Albus Potter and the Descent of Dismiusa

by Anonymous

Summary

Book 4/7. Sequel to "Albus Potter and the Sandblood Rising." Albus is stressed. The world is in turmoil, and his family is in danger; even his own mind is acting strange. And an ancient power is awakening. Who will seize control, or will it run wild? Legends will come to life and death will be cheated in Albus's 4th year.

Note: READING ALL OF THE FIRST THREE INSTALLMENTS OF THIS SERIES IS NECESSARY FOR UNDERSTANDING THIS BOOK! So, if you have not yet read them, please avoid this book like the plague until you have done so. With that out of the way, enjoy!
A firm hand wound its way around the long locks of her carefully styled hair; she sighed and leaned into the touch. It was part of the plan — it had to be done — but still, she dreaded how long it would be before that hand curled itself in her hair again.

“Slade didn’t make any mistakes, did he?” she breathed against his chest.

“Caradoc Slade is the Senior Undersecretary to the Minister of Magic,” said her husband soothingly. “He’s in the loop. He knows everyone, and he knows what’s going on. That’s what makes Slade such a valuable asset to the Sandblood cause.”

“He’s a wizard. And he’s not under the Marionette’s Medicine. Are we sure we can trust him?”

“We have to conserve our supplies of MM. And if Palmer Viller trusts Slade, then I trust Slade.”

“But Viller is just waiting for his opportunity to stab Slade in the back,” said the wife. “Don’t you think Slade would have figured that out by now?”

“Viller will have compensated for it.” said the husband. “In fact, I think Malseth’s death may have been fortunate, all things considered.”

“How so?”

“Malseth was brilliant, but Viller is craftier. Malseth had a hard time convincing Slade that we weren’t going to gun him down once we got what we wanted from him. But Viller was always clever with him. Now that Malseth is gone, Slade answers to someone he trusts even more than he trusted Malseth.” His hand relieved itself from her hair and slid its way down her chest. “I must admit… I was quite nervous about the future of the cause when Malseth expired. But Viller has taken up the mantle with more aggression than Malseth ever brought, and this plan of ours is going to get us the recognition Malseth lost us. Are you ready to be our bait to land a big fish?”

“I am,” replied the woman. “As long as you promise to rescue me.”

“We know, through Slade, the precise location of the area you will be taken for questioning if you are captured,” said the man. “All we have to do is make sure they capture you. Then you bust out, using Marsilia Scadjair’s personal secret weapon to kill Gerald Stenet. Then we arrive and whisk you away, back to freedom, leaving the Head of the Auror Office dead and the denizens of the magical world in utter shock. We’ll only be apart for a short time. It might even be as short as a single day before they question you.”

“Whatsoever the duration, you will have to make up the time to me.”

“Of course I will. You know how I love you. But for now, let us focus on the plan; you are to be captured tomorrow morning, after all. You have Scadjair’s weapon?”

The woman held up her hand, showing her husband her fingernails, which were painted a deep red-violet. The nails were sharp and pointed. “I suck on the nails, and the poisonous nail polish will react with my saliva to become active again; one scratch of my claws and the Head of the Auror Office keels over dead in five seconds.”

“Then that’s all you need. Of course, the dazzling good looks can’t hurt your chances of drawing him close enough to strike.”
The couple kissed, long enough to last the short time they would be apart.

“Time to get me captured,” said the wife, grinning widely.

There was nothing but sand. He was flying high, miles above the ground, but still, sand was all he could see in every direction. Seas of sand were covering everything.

He looked down. It was important — necessary — that he find something which was not sand. It had to be done immediately, as fast as possible, and his eyes raked the ground desperately; lives were hanging in the balance.

A small speck of stone caught his eye. What was it? It was square, short and not very wide, but it wasn’t sand, so he flew towards it, speeding towards the ground; he had to find out what this was. Could this stone slab be of any help?

But as he flew towards the rock, something strange happened. The seas of sand grew darker; clouds formed overhead, and it started to rain, but it was raining sand. Gusts of wind blew towards the stone, and the sea of sand below him started to swirl like a whirlpool, sucking him in.

He turned around; this was bad, he couldn’t go down there. But the whirlpool was dragging him down, out of the sky, and soon he was pulled below the crashing waves and disappeared below the surface, swallowed by the seas of sand.

Albus sat up in bed, panting heavily and patting himself to make sure he was all there and not covered in sand. What a nightmare… He’d never had one like that before. The memory stood fresh in his mind: his hand disappearing below the tide of sand. What did it mean? That is, if it actually meant anything. It could have been just a dream.

But it didn’t feel that way.

Glancing around, he discovered that his father was now standing in the doorway, looking in.

“Are you all right?” asked Harry. “You were making sounds in here.”

“Just a bad dream,” replied Albus.

“Ah. Reliving a terrible memory?”

“It’s not a memory,” said Albus, rubbing his eyes.

“Well, let me or your mother know if it continues.”

“Sorry to concern you.”

“I was coming in here to wake you up anyway,” said Harry. “I want you to see something really great as it’s happening. Do you want to come with the Auror Office to see us question one of the Sandbloods’ top commanders?”

“You got someone?” exclaimed Albus, sitting up so fast in his bed that he almost ended up standing.

“We’ve captured Coral Envix,” said Harry with a grin. “It was almost too easy to get her; we’d heard a leaked Sandblood trail telling us exactly where she would be. We’re taking her in to a secure location for questioning; Geri Stenet himself is going to help us get information out of her. This is going to be really exciting to watch; I wondered if you and James and Lily would like to
“I’d love to see,” said Albus, leaping out of bed and running to his dresser to extract the day’s clothes. “Thanks for offering!”

“No problem. I wouldn’t want you to miss this; I think it’ll be fascinating for you three to see how the Auror Office works.”

“How far up the ladder was Coral Envix again?” asked James, poking his head into the room.

“She is currently fifth in command of the Sandblood regime… or, she was, until we captured her,” answered Harry. “So she definitely knows a lot. We’ve known about her for a while; she was on the wanted list of the Ministry even before this all started. It’s weird to see her finally in custody. Her fingernails are even redder and pointier in person.”

“Now we’ve got her,” said James, pumping a fist. “And she’s not getting away.”

“Definitely not,” said Harry, smiling. “Let’s go find out what she knows.”

“Why aren’t we keeping her in the Ministry for questioning?” asked James as they pulled into the parking lot of a secure Muggle facility. “Or Azkaban or somewhere with magical protection?”

“We do have magical protection around here,” said Harry, flipping the switch that turned the invisibility boosters off. “It’s just not as easily seen, which is the point. We have to maintain the element of surprise. They know the defenses around the Ministry, and around Azkaban — they have no idea what protections we’ve put into place here.”

“It still doesn’t seem as safe,” noted Lily.

“Good observation,” said Harry.

“That’s not what I was hoping to hear about the security,” said James. “You know it’s not as safe, and we’re still here?”

“It’s complicated,” said Harry with a sly grin. “I’ll explain after the interrogation of Coral Envix.”

They walked into a door; Harry held his wand out the whole time, checking all of their surroundings, and only calmed down once a guard let them inside. They walked through several corridors and entered a small room near the center of the building.

There were chairs in the room, and one of the walls was made of thick glass. On the other side was a table next to a chair holding Coral Envix, who looked surprisingly calm for a Sandblood leader who had been captured. Her auburn hair was long and billowed seductively around her heart-shaped face. Her body was thin and curvaceous, but somehow she looked more athletic than most people Albus had ever seen. She was clearly a looker even at her age, which appeared to be around forty. She drummed her pointy red fingernails rhythmically on the table for several minutes as the Potters waited for the interrogation team to enter. She looked almost impatient, like she was looking forward to her questioning; Albus didn’t like this.

“She doesn’t look nervous at all,” commented James, speaking aloud the thought that was floating around in Albus’s head.

“She looks like she knows something,” said Lily.
“The Ministry should hire you kids right now,” laughed Harry. “Hold up — here’s Geri.”

Gerald Stenet, the new Head of the Auror Office after Auchland had finally been ousted, walked into the room as calmly as Envix. He was followed by another Auror, a dashing young man with mocha-colored skin whose hair was tinged with red-orange streaks. He took one look at Envix and was unable to keep his eyes off of her.

“Who’s that?” asked Lily, pointing to the younger Auror.

“That’s Rohan Otica,” said Harry. “Rohan is a fairly new and promising recruit. He’s been personally trained by Percy over this summer. Lucy and Molly got to know him fairly well, and they say he’s a great fighter and even better company. He’s only just out of training but he’s already a great thinker as well.”

“He looks like he’s thinking with the wrong part of his anatomy right now,” said James.

“Coral is known for her entrancing looks,” sighed Harry.

“Except, she’s a murderer.”

“That does put a damper on her relative attractiveness.”

Envix tossed her hair to the side and returned the gaze back to Rohan; he finally broke his eye contact, and stared at the wall.

“Coral,” said Geri, pulling up a chair to her table. He and Rohan sat down at her table, too close to the dangerous woman for Albus’s taste. A small electronic speaker broadcasted the conversation behind the glass wall into the observation room. “How good to see you.”

“A pleasure, Head Auror,” she said coolly. “To what do I owe it?”

“You’ve been causing us some trouble lately.”

“That’s certainly possible.”

“We’d like you to make up for that.”

“That’s certainly impossible.”

“Coral, you have greatly inconvenienced the Auror Office,” said Geri. “We are after the same thing — equality and unity among all people, Squibs and Muggles alike. So I don’t know what your problem is with us.”

“Obviously not,” scoffed Envix.

“That’s what we’d like you to tell us.”

“This is a psychological ploy,” whispered Harry quietly to his children. “We get Coral to tell us something small. Once she’s told us one thing, even if it’s not very important, she’s more likely to give us more important information.”

“What do you have against wizards?” asked Rohan quietly.

Envix glanced up at the attractive young man before her, and very subtly, she looked him up and down.
“We’re turning her own methods on her,” whispered Harry. “She’s been seducing people to get them to bend to her will for longer than the Sandbloods have existed. We’ve included one of our own highly attractive individuals for this task.”

“It can’t hurt to tell us?” suggested Rohan; he was a very soft-spoken person.

Envix stared at them.

“Of course it can.”

“Coral, if you don’t cooperate with the investigation, we can cause you a lot more trouble than you’ve caused us,” said Geri dangerously.

Rohan shot him a dirty look.

“He’s playing the part perfectly,” said Harry excitedly.

Envix brought her vividly colored fingernails up to her mouth as she stared at Rohan, and she began sucking on her fingertips.

“That’s… very suggestive,” said James as Harry leaned closer to watch.

Envix glanced behind the glass at the Potters for a moment, but she was drawn to Rohan in a way she couldn’t seem to resist.

“She’s got a husband, but we know she sleeps around,” whispered Harry to James; Albus, though, had great ears and was able to hear these sorts of secrets. He wondered why only James was privy to those words… It probably had to do with the adult content of the information.

Rohan stared at her lips as they licked each fingernail in turn. As she finished, she leaned forward. A glint appeared in her eye, the likes of which Albus had never seen before, and he felt his body heat up.

“What’s going on with her eyes?” asked Albus nervously.

“It’s called being a temptress,” sighed Harry. “We had her checked for signs of magic on the way in — she’s not using mind control or anything.”

“I’ll tell you what the Sandbloods have against wizards,” breathed Envix, “but just that and no more.”

Geri furrowed his brow and leaned forward. Rohan was already leaning forward.

Envix reached forward; her wrists were chained to the table, but she still could reach far enough to clasp one hand around Rohan’s fingers. She smirked at him.

“Ow,” said Rohan, pulling his hand away; there was a small trickle of blood.

“Your existence,” she snarled, “is our problem with you.”

She locked eyes with Rohan for several seconds, and then he broke his eye contact to look at his bloody hand; his other hand clutched above his heart, and he tumbled from his chair to the ground.

“An existence which has an expiration date,” added Envix, as Rohan gave a final twitch and then was still.
“Rohan, get up, it’s a bloody scratch,” sighed Geri. “You went through far worse in training.”

“No, he didn’t,” said Envix, fiddling with the cuffs around her wrists. “Unless he was delivered something worse than lethal poison in training.”

“Excuse me?” asked Geri, glancing down at her wrists just a moment too late.

Envix had removed her fifth finger on each hand — completely removed them, cleanly and bloodlessly — and ripped her hands out of their bindings now that they were narrow enough to squeeze through. Her fifth fingers had never been attached at all — they were fake, probably removed for the express purpose of slipping through handcuffs at a time like this. She leapt across the table and sank all eight remaining claws into Geri’s neck, drawing blood in each spot, and Geri threw her off to take out his wand but hit the floor before he could cast a single spell.

Lily shrieked in horror and James whipped out his wand immediately, both totally pale in the face, as Envix ripped a small card off of Geri’s body and sped to the door, opening it calmly with Geri’s identification card and walking out of the building.

“That was fast,” said Harry with a complete lack of the necessary panic, taking out his wand as if he had all the time in the world.

“Sound an alarm or something!” blurted James, headed to the door. “We can’t let her out!”

“No no no!” shouted Harry, grabbing James’s shoulder and pulling him back. “Don’t get involved. Too dangerous. Besides — look.”

The three Potter children turned to look inside the interrogation room again, and were shocked to see that Geri and Rohan had lifted themselves up from the ground.

“What’s going on?” demanded James as Geri and Rohan gave a thumbs-up to Harry from behind the glass, and then shook hands and healed each other’s wounds.

“Coral poisoned her fingernails,” said Harry. “But we heard about this plan through the spying device that you planted, Al, and we were ready for it. We gave Geri and Rohan the antidote beforehand, so they weren’t killed by the poison, and then we let Coral think she had the upper hand on us.”

“Why?” asked Lily, still shaking.

“Because Coral is planning to escape with help, at the moment,” said Harry. “So we’re going to let her lead us straight to her husband and two other Sandbloods who are planning to help her out. She’s breaking out of the facility right now, but we have Aurors stationed everywhere, watching her, and they’re going to recapture her along with three bonus Sandbloods once she meets up with them!”

“Brilliant,” laughed James, clasping his hands together. “That’s brilliant!”

“We’ve underestimated our enemy for too long,” said Harry. “It’s time they underestimated us for once. Sorry for not telling you, but Coral needed to believe that her plan was actually working, and the looks on your faces when she pulled off her apparent escape were perfect.”

Rohan waved to Harry and his kids; they all waved back.

“Send word to Perce that it worked,” called Harry. “I’m taking the kids back.”
Rohan nodded and lifted his wand; a majestic and regal lion Patronus manifested itself from the tip and soared through the ceiling.

The door to the interrogation room opened again, and half a dozen Aurors escorted four Sandbloods into the interrogation room. The Envix couple gawked at Rohan and Geri, unable to believe that they were alive, as more chairs were conjured in the interrogation room for their new guests.

Geri grinned and tilted his head. “Ah, I see you’ve brought friends,” he said. “Welcome back, Coral.”

The familiar sight of the Loch Stock Liner bursting through the waves filled Albus with joy every time. This time, though, he was even happier than usual, because the Liner was taking him to see Janelle.

“Lake Lombard, please,” said Harry to Milo as Ginny, James, and Lily secured the closest room. Killian Aubrey and Lynwood Chinch, who were now accompanying the Potters whenever they left the house, were right behind them. Tensions usually ran high between these two friends of Harry’s, so they took separate rooms.

“France is lovely this time of year,” said Milo with a nod. “Any particular reason for your visit?”

“My son would like to visit a good friend of his from Beauxbatons,” replied Harry with a twinkle in his eye.

“Good for you, making friends across country lines,” said Milo. “That’s a healthy habit. Especially if you have to flee the country.”

“Milo!” laughed Harry.

“What?” said Milo. “I’ve had to flee a few countries in my time! It happens! Good to have friends everywhere for times like that.”

“He’s having you on,” laughed Harry, directing his son to their family’s cabin. “Oh — we’re submerging, better get in quick.”

The ride was easy; they surfaced in the middle of a small pond just outside Janelle’s house. Her family wasn’t very rich, but they owned a lot of property. Janelle’s mother grew and cared for magical plants, and her father raised magical animals. She basically lived on a farm.

Janelle had waved to the Liner from her window. She was already outside and running towards Albus when he’d disembarked from the ship.

They intercepted each other in a strong hug halfway to her house. Janelle kissed him on both cheeks and then nuzzled her chin between his neck and shoulder.

“Missed you,” said Albus.

“I missed you, too!” said Janelle, smiling brightly. Her face was glowing; at times like this, Albus still had to wonder whether she was secretly part-Veela.

The rest of the Potters passed by with Aubrey and Chinch, and Albus took Janelle’s hand as they walked with his family to the house.
But the trip wasn’t as spectacular a reunion with his maybe-a-girlfriend as Albus had hoped. There wasn’t much to do except sit and talk with her parents, because their Auror guard insisted that the family stay together and indoors. Before they left, Janelle tried to bring Albus upstairs to her room alone so that they could snog or something, but Aubrey insisted on following them at all times so that there was always protection in case of an attack. At least, though, they were now able to have a conversation of their own.

“How is that Patronus coming?” asked Janelle as they settled on her bed. “You told me in your letters that your father was helping you master the Patronus Charm.”

“He is,” said Albus, “but we haven’t gotten very far just yet. I think I’ll get it before I head back to school, though.”

“What is the animal form of your Patronus?”

“It’s a coyote,” said Albus.

“A what?”

“It’s like a smaller wolf.”

“A little wolf,” said Janelle, pinching his cheek playfully. “I can see that.”

“Have you ever tried the Patronus?”

“No, it is a little too complex. I may try it soon, though.”

“What’s Donna’s Patronus?”

“My sister’s Patronus is a swan. How about your brother?”

“His is a little spiny lizard thing called a tuatara. I’m not sure I’m even remembering the name right. Whatever — it’s basically an iguana.”

“That is a lot different from your coyote,” said Janelle. “I wonder why that is.”

“Do you think your Patronus will be like a swan or something?” asked Albus.

“I am not sure. I think Donna and I are very different in most ways, so probably not.”

“What would you want your Patronus to be? If you could choose?”

“I am not sure if it would be what I want it to be,” said Janelle, “but… a lioness.”

“Hey, that’s Lucy’s Patronus!” laughed Albus.

“Who?”

“My cousin Lucy Weasley… The British Minister’s daughter. Her Patronus is a lioness. Er, her new Patronus, anyway.”

“New?”

“It used to be a dolphin, but it changed when she started dating a kid from our school named Katsuo Sinclair,” explained Albus. “Kat’s Patronus was a hawk, and hers became a hawk. She dumped him right before the summer, though, and then it changed back to a dolphin. Now it’s a
lioness.”

“Do you know anyone with a lion Patronus?” asked Janelle, enjoying the gossip.

“No, I don’t,” said Albus. “Er… I don’t think I do… Maybe.”

“What are your other family members’ Patronuses?” asked Janelle, looking over at Aubrey, who was keeping an eye on them; his presence was clearly agitating both of them.

“My mum’s is a horse, and my dad’s is a stag. Not everyone’s Patronus changes when they’re in love, but that doesn’t have anything to do with how deeply they’re in love. Actually, when my mum purposefully uses my dad for her memories and concentrates on the result, she makes a silver doe, and when my dad uses my mum he can make a stallion.”

“Maybe my Patronus will be a coyote,” said Janelle, nudging him.

Albus blushed; not knowing what to say, he continued. “M-my cousin Molly’s Patronus is a jaguar,” he said. “Victoire and Dominique never quite got the hang of it — it’s a hard spell, and even though they’re great duelists and all, it takes a lot of a hard kind of skill that they never got around to practicing. Louis can make a Patronus, though, ever since he started dating Caspar. It’s a bear, just like Caspar’s. Roxanne and Freddie haven’t gotten the spell down yet, either, and neither have Rose or Hugo or Lily, but we’re all still pretty young for it, so it’s not that much of a surprise… Oh! My Uncle Charlie has a dragon Patronus.”

“A dragon?” gasped Janelle with a huge grin. “That is magnificent.”

“It’s rare to have a Patronus be a magical creature and not just an ordinary animal, but it happens.”

Janelle sighed and glanced back over to Aubrey for a moment. Her eyes twinkled as she settled into deep thought; Albus could tell she was trying to think of a way to get Aubrey off their backs.

In a flash, she had her shirt off.

“It is very hot in here,” she said, tossing it to the side.

Aubrey flushed red and turned to stare at the wall.

“Why don’t you take your shirt off, too?” she suggested.

Albus reddened; he didn’t know what to do. She’d already taken her shirt off and was sitting there in her bra, but this was a favor he didn’t want to return.

“Come on,” said Janelle, winking as she tugged at the collar.

Albus reluctantly slipped the shirt over his head. It felt much warmer without a shirt, but maybe that was just the embarrassment.

“You know, I could go without pants, too,” said Janelle, standing and fiddling with her waistband.

Aubrey threw his hands over his head in exasperation and left the room swiftly.

“That is much better,” said Janelle, settling back down and putting her shirt back on. “I just wanted to get him out so we could talk normally.”

“That’s brilliant,” laughed Albus, looking at the closed door as he pulled his shirt back over his head.
“Well, thank you,” said Janelle, scooting herself closer. She leaned in for a kiss; Albus put an arm around her and closed the distance completely.

“So what else has happened since we last saw each other?” asked Janelle when they were both happy enough to break away.

“The Auror Office captured a few Sandblood leaders, but I’m not supposed to talk about it past that,” said Albus. “Coral Envix, and her husband. Palmer Viller is still out there, though.”

“Yes, but not for long,” said Janelle. “The Auror Office will see to that.”

“I think so, too.”

They kissed again.

“I missed you very much,” said Janelle. “Do you suppose there could be any way for me to visit during the school year?”

“You could maybe come on a Hogsmeade weekend,” said Albus. “I’ve been thinking about that. You could meet me in Hogsmeade. You wouldn’t be allowed in the castle without a lot of permission and stuff, so we could skip that part at Halloween and Christmas.”

“I would love to!” said Janelle. “And you will write, of course?”

“Every day, if you want me to!”

Janelle laughed. “We shall see about that. But no matter where you are, or how often you write, you will always be right… here.”

She took his hand and placed it on her chest, over her heart, which was beating as fast as Albus’s. He smiled and looked into her eyes.

Words were starting to form on her lips; the slowness of the build-up to whatever she was about to say made Albus think it was important. She took a deep breath and started over.

“I—”

“Albus!” came a shout from downstairs, bringing them back to earth. “We’ve got to get moving; we’ve got fifteen minutes to set up at Gabrielle’s!”

“Coming, Mum!” shouted Albus. He turned back to Janelle sheepishly.

“I will see you again for Halloween or Christmas?” asked Janelle.

“Sure, I’ll write you the details,” said Albus.

He leaned in and gave Janelle another kiss, and then he took her by the hand and brought her downstairs again.

Janelle’s parents walked them to the neighbors’ house three minutes down the road.

“Monsieur Claude has access to the RNFF,” explained Mr. Lombard.

“What’s the RNFF?” asked James, always the inquirer.

“The National Floo Network of France.”
“That doesn’t abbreviate to RNFF.”

“It does in French,” replied Mr. Lombard. “Sorry we don’t have a connection in our own house — it takes magic to operate, and… well, you know.”

“Not a problem,” said Harry. “As long as Masseur Claude doesn’t mind us using his fireplace.”

“He has always been highly considerate when it comes to things we need from the magical world,” said Mr. Lombard. “And just so you know, you said ‘Monsieur’ wrong.”

“Oh, did I?” laughed Harry. “Sorry, what did I call him?”

“You implied that he gives massages.”

Ginny snorted. “I don’t suppose that’s true?” she asked hopefully. “I’m feeling a little tense from all this… overprotection…”

“Well, we apologize for ensuring your safety,” mused Chinch.

“Drop the attitude, Chinch,” warned Aubrey.

“Being safe makes you tense?” asked Mr. Lombard.

“No, this does,” sighed Ginny, gesturing towards Aubrey and Chinch as they started yet another row.

Mr. Claude welcomed the Potters graciously, practically fawning over Harry’s presence in his home — with all the seclusion from the outside world, Albus had almost forgotten that they were celebrities. The French Floo Network, which was much slower but much smoother than its English counterpart, brought them to Gabrielle Delacour’s house. She had inherited it from her parents, who retired to Italy, when Aunt Fleur decided to stay in England with Bill.

“Teddy!” roared James excitedly, charging down his father’s godson.

James and Teddy always did something amusing whenever they met; sometimes James would pretend to choke Teddy, and Teddy would turn his face purple; sometimes James would pretend to punch Teddy in the eye, and Teddy would use his Metamorphmagus powers to give himself a black eye. This time, James reached out and pretended to slap Teddy hard across the cheek, and when he pulled his hand away, Teddy had given himself a bright red handprint across his cheek and was pretending it stung with pain. They’d done this since Teddy learned how to control his abilities; now Teddy was twenty-one and James was sixteen, and they still enjoyed the childish humor they always did. Hopefully, they always would.

“Hey, that’s everybody,” said Aunt Fleur, clasping her hands together. “Okay, crouch low and don’t make a noise!”

The entire family gathered in the back of the kitchen.

“Aubrey! Chinch! Get down!” hissed Ginny.

Aubrey and Chinch rolled their eyes and placed Disillusionment Charms over themselves.

The lights were turned all the way down, and five minutes later, they heard the door open.

“Louis, darling!” said his Aunt Gabrielle as Louis entered the house.
Louis conversed with Gabrielle for a minute or two, and then she directed him into the kitchen and turned the lights on.

“SURPRISE!” shouted the whole family, jumping up from hiding. Tiny fireworks from Uncle George went off when the room was illuminated, spiraling into the air and leaving smoke trails that spelled “HAPPY SEVENTEENTH BIRTHDAY, LOUIS!”

Louis’s face lit up like the fireworks as Caspar moved through the sea of Weasleys. The two hugged each other tightly before Louis started to greet all of his enormous family.

“When is Louis’s actual birthday?” James asked Victoire. “I can never remember all of my cousins’ birthdays.”

“It’s in a week, so we made his party early so we could actually surprise him,” replied Victoire.

Louis had a small conversation with everyone at the party.

“I haven’t seen you since the Triwizard Tournament!” he said when he finally got to Albus.

“Yeah, Dad says we should avoid leaving the house as much as possible,” said Albus. “But I got to visit Janelle today because we were coming to France anyway for your surprise party. Were you surprised?”

“Definitely,” said Louis cheerfully. “I didn’t know I’d be seeing Caspar here. But we see each other a lot anyway… every other weekend. I feel bad; you and Janelle should be allowed to see each other more often. Surely your parents wouldn’t have a problem with her coming to visit your house?”

“We’re under protection and no one’s supposed to know where we’re staying now,” mumbled Albus. “Not even family, so definitely not Janelle.”

“Ah. That makes sense but it still sucks.”

“Things are going well with you and Caspar, then?”

“Yes, definitely,” said Louis, grinning. “Maman has been all over me about what we’ll be doing once I pass my Apparition exam… she thinks we’re going to be trying to Apparate across country borders to each other at all times and Splinch ourselves dead. ‘Find a good halfway point to meet!’ ‘Don’t you dare leave without me watching!’ The usual mother stuff. There’s something about the first or last child coming of age that makes mothers go slightly insane.”

“Glad I’m in the middle,” said Albus, appreciating his middle-sibling position more than usual. “How’s the rest of the family?”

“Good, good,” said Louis. “Victoire and Teddy are still going strong… they had a few rough patches but they got through with style and they’re all the more in love for that. Xander Davis — I don’t know if you remember him, he became a prefect the year you came in — he asked Dominique out, and they’ve been on-and-off dating. How are James and Tabitha Floren?”

“She’s annoyed that she can’t see James very much,” replied Albus, “but they’re too lovey-dovey to actually care.”

“This is lasting much longer than I’d imagined it would,” said Louis appreciatively. “Not that I don’t think they’re a good match. They’re probably perfect. She’s the only one who can keep James in line.”
“Dad reckons Tabby is a lot like our grandmother, since James is a lot like our grandfather, except that Tabby didn’t hate James’s guts for most of the time they knew each other beforehand.”

A small disturbance caused them both to turn their heads; Aubrey and Chinch looked like they were about ready to go at it again.

“They’re your protection?” asked Louis, shaking his head.

“They’re supposed to be.”

“Looks like they’re more interested in themselves than you guys.”

“I know,” sighed Albus. “But Dad keeps saying that there’s a very small list of people we can be sure to completely trust… and Aubrey and Chinch are two people on that list who aren’t easily replaced. Those are his words, anyway.”

“Well, life is all about making the best of bad situations,” said Louis.

“Life is full of bad situations, yeah.”

“You could make a strong argument that life itself is a bad situation.”

“True,” laughed Albus.

“I’m going to go chat with the rest of my visitors,” said Louis. “See you at Hogwarts if I don’t see you before that.”

“See you, Louis, happy birthday!”

BANG.

Albus and Louis both jumped nearly through the roof and extracted wands; Caspar was lying on the ground, Stunned. Louis gave a shout and rushed to the former Durmstrang student’s side.

“He took out his wand as soon as Harry turned his back,” announced Aubrey in his most accusatory fashion, pointing dramatically at Caspar.

“My cousin’s boyfriend is not going to kill my dad!” roared James as Louis revived Caspar while apologizing profusely.

“Whether or not he would, we don’t know where he’s been!” argued Aubrey. “He could have been Imperiused; we haven’t been keeping a constant eye on him, so we can’t be sure, and I have been instructed to defend against any possible assailants—”

As Harry started to scold Aubrey harshly, Albus looked over to Chinch, who seemed to be very much enjoying the fact that his partner was being told off for his mistake. Aubrey seemed to notice this too, and if looks could kill…

“Could you maybe, er, apologize to my boyfriend who you assaulted?” requested Louis, tapping Aubrey on the shoulder and tapping his foot.

Aubrey turned to Caspar. “Why did you take your wand out?”

“I… don’t even remember,” admitted Caspar.

“What a world, where a person of age cannot even use magic in front of his boyfriend’s family,”
scoffed Aunt Fleur.

“He doesn’t remember why he took out his wand?” demanded Aubrey.

“He’s still woozy,” huffed Ginny, “and you shouldn’t be cross-examining him anyway; you should be apologizing, like my nephew asked!”

“I will not apologize for doing my job. And why can’t he answer my question?”

“He probably took out his wand for the most trivial of things!” yelled Bill. “Putting up a fallen decoration or moving a chair closer? I wouldn’t expect him to remember, because no one should have to expect to get Stunned or interrogated every time they try to use magic!”

“Leave us and cool down,” said Harry. “I’ll contact you again when we go to Diagon Alley if your head is clearer by then, but for now, please just… keep yourself away from my family.”

Shaking his head, Aubrey left the house, and a faint crack of Disapparition could be heard after he slammed the door.

“Well, I didn’t see that coming,” chuckled Chinch.

“Can it, Lyn,” said Harry. “I had to do the same thing to you when those kids were trying to take pictures of us at King’s Cross two years ago, and I’ll do it again if I need to.”

“No protection for your family?” mused Chinch. “You’ve already sent Aubrey away; I’m the only guard you have left. Think about your children, Harry.”

“I am thinking about them,” growled Harry. “I’m keeping them away from bad influences. James and Al have both expressed interest in the Auror Office and I don’t want them to get the wrong idea of what sort of people we let into the program.”

Chinch was properly taken aback, and kept his mouth shut the rest of the party, which was good for everyone else. Albus’s parents tried to keep their good humor and were mostly successful. They apologized to Louis and Caspar for the incident and tried to put it past them. But this wasn’t the first incident with Aubrey and Chinch, and Albus had to wonder how many were necessary before they were unable to put the incidents aside any longer.
“Can we work on my Patronus before bed? Please please please please?”

“You really want to get that Patronus down, huh,” laughed Harry.

“I want to do it so I don’t have to be jealous that Lucas can do it,” admitted Albus.

“Are you two still mortal enemies or has that phase passed yet?”

“We’re not really mortal enemies,” said Albus, “but I’m not sure we can ever really be friends.” Too much had happened.

“Well, that’s too bad,” said Harry. “I hope you change your mind. And sure, get your wands; we’ll have a little practice.”

Albus did a little fist pump of victory before taking his wands out. He always alternated which day he used his two wands, and he hadn’t encountered any problems since he started the process.

“Harry, dear, your birthday is in two days and I still don’t know what the hell you want,” called Ginny from the other room.

“I told you—

“—that the safety of your friends and family is all you ever need, yes, we know that. But birthdays are for things you want, usually material substances. You get safety three hundred and sixty-four other days in the year—”

“Three hundred and sixty-five this year,” interjected James. “Leap year!”

“Yes, thank you, honey,” said Ginny. “Point being, be a little more adventurous than ‘our safety,’ yeah? Surely there’s something in the world you could use.”

“I’ll think about it,” said Harry. “After we have Patronus practice.”

“Yes!” exclaimed Albus, his wands at the ready.

“Oh — and before you start, some news, boys… The Daily Prophet reports that a Ms. Paris Evranote will be taking the post of Diwand Spells at Hogwarts next year.”

“What?” said Albus. “What happened to Professor Dixon?”

“It doesn’t say, but I think he probably passed away. The man was ancient. You tend to catch things at that age which don’t go away. Or, at least, you’re too old to run from them. I’ll check the obituaries, but if they’ve already found a new teacher then he probably passed away a while ago.”

“Aw,” said James. “I liked Professor Dixon. It was fun to watch him hobble around.”

“I want to join the A.R.M. program,” said Lily, walking into the room.

“Keep up your grades to be even remotely close to what they were last year, and you’re a shoe-in,” praised Harry. “Lily, do you want in on this Patronus practice session?”

“Ooh, I’d like to, if that’s okay with Albus,” she squeaked.
“Of course!” laughed Albus. He knew she was probably still worried that he’d be jealous of her prodigious skill, but he’d learned to deal with it — be proud of it, even. That his own sister was outshining him had nothing to do with his ability — she outshone everyone in the school already. James had more to be embarrassed about, but somehow he never let it affect him, and Albus was learning to do the same.

“Lily, what happy memory are you working with?” asked Harry.

“When Professor Desulgon told me I was the most incredible young mind he’d ever encountered,” she said shyly.

“Excellent,” said Harry with a wide grin. “Al?”

“The first time I kissed Janelle,” said Albus.

Lily giggled; their father blushed a bit but shook it off.

“Over twenty years as an Auror, facing the darkest adversaries the world has to offer, and you still can’t handle the thought of your kids growing up,” chuckled Ginny to her husband as she exited the room. “Good luck, you two — call me in if something amazing is happening.”

“We will.”

Harry pulled out his wand.

“Accio Cacolevitens!”

A bottle full of a dark brown fluid zoomed from somewhere upstairs into Harry’s hand; he uncorked it and took a small sniff.

“The Levity Liquid,” said Harry, a grin breaking out on his face. “I brewed this one myself — I never really had a knack for potions, but I’ve taken it up as a hobby. Saves a good amount of money if you do these things yourself… if you do them right, of course. Take a good whiff, kids. Just one deep breath’s worth will do.”

He passed Lily the bottle. She inhaled through her nose; her exhale was noticeably calmer and smoother. She sighed contentedly as she handed the bottle to Albus.

Albus took as much of the scent as he could into his nose. He smelled rich, dark chocolate of the most extravagant sort. The smell seemed to transmute itself directly into his bloodstream, and he felt his limbs warm up within a heartbeat. A smile worked its way across his face with extreme ease, and all tension was gone from his muscles and his brain. He felt as if he’d just been relieved of all responsibility and all worries.

“One of my better attempts,” said Harry proudly. “I wouldn’t have you test my Calming Draught for me, though. Might make you schizophrenic.”

“You’d have made Snape proud,” called Ginny from the other room.

“Ridiculous, that was impossible,” responded Harry. “He’d have found something wrong with it and given me a failure with a side of detention.”

“...But he was still the bravest man you ever knew.”

“Hey, Aubrey and Chinch are insufferable, too, but I put up with them for all of our sakes.”
“I feel fabulous,” said Lily, swaying peacefully from side to side.

“Levity Liquid will do that to you,” said Harry. “Cacolevitens, the Levity Liquid, is known to be a big help in trying to produce a Patronus, so I made it especially for you two. Now, don’t expect that you will undeniably be able to do it just because you smelled the potion — it’s still going to be very difficult to produce a corporeal Patronus. Now, you won’t really know in advance when you’ll need to produce a Patronus, so you won’t have time to make yourself some Levity Liquid, but for casting a Patronus the first time and getting a feel for how the spell works, using this potion can do wonders. Lily, did you ever use this potion when you were working on your Patronus with Professor Desulgon?”

“No,” said Lily. “He said that potions would discount my efforts if I was going to make a record.”

“Okay. Now, we’re going to try the spell — but don’t be disappointed if it doesn’t work. Actually, you’ve just breathed in a proper dose of Levity Liquid, so you probably won’t be disheartened even if a volcano opened up under our living room and we were plunging into lava. Which is one of the reasons Levity Liquid isn’t widely used — it makes you blissful, but ignorant of everything happening around you. Ignorance is bliss, anyway.”

“Bliss is nice,” said Albus, not paying much attention to his father’s little bit of trivia; nothing really mattered.

“Okay. On the count of three, try your best. Have your wands?”

Albus and Lily nodded.

“Good. One — two — three!”

Neither Albus nor Lily lifted a wand.

“What’s the matter?”

“Oh. Nothing,” said Lily.

“Yeah, everything’s great,” said Albus.

“Okay, so… try the spell! Expecto Patronum!”

“But I like just sitting here,” said Albus with satisfaction.

“Yeah, it’s nice,” giggled Lily, flopping down on her back on the couch.

“Oh,” grimaced Harry. “I… may have made the Cavolevitens a bit strong, huh. No motivation.”

“Who cares?” said Albus.

“Yeah, you should have some more and relax with us,” suggested Lily.

Harry shrugged. “Oh, whatever. I haven’t been stress-free in years.” He took the bottle and inhaled much more deeply than his first whiff; he sank onto an adjacent couch and smiled himself into a nap.

A bell clanged throughout the house; Harry rushed to the door. The door of their new house in London was one-way see-through, so Harry could see that it was Killian Aubrey at the door, but
Aubrey couldn’t see inside.

There were a lot of things different about their new house. There was only one floor aboveground, for starters, and the bedrooms were underground, with fake bedrooms on the ground floor that stayed empty at all times. The fake bedrooms were where everyone kept most of their belongings, to make it seem as though that was where they slept. Only their family knew that the beds there were supposed to be decoys; the thought was that if anyone broke in, they would see the empty beds and assume that the Potters were not home. Even if they lost their possessions, the family would still be safe. The basement was impenetrable; the trapdoor to the downstairs was impossible to find without a password, which was currently “Aberforth.” The password had to be spoken with a hand pressed against one of the floor tiles in the bathroom, which was good that it wasn’t in a place that most people looked, but annoying because if you wanted to use the stairs, you couldn’t go until whoever was in the bathroom finished up.

Albus missed their old house, but their enemies knew where their old house was.

Harry inserted his wand into a slot near the door and turned it like a key; an orange light flashed over Aubrey, confirming that he wasn’t being impersonated. Then the door itself glowed slightly orange and they could hear the sounds of heavy rain.

“Your nickname in Auror Team Training,” said Harry; the door now allowed sounds to permeate through.


“Yes, I know it’s you now,” said Harry, opening the door. “No one else can complain like that.”

“Ha,” said Aubrey humorlessly as he stepped in. “It should be a crime for the weather to be this cold in the summer.”

“The Ministry is still receiving requests from Muggles that we change the weather,” chuckled Harry.

“Can I talk to you alone?” muttered Aubrey.

Harry raised an eyebrow. “No.”

“It’s about Chinch.”

Harry pressed a palm to his face.

“You haven’t invited him with us to Diagon Alley, have you?”

“Of course I have,” said Harry. “You see, I have this ridiculous notion that maybe if you two are around each other enough, you’ll get used to each other and stop acting like two-year-olds when you’re in each other’s company.”

“The son of a bitch framed me,” hissed Aubrey.

Harry groaned. “Killian, not in front of the kids…”

“I asked to talk to you alone already.”

“And I said no, because anything you want to say to me should be tame enough for my kids’ ears,
or else you shouldn’t be saying it,” explained Harry gently. “This is what I meant by acting like two-year-olds. Vulgar two-year-olds, at best.”

Albus had never seen his father act so condescending before. But he knew why. His patience had been worn thin by all of the defensive procedures; it kept the family safe, but doing everything a certain way, living and breathing according to protocol, had a way of wearing one’s patience down to the bone.

“He used all of you,” snarled Aubrey. “He’s the one who put the Imperius Curse on Caspar Engodska. He had Caspar Engodska take out his wand so that I’d Stun him—”

“Are you suggesting that a top member of the Auror Office used a spell capable of landing him a life sentence in Azkaban — to get back at you for annoying him?” sputtered Harry.

“Yes, I am, because he knew he wouldn’t be caught! He did that so I’d get in trouble with you, hoping you wouldn’t keep me around anymore—”

“Did it ever occur to you that if you had been reasonable and simply Disarmed him like any of us would have done, that I wouldn’t have been mad at you?” said Harry. “This ‘master plan’ that Chinch employed wouldn’t have done anything if you had simply remained professional!”

“I know that Chinch cast the Imperius Curse!” snapped Aubrey.

“Ah. You know this how?”

“The Durmstrang boy couldn’t remember why he’d taken out his wand, and Chinch was so smug when I was being—”

“I fail to see how that qualifies as proof,” said Harry curtly.

Ginny walked into the room apprehensively; she was carrying an ornate candelabra.

“I’m not interrupting anything?” she asked, biting her lip.

“It’s nothing,” dismissed Harry, “and he won’t bring it up again.”

“I—”

“I’ve chosen to forget what you’ve just said to me, and it would not be in your best interest to remind me,” warned Harry.

Aubrey heeded his instructions but did not look happy about it.

“The Portkey is leaving in three minutes,” said Ginny, waving the candelabra. “Everybody have everything they need for the trip to Diagon Alley?”

“Where is it going to take us?”

“Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes. Chinch is meeting us there.”

Aubrey made a displeased sound.

“If you want a spot on the candelabra, you’re going to have to stop that,” growled Harry. “All right, everyone. Gather around.”

Two minutes passed, and then James spoke up.
“Oh! I forgot Barry’s trick umbrella. I was going to return it to him when I see him today.”

“Oh, for Merlin’s sake!” huffed Ginny. “You couldn’t have remembered this any sooner?”

“I’m gonna go run and grab it—”

“No you most certainly are not! The Portkey leaves in — forty seconds—”

“That’s enough time!”

“No, it isn’t!”

“You can’t return the umbrella even if you bring it with you,” said Aubrey, grabbing James’s arm before he dashed off.

“What?”

“You’re not allowed to interact with anyone outside of family or members of the Ministry.”

Albus’s heart sank; he had talked with his friends about meeting at Diagon Alley today. “You’re not serious?” he whined.

“I’m afraid he is,” said Harry. “The Polyjuice Potion is a real threat. People could impersonate Barry, and we haven’t set up a system like security questions with any of your friends, so… unfortunately, you won’t be able to see any friends today. This shopping trip will be purely business.”

“Why didn’t you just send someone out to buy the stuff and let us stay home?” grumbled James.

“Because we can’t stay in the house all the time,” said Ginny. “You kids would all go insane. Heck, I’d go insane.”

“Me, too,” added Harry. “It wouldn’t be healthy. You need to get out and interact with the real world. I don’t want to deprive you of that, which is why I put up with Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum.”

“Excuse—” started Aubrey, and then they were hooked and flung into space by the activation of the Portkey.

The twisting and tumbling crashed to a halt in the middle of the back room of Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes; the odd silence of travel via Portkey was quickly replaced with the cute little sounds of unfinished toys and pranks to be perfected. Smoke was pouring out of several appliances, filling the room with an acrid smell and diffusing the already dim light cast by a glowing ball on the ceiling. A sign on the door said NO FIRE IN THE BACK ROOM.

Uncle George appeared smiling in the window by the door and unlocked the room for them. He opened the door and closed it quickly as he entered, as if he was worried that something might escape. Knowing Uncle George, that was a definite possibility.

Uncle George took a deep breath, and Harry and Ginny groaned in unison; they knew what was coming.

“His eyes are as green as a fresh pickled toad,

His hair is as dark as a blackboard.
I wish he was mine, he’s really divine,
The hero who conquered the Dark Lord!

Lily and James giggled; Albus joined in, still trying to figure out why Uncle George sang that love song to his father most times they saw each other. It must have been something some ditzy girl did back when they were at Hogwarts.

“Hello, George,” chimed Harry and Ginny, both trying to suppress embarrassed laughter.

“Potters!” said Uncle George. He walked over to James and pinched his cheek. “Did one of my experiments go wrong? What’s this hideous thing in the corner over here? Oh — it’s James! Forgive me.”

James laughed and shoved him away. “Why can’t there be any fire in here?” he asked, pointing to the sign on the door.

“Because boom,” said Uncle George. “Honestly, if you set a fire right now, I highly doubt that any of us would survive. There’s an alarm that will go off and if you don’t get that suit on within two or three seconds…” He pointed to a suit resembling Muggle astronaut gear. “Then you’ll be leaving as stains on my customers’ shirts.”

Several silent seconds passed.

“Ew,” said Lily once she realized what he meant.

“If for some reason you need to, all you have to actually do is touch the suit and it will encase you on its own accord,” said Uncle George. “But, bottom line, don’t do that. Anyway, Harry, darling, Chinch is scurrying around the store looking for suspicious people and is looking extremely suspicious while doing it, so I’d appreciate if you could put him to work so my customers will stop freaking out.”

“Gladly,” said Harry, looking anything but glad.

As they left the back room, Albus heard Ginny whisper to Uncle George, “Could this place really just… explode at any time?”

“Well, that room is where I keep whatever still needs its kinks worked out, and some of that includes some nasty mistakes with fireworks. So you would have to set a fire on the fireworks for the room to blow up, but you know I like exaggerating to scare the kids.”

“How have your fireworks been selling lately?”

“Just last week, our sales in Britain passed the leading Chinese brand! We were so proud, we gave everyone a pay raise.”

The portrait of Fred floated over, and the family started talking business. Albus started to walk away and found that he was immediately followed by Chinch.

“Can’t have any wandering Potters,” he buzzed as he followed Albus down a side aisle.

Albus couldn’t wait until he was back at Hogwarts. There, he’d be safe without a guard, and he wouldn’t have to endure Aubrey or Chinch acting as his disturbing shadow.

He was just thinking about their headmaster and his son when the two Wilcoxes walked through
The new front door of the new Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes, which had been rebuilt after its destruction last year, had a new trick. Whoever stepped on the mat just inside the door was sent spinning into the air and landing on the ceiling; one could walk on the ceiling just as easily as the floor. The ceiling was actually a favorite place to play for any kids who came in the shop. As of now, there were four little boys chasing each other around the roof and screaming while a very dazed Wilcox and Exo stared at the upside-down room in confusion.

“Step on the green mat on the other side of the room to go back down!” called George. “Hello, Helio and Exorian!”

“Hello,” said Exo, still a bit shaken as they crossed the room to get back on the floor below.

Albus ran over to hug his friend as Exorian stepped on the green panel to revert his gravity back to normal. Exo, however, seemed too distracted to hug back. Albus could tell there was something on his mind and he made a mental note to ask about it.

“Helio!” called Harry from across the room where Aubrey was standing watch over James and Lily as Ginny talked with Uncle George and Uncle Fred’s portrait.

“Harry!” replied Wilcox, saluting him.

Harry crossed the aisle to speak to Wilcox, giving an apologetic glance to James and Lily as they were left alone with Aubrey. James and Lily gave each other a glance of their own and then hurried after their father. Aubrey followed them, and when he caught sight of Chinch, his eyes narrowed.

As Harry was about to strike up a conversation with Wilcox, Aubrey stepped in between them.

“What you told Auchland in private after he asked you to become an Auror during the Dark Revival,” recited Aubrey.

“My wife insisted that it would make our family targets for the immense power of Gallen Ingot,” said Wilcox, slightly terse.

Harry placed a firm hand on Aubrey’s shoulder. “I was just about to ask him a security question,” he said between his teeth, “and I thought we agreed not to use that one for Helio because of the unpleasant memories it evoked?”

“He should get over it,” replied Aubrey. “And now that we know it’s him… Helio, you’re a public servant, so the kids are safe with you, right? You would be trusted to watch them for a while.”

“I… suppose they are,” said Wilcox numbly.

“Good, then do that,” commanded Aubrey.

“Excuse me,” said Harry, “but I’m the one who decides that, and you should probably ask him kindly before you inconvenience him like that – where are you going?”

Aubrey took Chinch by the arm and half-directed, half-dragged him to the other side of the store. Harry’s eye twitched but he stayed out of it.

“Well, with any luck, they’ll work something out,” he said, but his eyes clearly showed that he had no confidence in the probability of that outcome.
Albus turned to the side and whispered a remark for only Exo’s ears.

“Something wrong?”

Exo looked both ways and answered under his breath.

“Ivan Siobor is wrong.”

He jerked his head towards their fathers, who were having a conversation.

“The Auror Office still has no leads on Siobor?” asked Wilcox nervously.

“I’m sure we’ll get something on him eventually,” sighed Harry, sounding even less confident than if he’d expected Chinch and Aubrey to become best pals and ride a unicorn into the sunset hand-in-hand.

“The Werewolf Hunter?” asked Albus; Exo nodded.

Ivan Siobor had murdered dozens upon dozens of werewolves in Britain, but had disappeared without a trace or a whisper from the world and from the news; it had been a while since Albus had heard of him, with everything else that was going on.

“How about Solomon?” asked Albus. He also hadn’t heard much about the famed anti-Dark activist John Solomon who had been on the run from the law for a year and a half now, after being suspected as the man responsible for murdering half of the nation’s population of werewolves during a lunar eclipse in the so-called “Lunar Massacre.”

At the mention of Solomon, Exo cast a furtive glance to his father, who was deep in conversation with Harry about how to force Siobor and/or Solomon out into the open.

“I gotta tell you something,” said Exo almost silently. “But not here.”

“You can tell me,” said Albus.

“No, not here,” insisted Exo. “Your brother’s listening. I can tell by the way his ears are wiggling.”

“Astute observation,” said James without turning his head towards them.

“Good catch,” said Albus. “Here — do you want to escape our parents for a moment to tell me?”

“Sure,” said Exo, keeping an eye on James as they walked away. James seemed to sense that he wasn’t wanted, and did not pursue.

“What did you want to tell me?” asked Albus softly once they were a fair distance from their parents.

Exo looked around. “I feel… exposed, without Dad, or your dad…”

“We’re not going to get attacked in the two minutes we’re not directly next to them,” said Albus.

“But that’s exactly when someone would attack if they were watching—”

“Oh, for Merlin’s sake, no one’s watching us, we just got here. Hurry up, then, if you’re so nervous!”

“Okay,” said Exo, taking a deep breath. “I don’t know whether you’ll like this… but… I—”
“Two little people too far from their big people!” announced Uncle George, stepping over from out of nowhere.

Albus and Exo exhaled simultaneously, disappointed.

“By the way,” said Uncle George, “in case you were wondering where Aubrey and Chinch went, they’re having a heated row in the back room… I forgot to relock it.”

“Oh,” said Albus, his confidence in their personal guard hitting rock bottom.

“On a completely unrelated note to Aubrey and Chinch arguing in the back room where they think no one will hear them, have some free samples,” said Uncle George, holding out a pair of Extendable Ears.

Exo took one of the pair, gracious but confused; Albus understood and smiled widely.

“On a completely unrelated note to your gift of Extendable Ears,” said Albus, “how would one spy into the back room with an Extendable Ear, seeing as how the door doesn’t have a crack in the bottom like most doors?”

“On a completely unrelated note,” chuckled Uncle George, “there’s a ventilation shaft in the ceiling of that room which is not too distantly connected to the ventilation shaft of this ceiling.”

“How do we get the Extendable Ears up there without anyone noticing?” asked Albus. “On a completely unrelated note, of course.”

Uncle George pointed upwards; just then, two small children started chasing each other overhead, laughing and screaming as they dashed upside-down along the ceiling.

“Thanks,” said Albus, grinning.

“If they get violent back there, notify someone,” murmured Uncle George through the side of his mouth. “That is obviously a completely unrelated comment.”

“Obviously,” said Albus, tugging Exo near the door.

They exited the shop quickly and then turned back in; they were vaulted onto the ceiling. It took some time to navigate across the shop from this perspective, but Exo spotted the ventilation shaft on the floor near one of the walls. They took spots on either side of the grate and then sat down furtively. Making sure to hide the strings of flesh, they fed the Extendable Ears down the ventilation shaft and into the back room, following the sounds of shouting.

“—may have gotten everyone on your side with that dirty trick with the Engodska boy,” Aubrey was saying, “but I know what you’re—”

“I really don’t understand what you think I did,” said Chinch. “You think I used a highly illegal curse to turn our employers on you, for no actual benefit to myself?”

“Don’t play stupid, you enjoyed it!”

“Fine. I won’t pretend I didn’t. But I certainly wouldn’t have risked Azkaban to see you make a fool of yourself. I’m not as stupid as you think I am, let alone as stupid as you are.”

“It was a brilliant plan,” said Aubrey. “I don’t think you’re stupid at all — I think that was absolutely brilliant. Do something so outrageous that no one would suspect you. No one would
ever think you would use the Imperius Curse as a means to this petty end, which made the perfect cover for you to do so.”

“You are paranoid and mistrustful, Aubrey, but I really don’t think you’re that stupid. I have gained nothing from what happened in France, which gives me no motive to do what you’re accusing me of doing!”

“Oh, there’s a motive,” said Aubrey in such a dangerous tone that it sent shivers down Albus’s spine even through the Extendable Ear.

“Which is?”

“I’m onto you, Chinch,” said Aubrey. “I know there’s something about you that doesn’t sit right with me. When something doesn’t sit right with me, I find out why. I’m going to find out what you’re up to, and when the dust is settled, there’ll be no hole deep enough for you to dive down where I can’t scrape you off the bottom.”

“If you get some sick pleasure from fantasizing that people in the valued and trusted employ of the Ministry are secretly plotting against you,” said Chinch, “then please at least keep me out of it.”

“No one innocent credits their innocence to being in the ‘valued and trusted employ of the Ministry,’” accused Aubrey.

“First of all, that’s ridiculous and you have no idea what you’re talking about. Secondly, if I am not innocent, then what, pray tell, are you supposing is my crime?

“What happened to Delkan?”

There was a brief silence.

“Are you about to accuse me of being involved in Delkan’s death?” said Chinch, and the tone of his voice felt like spiders creeping along the back of Albus’s neck.

“Are you going to deny it if I do accuse you?”

“You know what happened. Everyone knows what happened. I still have nightmares about what happened.”

“Pitiable,” scoffed Aubrey. “Fine, then. What happened to Davies?”

“Excuse me?”

“What happened to Davies, Chinch? The same thing that happened to Delkan? According to you, yes. And — imagine this — you’re the only one who was present for her death, as well as Delkan’s—”

There was a slam that could only be Aubrey being thrown against a wall. Exo got up as if to hail someone to intervene, but Albus pulled him back down to listen a little longer first.

“I have tortured myself — for hours upon endless hours — for what happened when I was supposed to be there for my partners,” roared Chinch. “Wishing it was me. Wishing I was dead in their place, because they both had spouses and two children and I had nothing. I should have been the one who didn’t come back because I had nothing to come back to except for survivor’s guilt. But I have always come back because I’ve been the lucky one, if you can call it luck. And I have ever since been willing to die for any of my friends because I should already be dead.”
There was only heavy breathing for the next few seconds, and then Chinch restarted.

“If you’re accusing me of taking the lives of my friends, then you are accusing me of being traitorous to the one part of my soul that’s still keeping me alive and fighting — the love for the friends that I still have whom I don’t want to lose and will do anything to lose myself before they are lost. Don’t take that away from me. Do not take that away, or I have nothing left.”

There was movement; Chinch had released Aubrey from his hold on the wall.

“You’re a great actor,” said Aubrey. “Great. Then again, you’d have to be, or you would have been caught by now—”

“Just because you don’t like me as a person,” said Chinch, “does not mean that I’m plotting everyone’s murder. Grow up, Killian.”

“You are brilliant. No one believes me and you remain safe. But they will find out eventually. And don’t even think about trying to take me out — I’ve got eyes in the back of my head, and I’ve already told Potter that if I die he knows who to investigate first. It’s only a matter of time, Chinch. They all get caught. Voldemort fell at the hands of the man whose children you’re babysitting and if you don’t think he’ll catch on then, never mind, you’re not as smart as I thought.”

“There is just no way to reason with someone like you.”

“Reason isn’t an option for dealing with murderers—”

The door to the back room slammed open and Chinch speed-walked out; Albus took a sharp breath and reeled in the Extendable Ear so as not to be caught snooping. Exo followed suit when he realized what was happening.

“That was…” started Albus, trailing off.

“Distressing,” offered Exo.

“Sure.”

Uncle George gave them a meaningful look from the floor; the two boys shrugged, no other gesture seeming appropriate. A grimace, perhaps? Albus added a grimace, and Uncle George seemed to understand. He waved them over to the green mat where they would be returned to the floor.

“What did they say?” asked Uncle George quietly.

“A lot of arguing,” said Exo. “Aubrey kept saying he’s ‘onto’ Chinch.”

“He’s ‘onto’ Chinch? What does that mean?”

“I think Aubrey suspects Chinch of being a double agent,” whispered Albus.

“A double agent? Chinch? Chinch is on the very short list of people whom Harry actually trusts. Aubrey should know that, he’s on there, too!”

They stopped their conversation when Aubrey walked over, looking irritable.

“You’re not supposed to be with anyone but Helio Wilcox right now,” instructed Aubrey.
“You weren’t supposed to leave,” noted Albus.

Aubrey gave a purposefully fake smile.

“I’m supposed to keep you safe,” he said coldly. “That’s what I was doing.”

“I’m certain you were trying,” said Uncle George. “Now get them back to their parents — Harry and Helio look ready to leave.”

“Leave this miraculous emporium of juvenile exploitation techniques?” said Aubrey dryly. “Who would want to do that?”

“You’re two seconds away from leaving in a lot of pain,” said Uncle George. “And I apologize if I don’t impress you; I thought you of all people would appreciate juvenile.”

“Cute,” said Aubrey. “Get back to pretending you’re of use to the world.”

“I already fought with the Aurors, for years on end until there was enough peace for me to reopen the shop with a clear conscience,” retorted Uncle George, “but I had to do so without my brother, my best friend, because he died saving the world. And a piece of advice before you go… The next time you try to get into a petty insult fight, try doing so in the mirror; you’ll have more to insult, and at least you’ll pull off a stalemate.”

Exo snorted as Aubrey’s face finally showed real anger. Uncle George seemed satisfied with the outcome and turned around, his dragon leather coattails swishing behind him as he walked back to the front of the store and hailed the Potters and Wilcox.

Chinch didn’t look happy to be heading towards Aubrey again; Aubrey didn’t look happy that Chinch was still with them. Uncle George was whispering something in Harry’s ear, and when he finished, he gave a nod in Albus’s direction.

“All right, kids, let’s head down to Flourish and Blotts next,” said Wilcox.


“Goodbye, George,” said Ginny. “Glad the shop was rebuilt to your satisfaction.”

Harry approached Albus as they exited the shop and put an arm on his shoulder, pulling him slightly back from the group. Exo noticed and hung back as well.

“George tells me he gave you a little job,” said Harry. “What did you hear?”

Albus and Exo briefly explained the interactions for which they had eavesdropped.

“Oh, good,” said Harry when they’d finished. “That’s exactly what I wanted to hear. What progress they’ve been making! Progress in the wrong direction, though. Now they’re both trying to nail each other to the wall. That’s just lovely.”

“You think they’re trying to get each other in trouble?”

“I know they hate each other more and more every time they see each other,” said Harry. “And I know that Chinch knows that Aubrey has a short fuse. Chinch annoys him as much as possible, so that Aubrey goes off at the wrong times and loses face. I’ve seen it happen a lot — of course, I have a hard time believing he used the Imperius Curse on Louis’s boyfriend. But if Aubrey thinks
that’s what Chinch did, then that makes sense that he’d retaliate. I think he was just trying to seriously upset Chinch — make him so angry and unstable that he’d leave.”

“If that’s true,” said Exo, “it didn’t work… Chinch is still here.”

“Of course he is,” said Harry. “He’s faithful to his own grave. That’s why I keep him around.”

“That’s why you know you can trust him?” asked Albus.

“Well, yes,” said Harry. “And the reason I know he’s faithful to his own grave is because he was once tortured. A band of remaining Dark Revival elites captured him and tried to extract the whereabouts of your father, Exo, because they blamed him for the loss of one of their lieutenants… your mother. Another good friend of Helio’s was tortured with him — they killed her in front of Chinch, and he still didn’t give in.”

“Was her name Davies?” asked Exo.

“Davies was a different Auror,” said Harry, looking very sad at the memory. “Also died tragically. Chinch hates himself for losing her. She was his partner after he lost his first partner to a rogue Death Eater ambush.”

“Aubrey kept hinting that Chinch was responsible,” said Exo as Ginny fell back to see what they were talking about.

“Everyone knows that’s utterly absurd,” said Harry. “My guess is, Aubrey was trying to provoke Chinch into storming off in the middle of his shift, so that I’d think Chinch wasn’t reliable. Nothing would upset Chinch more than making him relive those deaths and then suggesting that he had something to do with them.”

“Aubrey and Chinch,” said Ginny, shaking her head in disbelief.

James hung back when Ginny slowed down. Lily followed James, and then the rest of the group fell back, too, so there wasn’t room to talk about Aubrey and Chinch anymore, as their personal guards were standing right beside them, on either side of the group so they didn’t have to look at each other. The Potters and Wilcoxes entered Flourish and Blotts tense and mostly silent.

“Okay, what do you guys need?” asked Ginny, eager to get the shopping trip over. That was saying something, as Ginny loved shopping.


“Oh, yes,” said Harry, looking over to Wilcox. “What happened to Dixon?”

“Harbingitis,” said Wilcox solemnly, and he and Harry struck up a side conversation as Ginny asked James if he needed any new books.

“Expert Transfiguration, Breaching the Darkness, and Advanced Potion Making, volume 2,” said James.

“Lily?” asked Ginny.

“There’s no books on my list that we don’t already own,” replied Lily.

“Are you sure you don’t want newer books? James did a number on some of those.”
“I love hand-me-downs,” said Lily airily. “They feel better.”

“If you insist,” said Ginny. “Come on, James, Albus, Exo.”

They walked up the stairs towards the books for Hogwarts fourth year students, right as a small family crossed their path from the fifth year section.

“Ugh,” said James as Albus recognized the family as the Pierces.

“She’s out of prison?” whispered Ginny in a very hushed voice. “She murdered a Muggle man with Dark magic in front of a massive Muggle audience.”

“The Family Who Lived,” said Asher, a wand suddenly appearing in his hand from the sleeve of his robe. “For now.”

“Hello, Ginevra,” said Greta. “How goes life under a rock?”

“More comfortable than prison,” replied Ginny, ushering her children away.

If Greta was bothered by the comment, she didn’t show it. She was the picture of typical pureblood poise, superiority complex on full display.

“I did what I had to do,” called Greta at her back. “If the Ministry flexed their muscles at the Squibs like I did at the Muggles, you wouldn’t be having this problem.”

“Do not reply,” warned Ginny as James curled his hand into a fist. “It can only end badly if it doesn’t end here.”

“You still need your Transfiguration textbook, Asher,” said Greta to her elder son.

“I’ll get it,” said Asher. “You two go; I can Apparate back when I’m done.”

James turned his head slightly to look behind him. Red Pierce had followed his mother down the stairs, but Asher was following them.

“Do not engage with him, whatever you do,” said Ginny, also taking notice.

The other two Pierces, as Albus could see from the second floor, exited Flourish and Blotts without a glance back at their older son. Asher followed the Potters all the way into the fourth years’ bookshelves.

“Potter,” said Pierce, coming up beside James. “How is your pouf of a cousin?”

Ginny kept a firm hand on James’s back as they advanced towards the book that Albus needed.

“Stupid move,” declared Pierce. “Half-breed and Muggle-lover… he didn’t need to add ‘fag’ to an already extensively filthy list.”

James whirled around; his fist was deflected from being implanted in Pierce’s face only by Ginny’s quick hands. Pierce’s wand was discreetly pointed up at him.

“I apologize, that was unfair of me,” said Pierce. “Eighth-breed. It’s his grandmother who’s the half-breed. Well, we definitely know he inherited the gene for attracting men, don’t we. What a happy little slutty life he’ll have.”

Albus had been genuinely worried that his brother was about to cast an Unforgivable Curse. Now
he was worried that he himself was going to do it.

““You Potters need to learn how to exploit your inferiors,” said Pierce, coming dangerously close to James. “You don’t take advantage of those lesser than yourself, then you don’t stay on top.”

““You can’t stay on top if you were never on top,” said James.

““When I want something, I always get it,” said Pierce, “so I don’t see how that puts me anywhere else. Are you choosing to be at the bottom, Potter?”

James, thankfully, did not respond.

Pierce figured out immediately that he was going to be ignored, and the swift appearance of Aubrey and Chinch at his side made him rethink his decision to harass James. “Fine, then,” he said. “That’s your choice, and it’s my right to use you to get what I want, so don’t be surprised when it happens. The stronger always survive, Potter, and I don’t think anyone on the planet would presume to call Muggles stronger. Remember that, and don’t get in the way or try to resist what will inevitably become of the weak; join them if you must.”

He passed them, smacking into James’s arm, and disappeared down the end of the aisle as Ginny pulled Albus’s book from the shelf and breathed a sigh of relief.

“What a miserable little mistake,” said Ginny.

“What was the point of that conversation, exactly?” asked Exo, looking at James, who was still having trouble breathing calmly.

“People like that get their fixes from pretending they’re better than everyone else,” said Ginny. “I’m sure we won’t see him again now that you’ve started ignoring him, James.”

“I hope not,” said Lily. “He was quite an unpleasant boy.”

“Is Red Pierce any better?” asked James, looking over at Albus and Exo. “He’s between our years, but I’ve avoided him ever since I met Asher.”

“I don’t know,” admitted Albus. “I’ve avoided them, too.”

“Keep avoiding them,” said Ginny. “Let’s get to the sixth year books and get what you need, James, and then let’s leave quickly. This trip is infinitely more stressful than I’d imagined. I would have gone to Dillied Alley if there was a bookstore that carried these books…”

The Potters and Exo picked up the books that James needed for his N.E.W.T.-level classes as quickly as they could find them, and then quickly walked to the front of the store to make their purchase. A quick glance across the store told Albus that Asher Pierce was lurking just behind a shelf, watching them.

Harry and Wilcox joined them as they left the line and headed towards the door; Pierce was suddenly right behind them. But as they were just about to open the door to leave the shop, an alarm blared through the entire store.

“SHOPLIFTER, STOP. SHOPLIFTER, STOP. SHOPLIFTER, STOP.”

The alarm was the screaming voice of a man; several store employees fell onto the Potters. Pierce walked right up to James and smirked.
James looked over accusingly at Pierce, who shrugged and tugged his bag closer to him.

“Mr. Potter, I’m going to have to ask your family to stop,” said one of the store workers, starting to check everyone’s bag.

“I’m going to take a guess it was him,” said James, throwing a finger at Pierce.

“The alarm went off as your family crossed the line,” said the worker, pulling out an unfamiliar book from James’s bag and tapping it with his wand; it glowed bright red. “It’s this one.”

“Oh, goodness,” said Pierce dramatically. “James Potter is a thief!”

“You put this in here!” roared James.

“I won’t deny it,” said Pierce, walking calmly out. He turned the corner, arrogant as ever, and disappeared from view.

The worker waved his wand now that he had retrieved the stolen book, but the obnoxiously loud alarm continued.

“There was a second book stolen,” said the worker, eyeing the Potters and Wilcoxes carefully.

“Are you kidding?” groaned Harry.

The worker searched every bag twice, and came up with nothing. He scratched his own head and looked at them suspiciously.

“Oh, don’t tell me,” yelled James. “It was Asher Pierce! He put that book in my bag to distract you guys when he was actually stealing something!”

The worker gave James an irritated but slightly embarrassed glare. He shook his head and dismissed the alarm.

“Let’s check again,” he said. “Walk backwards, everyone, and then walk through the line again.”

The Potters and Wilcoxes backed across the black line on the floor that marked where the alarm would go off, and then crossed it again; there was no alarm.

“You can go,” he said, defeated.

“I guess that’s what Pierce meant by ‘exploiting the people below you,’” grunted James.

“What an arse,” said Lily casually.

They exited Flourish and Blotts, and before they could talk about where they were going next, Albus heard some very familiar voices.

“Albus! Exo!”

Alec and Aidan were waving to them from just down the street. The two boys began to rush to their friend, but skidded to a stop when Aubrey and Chinch stepped between them.

Albus tried to grimace at them from behind the bodyguards; Exo flushed and uncomfortably stepped from side to side to try to see them, too.

“Sorry, but we cannot allow visitors at this time,” said Aubrey.
“Visitors?” coughed Alec. “We’re only his best friends.”

“You’re honestly going to stop us from seeing him?” scoffed Aidan.

Neither Aubrey nor Chinch moved. Aidan and Alec both shot annoyed looks at the family, and then turned away.

“Great,” said Albus. “Just how I wanted it to go when I see my friends for the first time in months.”

“You don’t know if they were your friends,” corrected Chinch.

Albus pressed a palm to his face.

“It’s for the best, Al,” said Harry gently. “But even for what it’s worth… I’m sorry you have to put up with this.”

“How much longer will we have to put up with it?” whined Albus.

Harry didn’t answer.

The lack of an answer was worse than anything his father could have said. Albus was left with the unspoken dread that this might very well continue for the rest of his life.
Harry was home with his family a lot more than usual. Cynically, James joked that it was because he didn’t think they’d survive very long and wanted to spend as much time with his kids as possible before they kicked the bucket. It didn’t matter how sarcastically he said it, though; it always made Albus nervous.

The increased presence of his father did allow Albus to work on his Patronus more often. One day, when Harry had promised to teach them the spell, he came home with some Levity Liquid that he’d purchased instead of trying to make it himself.

“All right, we’re going to do this right today,” he said, reading the label. He handed the bottle to Lily. “Uncap it, exhale completely, and then inhale at your normal breathing speed for roughly three and a half seconds.”

Lily took the bottle and breathed in happily. She handed it to Albus, who stared at the bottle.

“Go on, Al, it’s not like the stuff I made,” laughed Harry. “Much less potent. It’ll help you a lot.”

“No,” said Albus. “I want to do it myself.”

“You will, eventually,” said Harry. “Your attempts without the potion will succeed much quicker once you’ve gotten the feel of the spell, which is why the Cacolevitens can help so much.”

“I have already done the spell,” said Albus. “I want to try it without the Levity Liquid. I feel like I can get it today.”

Harry sighed. “If you really don’t want to, I can’t make you. I really think the potion will help you get the hang of it so that you can do it yourself faster, too, but it’s up to you.”

“I’ll do it myself,” repeated Albus.

“Okay, then get ready,” said Harry. “Lily, are you ready?”

Lily’s chest swelled and she nodded with her wand up high.

“Albus?”

“Definitely,” said Albus. He was feeling something inside him that told him today was the day. He took a stance with high confidence.

“One — two — three!”

“Expecto Patronum!” chorused the siblings.

James came up from the basement just as twin jets of silver light beamed out of Albus’s and Lily’s wands. He looked on and nodded, settling into a nearby couch to watch.

The Patronus jets illuminated the room, spreading out slightly like a barrier in front of them, and disappeared a few seconds later.

“That was brilliant!” exclaimed Harry. “Much better — the best yet from both of you, barring your actual Patronus, of course, Al, but those were special circumstances. Just a few things I noticed —
you both forgot a little bit how to sustain your Patronus once it’s up. Keep your memory in mind the whole time, and if you feel like your spell is weakening, immerse yourself in the memory completely. Let it take you over. That memory isn’t just serving to fuel your protection, it is your protection, and you’ve got to let that memory shine through you and become your physical and mental shield. There are few things more compelling in keeping us alive than reminiscing on the best moments of our lives. So remember what I read you about the flow of mental energy through the body—”

“Expecto Patronum!” interjected Albus.

He’d finally figured it out. He’d always worked on his own pace, and had always had his greatest success when left to his own devices. He didn’t know if it was natural talent, or dumb luck, or a combination of both, but that was how he did things, and deviating from that was holding him back from his true potential with the Patronus Charm. He wasn’t going to ignore his father’s advice completely, but he was going to have to subject that advice to his own gut instinct.

His coyote Patronus sprang into the room, landing adeptly on the floor and gazing back at Albus. Its eyes were like stars, glowing brighter than the rest of the body. It pawed the ground as if waiting for orders.

“Whoa — that’s it!” Harry pumped a fist. “Ginny, come here, Al got it!”

Ginny burst into the room a few seconds later and gasped at the beautiful Patronus that Albus had summoned. They all had time to admire it for a few seconds before it disappeared in a puff of silver smoke. Lily squealed and clapped, which she probably would have done even if she hadn’t taken a whiff of the Levity Liquid.

“Good job, little bro,” said James. He gave a thumbs-up to his little brother and went back down the stairs into the basement.

“Albus, that was wonderful,” fawned Ginny.

“Beautiful,” said Harry.

Albus shone with pride; he felt like he was glowing as bright as his Patronus.

“Oh, we forgot to tell him,” said Ginny suddenly as Lily continued her efforts to work the spell.

“Forgot to tell me what?” asked Albus. Something about the Patronus? Or were they talking about James?

“Oh, right,” said Harry. He turned to Albus, his serious-face on.

“What?” asked Albus, now nervous.

“We booked you an appointment with a psychologist the week before you return to school. Her name is Dr. Vanessa Varnisse, and she—”

“A psychologist?” laughed Albus. “That’s a joke, right? I’m not insane.”

“A psychologist isn’t for insane people,” said Harry. “A psychologist is for perfectly sane people who have undergone extreme duress on the mind.”

“What are you talking about?”
“Your little adventure down in the Sandblood base,” said Harry. “We should have sent you after the Lunar Massacre, too, but we didn’t think of it. But that one wasn’t your fault. This time… you were directly involved in the deaths of two people, one of them innocent. That kind of event can leave its mark. We think it would be best if you had a professional mind to talk to.”

“I’m perfectly fine,” said Albus, somewhat offended.

“Your mind on the outside may be fine, but I’m talking about a mark on the soul,” said Harry. “Even if it wasn’t murder, when death follows you, it’s hard to feel normal after that. Believe me — I know.”

“Nothing’s wrong with you,” emphasized Ginny. “Everything that may or may not have happened to you is perfectly normal. But, do you remember when we thought that your loss of magic was due to what happened at the Lunar Massacre? Something like a magical block could truly happen if you go through anything else that stressful, and this is a good way to take precautions against that.”

“All you’ll be doing is going to see a psychologist who will make sure you’re one hundred percent okay after the events you were a part of,” said Harry. “There’s no downside to this for you. If you’re completely fine, then we’ll know you’re fine, and if there’s anything she can do to help you, then she will. If there’s even a tiny chance that your soul is a little bit scarred due to involuntary manslaughter, then we want to make sure that wound doesn’t spread, or get re-opened at any point in your future.”

“Is that a thing?” asked Albus skeptically.

“Professor Wilcox suggested that you go to this psychologist when I was talking with him in Diagon Alley,” said Harry. “Helio has been sending Exo to her for a while now, to try and help him cope with his werewolf condition. According to Helio, she’s really helped him. Who knows? You might like her, too, and you might want to see her more often than just today, to talk about more than just the deaths of Malseth and Vivekkamal. It’s not easy being famous from infancy.”

“Right,” said Albus, acknowledging that his father knew something about being famous from infancy. Still, he didn’t appreciate the suggestion that he wasn’t strong enough to deal with this on his own. But at the same time he knew that it might be nice to see a psychologist — it would be a new experience for him. Maybe he’d get something out of it. It couldn’t hurt. “Sure. I’ll go.”

“Glad to hear it,” said Harry. “Your appointment will be on the Tuesday before you leave for Hogwarts. It might help, before you go, to think about some things you want to talk about in advance.”

“I will,” said Albus.

Lily wasn’t paying much attention to the discussion, though that was probably due to the Levity Liquid; normally she kept an ear open for everything, silently observing. That was a trait all of the Potter children shared.

Albus began to think about what he might be able to discuss with his psychologist; nothing came to mind. But maybe she’d help him think of something. That’s what psychologists were supposed to do, right? Manipulate your thoughts?

He laughed to himself; that was putting it darkly. Right now, he was setting all of his dark thoughts aside and relaxing. He cast another Patronus, this one with much more difficulty due to the strain on his ability, but let the warmth from the spell fill him up afterwards. The memory he used was a kiss he shared with Janelle, and basking in the light of his Patronus made it feel like it was
Happening again.

Harry placed a hand on Albus’s back as they stood in wait by the door.

“Nothing to worry about,” he said. “No reason to worry. All you’re going to do is talk, and only about what you want to talk about.”

Albus nodded. “I know.”

“She will probably already know a good deal about you. Our lives aren’t exactly one hundred percent private, after all, and she also knows Helio Wilcox. You probably won’t be able to talk to her about Exo, though, due to her patient confidentiality agreement. Or, maybe you can, but she won’t tell you anything he’s told her. And remember not to reveal too many details about your mission — just what’s necessary.”

“Got it.”

The door finally clicked open, and a woman about his grandmother’s age peered out. Her hair was auburn, her eyes were green, and her smile was kind.

Harry clapped his son on the back and then stood to leave.

“Allbus Potter?” asked Dr. Varnisse, smiling.

Albus stood up, too. “That’s me,” he said as his father waved goodbye.

“Come in, dear, and we’ll get started right away,” she said somewhat floatingly.

“Good, because you charge by the hour,” joked Harry. “Your mother will come to get you as soon as you’re done, Al; Dr. Varnisse will send us word. Have a good time.”

“Oh, the only times that are allowed in here are the best,” said Dr. Varnisse. “It shouldn’t take too long for me to verify that Albus is ship-shape, right, Albus? So however long our session runs depends mostly on you.”

“Perfect,” said Harry. “Bye, Al.”

“Bye, Dad,” said Albus as his father headed out to the Auror Office.

Dr. Varnisse gestured him to the door and followed him through. There was an extremely comfortable-looking chair by an extremely comfortable-looking bed that seemed to be able to recline however far he would like; in short, everything he would have expected from a psychologist’s office.

“Have a seat,” she offered, gesturing to the bed. “The chair will recline with you whenever you sit up or lie back.”

Albus took the bed; immediately, the back half of the bed rose up to meet his back in the most comfortable position possible.

“Now, I’m just going to ask you a few questions before I turn the discussion over to you,” said Dr. Varnisse, settling into her own chair. “Just to make sure you’re coping with the tragedies you witnessed. If you don’t think there’s anything wrong, I believe you, so we’ll just reinforce what we already know today. Sound good?”
“Absolutely,” said Albus, warming up to her already.

“Wonderful. Then we’ll get started.”

She adjusted her thin black spectacles and tugged on the bottom of her clipboard; a quill popped out, which she took, and a piece of paper manifested itself onto the clipboard. She settled herself deeper into her chair and sighed.

“Have you been experiencing any chronic tenseness?”

“Not any more than would be expected from someone who’s constantly surrounded by an armed guard,” said Albus.

“You want to talk about that?” asked Dr. Varnisse, peering over the top of her clipboard.

“Maybe after this part is done.”

“Sure thing. Have you experienced any decrease in performance in your magic?”

“No,” said Albus, “it’s been better than ever.”

“Glad to hear it. Let’s see… Has your memory been intact? As in, you remember everything you’ve done during the day?”

“Er… I forget dreams I’ve had, sometimes…”

That was something he could talk about — his recurring dream of flying over the desert. He’d wait until after the formalities were finished, though.

“Okay, but that’s normal, so… other than that?”

“No, I haven’t had any amnesia.”

“Good. Any severe mood swings?”

“Nope.”

“Okay, and how about intense periods of depression, or regret, or negative thoughts in general?”

“No.”

“Tormented, day or night, by visions of what happened?”

“Still no.”

“This is ridiculous,” said Dr. Varnisse, taking the paper off of her clipboard and placing it on her desk. “We don’t have to continue this. You’re fine, we both know.”

But Dr. Varnisse underestimated Albus’s analytic eyes, and his ability to piece together the situation from little data. From the glimpse he’d gotten when she’d taken the paper off of her clipboard, he saw that she had written only six bullet points, and she’d asked him six questions. From this, he divined that her flippant attitude towards protocol was a ruse. She could tell that he wasn’t really interested in talking about what had happened in regards to the deaths he witnessed, and she was trying to make him friendlier to her by taking his side — pretending to throw out the questionnaire early because it was useless as to what “they both knew.” She was buttering him up, making him feel better and more at ease, giving the impression that she understood him. After all,
she was a doctor who specialized in the mind. Albus smiled with inner pride at the result of his analysis; Dr. Varnisse seemed to take the smile as a sign that her little ploy had worked. Albus didn’t care about the slight manipulation; it wasn’t like she was covering a complete lack of empathy or anything like that, she just wanted to establish a connection faster. Nevertheless, Albus kept his eyes open for more mental tricks.

“Is there anything in general you would like to talk about?” asked Dr. Varnisse.

Albus nodded. “Yes, actually. I’ve been having recurring dreams. My dad said it’s probably just because of my experiences. I told him they don’t feel like dreams, and he says he understands that feeling, but he doesn’t know what they mean.”

Dr. Varnisse leaned forward a bit in her chair and combed some hair out of her eyes with her long fingernails. “Do tell,” she said.

“I dream that I’m… flying. Over seas of sand. And I’m looking for something… something that isn’t sand. But I don’t really know what it is.”

“Go on,” she said, her eyes seeming to crackle with electricity.

“And I usually find it, if I’m not woken up first. It’s this little rock. I try to go near it, but something bad happens. I try to escape, but… I can’t. It’s raining sand, and the sand is like a whirlpool, dragging me down. Have you… Have you ever heard of anything like that?”

“Albus Potter, are you very gifted with mind-based magic?”

Albus started.

“Er — yes, I think I am. My silver lime wand… sometimes reads peoples’ minds on its own.”

“And have you recently gone under the Connectivity Charm?”

“Er…”

He had, but it was cast by Wilcox during the mission he wasn’t supposed to disclose.

“Or the Imperius Curse, or the Marionette’s Medicine, or anything like that?”

He had been under the Imperius Curse last year and had used the Marionette’s Medicine.

“Why do you ask?”

“When your mind is assailed, or becomes connected to another mind in general,” said Dr. Varnisse, “there can be some unintentional… leakage of information. Especially if one of the minds in question is inexperienced, or weakened from some other outside influence. What can happen is that one mind will accidentally relay some information into the other without ever being aware of it. But it is almost always between the subconscious parts of the mind, so the new mind doesn’t receive the information as if it was told in speech. You will receive the signals in subconscious thought, or in dreams.”

“So, when I had an experience with connected minds,” said Albus, “you think that caused me to see some of the thoughts of the person I was connected to?”

“It’s entirely possible. If a thought was plaguing the other party, then that thought may have been transferred to you, and it may very well have started plaguing you.”
Albus tried to imagine why Malseth, or whoever was controlling Theela Dane with the Marionette’s Medicine, would have been imagining seas of sand.

“I’m not sure what it means,” said Dr. Varnisse, “but that would be my guess. Recurring dreams are never something to ignore without analysis. There fairly often is a cause, and that cause may be influential in other parts of your life as well.”

“It’s not the first time I’ve had recurring dreams,” said Albus, “but the first time was caused by something traumatic that I lived through.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“I’m okay now,” said Albus quickly.

“How did you stop those recurring nightmares?”

“I… sort of accepted what happened,” said Albus, “and they stopped.”

“Do you want these dreams to stop?”

“Well, they’re not exactly pleasant,” said Albus. “I keep drowning, breathing in a lot of sand, and it’s just as awful every time. But if I could get information about the Sandbloods’ plans through this…”

The world already knew that Albus’s family had been abducted by the Sandbloods, so he wasn’t giving anything away by revealing that it was the Sandbloods who Imperiused him. He just needed to neglect to mention that he had used the Marionette’s Medicine on a Sandblood.

“That’s an interesting thought,” said Dr. Varnisse. “Tell me if you get anywhere on those efforts — perhaps I can help you further.”

“I will, thank you for offering,” said Albus.

Dr. Varnisse scribbled some notes on her paper, and another thought jumped into Albus’s mind.

“I’d like to talk about something else,” he said.

Dr. Varnisse peered at him with a soft smile over her spectacles. “Of course.”

“I have this friend,” said Albus. “His name is Eftan Griffiths. Or, he was my friend. But… he hasn’t talked to me in a while. I’ve tried to reach out to him. We used to be really good friends. He was one of my best friends. But now, he doesn’t talk to me at all. He doesn’t even really look in my direction. I miss being friends with him.”

“Does he miss being friends with you?”

“He doesn’t show it if he does. He doesn’t really have any friends anymore.”

“Not a one?”

“No.”

Dr. Varnisse bit her lip and stared up at the ceiling, thinking.

“And have you tried to reach out to him?”
“Yes. But he always shoves me away.”

Dr. Varnisse looked down from the ceiling and twirled her quill adroitly around her fingers.

“So do you think that Evan would be—”

“Eftan.”

“Sorry. Do you think that Eftan would be better off if he had more friends?”

Albus nodded. “Yes. He’s in Slytherin, and he’s bullied a lot by other Slytherins because he’s… from a Muggle family.”

He didn’t want to say “Muggle-born” because the Sorting Hat had suggested otherwise — something he didn’t quite understand, seeing as how Eftan’s parents were Muggles.

“I only know what you’ve told me,” said Dr. Varnisse, “but it sounds to me like Eftan avoids other people because he’s accustomed to being hurt by other people. If he was Muggle-born, then he probably had a good many Muggle friends growing up, some of whom may have rejected him when they learned he was a wizard. If there was a fight between him and another of your friends, this may have reinforced a deep-seated belief that friendship leads to sadness. Did you have a big falling-out, or did he just slowly phase out of your friend group?”

“The latter,” said Albus. He paused. “But…”

“But?”

“But I accidentally read his mind, one time. I saw memories he had about getting bullied. That’s how I know it’s been happening. I tried to confront him about it — I tried to tell him he had to do something — but he turned me away.”

“Was this before or after the friendship started to deteriorate?”

“He had always been a little farther away from the center of our group,” said Albus. “I guess he stopped hanging out with us more and more after this happened.”

“Maybe this was the catalyzing event,” said Dr. Varnisse. “It’s possible that the decay started there.”

“I feel terrible,” muttered Albus.

“Don’t. It’s not your fault. Eftan may have realized that being friends with the son of Harry Potter might not have helped his popularity with the Slytherins… all the same, that is nothing that can be helped on your part.”

“I asked him if that was why he didn’t want to be friends with me.”

“And he said?”

“He said that he just prefers being alone.”

“Maybe that’s true.”

“Maybe it is,” said Albus, “but he should still have friends. I feel like it’s unhealthy that he doesn’t.”
“Those are your feelings,” said Dr. Varnisse. “I know you miss your friend, but in regards to you personally… I feel that you can’t do much at this point. You are the son of Harry Potter, and being friends with Eftan would put a target on Eftan’s back even bigger than the one he already inherited. Things are more complicated for his end of the friendship than yours, and if he has decided that the friendship isn’t worth the trouble, then he isn’t really a true friend.”

“But I want to help him get over that.”

“I know you do, and that’s a noble thing to wish. But I think that, unfortunately, because of the cards you were dealt in being a Potter, you’re not the person for that job. I hate to have to tell you that, but I am supposed to be honest.”

Albus nodded. “I understand. But is there any way I can help him?”

“Respect his boundaries,” said Dr. Varnisse. “Aside from that, perhaps you could encourage other people to try and reach out to him, but if he finds out you’re behind it, he may never trust a helping hand again. My advice is to let him find his own way. If he ever experiences a time when he needs someone to be there for him, he will always be able to find a friend. If he never needs a friend… well, some people just don’t. It’s sad, and it often does lead to sadness, but sometimes there’s nothing you can do.”

“That’s absurd,” said Albus. “How can there be nothing I can do?”

“As hard as it is to admit that you’re powerless, sometimes, you have no power over the situation.”

“No,” said Albus. “I’m not going to let Eftan grow up friendless. That’s not the way to live your life. Just because he thinks he’s better off alone doesn’t mean he is. How can having friends ever be a bad thing?”

“It isn’t,” agreed Dr. Varnisse.

“Then I should do something to help if I can, and I shouldn’t just assume I can’t!” he argued fiercely.

Dr. Varnisse nodded and looked back down at her papers.

Her eye didn’t glint. Her mouth didn’t twitch in the suppression of a smirk. But still, Albus could tell that something was synthetic about the reasoning he’d just undergone. He wondered how much Dr. Varnisse had known about him before he’d arrived; she’d probably asked his father or Wilcox about how his mind worked. Because he knew, right after he’d arrived at his conclusion, that she had been guiding him towards that conclusion all along. She must have known that he was somewhat rebellious when authority tried to command him, so she told him not to pursue a solution to Eftan’s problem… which made him all the more passionate about helping his friend.

Did all psychologists work like this? Saying all the right things, carefully manipulating every sentence of the discussion? Even if it was unconventional, though, it was working: Albus felt all the more persuaded to try and reach out to his old friend again. At the same time, Dr. Varnisse’s warnings rang true in his ears, about how his heritage might complicate his friendship with Eftan. He would have to be careful about that, but she was helping him in that regard as well. She was brilliant.

Albus had already decided that he liked her, and he knew he would be seeing her again soon if any sizable mental challenge came up in his life. He could have really used her at the beginning of last year when he’d been having trouble with his magic.
“You’ve been in some very deep thoughts just now,” said Dr. Varnisse with a smile. “Would you like to share any of those thoughts?”

“I think I will,” said Albus, leaning back even further in his chair, and effortlessly the story of his life began to spill from his lips.

The week after Albus’s visit to his psychologist had him in a better mood than he’d experienced throughout most of the summer. He no longer felt trapped within his own home. She’d helped him more than she probably even knew. Or perhaps she did. He figured out quite how her mind worked, but he felt as though he wasn’t supposed to.

“How was your day?” asked Ginny as Harry came home the morning that the Hogwarts Express was scheduled to leave. “Er, I mean, how was your night?”

“The night shift is always heart-pounding,” said Harry. “But not tonight. It was actually pretty uneventful. Which is unusual, but a nice change. I mean, I would love to be catching some evildoers and all, but I would also not mind if nothing happened for the rest of our lives.”

“Aw, where’s the fun in that?” asked James.

“Oh, and Harry, dear,” said Ginny, putting an arm around Lily’s shoulders. “Guess who finally mastered the Patronus Charm last night?”

“What?!” exclaimed Harry. “That’s wonderful! What kind of animal is — No, don’t tell me, just show me!”

Lily raised her wand bashfully. “Expecto Patronum!”

A brilliantly silver four-legged thin mammal arced nimbly from her wand and pranced around the room, showing off proudly. Lily gazed at it with loving eyes.

“A gazelle,” said Harry, nodding. “I can see that. And, can I just say, wow! All three of you kids, once you got the spell down, have been able to cast it with such ease every time since. It’s just amazing. You three kids are all so gifted. I really couldn’t be more proud!”

“Thanks, Dad,” said Lily.

“Let’s get you off to Hogwarts now so you can learn how to make us even more proud,” said Ginny. “Are you ready, Harry, dear? Sorry to rush you off… I know you just got back, but you’re kind of later than we expected…”

“No, no, I’m absolutely ready,” said Harry. “I wish I could go on the Hogwarts Express to make sure all of you are protected, but that would probably do the opposite… my presence would probably make the train more of a target. But Aubrey and Chinch are going to be on the train with you this time—”

“You honestly put them on the same job together again?” moaned Ginny.

“Well, it’s not just them this time… there’s also Alana Falagair, you remember her—”

“How could I forget?” grumbled Ginny.

“And Sysmal will be there—”
“Parock Sysmal? You can’t be serious. The man jumps a mile high when someone so much as sneezes!”

“That’s a good thing at this point. And don’t forget, most of the teachers will be on the train this time, too, to guide it safely to the castle.”

“That’s something I can agree on. You shouldn’t even have had to invite any Aurors, what with Charlie and Neville and Desulgon and Plinky aboard.”

“Well, you know,” said Harry, rolling his eyes. “The ‘P’ word.”


“James!” shouted Ginny.

Harry sighed and shook his head. “I was referring to ‘Politics.’ The Ministry wants to make it look like they’re doing something, so they put Aurors on the Hogwarts Express. It’s got a lot to do with politics.”

“I thought you hated that sort of business,” said Ginny. “You threw it back in Scrimgeour’s face more than once.”

“There’s a difference that I can accept,” said Harry. “The Ministry actually is doing something, but they can’t disclose everything to the public at this time, so it doesn’t look like much is happening. Public displays like the Hogwarts Express are partially to keep the panic down, but not simply for the sake of covering up mistakes, which is the part I don’t like. That’s why Auchland was kicked out from his position as Head. Anyway, I still do think that having Aurors on the Hogwarts Express is a good idea either way.”

“Sure, I suppose,” said Ginny. “But can we talk about this later? We do need to get to King’s Cross fairly soon… We’re very late now.”

“Does Mum just… not like a single Auror except her husband and brother?” whispered James to Albus.

“There’s Geri Stenet,” said Albus. “And he’s Head Auror, so he’s all that matters, I guess.”

“No, it still sucks. Even if Stenet is leading, he’s leading a band of imbeciles. Except Dad and Uncle Ron, of course. And hey, is Molly still dating Stenet’s son?”

“As far as I know,” said Albus as his parents began to chivvy them out the door.

They traveled to King’s Cross in a Ministry vehicle, accompanied by Parock Sysmal, who spent the entire trip staring out the window with a white-knuckled death grip on his wand. They then had to walk through the station with their guard, drawing more eyes than usual (even for their family). This gave Albus the impression that they were less safe, since they were sticking out like sore thumbs, but he didn’t say anything.

After they were escorted to the barrier, they were subjected to more annoyance as they were patted down for weapons by Muggle officials and then checked for powerful or Dark magical artifacts by wizard officials before they could pass through the enchanted barrier. James waved to Marco, whose family was being searched ahead of them; Marco waved back sullenly. Eventually, his family was allowed through, and the Potters took their turns.

“It’s for the best,” sighed Ginny, more to calm herself than to calm her children.
“The concealment detectors are absolutely necessary,” agreed Harry. “I mean, with every single person we know having a chance of being under MM, there’s no way we can take any chances.”

“Any headway on the development of a cure for MM, by the way?” asked Ginny.

“That’s actually why I was late,” whispered Harry. “I was visiting an old acquaintance. We’re getting a crack team together, all Potions experts who can try and develop an antidote to the effects of MM; they’re being advised by a portrait of Snape.”

“Excellent. Have they gotten any progress?”

“Well, the Marionette’s Medicine never had a cure in the hundreds of years of its existence,” said Harry, “so don’t expect anything too quickly. But then again, modern potion-making has come a long way since the fourteenth century. They stopped looking for a cure in 1305 when all the mulunctapoli were exterminated, and there have been a lot of advancements since then… so it certainly isn’t true that we have no chance. In fact, if we have even a single breakthrough, I’d say the cure could be concocted within a year of that development.”

“Let’s hope it’ll take less time than that,” said Ginny. “I feel like what we have is a ticking bomb and no one knows when it’s going to go off… but when it does, it’s going to be messy.”

The officials finally stepped aside and allowed the Potters to pass.

“They’re profiling,” scoffed Ginny indignantly as they stepped onto Platform Nine and Three Quarters. “The Murrays ahead of us are Muggles and Marco is Muggle-born, and those men took much more time searching the Murrays than they did searching us.”

“I’ll notify Saiyon down at the Dimly,” said Harry. “Maybe he’ll be able to discourage that sort of thing.”

“Who’s Saiyon?” asked Lily.

“What’s the Dimly?” asked James.

“Hal Saiyon is Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement,” said Harry. “The DMLE for short, but everyone pronounces the acronym like a word: Dimly. Which is actually pretty fitting, because they’re all rather dim down there. Saiyon probably won’t bat an eye if I give him this news, though… Not that he has anything against Muggles or Muggle-born magical folk, but he’s very cool and composed. Nothing ruffles him. He’s like the exact opposite of Sysmal, who is basically the definition of paranoid. Unless it’s something potentially damaging to life or property, Saiyon won’t care.”

“We need a change in personnel in pretty much every department in the Ministry,” said Ginny.

With those dark thoughts left in his head, Albus stepped onto the train. But Dr. Varnisse had helped him look past the troubles in his life and focus on the silver lining, and he quickly found his good humor again when he remembered how much he liked riding the Hogwarts Express — he hadn’t done this in a while.

Parock Sysmal speed-walked ahead of Albus and ducked into an empty compartment. As Albus passed the compartment, the timid-looking man cast a meerkat Patronus, which diligently began looking around in all directions just like him; he seemed to calm down slightly after his Patronus had been cast.

He looked around and found Alec waving to him. He stepped into a compartment that also housed
Mia Moon, Aidan, Exo, and the Greengrass triplets, three Ravenclaws in their year with whom Albus didn’t normally talk much.

“Hello, Albus,” said either Archie or Ashton. Archie and Ashton were identical and it was almost impossible to tell the difference between them for most people. Sebastian could be told apart slightly because his ears, nose, and chin were slightly pointier. Also, though he had been taller than his other two brothers for the first couple of years, they were growing faster than him now, and Sebastian was now thinner and shorter than either of them. The three triplets were now Chasers on the Ravenclaw Quidditch team, and they were very good — they had an almost uncanny ability to strategize with each other, which Albus would suspect was due to the fact that they were triplets. Ravenclaw’s Quidditch team, he’d heard, was going to be hard to beat this year.

“Hello,” said Albus.

Alec, also in Ravenclaw, cleared up confusion. “In case you were wondering, that one’s Archie,” he said bluntly, pointing to the triplet by the window.

“The easiest way to tell Archie from Ashton is that Archie has a tiny little mole just below his right eye,” said Mia.

“Hi, Archie, Ashton, Sebastian,” said Albus in turn.

“Their brother started dating my sister over the summer,” said Mia. “They’re in the same year in Ravenclaw.”

“Oh, yeah, Kalina is the Ravenclaw Seeker, right?” said Albus.

“Yeah, she and your brother have gone head-to-head a couple times.”

“We’ll see who wins this year,” grinned Alec.

“Hey, Albus, when I was walking onto the train I could have sworn I saw those two dunderheads who were ‘protecting’ us at Diagon Alley,” said Exo. “Aubrey and Chinch? Are they actually here right now?”

“They are,” said Albus, rolling his eyes. “Dad still thinks they’ll be able to get over their little rivalry, or whatever it is between them.”

“Who are we talking about?” asked Aidan.

“Aubrey and Chinch,” said Albus. “The Aurors who wouldn’t even let you guys talk to me in Diagon Alley.”

“Say again?” said Alec.

“When you and Aidan found me in Diagon Alley and tried to come say hi?” said Albus. “Aubrey and Chinch wouldn’t even step to the side so I could wave back.”

Aidan and Alec glanced at each other.

“We didn’t see you in Diagon Alley,” said Aidan nervously. “We looked, but we thought we’d missed you.”

Albus blinked.

“That wasn’t you two who tried to walk over to us in Diagon Alley?” he asked numbly to confirm.
Alec and Aidan both shook their heads.

“Bloody hell,” said Albus, looking at Exo. “I think Aubrey and Chinch actually saved our lives.”
“Okay, call me crazy,” said Aidan, “but—”

“You’re crazy,” interrupted Alec.

Aidan’s shoulders went limp. “You’re supposed to decide whether I’m crazy or not after I say what I was about to say.”

“You asked me to do something and I did it.”

Aidan sighed. “Anyway, call me crazy, but… do the trees in the Forbidden Forest seem taller to you?”

Albus looked out the window of the carriage they were riding up to the castle. Above the thestral’s head he could see the line of trees marking the outside of the Forbidden Forest — and they definitely did seem taller than usual.

“You’re not crazy,” agreed Exo. “I’m getting that, too.”

“And the grass seems greener,” said Albus. “Doesn’t it?”

“Actually, yes,” assented Aidan.

“Wonder what that’s all about,” said Alec.

Maybe there was just the right amount of rain and sun this summer?” suggested Exo hopefully.

“It’s never as simple as that, is it,” sighed Albus.

The carriages plodded forward. The castle was more beautiful than ever, set against a backdrop of some of the greenest foliage they’d ever seen.

“Hey,” said Aidan suddenly. “We’re going to be mentors this year.”

“Yeah, I was thinking about that,” said Alec.

“I totally forgot about it immediately after signing the agreement,” admitted Albus. “I wonder who I’m going to be tutoring. Does anyone in our year have siblings who turned eleven in time?”

“Holly Glissendale’s youngest brother,” said Alec.

“Oh, yeah,” mumbled Albus. “Holly.”

Holly had made a point not to speak to him unless slandering Janelle, which forced him to avoid her like the plague.

“Parker Pullman has a brother coming in this year,” said Exo.

“Is his brother blind,” too?” asked Alec.

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Oh, and hot-as-hell Abby Quinn has a sister coming,” added Alec.
“You have a girlfriend,” chided Aidan.

“Abby Quinn is the same level of hotness no matter how many girlfriends I have,” stated Alec. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, I hear she’s also a bit of a banshee. I like Mia a lot more than her.”

“Yeah, I never see you two apart,” chuckled Albus. “I was surprised to see that you joined our carriage instead of hers.”

“Well, I like you guys, too,” said Alec. “And Mia is chatting with the Greengrass triplets, anyway.”

“Don’t they usually hang out with Scorpius?” asked Albus.

“Yeah, Malfoy is their cousin,” replied Alec. “But they say he’s sort of become a loner lately. He doesn’t really fit in with the other Slytherins or something. He only ever hung out with his cousins and now he doesn’t even want to be around them anymore.”

Albus’s heart jumped. This sounded very familiar.

“Does that remind you guys of anyone else we know?”

“Eftan?” said Aidan, nodding. “I was thinking the same thing.”

“I bet Eftan and Scorpius could be good friends,” said Albus. “Neither of them really ever connected to the Slytherin crowd and now they prefer to be alone. Maybe, since they’re both going through the same sort of situation, they could really connect with each other.”

“But if both of them prefer to be alone, they’re not going to try to be friends with each other,” said Exo.

Albus knew this, but his chat with Dr. Varnisse still made him think that something could be done. “Maybe we could get the Greengrass triplets to introduce Eftan and Scorpius to each other.”

“Interesting thought,” said Alec. “I don’t know if it’ll work, though.”

“Well, we should try.”

“Try to get a Malfoy to be friends with a Muggle-born?” said Aidan skeptically.

“Scorpius doesn’t seem… hateful,” said Albus. “He just seems evasive, and solitary. But I think we should do whatever we can to at least get a friend for Eftan. I don’t like the thought of him going through his entire Hogwarts career without friends. And if we can do something to help him, then we should.”

“I guess so,” said Aidan. “I did always feel bad that we didn’t try to include him more after he started drifting away.”

“Did he ever give us a particular reason he stopped wanting to hang out with us?” asked Alec.

Albus glanced back out the window. He felt partially responsible, if not wholly responsible, for Eftan’s alienation from their group, which was partially responsible, if not wholly responsible, for his desire to help his old friend.

The Sorting Hat was on its stool, and the second through seventh years were at their House tables. All that was missing from the picture was the nervous band of first years; as the door opened and
Professor Longbottom led them into the room, the scene was made complete.

The Sorting Hat twitched momentarily, and then opened up its mouth to belt out its ever-changing yearly song.

"The Founders, choosing students,
sought the features they affirm:
courage, cunning, work and wit.

Shall we define each term?

Courage, despite what’s often heard,
Is not the lack of fear.

It means then when you’re fighting,
you know why you must be here.

Cunning means you’re well aware
Of all the goings-on.

It means that when the battle’s lost,
You know you must be gone.

The hardest workers bridge the gaps
That stretch from dreams to lives.

It means that when you’re set to go,
You know how one arrives.

And knowledge is another prize
Which men should seek to share.

It means that when you’re finished,
You know where to go from there.

Now listen close, for listening
Is one more virtuous trait:

Courage, cunning, work and wit
Alone are not so great.

Ask any of the Founders—
One trait, they do not seek.
They look for balances of traits
Which can make you all unique.
And while it’s true our Founders
Had one trait that they preferred,
The presence of some other traits
Was never what deterred.
The world is not all black and white—
Nor is it shades of gray.
The world is shining rainbow-bright;
New colors form each day.
So Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs,
Slytherins and Gryffindors,
Understand each other well;
Awareness ends all wars.”

The usual clapping at the end of the song began, but for some reason it seemed a lot louder than usual. It was also accompanied by a loud rumble from beneath the floor. Albus clutched his head.

“Dad looks worried,” noted Exo. His voice sounded much louder than usual to Albus, whose head was pounding with a terrible headache. “What’s that shaking?”

Wilcox definitely seemed unsettled. Something was bothering him, and a few of the other teachers didn’t seem to like the sound of the rumbling, either.

“When I call your name,” announced Professor Longbottom, “step forward and put on the hat, and you will be Sorted.”

Albus’s head was slowly exploding; this wasn’t a normal headache.


When Albus next opened his eyes, he was in the hospital wing.

“Ah, Potter,” said Madam Birchbaum, rushing to him and handing him an orange potion. “Have some Orienge. You appear to be undergoing mental whiplash. It can happen to people who have undergone extreme magical stress on the mind — such as your little adventure with the Marionette’s Medicine. The whiplash happens at unpredictable times following the stress — your mind can feel some harsh aftereffects.”

“Er… what about the Marionette’s Medicine?” said Albus. She wasn’t supposed to know about that.
“Don’t worry, I’m keeping it confidential,” said Madam Birchbaum. “Professor Wilcox needed to tell me about any severe mental stress you’ve had, so that I could ensure you got the proper care for what was affecting you.”

“But… why would I only be feeling it now?”

“A return to a strongly magical area. The mental wounds you suffered were slightly reopened when you visited your psychologist; that happens when you open up to someone completely like that. You exposed the delicate parts of your thoughts again. Anyway, your mind was exposed, and a return to such a concentrated magical hub as Hogwarts was like salt on a cut. Drink up; you’ll be fine.”

Albus drank the Orienge potion; his headache was relieved almost instantly.

“I have wounds in my mind?” he asked worriedly.

“You’ve gone through a lot more trauma than most people your age,” said Madam Birchbaum. “I think we can both agree on that. Your mind is also very sensitive and — no offense — very exposed.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re so naturally inclined towards Legilimency,” she replied. “Your mind likes to pick up on other people’s thoughts. But it leaves you a little more at risk for things like this, if you’re not prepared. A little Occlumency training should set things straight… permanently, if you’re good enough. Also, I might mention that your family history doesn’t help your cause — if I remember correctly, your father had a habit of flitting in and out of the mind of a certain someone, and though that wasn’t a genetic occurrence, he certainly had a predisposition for the control he had over it towards the end.”

“Tell me about this mental thing that just happened to me,” said Albus. “Are you just guessing at what happened, or does this sort of thing happen often?”

“It doesn’t happen incredibly often, but enough that we do know what we’re talking about,” said Madam Birchbaum. “I know you might not really trust our opinion after we failed to see the problem with your stunted magic last year, but we’re quite sure on this one.”

“I saw something,” said Albus. “Right before I blacked out, I had a vision of a green woman.”

“You might have been picking up on something spiritual,” said Madam Birchbaum. “I’d talk to Professor Allira if you think you’ve had a vision.”

I’d rather not, thought Albus. Their Divination teacher was kind, but eccentric in an unstable sort of manner. He didn’t go out of his way to spend more time with her.

“Will my mental wounds ever heal?”

“Oh, of course,” said Madam Birchbaum. “They should heal very soon. Come see me every week or so and I’ll help the wounds close up — should only take a month or two.”

Albus suddenly felt an extremely strong urge to use the facilities.

“That’ll be the Orienge,” said Madam Birchbaum knowingly as Albus stood to attend to the restroom. “Side effects may include instantly full bladder.”
Albus pondered his vision as he entered the lavatory. A green woman, dressed in a brown cloak. Her dark green hair cascaded down over her eyes. She was behind some sort of a wall. She seemed to be suffering. What did it mean?

When he was released and went back up to the Gryffindor fourth years’ dormitories, he was greeted with tentative enthusiasm by Rose, James, Hugo, and Exo.

“Are you okay?” asked Rose. “You sort of dropped your face onto the table.”

“I’m fine,” said Albus. “Madam Birchbaum said there’s nothing permanent. What did I miss in the Sorting? Any important announcements?”

“Exo’s dad really doesn’t want anyone in the forest this year,” said James. “There’s, like, a two hundred point deduction from anyone who goes in without permission, and they’ll also get two months’ detention and possible expulsion.”

“That’s…”

“That’s what?” asked James.

“That’s a lot of things,” said Albus, “and none of them are good.”

“Tell me about it. Oh, and Wilcox was talking about how Professor Dixon died.”

“What did he die from again?

“A severe case of being old as dirt,” said James.

Rose glared at James. “It was Harbingitis, Albus.”

“What’s Harbingitis?” asked Albus.

Rose spoke, as always, as though there was someone only she could see who was whispering the dictionary definition in her ear. “Harbingitis is a magical disease that causes you to predict random symptoms and then experience them, up until you predict your own death — and you’re always right. It’s less frequent for younger people but you can catch it at any age, you just might end up predicting your own death a hundred years in the future if you catch it at thirteen. Not contagious, and it’s not the most common of diseases so there’s no known treatment yet. But, you know, some people like knowing exactly when they’re going to die so they can get their affairs in order. Professor Dixon correctly predicted his death on July 28th and that’s when he died peacefully in his sleep.”

“Kind of convenient that he predicted his own death, I guess,” said Albus. “They knew they had to start looking for a new teacher.”

Rose gaped at him.

“That’s a horrible thing to say!”

“What?” said Albus defensively. “Death happens!”

Rose turned away and shook her head, muttering something that sounded like “Boys.” James and Hugo followed her away.

“The new Diwand Spells teacher seems nice,” said Exo. “Her name is Professor Evranote. She introduced herself quickly and she seems fun.”
Albus suddenly remembered something else he’d missed, and his heart sank; he’d really been looking forward to that part.

“Who’s my mentee?”

“You got Parker Pullman’s little brother, P.J.,” said Exo. “I got this little kid Rudiger Reade whose family is used to being in Slytherin, like mine. I think the Sorting Hat gave him to me because we’re a lot alike. But not as alike as me and Eftan’s mentee.”

“What?”

“Eftan got this scrawny, freaked-out-of-his-mind boy named Corey Brown,” said Exo. “And I’m almost positive he’s a werewolf.”

Albus tilted his head. “Really?”

“Really,” said Exo. “His growth has been stunted… he’s got some hints of scars… and I just get this sense from him. It’s like I can feel his wolf inside him.”

“I feel like your dad would have told you if there was a werewolf coming to Hogwarts,” said Albus. “So that you could help them, you know?”

“Maybe I’m not supposed to know,” said Exo. “But maybe if I ask him, and show him that I already know, then he can tell me a little more about Corey.”

“Go for it,” agreed Albus.

“Alec’s mentee is Holly’s little brother—”

“Great,” groaned Albus sarcastically. “Maybe I’ll get to see more of Holly now.”

“And Aidan’s mentee is this kid with pure red hair named Christopher Fireborn. He’s redder than a Weasley.”

“That’s saying something,” said Albus. “Anyway, what do we do, exactly, in regards to being a mentor? I guess I wasn’t awake when they went over that…”

“Our mentors are going to mentor us on how to be mentors,” said Exo. “You should meet up with Gil really soon to talk.”

“I will,” said Albus.

Exo glanced around; no one was listening.

“Tomorrow, after breakfast and before Herbology, let’s take a walk around the grounds,” he said quietly. “I still need to tell you something important.”

Albus nodded as Exo ducked away.

He seemed to have been in the hospital wing for some time; it was late at night. He didn’t feel tired, but he brought himself up to bed and eventually was able to drift off to sleep.

When Albus woke up in the morning, he had intended to send his father a letter about the people impersonating his friends, but Exo had told James about the imposters and James had already sent a letter to their parents. It was instead Exo’s secret that was nagging at Albus all morning. It was
something Exo had been meaning to tell Albus since Diagon Alley. What could it be?

Several thousand guesses later, none of them likely, he took a walk with Exo outside towards the grounds, to wander a bit before Herbology.

“Okay,” said Exo. “First of all, I got an owl. Her name is Marce.”

“All right,” said Albus, nodding.

Exo sighed. “I… I wrote to John Solomon.”

Albus jumped and stumbled; he kicked up a large amount of grass trying to catch his footing again.

“You did what?”

Exo stopped walking; so did Albus. They were silent for a while by the edge of the Forbidden Forest, listening only to the rustle of the tree leaves in the wind.

“It’s starting again,” said Exo. “The werewolf murders. You remember the Werewolf Hunter, Ivan Siobor? He’s picked up steam again and more werewolves are dying. I’m in danger every second I’m not cured, Albus. It probably means I’m in danger for the rest of my life, but if there was even a small chance…” He wiped his nose.

“You wanted to tell me this in Diagon Alley,” said Albus. “So you’ve had time to get a response… Did he write you back?”

Exo bit his lower lip.

“Marce came back a few days ago.”

“With the letter?” asked Albus. “She never found Solomon?”

“She didn’t have the letter when she came back.”

Albus gawked again.

“That means she found him,” said Exo. “She seemed happy, like she’d completed her task, and she wouldn’t come back happy without the letter if she hadn’t done the job, right? I know owls can even find people who can’t be tracked by magic. It’s possible, right? I think John Solomon got my letter asking him to cure me, and I think he’s already read it even now as we’re talking.”

Albus nodded. “And he didn’t give Marce a letter back? Or did someone intercept her?”

“I told you, she seemed victorious when she came back, and she didn’t show any signs of having been taken by force to remove a letter or anything,” said Exo. “But why didn’t Solomon write back to me yet?”

“Maybe he’s trying to conceive a way for you to meet,” said Albus a little breathlessly.

Exo nodded. “That’s what I thought, too. I just thought you should know… since you and I both know Solomon is innocent, you know. And because…”

“Because I promised I’d come with you if you tried to meet Solomon,” said Albus, placing a hand on Exo’s shoulder, “and I won’t back out of that promise now, or ever. If he writes back to you, tell me straight away, okay?”

Exo nodded, smiling through a few happy tears. He wiped his eyes and started walking towards
Albus started to follow Exo, but his shoe snagged on something.

He tripped and fell forward as his sock left his shoe. He glanced back; a thousand tiny little blades of grass were creeping up the side of his shoe, holding it in place. As he watched, they started to drag it down, sucking it under the ground slowly.

“Hey!” he yelled, reaching for his shoe. The movement of his arm snapped several tendrils of grass that had attached themselves to his arm, and he realized that the grass was attempting to swallow him up, too. He leapt away, snapping a hundred or so strands as he charged away towards the greenhouse where they were having class. He grabbed Exo’s arm as he passed, pulling his mesmerized friend away from the danger.

“Professor Longbottom!” shouted Albus as he burst into the greenhouse. “The grass outside is eating my shoe!”

Professor Longbottom had been talking to Mia; he looked over with a very curious look on his face.

“Hurry, before my shoe’s gone,” said Albus, gesturing outside.

Professor Longbottom sprinted outside, and skidded to a stop when he saw where Albus was pointing.

“Fascinating,” he said, looking at the top of the shoe which was almost completely under the surface of the ground. He waved his wand. “Relashio!”

The grass retreated under the ground, leaving a bare patch ten feet in diameter.

“That’s Snaggrass,” he said, digging into the soil and pulling out Albus’s muddy shoe. “But… this is far too low in elevation for Snaggrass to be growing. And that’s a lot faster than Snaggrass usually works… I should take it in for testing.”

“Where did it go?” Albus asked, looking at the topsoil.

“It receded into its roots. It’ll grow back. I’ll have to remember to mark off this area so no one else goes there, and strengthen the grass around this circle so the Snaggrass doesn’t spread.”

As he spoke, new grass was already sprouting from the soil. Within seconds, it had repopulated the bare ground area, but stopped growing before it overtook the height of the grass around it, or its barriers on the outside of the circle.

“Snaggrass will do that,” said Professor Longbottom. “It’ll make itself look like regular grass, to fool animals into sleeping there, and then it’ll cover them and drag them under before they wake up. It’s related to Devil’s Snare. I think we could actually have a good class on Snaggrass… I might scrap our lesson plan and bring everyone out here.”

“Scrap the lesson plan?” asked Mia.

Mia was a Herbology nut who always came to see anything involving cool plants. Her extraordinary eyes, one blue, and one purple, were always analyzing Hogwarts vegetation, or reading up on interesting flora facts. Professor Longbottom loved her.

“I’ll save today’s lesson for later,” said Professor Longbottom. “We can’t miss this opportunity to see Snaggrass, especially this close to home. You can’t plant it, or it’ll eat its own pot, spill itself,
and die. But here it is in the wild, outside of its usual habitat.” They walked back to the greenhouse
to tell the others. “I’ll do the Justicerts some other day… I need to calm all the plants down
anyway. The greenhouse is acting up. The plants are more volatile than usual, and it’s making me
nervous that someone might get hurt.”

Albus frowned and glanced back at the Forbidden Forest. The wind had stopped blowing, but the
trees were still swaying.

“Who the hell,” said Exo as he huffed and puffed in his attempts to stir the incredibly thick potion,
“figured out that you have to stir Uprain in groups of three, seven, four, eight, and then five
rotations alternating direction? It’s just so random.”

“I think you have to know a little bit of Arithmancy,” replied Albus. “The best Potioneers know a
lot of Arithmancy so that they know which magical numbers are most effective in the stirs.”

“And?”

“And this makes a lot of sense, given what we learned last year.”

“Which is?”

Albus had forgotten that Exo wouldn’t know this — he dropped Arithmancy early last year to
lighten his course load. His electives now were Muggle Studies and Ancient Runes and the A.R.M.
program. His grades had suddenly become much higher after he let go of that one class — he
seemed to be bright enough to have gone to Ravenclaw if the Sorting Hat had seen fit, but couldn’t
keep up with all the work. Albus, though, was excelling even with all thirteen of his courses.

“Towards the end of last year, we talked about numerical sequences,” said Albus as he stirred his
very thick potion, which became thinner with each pass. “The most magically significant sequence
in the world, named the Supersequence, is seven, three, six, two, and five. You subtract four, add
tree, subtract four, and add three, from the starting point of seven, the most magical number. It
looks like the Uprain is reordered so that three comes first… Our sequence, which is three, seven,
four, eight, five — adding four, subtracting three, adding four, subtracting three — also happens to
be what you get when you subtract each number in the Supersequence from the number ten. In
addition, since it is an elemental-type potion, and there are three elements in Wizarding lore —
land, sea, and sky — it starts with a three, and if you notice that three plus seven plus four plus
eight plus five is twenty-seven, or three to the power of three, it doesn’t seem random in the
slightest.”

Albus finally looked up; Exo was gawking at him so intensely that he wasn’t even paying attention
to his potion, which was starting to boil.

“Exo, your potion is spoiling,” he said quickly.

Exo gave a start and returned to his stirring. “How do you even know all of that? Did you come up
with that yourself?”

“Yes, actually,” said Albus. “Professor Valon told us to read the instructions on how to make the
Uprain before we started, and I’ve been thinking about it since the start of class.”

“We’re still on our first day,” said Exo, shaking his head. “That’s a lot of thinking for just your
first Potions class.”
Albus’s stir was getting quicker; his potion was very thin and almost ready. He’d done two of the stir sequences, so one more would do it. “Well, we have double Potions today, so it’s like our second Potions class.”

“You’re a real prodigy, you know that? Anyone can get good grades, but... sheesh. Practically no one would think about it the way you just did.”

Lucas was near them, and eyed Albus with slight envy. Potions was always the area where Albus could beat Lucas handily.

Albus kept stirring. “Thanks, Exo.”

“I mean it.”

“I have Arithmancy right before A.R.M. today,” said Albus. “I’ll ask Professor Ramanu about this potion and see if I’m right. I think she was a Potioneer before she became a teacher, so she might know.”

Albus finished stirring his cauldron and looked over at Eftan.

Eftan was still working alone. In Defense Against the Dark Arts, which had come right before this class, he had been in the corner farthest from other people, looking sulky. Scorpius had been nearby, also avoiding human interactions. They both had continued this behavior into Potions. Sylvester Alamandrine, who was friends with Eftan for a little while, was also on his own, but he was talking to some of the Slytherin girls and making conversation, unlike his former friend. What had gotten into Eftan? Scorpius had always been like this, but it didn’t make sense that Eftan would see how great it was to have good friends and then choose not to have them.

“We should talk to the Greengrass triplets next class,” said Albus.

“I forgot... What class do we have next?”

“Transfiguration, so it is with Ravenclaw.”

“Why do we want to talk to them, again? You want to see if they can somehow influence Scorpius and get him to befriend Eftan?”

“That’s right.”

“It’s never going to work,” said Exo, shaking his head.

“You never know,” replied Albus confidently. “It’s worth a shot.”

“If you say so.”

“I say so.”

Lucas looked up from his potion, which he had just finished. He looked at Albus’s, apparently comparing them by sight. He met Albus’s gaze but didn’t say anything. They weren’t rivals, but they still weren’t really friends.

Albus sighed. Was he being hypocritical? Was he shunning friendship for no reason? Could he and Lucas ever be friends?

After a few more minutes, more and more people started to finish their Uprain. Professor Valon walked around to investigate the progress, and when he was satisfied, he called for everyone to
“Here,” he said, waving his wand and distributing umbrellas to every student in the classroom. “Now add your Cloud Feather and see what happens.”

Albus picked up his Cloud Feather, a wisp of misty material collected from clouds that formed when magically altered water was evaporated. He dropped it into the solution, and bubbles started to form instantly; the water boiled and shot up as steam into the air. Most peoples’ potions did the same, and then a large cloud formed on the ceiling of the Potions dungeon and it began to rain.

“Open your umbrellas — why do you think I gave them to you, to admire the pretty colors on them?” said Professor Valon as the slower students in the class like Riley Andersen began to realize that they had been handed umbrellas for a reason. They waited out the rain while Professor Valon talked about the potion they had just created. The rain subsided within a couple of minutes.

“And finally, you may add as many Thunderroots as you’d like, right before adding the Cloud Feather, and you’ll get a thunderstorm,” finished Professor Valon as the students began to pack their soaked belongings. “The intensity of the thunderstorm varies with the amount of Thunderroot added. I didn’t let you do that here, obviously, because one of you would probably have been struck and electrocuted… it wouldn’t have hurt you severely, but it wouldn’t have been pleasant. This potion is used worldwide to end droughts if Muggles are suffering too badly, but they have to brew a massive amount of it. The amount of rain increases exponentially with the volume of the potion, though, so you can obtain large storms without brewing a potion the size of a lake. But make too much and you’ll have a hurricane or a monsoon coming at you.”

“What’s ‘exponentially’ mean?” asked Jonah, raising his hand.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Is that Muggle math or something?” asked Toby.

“It won’t be on the test. Don’t worry about it.”

Jonah and Toby lowered their hands happily.

They left Potions shortly after. Albus purposefully stayed behind a bit so that the Greengrass triplets, wherever they were coming from, would get to Transfiguration before him. Then he would follow them in, see where they sat, and sit near them. Exo followed suit; he followed Albus most places now.

They entered the Transfiguration classroom as soon as they saw the Greengrass triplets come in. The brothers sat in a row, with Sebastian in the middle; Albus sat on the left next to Archie and Exo sat on Albus’s other side. Alec settled down next to Exo.

“Hello, Albus,” said Archie. “How are you?”

The Greengrass triplets usually had excellent manners and rarely spoke in the vernacular. They were, after all, pureblood cousins of Scorpius, and they had probably been raised in a very proper household.

“So how have your first classes been?” asked Albus.

“Excellent,” said Archie. “I’ve found it quite easy to reinsert myself into the Hogwarts routine. And you?”
“Same, but I almost got eaten by grass today…”

“Do tell,” said Sebastian, looking over and grinning.

The door opened, and an unfamiliar girl entered the room. She was very pretty, with ruffled black hair, smooth dark skin, and big brown eyes. She was older than everyone else — perhaps in her seventh year, but Albus was sure he’d never seen her before. She sat in the back of the classroom and took out a notepad. She was scribbling with a pen rather than a quill, and she was writing furiously fast.

“Good morning, Eloa,” said Professor Desulgon.

The girl named Eloa nodded and returned to her writings.

“Who is that?” asked Albus quietly.

“Oh, I had forgotten you were unconscious for the introductions after the Sorting,” said Archie.

“That’s Eloa Loft. She’s visiting from South Africa. Her parents are starting a school of magic down there and she’s just here to observe.”

Albus looked at her for a while longer. He’d grown up scrutinizing everyone to see if they might be potentially dangerous, but this girl seemed relatively normal.

“They want to have a sort of a sister-school relationship with us,” said Sebastian. “We might get to visit South Africa in the coming years.”

“Oh, that would be neat,” said Albus. “I’ve only ever been to northern Africa, to see my Uncle Bill in Egypt. It would be cool to see South Africa.”

“She’ll be popping in and out of classrooms all the time for a few weeks,” said Exo. “She won’t be here very long.”

“Anyway,” said Albus, “I wanted to ask you guys something.” He needed to get to the point before Professor Desulgon started up class and stopped them from talking.

“We’d be happy to hear,” piped up Ashton from the other end of the table, leaning further in.

“You know how Scorpius is being all moody and alone?” said Albus quietly.

The three boys nodded.

“Well, I was wondering,” said Albus. “He and Eftan are acting the same. Eftan is trying to avoid all human contact, too.”

“Eftan Griffiths?” said Ashton. “I’ve only talked with him on a few occasions.”

“That’s because he doesn’t really talk to anyone anymore,” said Alec.

“Just like Scorpius,” said Albus, trying to lead them to the same conclusion.

The sharp Ravenclaws seemed to all pick up on Albus’s train of thought at the same time, and they all glanced at him curiously.

“You want to see if perhaps Eftan and Scorpius could foster a friendship?” asked Sebastian.

“I just want to do whatever I can to help my old friend,” said Albus. “It doesn’t seem healthy that
they’re both always alone. Don’t you think?”

“I agree with you there,” said Ashton.

“Yes, Scorpius got a little depressed and stopped talking to us,” said Archie quietly, “and that only deepened his depression when he decided not to talk about it to anyone.”

“How do you suppose we go about this?” asked Sebastian.

“Try to get Scorpius to start up a conversation with Eftan, I guess,” said Albus, “and see where it goes from there. I just wanted to run it by you to see if you had any ideas on the matter.”

“Not a one,” said Sebastian.

Archie and Ashton nodded and shrugged.

“But,” continued Sebastian, “I can understand what you mean. It’s unhealthy for both of them not to have a friend in the place they spend most of their time. And I think it could work if we don’t make it obvious that we’re… synthesizing the camaraderie.”

“Speak English,” grunted Alec.

“I’m speaking excellent English,” said Sebastian, confused.

“Much better than he ever does,” dismissed Albus. “So will you think about it?”

“We will,” said Ashton.

“You’re absolutely right that we should try to help them if at all possible,” said Archie. “We’ll give it some thought and get back to you.”

“And you should let us know in the meantime if you have any inspiration,” said Ashton.

Alec, Exo, and Albus all nodded as Professor Desulgon finally started class.

After an exhausting Transfiguration session in which they reviewed everything they’d ever learned in only an hour’s time, Albus trudged off to Arithmancy. On the way, he passed James, and a thought appeared in his head so rapidly he hadn’t even caught up to his own line of reasoning when he tugged on James’s sleeve.

James looked down. “Greetings, little brother.”

“Hi, James. Can I borrow the Cloak?”

James raised an eyebrow. “Already thinking of getting into trouble, are we?”

“No,” said Albus.

“You should have said yes,” said James. “I’d have handed it over right away if I thought you were getting into mischief. So what are you doing, if not mischief?”

“I never said it wasn’t mischief,” replied Albus. “I just said I wouldn’t be getting into trouble.”

James nodded. “Sounds reasonable to me. Sure, I’ll get it to you tonight.”

“Thanks,” said Albus, turning the corner and heading to the Arithmancy classroom.
The Invisibility Cloak, he assumed, might come in handy if he wanted to get Scorpius and Eftan alone so they could have a conversation. If anyone else was around, they might not say anything, but if they were the only ones in the room, perhaps he could kick-start a conversation somehow. He hadn’t thought that far ahead, but if nothing else, the Invisibility Cloak would help him to monitor whether the friendship was a possibility.

He walked into Arithmancy to find Professor Longbottom in deep conversation with Professor Ramanu.

“...will update you with the growth rate as I get more information,” Professor Longbottom was saying, “and you can check for significance in the data.”

“I’d be more than happy to do that for you,” said Professor Ramanu.

“Thank you, Janet. Take care.”

“You too, Neville.”

Albus watched Professor Longbottom leave, and then walked up to the front of the classroom, remembering a question he’d had in Potions.

“Albus,” said Professor Ramanu, smiling at his appearance.

“Hello, Professor,” said Albus. “I was just in Potions today, and I was wondering whether the Supersequence had anything to do with the Uprain potion?”

She smiled even wider. “The Supersequence has everything to do with the Uprain potion!” she replied.

Professor Ramanu had taken a liking to Albus from the beginning of the previous year — he’d learned Muggle mathematics with ease, unlike the rest of the class, and had excelled in calculations where other students lagged far behind. At a time when Albus had been lacking in his magic-based classes, he’d taken great pride in his ability to do Arithmancy just fine, and he had formed an excellent relationship with Professor Ramanu because of that. Because of his connection, he decided to try his luck in probing around what Professor Longbottom was doing when Professor Ramanu finished confirming his suspicions on Uprain.

“What did Professor Longbottom ask you about when he came in just now?” asked Albus with the air of innocent curiosity to which he knew Professor Ramanu responded well.

Professor Ramanu tilted her palms up and shrugged. “He thinks that the plants in the greenhouse, as well as plants outside the grounds and the Forbidden Forest, are growing at a peculiar rate.”

“A peculiar rate?”

“Faster, to be precise,” said Professor Ramanu. “A lot faster than normal. He’s decided to start measuring the growth rates, and he’ll deliver the numbers to me so I can check to see if there is any significance in the rates. Arithmancy can be useful to divine whether there is some outside presence influencing peculiar activity, if that activity can be quantified into data sets. I might even be able to tell what’s causing the plants to grow faster if there’s enough available information about the source.”

“I’d like to see how that works, if I’d be allowed,” said Albus.

Professor Ramanu placed a fist under her chin and looked at him. “I don’t see why not,” she said.
“I don’t imagine this information is classified or anything. It would be nice to have someone around to keep books. I’m very pleased that you’re so interested!”

“Of course,” said Albus happily. “How often will I get to see some Arithmancy done by a professional right before my eyes?”

Professor Ramanu blushed a little and shooed him back to his seat, promising she’d let him know when she would be working on Professor Longbottom’s data.

Albus grinned to himself about his little bit of manipulation — now he could keep an eye on what Professor Longbottom thought might be going on. The greener grasses and taller trees had unsettled him for some reason; something about it all seemed fishy, and this was his chance to figure out what it was, if it was anything.

That exploitation of his relationship with Professor Ramanu — that had been a rather Slytherin-like action, hadn’t it? But he thought back to the Sorting Hat’s song — everyone had a little bit of every quality, some more than others. Not every action he performed would be one hundred percent like Godric Gryffindor; he had simply been Sorted where he most belonged.

The class consisted of mainly review of Muggle mathematics and the introduction of basic algebra, which instantly gave most of the class glazed eyes and sore brains. Albus was one of the few who were still raising their hands to answer questions, and he saw Professor Ramanu smile every time he did so.

When the class ended, he headed over to dinner; after dinner had finished, he walked to Diwand Spells to meet Professor Evranote in person.

She had hair that was dyed violet and silver, and Albus already decided he liked her. Other than her hair, she didn’t really have any distinguishing features. She used little beautification but she was still comely, and her figure, though she was probably in her forties, was that of an acrobat or an accomplished dancer. She greeted the class warmly.

“Good afternoon, class, I am Professor Evranote,” she said. “I know I have over a hundred years less experience than your previous teacher, but I hope I can live up to his standards.”

“If she doesn’t talk at the speed of a brain-dead tortoise, she’s already far past his standards,” whispered Alec.

“Hogwarts was where I always knew I wanted to teach,” said Professor Evranote, “but I never suspected I would be able to teach my favorite subject. You kids are very lucky to have this program — I had to attend three extra years of school to become versed in Diwand Spell casting. It was a subject I always knew I’d want to pursue once I left Hogwarts, but even I couldn’t foresee how difficult it would become.” She straightened her robe absently as she looked about the classroom. “How far have you advanced in this class, up to the present time?”

The class didn’t respond.

“Have you covered iterations and channeling?” she asked; the class nodded. “In your Mastering the Wands textbook, written by your previous professor, different levels of spellwork are specified. Have you finished Levels 1 and 2 of Simple Iterations and Simple Channeling? And how many levels of Simple Diwand Spells have you covered?”

“We almost got halfway through Level 2 of Simple Iterations and Simple Channeling,” said Holly.
“And we only barely finished Level 3 of Simple Diwand Spells,” added Albus, the memory resurfacing.

Holly shot Albus a dirty look which he didn’t feel he deserved; he gave her back an innocent questioning glance, but she turned away.

“Oh, goodness, you’re behind where you should be,” said Professor Evranote with a grimace. “No matter — we’ll catch you all up to speed. By the end of this year, we want you to be well-versed in Iterations and Channeling — both Simple and Complex — and you’ll finish Simple Diwand Spells all the way up to Level 7. It’s doable. We should also have finished Complex Diwand Spells Level 1 by the end of the year, but that might not be possible… We’ll see whether we have to group that into your fifth year or not. Hopefully we can catch up far enough to cover that, too — you don’t need any more stress when you’re learning Metronoming, Telescoping, and Concurrence. Those subjects are nasty even in the Simple stage, and it’ll be hard to catch up from the fifth year on. You are the first class to undergo this program — let’s show Professor Wilcox it can work.”

She set right to work explaining some of the Level 4 Simple Diwand Spells, and Albus could already tell she was going to be an infinitely more effective tutor than Professor Dixon. He wondered where Professor Evranote was when they were first looking for the position.

When the class ended, he walked up to her. It was always to his advantage, he’d learned, to form a good relationship with the professors as quickly as possible.

“Hello, Professor,” said Albus.

Professor Evranote waved hello to him while still shuffling papers. “Hello. Albus Potter, is it? You were one of the more active students today.”

“Yes, I thought the lesson was excellent,” he said eagerly.

Professor Evranote smiled cordially. “I’m glad to hear you think that! I was very nervous; this was my first time teaching a class of young people.”

“You did wonderful,” said Albus.

“It means so very much to me to hear that,” she replied.

“Did you apply for this position last year?” he probed.

Professor Evranote shook her head. “No,” she said. “I was working with an adult Diwand Spells education class in Canada. Have you heard of the Molstraem Magical Academy in Nova Scotia?”

“It rings a bell,” said Albus.

“Well, there’s also a private team centered at the school which is working on a new method of mass transportation,” said Professor Evranote. “It’s like a Diwand Portkey, but instead of objects that transport people across distances, they open a sort of portal.”

“Really?” asked Albus. “I’d like to learn more about that.” It sounded fascinating.

“Yes, well, the only problem is that the only known method of opening a portal requires copious amounts of Dark Magic,” she said with a bit of a cringe. “They’re trying to work out how to open portals without using Dark Magic. I was working with them when I got word that a position was open here.”
“Have you had any progress on that front? Portals without Dark Magic, I mean?”

“We’re deciphering the ancient scrolls of Herpo the Foul,” said Professor Evranote. “Herpo’s private sanctuary was discovered shortly after Voldemort’s fall. Voldemort studied in Herpo’s sanctuary extensively, and learned a great deal of Dark secrets from the place. He never discovered the portal scrolls, though — thank goodness. Herpo was the first to create portals, but they could only take an individual seven times before closing forever. And the process was so lengthy. It also required many rare and valuable materials, and a lot of Dark Magic. We’re working on getting rid of that part.”

“Herpo the Foul? I feel like studying anything he wrote is a bad idea.”

“We’re trying to avoid the darker materials,” said Professor Evranote. “But the portal scrolls may hold a key to an incredible development in the magical community.”

“That I can understand.”

“I do feel somewhat unclean,” admitted Professor Evranote, “pillaging the knowledge of the same place where Voldemort learned some of his greatest tricks. But I’ve also always dreamed of doing something spectacular in the world.”

“Haven’t we all?” said Albus.

“Probably,” said Professor Evranote. “Anyway, I’m still working on that front, since I’m only here on Mondays for the fourth years, Thursdays for the third years, and two Fridays a month. Wouldn’t it be nice if we finally got the portal working so that I could jump there and back her in an instant?”

“That would be nice,” said Albus. “I’d like to stay updated on the progress of those portals!”

“The project is moving painfully slow,” said Professor Evranote, “but I’ll let you know how it’s coming along, if you’d like.”

“Yes, definitely,” said Albus eagerly.

“It was excellent talking to you, Albus.”

“You, too.”

Professor Evranote stood, now that she’d packed her bag. “I must be getting back to Nova Scotia. I don’t want to stay overnight on this side of the Atlantic — the difference in the time zones will screw with my head. Have an excellent week, and I will see you on Friday for our first double period.”

“See you then,” said Albus.

She patted him on the shoulder and left.

Albus was friendly with almost all of the staff at Hogwarts. If any new teachers came in next year, he’d try to make friends with them, too. It was always good to be on good terms with the teachers.

He was on good terms with most of the school, in fact. As he walked back to Gryffindor Tower, though, he caught sight of someone he wasn’t on good terms with in the slightest — Red Pierce, hanging with a couple of his Slytherin friends. They gave him rude glares; Albus dismissed it, laughing to himself at how even Holly could glare in a more intimidating fashion.
He stepped into Gryffindor Tower and was greeted by a pink-haired Gil.

“Albus!” said Gil, brushing his vibrant bangs away from his eyes. “How’s my favorite mentee?”

“Good, how’s my favorite mentor?” asked Albus.

“I’m excellent. Are you sure you’re okay, after you fainted during the feast?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” said Albus. “I got it all sorted out.” He grinned. “I like your pink hair, by the way.”

“I do, too,” said Gil, combing his fingers through it lovingly. “I’m going to go green when I get tired of this. If I get tired of this. But I probably will.”

“Green hair,” laughed Albus. “I like it. How’s the beginning of your final year?”

“I can’t really believe it’s my last year,” said Gil. “But hey, we should talk about mentoring while we’re both here. I’m supposed to mentor you on how to mentor so you can mentor your mentee.”

“I’d be happy to,” said Albus, settling down on the couch.

Gil sat down beside him.

“You were a bright kid, Albus,” he said, “and I didn’t even really know what to do with you when the Sorting Hat assigned you to me. You seemed to be able to do everything on your own without much problem. So I’m just going to tell you the formalities that they told me, and some things that I’ve heard other people picked up on during the course of their mentoring. You didn’t really need much guidance, so I didn’t really get much practice!”

“Sorry,” said Albus sheepishly.

“That’s all right. I bet the Sorting Hat gave you a smart cookie. Who did you get as a mentor, again? Were you conscious during that part?”

“No, but Exo told me. I have Parker Pullman’s little brother.”

“Ah, yeah, Scottie! I only remember him because he asked Louis for directions earlier today. I’ll bet Scottie will turn out a little prodigy like you…”

“Wait, who?”

“Scottie Pullman,” said Gil. “Isn’t that Parker’s younger brother? Parker’s in your year, right?”

“Yeah,” said Albus, “but Exo told me his name was P.J.”

“I think he goes by P.J., too,” said Gil.

Albus furrowed his brow. “Where does the P come from?”

Gil gave this question due consideration. “Huh. Good point. I don’t really know.”

“That doesn’t make any sense that you can get ‘P.J.’ from ‘Scottie,’” said Albus.

“Well, I think he goes by both.”

Albus shook his head.
“You’ll have to ask,” said Gil. “So, what do you want to know about mentoring?”

“Anything you can think of!”

Albus lifted himself from the chair when Gil was done explaining to him how to be an effective mentor. He shook Gil’s hand and departed for the dormitories. Gil’s role as a mentor was now to make sure Albus was being an effective mentor in his own right — an excellent little nuance brought by the spacing of three years between mentors and mentees. Wilcox had planned this out very well, ensuring that at this stage, the new mentors would have mentors to show them the ropes of mentoring. The first three years of mentors had to learn it on their own, but from here on, the knowledge and experience would trickle down with each passing year.

He couldn’t wait to meet up with Parker’s little brother and start trying to be a mentor. He had been looking forward to his return to Hogwarts for a long time now, and it was just as wonderful a place to be as he had remembered. He’d waited out his days in his home with mild irritation that the summer was taking so long to end. His father had warned him that the grass was always greener on the other side — and that once he was at Hogwarts, he might miss home again — but Hogwarts indisputably had the greener grasses in this situation. He didn’t have to deal with Aubrey and Chinch or other guards watching his every move, he didn’t have to worry about imposters impersonating his friends, and he didn’t have to sleep underground in a room devoid of all of his belongings, which were in a fake room above his head. No, there wasn’t even a comparison — the grass wasn’t just less green at home, it was nonexistent… both metaphorically and in reality.

He walked up to the fourth year dormitories and settled back into his four-poster bed happily. A warm dormitory beat out a cold cellar any day.

“I don’t suppose this great weather can last,” said Exo, glancing out the window.

“I don’t see why it wouldn’t,” said Albus cheerily, allowing his body to sink into his bed.

Exo turned to him with a smile. “You’re in a great mood today.”

“Am I?” asked Albus.

“Dad told me you’re visiting my psychologist now. Isn’t she just the best?”

“She’s really great,” agreed Albus.

“I always feel so much better after I go to see her, and she doesn’t even use spells on me. Did she use any on you?”

“Nope,” said Albus. “She only talked.”

“She got a Muggle degree in psychology after she left Hogwarts,” said Exo. “She really thinks the nonintrusive methods are the best.”

“They’re working so far.”

Exo flopped down on his bed. “Have you met your mentee yet?”

“Nope. Is his name P.J. or Scottie?”

“I think he goes by both, but I’m not really sure where those initials come from.”
“I was hoping you’d know.”

Parker walked into the dormitories at that moment. He raised his hand.

“Evening, Exo, Albus,” he said before shuffling his way towards his bed.

“Mr. Earle is really helping you with that aura-reading stuff, huh,” said Albus.

“Yes, but I also heard you talking in here before I walked in,” said Parker.

Albus’s part-Kneazle cat Gimmick — certainly not a little kitten anymore, but an adult cat — had slipped through the door when Parker entered and leapt into Albus’s bed. Gimmick had never done this before; he usually liked to explore the castle at night. The behavioral shift was interesting, but maybe Gimmick was just grown up now.

“Hey,” said Exo, “is your little brother called P.J. or Scottie?”

“He goes by both,” replied Parker.

“Where do the P and the J come from if his first name is Scottie?” asked Albus.

“His middle name is Joseph.”

Albus and Exo glanced at each other.

“Okay, so that’s the J, but where does the ‘P’ come from?” asked Albus.

“From his first name.”

“His first name is Scottie,” said Exo.

“Yes, ‘P’ for Scottie,” said Parker.

Albus and Exo stared at him.

“I’ll just let you confuse yourselves for a while over that, then,” said Parker with a laugh before he jumped in his own bed.

Albus spent a while before bed puzzling over his mentee’s name until he decided he’d never understand it, and he slipped off to sleep.

Before his eyes shut for good, he wondered if he’d see the green woman in his dreams again. But his sleep was dreamless, sound, and one of the best sleeps he’d had in a long time.
“Line up!” bellowed James in his most commanding voice.

Albus looked on with pride. His brother was born to be a Quidditch captain; James looked to be completely at home here. He was also a born prankster, but at the moment, no one could argue that James belonged anywhere else. The wind whipped his hair fiercely so that every girl nearby was sighing, but James had eyes for only one – Tabitha Floren, the Slytherin girl whom he had been continuously dating for nearly two years now. James was never so devoted to something that wasn’t himself. Tabby was here now, watching her boyfriend run the Quidditch tryouts, and it was clear from James’s face that there was nowhere he’d rather be.

The Chasers were selected from a large group of very good players. The three starting players were the same from the previous year: Pallie Bell and the Leigh sisters, Lara in her fifth year and Leah in her sixth. Albus hadn’t seen them play, but from what he witnessed during practice, he was happy with the choice. The starting Beaters were Freddie and Roxanne. Nobody suspected that this choice was biased – all they had to do was watch the siblings play for a few seconds or so, and it would become clear that they had skills far beyond any of the other players.

The Keeper, however, was an incredible shock. It was Lucas’s mentee. According to Exo, the entire school got a bit of a surprise early on in the Sorting when a first year named Silva Brightstar was Sorted. He walked up to the stool and grasped the brim of the hat to put it on his head – but the hat shouted “GRYFFINDOR” the second it touched his hand, even before he had picked it up. According to Professor Longbottom, this had only ever happened for Slytherins in the recorded past.

Silva was a confident-looking first year boy with jet-black hair. He wasn’t scrawny like most of the first years that Albus had noticed; he was maybe as tall as the third years and some of the fourth years. He outperformed all of the other prospective Keepers by a mile, even using one of the school brooms; his reflexes were unparalleled. He looked like he’d be a seven-year lock on the position. James had already decided to ask Professor Longbottom for permission for Silva to keep his own broom.

Then came the tryouts for the back-up Seeker position, and Albus absolutely excelled. His main competition was the second runner-up from last year, Abbott Ashdown. He kept a close eye on Abbott during the tryouts, which were the same as all previous years – catching the floating golf balls. Every time he got near Abbott, Albus swiped the ball for which Abbott was headed, and while Abbott was dazed, Albus plotted out a circular path which would take him near the most balls and then loop back near Abbott so he could steal one from under his nose again. The result was that Abbott could barely get any balls collected before Albus came back around to meddle with him, and Albus beat him by three times Abbott’s amount. James looked absolutely awed, and Albus was beaming with pride at having impressed his Quidditch star of a brother.

Albus walked away from the tryouts with Freddie and Roxanne; he hadn’t had much time to converse with them recently, as with most of his family and friends.

“How are things going, guys?” asked Albus.

“Fantastic,” said Freddie. “Dad told me I could work at the shop for a couple of years after I graduate so I can save up money. I might even get to take over the Dillied Alley branch if Uncle Lance retires.”
“That’s great news! Are you still dating Heather?”

Heather Alkalax was Freddie’s girlfriend, a year below him in Ravenclaw.

“I am,” said Freddie. “The first of November will be our one year anniversary.”

“Aren’t you going to demand whether I’m dating Lucas again?” asked Roxanne.

“Are you?” asked Albus calmly. “It’s not really my business, though, is it?”

Roxanne stared at him. “Wait, are you over your ultra-male-syndrome? Are you and Lucas on good terms now?”

“We’re on neutral terms,” said Albus. “We both know that the other exists, and we’re just passively ignoring that fact.”

“Thank goodness.”

“Are you dating him, though?”

“Nope, just checking whether you were over your macho-man rivalry with Lucas.”

“It was more of a school rivalry,” said Albus.

“Got any new rivals to replace him?”

Albus thought for a moment.

“The Pierces. I hate them.”

“Well, Asher will be gone after this year…”

“I wish it were sooner.”

Roxanne and Freddie broke off to sit with their friends when they reached the Great Hall for dinner. Albus sat between Exo and Parker.

“Hey,” he said to Parker. “I’m meeting your little brother after my double Diwand Spells class. Would you mind finally telling me what his name is?”

“It’s P.J.,” said Parker. “Or Scottie, if you prefer.”

“I just don’t understand,” said Albus.

“Then don’t try to understand. Just pick either P.J. or Scottie and stick with it.”

“This is really killing me,” laughed Exo.

“Sorry,” said Parker. “But we really like teasing people about this. I suppose you could try and guess if you wanted.”

“Is his name Pscottie?” asked Exo.

“What?”

“Puh-Scottie. Pscottie. Or is the P silent? Is that his name?”
“Last time I checked... no.”

Finally, James came in after he was finished cleaning up from Quidditch practice. He stopped to tap Albus on the shoulder and leaned in close to whisper in his ear.

“Hey,” he said. “Have you finished with the Cloak yet?”

“Oh,” muttered Albus. “I’ll try and use it tonight.”

“I want it for the weekend,” whispered James. “It’s our first weekend back, and my friends and I have been working on a little project over the summer that we’d like to test out…”

Albus smiled. “Okay, I’ll try to get my little job done today.”

“If not, I’ll lend it back to you after this weekend.”

“Not a problem.” He rarely ever saw Eftan or Scorpius on the weekends anyway.

As James walked away, Albus realized that he might want to have it for his next class – Eftan and Scorpius were both in the A.R.M. program, after all, so they would both be in his next class. Maybe he would try to get a conversation going between them today. He left dinner early to run back upstairs and collect the Cloak.

As he ran upstairs, he considered how it might happen. The usual trend for these two Slytherins really lent itself to the ideas he’d brainstormed to this point. Everything involved isolating the two in a room together and then trying to invisibly kick-start a conversation somehow, and Eftan and Scorpius were always the last to leave their classes. Albus suspected this was because they didn’t like walking in a crowd of people, so they would normally take longer to pack up their stuff so that when they left, they weren’t around anybody who might try to talk to them (oh, the horror). But this meant that they were often alone together. It might not be too hard to get them speaking to each other, especially with the suggestions that the Greengrass triplets had provided.

“Scorpius is a very courteous person,” said Archie when Albus asked if they’d thought of anything.

“He will usually lend a helping hand,” added Ashton.

“He was raised in a household that valued flattery very highly,” noted Sebastian.

“We don’t know Eftan well enough to know whether he would stop to help someone if they dropped their books, but we’re pretty sure Scorpius would,” said Archie.

“So, we were thinking that if you were to somehow cause Scorpius to bump into Eftan and make Eftan drop his books, Scorpius would definitely stop to help,” said Ashton.

“But you would have to make sure Scorpius is the reason that Eftan drops his books, otherwise he might not stop,” said Sebastian.

“If Scorpius accidentally bumped into someone and they dropped their books, Muggle-born or pureblood, he is the sort of person to stop and help them,” said Archie.

“That was just the way we were all raised,” explained Ashton. “If you make a mistake and someone else is inconvenienced, it’s the proper thing to help them out.”

“Scorpius was raised learning to gain face, publicly and privately, whenever possible,” said Sebastian, “and if he does something wrong, he’s always obsessed with correcting it.”
“So if Scorpius bumped into Eftan, and Eftan dropped his books,” started Albus, “then you think Scorpius would be bound to help him pick up, because Scorpius wouldn’t be able to deal with the fact that he did something wrong? He’d need to correct it?”

“And we know Scorpius well enough to know what he would do afterwards,” said Archie.

“He would apologize and ask if Eftan needed help with anything else,” said Ashton.

“He would at least start a conversation,” said Sebastian. “We know – we were taught the same manners.”

“So you think this will work?” asked Albus. “Bumping Scorpius into Eftan and making Eftan drop something he’s carrying?”

“Definitely,” said Archie and Ashton together.

“I’ll try it,” said Albus. “Thanks, guys!”

Now, he was about to test out the Greengrass triplets’ theory.

Albus laughed to himself – it really felt like he was setting up two friends for a romantic relationship, the way they were going about this. Trying to break the ice and start a conversation. But it really was just about finding both of them a friend, so they weren’t lonely and moody all the time like they were now.

Albus approached the Fat Lady with enough time to spare that he didn’t have to rush. “Karmermarkers,” he said.

“Expertly articulated,” she said, and she swung forward.

Albus was about to step in when he heard the distinct last two words of a shouted argument from a very familiar voice–

“–LOVE YOU.”

Albus froze in place, a foot inside the hole behind the portrait.

The voices stopped for a moment, and then one of them – another very familiar voice – said, much quieter, “...Was that the portrait hole?”

Albus decided there was nothing to be gained by pretending he wasn’t coming in, and he stepped inside awkwardly, hugging the wall as he walked to his dormitory. As he entered the common room, he saw Gil and Louis standing behind the fire.

The shout rang in his head and he recognized the voice – Gil had shouted those words to Louis.

Gil was looking very pale right now, and Louis was tugging at his collar. They were both sweating, but neither of them was stepping away from the fire.

“Hi, guys,” said Albus as pleasantly as he could muster before slipping into the fourth year dormitories as if he hadn’t heard anything unusual.

“Hi, Albus,” said Louis quietly.

Gil put a hand over his mouth and turned to face a wall.
Albus stuffed the Invisibility Cloak inside his robe and grabbed a textbook to carry out, so that it wouldn’t look like he’d come in and left without getting anything. He walked out of the dormitory and made a beeline straight for the portrait – but some part of him, though he knew it was incredibly unethical, really needed to hear the end of this conversation. He slipped the Cloak on, went to the portrait, swung it open and then shut, and then crept invisibly back into the common room.

“I think he heard that last part,” said Louis, sitting down.

Gil still wasn’t saying anything.

“Gil.”

There was no answer. Gil had his face in his hands in the corner.

“I’m with Caspar.”

Gil still didn’t acknowledge that he’d heard Louis.

“I’m really sorry.”

Albus held back his breath as much as possible; his breathing sounded incredibly loud to his ears and he didn’t want to be caught. The only sounds in the room were the crackles from the fire.

“Gil?” said Louis.

Gil’s shoulders shook a little bit.

“You’re one of my best friends.”

“And it’s torture,” said Gil.

Gil’s first words since Albus’s arrival were spoken with slight gasps and a voice that trembled more than a little.

“I’m sorry?”

“I’ve been your best friend for so long,” said Gil, finally turning around; the movement of his head caused a couple of tears to drop. “I knew I was gay since I was fourteen, and I told you when I was fifteen. I didn’t know whether you were… but I told you because I loved you even back then. And you didn’t tell me anything.” His voice was quavering more with each word.

“I’m… really sorry, Gil,” said Louis. “But… I didn’t even know I was bisexual until I made eye contact with Caspar at the Triwizard Tournament. And by then… it was already too late to tell you – I didn’t want to hurt you–”

“So then, that’s it,” said Gil, his voice suddenly perfectly clear. “You looked at Caspar and you fell in love with him – and that’s how you knew you were bisexual?”

“I struck up a conversation with him after that, yes,” said Louis, “and then I realized, shortly after, that what I was feeling for him was–”

“And you’ve known me for over six years,” said Gil, “and I never had that effect on you. Then that’s it.”

Louis cringed.
Gil broke down.

Albus feebly watched his mentor collapse onto the ground crying; Louis walked up to him and picked him slightly off the ground to hug him, but Gil pushed him away.

“I’m – s-sorry – t-too,” choked Gil. “I sh-should have… known. And I sh-shouldn’t have… said anyth-thing. Now I’m just – m-making you f-feel b-bad – for something – you can’t ch-change.”

“Give me a hug,” said Louis sternly.

Gil looked up as Louis embraced him in a tight hug, and he didn’t break away this time.

“You don’t have to apologize,” said Louis. “I do. I feel like I should have explained myself earlier. I don’t even think I’m bisexual. I think it’s only Caspar. I’m… I’m women-and-Caspar-sexual.”

Gil sniffled and gave a slight laugh.

“I reserve the right to feel awful about the way I handled things, if I choose,” said Louis. “And I’m going to. I feel awful. But you’re my friend. Right? Has that changed?”

Gil shook his head no.


Gil nodded with his eyes squeezed shut; tears dripped onto Louis’s shoulder.

Albus realized that he was sort of trapped at this point – he had to wait for Louis or Gil to exit before he did, or else they would probably notice that the portrait door opened and closed by itself, and they might piece together that Albus had been eavesdropping. He had to leave for class before long, though – would he have to be late to his first Diwand Spells double period just to avoid notice from his mentor and cousin?

He heard a muffled voice, and then the portrait door suddenly opened – he almost fell backwards onto Riley as he entered the room. He heard Gil and Louis shuffle away as Riley and Scott climbed through the portrait hole; Albus pressed himself against the wall and darted out before the portrait closed over him.

He always felt bad about eavesdropping, but the reward was worth the guilt. He was a person who liked being in the loop on every topic, which was probably why being in the dark on the matter of the name of Parker Pullman’s little brother bothered him so much.

He took off the Cloak in a nook behind a small tapestry and stuffed it in his bag; it was better to keep the number of people who knew about the Cloak to a minimum. He exited the tapestry into the curious gaze of Peeves, and then had to avoid flying tomatoes for the rest of the trip to Diwand Spells.

Professor Evranote was at the front of the classroom when he walked in, holding two wands high up in the air and twirling them. He settled into his usual seat near Exo, Aidan, and Alec, just as Professor Evranote started class. He was shivering, but as he reached his seat, he felt a pleasantly warm breeze.

“Convection charms,” announced their teacher. “A Level 5 Diwand spell. We’re going to get you started on Level 5 now, and we’ll finish Level 4 in our shorter classes. Does anyone know the incantation for this spell? Who has read ahead? Yes, young man with the blindingly blond hair, and please state your name so I can start learning?”
“Lucas Lotor, and the incantation is *Ir radiatus expulaethri.*”

“Good memory. That’s it precisely, Lucas. Now, did your previous instructor ask you to memorize incantations of every Diwand spell you covered?”

“No,” said most of the class in unison – Albus had been exempt from exams due to Operation Albus Severus Potter, so he didn’t exactly know.

“Then I won’t require it, either,” said Professor Evranote; the class began applauding. She laughed and took a bow. “Out of the blue, does anyone know the only two spells with four words in their incantation? Yes, over there, and your name please?”

“Rose Weasley,” said Rose, and Professor Evranote nodded in recognition. “And the first is Shatterbolt.”

“Excellent. And you, sir?”

“Aidan Finch-Fletchley. The second is Magmation.”

“Yes, Magmation, another Diwand spell which turns solid rock into magma,” said Professor Evranote. “But that spell takes so much energy, you’re considered a god among wizards if you can get even a couple cubic feet of lava. Still, though, it will probably prove to be a highly useful spell for defense, especially if you have an army ready to combine their forces with some extreme Diwand Telescoping into a single area to form a molten moat. But can anyone tell me, what is it about this spell that makes it mostly useless in all other situations? Yes, sir?”

“Alec McKinnon,” said Alec, proud to finally be able to answer a question. “It’s useless because even if you manage to create lava, you can’t control it – molten rock is uncontrollable by wizards, and it is the only naturally occurring non-organic magic-repelling substance, as proven by Eqia Prolzein in the second century.”

Albus and Aidan looked over, impressed.

“I like volcanoes,” whispered Alec sheepishly.

Mia was raising her hand.

“I thought Gallen Ingot could control lava?” she asked when Professor Evranote gestured to her.

“Your name, ma’am?”

“Mia Moon.”

“Gallen Ingot was one of the few people powerful enough to control it to any degree,” said Professor Evranote, “but he did so indirectly. He could control the ground below him, and he put so much pressure on the earth’s crust that the lava exploded from underneath. This feat has never come close to being repeated, despite many attempts. In general, though, if you ever encounter molten lava in your lifetime, you better have some way to fly or at least escape rapidly, because no spells will affect lava to any degree. Lava was one of the substances used to destroy witches in the witch hunts, because magic does nothing to it. Good question. Any others?”

“What’s the incantation of Magmation?” asked Holly. “Oh – and I’m Holly Glissendale.”

“Thank you for giving me your name. I actually can’t remember the full incantation of Magmation offhand – I’d probably get it wrong if I told you now. I’ve never used it, and of course, it was only
invented several months ago by your very own Professor Desulgon.”

Rose and several other girls sighed; Aidan and Alec scoffed.

“What?” asked Exo, looking over.

“I think he’s pretty cool,” said Aidan, “but I don’t see how he’s so attractive.”

“Girls and young male teachers are a weird combination,” whispered Alec.

“I think his intelligence is helping his attractiveness, especially with Rose,” said Albus. “She appreciates a smart guy.”

“A smart guy who’s almost thirty?” said Aidan. “She’s fourteen.”

“Let girls be weird,” said Alec. “Otherwise they get mad.”

“Whatever.”

“We’re going to practice the Convection Spell now,” said Professor Evranote. “It’s different from normal heating and cooling charms because your second wand can forge a barrier as elaborate and convoluted as you’d like between the hot areas and the cold areas of the room, and the temperatures can get seriously extreme once you’re a competent caster. But forging that barrier is in fact grouped into Level 5 of the Complex Diwand Spells category – for now, you’ll be dividing the heat and the cold with just a swish of your second wand to simplify things. Everyone line up!”

The spell was simpler than Albus expected for a Level 5 charm, but when Professor Evranote allowed them to make attempts at the Complex version, not a single person came close to changing the temperature barrier. He wondered how difficult Frostflame or Shatterbolts would be if he tried to pull them off now – Frostflame was a Level 7 Complex Diwand spell, and the Shatterbolt was off the charts in difficulty; it wasn’t even categorized into a level.

He was so invested in the class – the first really interesting Diwand Spells course he’d ever had – that he almost forgot to hang back after class. After he’d left the room, he jolted with the memory of his intended action, and he slipped on the Cloak and slipped back into the room.

Eftan and Scorpius were last, as always. Scorpius started to walk out first, and Eftan followed shortly after, carrying an armload of books – Eftan always took out extra books from the library and brought them to class. He needed extra material to study, to fill the time he wasn’t spending with any friends.

Albus didn’t need a wand for this one. Wandless magic was the silent, forceful, elemental way to go, and there wasn’t a spell that was more effective than this: He waved his hand vertically down through the air, and a ripple of energy vibrated through the air. When it struck Scorpius, he staggered backwards; Eftan wasn’t too far behind, and Scorpius smashed into him with enough force to meet Albus’s liking. Albus next muttered a very soft and very weak Disarming Charm at Eftan to make sure the books were dropped.

“What the hell,” mumbled Eftan, standing up.

“My apologies,” muttered Scorpius. He bent down and helped pick up Eftan’s dropped belongings.

“I got it,” said Eftan.

“Yes, and I’m helping you get it,” said Scorpius curtly.
Eftan’s books were all back in his arms in a few seconds; Eftan walked out the door quickly, and Albus sighed in disappointment.

Eftan stopped just outside the door, as Scorpius was picking up his own bag from the floor. He turned around.

“Thanks,” said Eftan gently.

“You’re welcome,” said Scorpius politely.

Eftan departed instantly after the formalities were over.

It’s a start, thought Albus.

He raced back up to Gryffindor Tower, where he was supposed to meet Parker Pullman’s little brother, P.J. or Scottie, for his first mentoring session.

He stepped into the common room, and the first thing he noticed was that Gil and Louis were still there, reading books in different chairs in front of the fire.

“Hey, Louis, did your first answer have anything to do with asphodel?” asked Gil.

“Nah, I left that out,” said Louis, nibbling on the end of his quill.

“Okay, never mind, then.”

“Now you’re making me nervous. Maybe I shouldn’t have left it out.”

“No, actually I think I’m going to take out my couple sentences on asphodel.”

“I just talked a little bit about moly.”

“Yeah, I think that’s what I’m going to do.”

“Let me know if you have any questions on that one.”

“Will do.”

Their conversation was as if nothing had ever happened between them. Albus eyed them carefully, but not too carefully to give away that he’d heard anything. Gil looked perfectly fine; they both looked like they weren’t letting anything concern them. That was good – Gil and Louis were good friends and Albus was glad it wasn’t changing.

A lot of the mentors were sitting down with their mentees in the common room. Lucas was talking with Silva Brightstar about how Quidditch tryouts went, and Exo was explaining the A.R.M. program to Rudiger Reade. Albus found Parker Pullman’s little brother among the crowd and sat him down at the edge of the common room.

“Hey,” said Albus, hoping his confusion would be cleared up. “Before we start… would you mind telling me your name?”

“It’s P.J., or Scottie,” replied his mentee. “Whatever you prefer.”

Albus sighed. “I’m going to call you ‘P.J. or Scottie’ whenever I address you.”

“Okay,” said P.J. or Scottie.
Albus twirled a quill around his hand. “So, P.J. or Scottie. What do you want to know about Hogwarts?”

P.J. or Scottie thought for a moment, his eyes twinkling. He smiled.

“Anything you can think of!” he said eventually.

Albus was thoroughly reminded of himself – that was the exact response he’d given to Gil when Gil had asked Albus what he wanted to know about being a mentor. The Sorting Hat had chosen his mentee well – Albus was very strongly reminded of himself through this boy. P.J. or Scottie even looked like Albus – green eyes, and the exact same dark brown scruffy mane of hair that Albus had. Parker’s hair looked a lot like Albus’s, but P.J. or Scottie’s entire physical appearance greatly resembled Albus’s appearance in his first year. Seeing him brought back memories of Albus’s first steps at Hogwarts, and he found it very easy to place himself in the shoes of a first year because it seemed like he was talking to his first year self.

Albus looked over to his own mentor – Gil was listening in on his progress with a grin, and Louis was keeping an eye and an ear on his mentee, Exo, as Exo performed his first duties as a mentor. Albus explained everything he could bring to mind about Hogwarts – the best hidden passages, which steps were fakes, and how to pull ahead in classes. P.J. or Scottie listened attentively, soaking it all in, which made Albus feel even better about how he was doing. He wondered how Gil and Louis and the others managed to be effective first-time mentors without anyone to show them the ropes. He was glad he was among the first group to receive mentors.

As he was telling P.J. or Scottie about Peeves, James came up behind Albus and cleared his throat.

“What’s – oh, right,” said Albus, remembering that he was supposed to lend back the Cloak. “In a moment.”

“Did you get your little job done?” asked James quietly; Albus nodded.

“What job?” asked P.J. or Scottie as James walked away.

“Sorry, but I can’t say,” said Albus.

“Oh, come on! It sounds exciting. Tell me.”

“You haven’t even told me what your name is,” retorted Albus.

“It’s P.J.,” said P.J. or Scottie. “Or Scottie.”

“Then I don’t know what ‘job’ you’re talking about,” said Albus with a smile.

The mentoring session ended shortly after that, but the relationship that Albus and his mentee were forming was going to last for years to come.

It would help if he knew his mentee’s name, of course.

Albus leaned across the aisle at breakfast on Saturday towards the Ravenclaw table to tell Alec what had happened after Diwand Spells the previous day.

“So Eftan said a couple words to Scorpius,” said Alec. “That’s good. That’s a start. It’s infinitely better than his communications with anyone else for the past year and a half.”

Albus nodded. “Tell the Greengrass triplets it might have sort of worked. We’ll need a little bit
more nudging, of course, but it could work.”

“Absolutely,” said Alec.

The mail flew in as usual. All manners of owls were swooping in, circling around until they spotted their owners and dropped letters to them.

Albus caught a letter from Janelle’s owl Buteau; it had her handwriting on it. He smiled.

“Janelle’s owl is huge,” remarked Alec.

Albus opened the letter eagerly.

Dear Albus,

How are you? I miss you already and you’ve only been in school for a week. It’s too long until I see you again… Perhaps I can visit at Christmas?

Listen what happened to my sister! Donna got an offer from Madame Maxime to be the liaison to–

He was distracted from his perusal of the letter by something landing directly on the top of his head.

“Oh, man, Buteau just took a massive dump on your head,” laughed Alec.

Albus watched something gray roll off of his head and he almost retched. What on Earth made Buteau want to do that to him?

He looked over to Alec just in time to see an owl drop a letter into his lap and then immediately unburden itself with a large load of droppings onto Alec’s arm.

“Oh!” said Alec, and then the entire Great Hall went into an uproar.

Every single owl in the room in turn was suddenly experiencing the same effect – their eyes would bulge, their beak would drop open, and then suddenly they were unable to hold anything in. Their droppings were raining down in droves from the ceiling.

Suddenly, Albus remembered that he’d lent the Invisibility Cloak to James.

Once the teachers realized what was happening, Professor Longbottom jumped to his feet. He scanned the Gryffindor table with decisive intent, and once his eyes had finished raking across the table, he looked over to the Ravenclaw table and swept his eyes along that one, too.

A Howler, or something that greatly resembled a Howler but had probably been invented by James and his friends, landed on Professor Wilcox’s desk; he barely noticed it among all the commotion, until it started smoking. He looked down as it burst into flames, and fireworks went off everywhere.

“HAIL LOKI, POKEY, PO–”

An icy blast from Wilcox’s wand shattered the Howler-like contraption, and he looked up without a hint of amusement on his face. The fireworks were still flying everywhere, though, and as he tried to destroy them, more appeared; it seemed that Loki, Pokey, Polo, and Pent had borrowed a few explosive pages from a book belonging to Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes.

Albus saw a brief flurry of movement as James ripped the Cloak off of himself and stuffed it into
his bag in one swift motion; he was well-practiced with slipping the Cloak off so quickly that even people nearby didn’t notice. Then again, there was a lot of distraction going on at the moment, and he was between Gavin and Marco to ensure that nobody saw.

But Professor Longbottom had noticed his absence, however brief, and when he looked back to the Gryffindor table and saw that James was suddenly sitting there, his eyes narrowed and he stared down his friend’s son for so long that even James looked ruffled when he broke gaze.

It was yet another uproarious prank from the infamous Loki, Pokey, Polo, and Pent, but Professor Longbottom’s lengthy staring contest with James had Albus worried. Was Professor Longbottom catching on? Could he prove anything?

Professor Longbottom was a friend of the family, and he was a very good-natured man on the whole. Albus had only seen him angry during those few times when he’d gotten into fights with Lucas. Now, when Professor Longbottom seemed to have picked up on James’s involvement in the latest prank, it looked like he was on the verge of one of his very rare outbursts. Albus thought the pranks were hilarious, but the teachers probably had a different view, and if James ever let his guard down again, Professor Longbottom would probably get angry again. And considering the scope of James’s transgressions, the “family friend” card probably wouldn’t get him too far.

As copious shouts of Scourgify filled the air, Albus looked around and admired the genius of the prank, however disgusting it may have been. He hoped this wouldn’t be the last of the works of Loki, Pokey, Polo, and Pent… but with the look that Professor Longbottom was giving James made Albus wonder if James had the nerve to try again.

Albus remembered his next few weeks at Hogwarts by the things that didn’t happen, rather than the things that did.

There wasn’t another prank from Loki, Pokey, Polo, and Pent.

Gil’s and Louis’s friendship did not seem to be damaged.

Eftan did not yet converse with Scorpius again.

Albus did not learn his mentee’s name.

Exo did not receive a reply from John Solomon.

Professor Longbottom still had not reported to Professor Ramanu on the odd growth rates of his plants.

And Albus’s classes continued to not challenge him.

The school year became a very predictable routine – learning spells, doing homework, flying around the Quidditch pitch on weekends just for fun, writing to Janelle and his parents on occasion, and waiting. There was a lot of waiting – he waited to see what was going on in the greenhouse, waited for Exo to hear back from John Solomon (if he ever would), waited for the Quidditch season to start, and waited for Christmas. Out of his anticipations, the Quidditch season started first – in late October, earlier than usual.

Against an incredibly green backdrop, despite the rapidly approaching winter, Gryffindor and Slytherin took the field.

“And here comes Slytherin!” bellowed Barry Dunbar, who was still the school announcer for
Quidditch matches. “Slytherin isn’t a team to be trifled with this year, but they do have a young Seeker, so James Potter might have the advantage of experience over her, since he’s such an old man. There goes the Keeper, sixth year Melanie Baxter-Thornton, still keeping alive that lengthy Slytherin tradition of strong female Keeper Captains!”

Albus recognized Jonah’s sister strutting out into the field, chin high. He wondered if Jonah would really be that upset if Gryffindor lost.

“Here are our Slytherin Beaters, fifth year Ross Delle-Smith and sixth year Aly Lark! They are followed by the team Chasers, Jasmine Zabini in her fourth year, and Myra Lacralose and Brooke Baxter in their seventh; Brooke is Melanie’s cousin but looks like she could be her twin. And here comes their brand-new Seeker, Artura Reade! We’ll see how she holds up against the Gryffindor Captain… here’s James Potter!”

There was a lot more cheering for James than for the rest of Slytherin combined. But Slytherin in recent years had vastly changed from the Slytherin Albus had experienced in his first year at Hogwarts. They were colder – more distant. It might have been due to the Revelation Relocation, which was the name given to a phenomenon that occurred and had been occurring since the Global Revelation.

Many families, most of them pureblood, fled areas where Muggles lived and began building all-magic communities that excluded Muggle buyers. This had been done after Muggles became aware of the existence of wizardkind; some Muggles had not taken so kindly to magical presences in their neighborhood, and some wizards were happy enough to leave them when their identities were no longer secret, especially in some cases where the wizards in Muggle neighborhoods were threatened. Those with Muggles in their families usually stayed, because they felt welcome in both worlds, but the purebloods relocated themselves – this phenomenon, only noticed years after wizardkind was revealed, became coined “the Revelation Relocation.”

Purebloods became segregated from Muggles like no other time in recent history as a result of this mass movement; they were also separated from anyone with Muggle families, like Muggle-born witches and wizards. They were so disconnected from everyone else that the effect was even trickling into a place like Hogwarts, where everyone was supposed to mix and feel welcome. Albus wondered how Wilcox felt about this; he was a Slytherin, and he was all about helping everyone get along.

The Gryffindor team had already taken the field and the match had already started when Albus broke away from his thoughts, and he tried to remind himself to enjoy the game. He kept looking over to the Forbidden Forest, though; he was unable to shake the thought that something was different. He remembered the view from the Quidditch stadium in previous years, and the trees looked… bigger. Or closer. Or both. He stared at the trees, raking the tree line, trying to determine if it wasn’t just his eyes.

It wasn’t out of the corner of his eye when he saw something move – he was looking right at the trees, and he saw it directly. There was no question that he’d seen it.

It was like nothing he’d ever laid eyes on before. It was still very distant from where he was sitting, but he saw enough to get an impression. The creature looked like a naked, pale human. But it was grossly deformed and extremely ill-proportioned; it swung out from one tree like a monkey, and something under its arms expanded almost like a wing as it sailed far too lightly to the next tree.

He only witnessed it for an instant, and then the creature passed from his sight. He tried to find it again, but nothing appeared. It had vanished into the trees… or at least, he could no longer see it from where he was sitting.
“What in the hell?” whispered Albus.

Aidan looked up. “What? What’s going on?”

“I saw something—”

“ZABINI SCORES! Ten-nothing Slytherin. Keeper Silva Brightstar, the first year, may have absurd talent, but if you have absurd nerves to go with it, that doesn’t really get you anywhere! He’s got to center himself if he wants to stay up there!”

Albus didn’t look back at the pitch even briefly. He kept inspecting the general area where he’d seen the creature.

“Say again?” said Aidan, looking back to the game for a moment before turning to look at the forest with Albus again.

“I saw this creature,” said Albus. “I saw it moving along the trees – there, by the tall one with the twisting double trunk. It went from one to the other and it vanished – maybe it’s concealing itself behind the trunk. I’ve been watching to see if it reappears.”

“In the Forbidden Forest?” asked Aidan, surprised. “Things don’t normally come to the edge. And Wilcox or Valon would probably have noticed if there was activity around the outer rim of the forest.”

“My dad hasn’t gone into the forest much lately,” said Exo, turning around from below to join the conversation.

“He hasn’t?” asked Albus. “It was dangerous before, and he didn’t care then.”

“Does he think it’s even more dangerous now?” asked Aidan, looking around the area that Albus had pointed out.

“I wouldn’t know,” said Exo honestly. “He’s mapped out most of the Forbidden Forest, but he stopped mapping it. I noticed a little while ago that the map he’d made wasn’t getting any more detailed, but I’m not sure when he stopped updating it.”

“This is all just too weird,” said Albus. “I want to ask what’s going on, but I feel like there’s a zero percent chance that I’ll get an answer.”

“You could still try,” said Aidan. “It’s the only way you have a chance of finding anything out…”

“Well, there’s another way,” said Albus shyly.

Aidan stared at him, very seriously frightened. “Please, please tell me you’re not thinking of sneaking into the forest.”

“Relax, there’s no way I’m doing that,” laughed Albus. “Don’t worry; I’m not James.”

As soon as he said it, he started to hope very dearly that James wasn’t thinking of sneaking into the forest. He’d have to make sure no mention of the creature was made around his brother, or James might very well go wandering into the forest to look for it.

Half an hour later, Albus had still tuned out almost the entire match so far, looking around the trees for the creature he’d seen. He was only snapped back to reality when Alec shook his arm.

“Are you watching this?” he yelled exuberantly.
Albus turned back to the match just in time to see a spectacular save by Silva Brightstar. Silva tossed the Quaffle to Pallie Bell, who ran down the other end and almost scored; the Slytherin Chasers barreled down the field and Silva made another awe-inspiring catch in front of the left goal post. He tossed it back to the Leigh sisters, who dribbled it back and forth down the field; Roxanne and Freddie both bashed Bludgers on either side of the Slytherin Keeper, and he dove the wrong way when Pallie tossed the Quaffle at one of the goal posts; it sailed through.

“Another goal for Gryffindor! That makes one hundred and thirty to twenty! If they make it to one hundred and eighty without any more contest from Slytherin, they’ll have the victory sealed even without the Snitch! And SILVA BRIGHTSTAR MAKES YET ANOTHER DAZZLING DIVE!”

It seemed that Gryffindor had shifted its strategy, probably all around the burst of confidence that Silva Brightstar had suddenly experienced; he was saving goal shots as if he was a professional in the Quidditch World Cup. Now neither Beater needed to defend the goal posts, since Silva was proving capable of protecting the goals completely on his own, and both Beaters were on the offensive – the result was that Gryffindor was piling on the points.

But this proved to be unnecessary as James suddenly spotted the Snitch, speeding after it so fast that he had it before Artura Reade even got an eye on it. The Gryffindor crowd screamed themselves hoarse, but everyone was also still slightly disappointed that they didn't get to see Silva Brightstar for longer.

“Beginner’s luck,” said Alec after he was done cheering for Silva. “I appreciate it, but it’s not going to help against Ravenclaw this year. The Cup is a lock for us.”

“And Gryffindor’s got the key to that lock,” said Albus. “His name’s Silva Brightstar and he’s here for seven years!”

“Unless his ego gets bruised so badly by the Greengrass triplets that he never wants to go near a Quidditch field again,” teased Alec.

“You only think they’re that good because they haven’t faced Silva yet,” said Albus. “You’ll be singing a different tune when their so-called ‘unstoppable force’ meets a real immovable object!” He scratched his head. “Hey, that reminds me, actually. What was the answer to that riddle from the Ravenclaw door in our first year? You know, the one about what happens when an unstoppable spell meets an unbreakable shield?”

“Oh, did Holly never tell you before she started hating you?” asked Alec. “Well, I can’t tell you, either. Ravenclaw’s honor, you know.”

Albus’s shoulders slumped. “When can you tell me?”

“Maybe when we graduate,” said Alec. “Or on your deathbed.”

“Haven’t Aubrey and Chinch taught you anything?” asked Albus. “I’m always on my deathbed. I could die at any moment and you’ll be so upset about never having told me the–”

“I saw it!” exclaimed Aidan.

Albus swung his head around rapidly to look at the trees again. There were only leaves blowing in the wind.

“That was it, I think,” said Aidan. “The same thing you saw, maybe. The pale humanoid creature?”

“That’s probably what I saw,” said Albus.
“I was scanning the trees like you said when I saw a flash of the creature; I looked directly at it and saw it for just a second before it jumped to the side and disappeared from my view.”

Albus examined as many individual trees as he could make out from this distance, but he failed to find it again.

“I don’t like that it’s hanging around near the edge,” said Aidan. “Maybe we should tell Professor Wilcox.”

“Maybe,” said Albus. “Where did you see it?”

“A couple hundred yards down from where you said you saw it,” said Aidan, pointing.

Albus squinted. “What’s in that direction?”

“Eventually Hogsmeade?”

“A forest creature wouldn’t be headed into Hogsmeade,” said Albus. “I wish we had Wilcox’s map of the forest…”

They both looked over at Exo.

“Hey, don’t look at me,” said Exo, holding his arms up. “I’m not stealing that from my dad. It’s his pride and joy.”

“Does Valon have a copy?” asked Aidan.

“Can we talk about the awesome Quidditch game we just saw?” interrupted Alec.

“I’m not stealing it from anyone,” said Exo. “I’ll take a look at it if you want, though. Tell you where things are. But I won’t take it from him; he’d know in a second.”

“Tell us if there’s anything between the Quidditch pitch and Hogsmeade,” said Albus, nodding.

“Thanks, Exo.”

“Will do,” said Exo. “I’ll visit Dad’s office when I can.”

Albus gave one final look towards the trees before slipping back into the school with the rest of the crowd. Being outside of the castle walls made him nervous now. He hoped the feeling wouldn’t linger.

Halloween swooped down on them like a bat. Albus felt like he had hardly been in school for a few weeks, let alone two months.

On Saturday, the day of Halloween, they were allowed into Hogsmeade as usual. The only problem was that they still weren’t safe so far from the castle, so Harry decided to send over protection. Thankfully, this time it wasn’t Aubrey and Chinch; it was Alana Falagair, while Parock Sysmal guarded James and his friends. Alana’s brown hair ruffled in the light breeze as she bounced along behind them, so distracted by flowers and insects that Albus wasn’t so sure she’d be ready in case of an ambush. He recalled that his mother strongly disliked Alana, but he never did find out exactly why.

Albus and his friends wandered over towards the Shrieking Shack, which was always a great place to visit on Halloween. Even if they knew where some of the legends had come from – Teddy’s father – it was still a creepy old place to admire.
“So Exo looked over his dad’s little map of the forest,” said Albus, quietly so that Alana wouldn’t overhear, as he, Aidan, and Alec congregated by the lookout that viewed the Shrieking Shack and Alana charmed the flowers into dancing around her. Exo wasn’t able to come, seeing as how there would be a full moon that night. “He said he didn’t really find anything that interesting between the bit of forest near the Quidditch pitch and the bit of forest near Hogsmeade.”

“Maybe it wasn’t heading in that direction specifically,” said Aidan. “Maybe it was just pacing or something.”

“There really isn’t anything important around the edges of the Forbidden Forest at all,” added Albus. “It’s only once you get deeper that you start to find landmarks like Aragog’s old web and the clearing that my brother and I discovered a while back.”

He turned to the Shrieking Shack, which was a much more pleasant sight than the memory that was coming to mind of the blood-covered forest clearing.

“Exo said it’s mostly just normal woods near the edge,” he said. “Nothing special. So I wonder why the creature was at the edge of the forest at all.”

A cold breeze blew across their bodies; they all tightened their cloaks at about the same time.

“I could go for a butterbeer,” said Alec, to general murmured agreements.

They turned in the direction of the Three Broomsticks and began to walk.

As they crested a hill, a most unfriendly voice mused out to them.

“Well, look who it is.”

Albus turned his head slightly to see Red Pierce walking along an adjacent path, and his stomach dropped a few inches. It dropped a few more when Asher Pierce strolled up behind his brother. Alana was suddenly alert, a wary eye trained on the Pierces at all times.

None of the group responded to Red; they just kept trudging forward.

“Rude as sin,” clucked Asher. “Those tainted with filthy blood don’t understand civilized ways of greeting, I suppose.”

“Why don’t you just leave, now,” said Alec. “You’re not fooling anyone into thinking you’re anything but gigantic gits.”

“Settle down, blood traitor,” said Red. “We’re just reminding you who’s better, is all. So you don’t forget, you know.”

“Don’t respond,” muttered Albus as they continued to walk.

“Remember, Potter,” said Asher. “We get what we want.”

“This didn’t end well for James and it’s not going to end well for us if we don’t just keep walking and hope we lose them,” said Albus.

But Red and Asher had stopped walking, and they soon passed out of the sight of the friends and their guardian. Alana kept an eye on them until they disappeared.

“They are really terrible people,” said Aidan shortly.
“Tell me about it,” said Albus.

“We don’t need to tell you about it, you just saw it,” said Alec, who still sometimes missed blatant sarcasm.

“You three used to have another friend, didn’t you?” asked Alana. “In Slytherin?”

“Used to,” said Albus; Alana’s face fell. Albus remembered that she was from Slytherin, and was particularly sensitive to bad news about Slytherins being unfriendly.

They turned into the Three Broomsticks and ordered four butterbeers, clinking them together noisily and drinking them gratefully.

“Turns a cold day into the best kind of day,” said Alec, drinking most of his beverage but spilling a fair amount down the front of his shirt by accident.

One could even forget about the Pierces when this stuff was around. Albus drained his quickly and let it warm him from the inside.

“I’m going to take Janelle here on Christmas,” he said happily as they left. “I don’t think they have butterbeer in France.”

“She’s coming to visit on Christmas?” asked Alec excitedly.

“Yeah, over the holidays,” said Albus. “Dad says I should probably stay at Hogwarts over Christmas, because of safety issues, so I asked Janelle if she might want to hop over to Hogwarts.”

“That’s great,” said Alec. “Nice Christmas present.”

“For both of us,” said Albus. “She seemed really happy when she wrote back to me to accept my–”

Albus cut himself off when he saw someone running towards them at full speed.

“Stop!” he yelled. “Stop – stop right there!”

The three friends paused their walk, but all of them backed slightly away so that Alana could greet the new arrival first.

“Is something the matter?” she asked.

The man thrust a finger at Albus. “Bloody thief ‘ere, that’s what’s the matter!”

Albus stared at the man, unable to understand what he meant. He hadn’t stolen anything… recently… and definitely nothing from Hogsmeade.

“Do you have a reason behind this accusation?” asked Alana sternly.

“E’s got an Invisibility Cloak, don’t ‘e?” shouted the man. “Arry Potter’s got an Invisibility Cloak, I bet this little rat’s got that Cloak on ‘im right now!”

“I don’t,” lied Albus. He had the Cloak with him now, actually, but this man didn’t need to know that. But why would he be asking this? Had James done something? Was it the Pierces, trying to “get what they want” and blame it on the Potters again?

“Look, ‘e’s lyin’, I can see the bulge in ‘is robe ‘e’s tryin’ to conceal!”
“Sir, what’s your name?” asked Alana patiently.

“Swait,” said the man in a low growl. “I own the Bait-‘n’-Switchblade ‘round the corner. A little shop for ‘untin’ gear and whatnot. No kids allowed.”

“So Albus hasn’t gone in there, then,” stated Alana simply.

“E ‘as!” bellowed Swait. “I seen somethin’ move and I run out to the back and someone with an Invisibility Cloak runs out me shop! Robbed me back room where I keep all me special equipment! Stole me best knives!”

“Don’t you have anti-theft charms?” asked Alana.

“Yeah, and alarms to sense ‘uman presence,” said Swait. “I’m still workin’ out ‘ow ‘e managed to get past those.”

“Excuse me,” said Aidan. “But I’m just wondering how you managed to see someone move if they were under the Invisibility Cloak?”

“I seen it flap up or somethin’,” said Swait. “I seen a flash o’ color like the Invisibility Cloak comin’ up while ‘e was runnin’. I’m a goddamn ‘unter, I know when I seen movement!”

“A flash of color?” confirmed Albus.

“Yeah, like the color o’ your arm, kid,” snarled Swait. “That fleshy color there.”

“Flesh color?” repeated Albus.

“Why you soundin’ like you realizin’ somethin’?” asked Swait suspiciously.

Albus could only picture the creature that was headed in the direction of Hogsmeade the last time they checked.

“Your anti-theft charms,” asked Albus. “Do they work on just people, or animals, too?”

“When the ‘ell would an animal be breakin’ into me ‘untin’ shop and stealin’ me stuff when I’m right there with me ‘untin’ license and surrounded by weapons?” scoffed Swait.

“An invisible animal wouldn’t care,” said Albus to himself.

“Eh? What’s that?”

“Nothing,” said Albus. “I don’t have the Cloak on me and I’ve been with Alana since leaving the castle, though, so I haven’t stolen anything.”

“Where’s your brother, then? And your sister? There’s three Potter brats, eh?”

“Yes, but–”

“I can vouch for the Potters,” snapped Alana. “Good day, Mr. Swait.”

“Ey!” yelped Swait. “I need that shit back NOW! Where the ‘ell does ‘e think it’s gone to – ‘e knows, I can see it! I need it before someone else finds it–”

Alana turned around as Swait cut himself off. “And, er, why is that?” she asked.
“I just need it back,” mumbled Swait.

Alana strode around the corner, towards where the shop was. “Wait here for a moment, kids… watch each others’ backs for a few seconds…”

“’Ey! What do you think you’re doin’?” demanded Swait, running after her.

Alana returned with Swait in handcuffs, chuckling; apparently, he’d housed a number of illegal products in the shop, in plain view to anyone who knew spells for revealing hidden artifacts – and Alana was an Auror, so she wasn’t about to miss anything like that.

Albus looked over to his friends. “I want to know what we’ve been seeing,” he said seriously. “Let’s get down to the library whenever we can, and look around for information on what animals can turn themselves invisible.”

“Good idea,” said Aidan. “We can compare our findings to try and pinpoint that this creature is during the next Quidditch match.”

“Aw, not during Quidditch!” whined Alec.

Albus spent a good number of hours in the library in the next few weeks, looking over the different species of animals with powers of invisibility. But nothing seemed to fit the descriptions he’d had and heard. Pale, like flesh… human-shaped… There seemed to be no animals described that way, unless they were in the Restricted Section, which he was currently unable to access.

The biggest development he had in the process, though, came from a place that shocked him. Of all places to actually learn something, the answer came from an idea he had during History of Magic.

Professor Binns was describing a large European escalation of warfare from the middle ages. “There was a massive build-up of forces,” he droned, “in response to what Spanish wizards believed was a highly specialized secret weapon being developed by France. In response to Spain’s weapons build-up, all other forces started building up to match Spain, in case Spain went on the attack. But what Spain thought was a secret weapon coming from France was actually just a cross-bred plant being grown by French botanists; when Spanish spies came across it, and it started belching fire, they assumed it was a weapon aimed against them. But really, it was just a hybrid plant, formed from cross-breeding a Magmarbor with a Stonehedge.”

Albus considered this for a moment – something being mistaken as a weapon that was actually a plant.

Could he be mistaken in what he thought he saw? Was this creature a plant?

He might not have considered this possibility if the paranoia had not been consistently in the back of his mind that this had at least something to do with the legend of Dismiusa.

He decided against going to the library again – this was also the day before the next Quidditch match, which was when he and his friends had decided to share the results of their searches, and he didn’t have much time to research invisible plants. Instead, he simply approached the portrait of Litinia Darstary which hung in the History of Magic classroom; she’d been a Herbology professor at Hogwarts, so perhaps she knew what he was looking for.

Litinia was very pleased to see him. Her bright eyes – one blue, and one purple, the same eyes as star Herbology student Mia Moon in his year – sparkled with joy. “Albus Potter!” she exclaimed. “It has been too long since you’ve talked to me.”
“Yeah, I know,” said Albus sheepishly. “Sorry about that.”

“Not a problem. Now, how are you?”

“I’m excellent lately,” said Albus.

“Yes, you must be excellent, after having overcome that dreadful magical block!”

“Yes, that was a relief,” he replied. “I was wondering, ma’am, if you knew of any plants that can move and turn invisible?”

Litinia looked at him with a curious expression. “Why… I don’t know if there is such a plant. Perhaps you could achieve such a result through cross-breeding, but that’s strictly forbidden due to the dangerous nature of such activities, and the unpredictability of their results. Mobile and invisible? What a frightening plant that would be. But to satisfy my curiosity… why do you ask?”

“Well…”

The more Albus thought about it, the more ridiculous he found the notion that it could have been a plant. It was definitely moving – they might have seen two separate creatures in the woods, so it might not have been a single creature on the move the first time they saw it, but obviously, if one of them robbed a weapons shop, it was both highly mobile and highly sentient. No plant would have done that.

“Never mind,” said Albus. “I just thought I saw something moving around in the woods, and one of them robbed a shop nearby, but I couldn’t find any information on invisible flesh-colored humanoid animals, so I thought maybe it was a plant…”

“Invisible… flesh-colored… humanoid animals?” asked Litinia breathlessly.

Albus stared at her. “What? Do you know something?”

“It sounds like you have described the Fokii.”

“The what?”

“The Fokii,” said Litinia. “Corpses of humans invaded by a terrifically awful Dark fungus with unknown origins. So it’s not really an animal, and it’s not really a plant. They’re incredibly intelligent and nastily mischievous.”

“And they can turn invisible?”

“You can only see them when you’re looking directly at them,” said Litinia. “You can’t view them in your peripheral vision. That might be why you thought they could turn themselves invisible – once they leave your sight, you’ll have a hard time relocating them, especially with their agility, which makes them almost practically invisible.”

“What do they do?”

“They sneak up behind you and bite off chunks of your flesh.”

Albus’s stomach recoiled at the thought.

“That’s all they usually do,” said Litinia. “The bite isn’t infectious or anything… Obviously it would hurt, but you’d just treat it like a normal scrape or cut and you’d be fine. Now, if you have had Fokii in your woods, it would be assumed that there was a reason – something brought in the
fungus, which then infected the corpses and turned them into Fokii. The only carriers of the Fokii Fungus were a little creature that went extinct in 1305... so the Fokii passed out of common knowledge as well, because without the presence of mulunctapoli, the fungus cannot reproduce.”

“The mulunctapoli that were released into the woods brought back the Fokii?” asked Albus.

“That’s right. And no one has been sent into the hospital wing with bites?”

“No,” said Albus. “The Fokii have only been hanging around the edges of the woods, except for one of them breaking into a Hogsmeade shop around Halloween.”

“Oh, that’s not good,” said Litinia. “I was hoping you would say they were biting people.”

“What? Why?”

“The Fokii are dangerously devious,” she said. “If they were biting students, at least we would be secure in the fact that all they wanted were meals. The fact that they’re not biting anyone, and stealing things from shops, means that they’re plotting something bigger than just feeding themselves.”

Albus cringed.

“That’s the bad news,” said Litinia. “There’s worse news, and far worse news.”

“What’s the worse news?”

“The worse news is that the Fokii Fungus is not specific to humans,” she said. “It prefers humans, since they are very intelligent creatures, and the fungus can take control of their brains, but any corpse buried near the forest can be infected. The fungus can even restore the corpse if it’s been magically altered. And the Forbidden Forest is not exactly the graveyard of bunnies and puppies. There are probably a lot of dead creatures there which we would not care to see come back – especially not if they’re invisible. Water monsters aren’t out of the question, either – the fungus is perfectly happy to sink to the bottom of a lake and keep looking. It can even travel through solid rock to find a corpse buried beneath it. It’s a highly sentient fungus and it will find a corpse if one is around. And the more it finds, the more it breeds – if mulunctapoli are near to germinate its spores.”

“Wait – how old does the corpse have to be for the fungus to not affect it?”

“The fungus can affect any corpses that are still intact,” replied Litinia, “even to the point of animating bones. The only difference is that older corpses are more fragile, so the fungi might not choose to use them. They rot faster, and the fungus has no use for a corpse that’s falling apart.”

“Okay,” said Albus. “What’s the far worse news?”

“It’s bad enough that I’m not even going to tell you,” replied Litinia. “I think I’ll have to go inform Professor Wilcox of this immediately.”

She turned and practically sprinted from her portrait.

“What do you suppose that means?” asked Aidan, eyes glinting with suspicion.

The Quidditch pitch was full of roaring students and roaring winds and rains upon the arrival of the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff teams, so he had to shout to be heard.
“I think the term ‘far worse news’ pretty much gives away what it means,” said Alec. “It means that the news is far worse.”

“Let’s welcome the Ravenclaw Eagles to the field!” announced Barry. “Seventh year Beaters Esperanza Ruiz and Captain Anya Brown lead the team – a devastating duo that could give Fred and Roxanne Weasley of Gryffindor a run for their money, if not exceed their skills completely. We look forward to that match-up at the end of the year. There go Keeper and Seeker Tyler Emmett, year seven, and Kalina Moon, year six. She’s a formidable one; she’ll give any of the current Seekers more than a little trouble. And we have the stellar Chaser trio, the fourth year Greengrass triplets! This entire team is deadly dangerous, and we’ll love to see them out, the seventh year Seeker, followed by the third year Keeper Helen Foster. After them are the Chasers: Devon Elbiell, year five; Skyler Dock, year six; and Eileen Dock, year seven. Then come Beaters Delilah Dock of her fifth year – the third Dock on the Hufflepuff team, just like the three Greengrasses on Ravenclaw – and new recruit Skye Summers of her fourth year. Give them a hand, folks; they’ll be your entertainment this morning, even in this terrible weather, and they deserve a round of applause!”

Albus clapped hard for his classmates on the field, the Greengrass triplets (whom he had taken to liking) and Skye Summers. He didn’t talk with her much, but she seemed nice. The applause, though, was difficult to hear over the pounding rain and howling wind. It seemed highly unlikely that the Quidditch players heard any of it.

“This game could go on for a while – these conditions are terrible for Seekers to find the Snitch,” stated Barry. “And they’re off!”

“So the Fokii are what we saw,” said Aidan. “I’ve heard about them before. This is awful news. You know what kinds of things are buried in the Forbidden Forest?”

“Acromantulas, for starters,” said Alec, shivering. “I’m not a huge fan of spiders.”

“There aren’t many people around who are.”

“Yeah! And you know why there aren’t that many around? Because those people made the mistake of trusting spiders!”

“There’s a really bad overtone to all of this,” said Aidan. “And it gets worse – I hear that if a Fokii kills a wizard, and if the spores then occupy that person immediately… it forms a Fokii that can still use the wizard’s magic.”

“An invisible flesh-eating creature that can use magic?” said Albus. “Maybe that’s the ‘far worse news’ that Litinia didn’t tell me. How much worse than that can it get?”

“I don’t know,” said Exo, “but whatever Litinia ended up telling my dad… I hope he’s prepared for it.”

The Quidditch match lasted much less than anyone had been expecting. Jason Lindley found the Snitch for Hufflepuff before half an hour had passed, but by that time, the Greengrass triplets had already scored thirty-one goals for Ravenclaw and the ending score was three hundred and ten to one hundred and seventy – an absolute thrashing. Lindley simply seemed to feel the need to end the game before it got any worse.

The Greengrasses were good. Would Silva be able to keep up with them?

Albus and his friends were some of the first to reenter Hogwarts, because instead of filing out in a
line like most of the students did, they simply jumped over the back of the stands and, with a little magic to cushion their fall, they landed close to the door leading back into the castle. Professor Valon gave them a little raise of his eyebrow at the stunt, but understood that they just wanted to get out of the rain as soon as possible.

Albus entered the hallway and stopped short.

Aidan and Alec bumped into him from behind, their shoes squelching to a wet stop.

“What?” grunted Alec.

“Look around,” said Albus, gesturing to the walls. “It looks like a dog shook itself dry in here or something.”

Little droplets of water were splattered all around a central puddle in the hallway, sprinkling the walls and even the ceiling, which was slightly dripping.

Albus squinted in the distance – out of the corner of his eye, he thought he’d seen a small plant hovering in midair near the end of the corridor. A crowd of people bumped him as they passed, chattering loudly, and he lost sight of it before he centered his vision on it.

“That was weird,” he said, charging down the hallway after the apparition.

“Hey!” shouted Alec and Aidan, running after him.

Albus pulled to a halt at the end of the long corridor, looking in both directions. To the right, the path led to the dungeons. The other way led to the Great Hall and the other dormitories. As the other students caught up to him, giving him odd looks, they broke into parts; some Slytherins headed down to the dungeons where their dormitories lay, and everybody else headed towards their respective dormitories or to the library.

“I wonder which way it went,” said Albus.

He looked both ways again.

“If it was really there,” he added.

“What are you talking about?” asked Aidan. “What did you see?”

“I thought I saw a plant hovering in midair,” said Albus. “It was too far down for me to be sure, though…”

“I really hope it wasn’t being carried by something invisible,” said Alec.

A wave of dread washed over Albus just as a horrible shriek of panic echoed from the dungeons.

He slipped with his wet shoes as he tried to gather his footing again, and he hit the ground hard; Peeves snorted with laughter above them. Albus picked himself off the ground and sprinted down the hall towards the continued screams that were echoing down that way. If that was a Fokii trying to make more of its kind, it could be attacking students left and right, and he had to find it – only he and his friends (and probably Wilcox by now) knew what the creature was…

He passed several students who were rubbing their eyes and gawking down the hallway; he passed a hissing Gimmick, whose fur on his back was bristling as he stared down in the direction of the hidden passageway that Albus had discovered at the end of his second year.
He heard scattered segments of nervous conversation everywhere as he dashed down to the destination that he somehow knew was where he needed to go.

“–you see that?”
“–kept disappearing–”
“–all over the ceiling–”
“–plant thing it was carrying–”
“–those claws–”

People were screaming and pointing at the ceiling, but not in any one direction. Albus looked up, combing the ceiling with his eyes as he ran, and his eyes caught on a levitating plant and a thin silver object hanging next to it, and as he focused his vision on it, the creature appeared in his sight.

The Fokii was in motion over the heads of the Slytherin crowd, grabbing onto the ceiling and swinging like a monkey. It seemed to have been formed from a human carcass, but it was mutilated and disfigured. Only a few short strands of scraggly hair dipped down from the back of its head, it had sunken eyes and no nose or ears, and a large gash was open on one side of its chest, which was covered in skin so thin and pale it was almost transparent. Albus could make out the form of a heart, and despite the fact that it looked diseased if not dead, it was beating.

But it was altered far beyond the effects of whatever caused its death. The mouth was almost constantly open in a wide, hungry snarl, and crooked, jagged teeth burst out so far that they had to be stored outside the lips when the mouth was closed. The arms and legs were about one and a half times their usual length, and the claws that stuck out from the fingers and toes had never belonged to any human. The claws on its hands were gripping along the ceiling as it swung further into the dungeons, carrying a plant with a little red flower on the top and a small sliver of metal in the horribly elongated claws, including one that appeared to be retractable which protruded from the back of its heel and curved under its foot. It was a gruesome sight – and as Albus noticed a second later, he was the only one witnessing it, as everyone else had cleared out as quickly as possible.

The Fokii looked back at Albus and hissed, spittle flying as all of its teeth jangled together like a chorus of grisly wind chimes. For a moment, Albus was worried that this was exactly what it was searching for – somebody all by themselves, a prime opportunity for an attack – and he whipped out both of his wands. But by the time he had them out, even before he’d aimed them, the Fokii had turned and fled the area, continuing its voyage further into the dungeons.

When it leapt across the ceiling, Albus lost sight of it for a moment. Remembering that he couldn’t allow it to enter his peripheral vision, he kept a close eye on the creature as he darted after it. At the moment he began to run, an almost excruciatingly loud alarm sounded throughout the school – the alarm used in siege drills, except that this wasn’t a drill. He knew the alarm had been sounded because of the appearance of this creature. The blaring alarm startled the creature, and it fell from the ceiling; taking its two items up in its hands, it fled on foot.

It was faster than him, and as it turned a corner far ahead, he became very afraid he would lose it. As he turned the corner, he came upon the very same strip of wall to which he had been led by Gimmick, and his breath hitched as he noticed that it was already open.

He couldn’t let it open the door at the bottom of the passage – he didn’t know if this creature had the power to open the door, and he didn’t know what was behind it, but he did know that he didn’t
want to take that risk. Regardless of what was behind that door – whatever had caused that horrible sound in the middle of the night at the end of the year before last – it was not something that he wanted loose in the school.

*Could it be–?*

As he bounded his way down the curving stairs, he readied his wands for anything. He had to be aware of his surroundings at all times – if he didn’t know where his foe was, he could be easily taken by surprise and become one of their foes himself. He had to examine every inch of wall to make sure there was nothing hiding there, and he had to pray that there weren’t any more of them inside this passage.

His heart began to race faster than his feet down the stairs, and for a second, he thought he should have turned back by now to get a teacher or someone who could help. But he couldn’t take the time to do that. What if the creature was already in the process of opening the door?

He landed at the bottom of the stairs and stared down the dark passage.

“*Expecto Patronum!*” he called out.

His coyote Patronus burst from his wand to illuminate the gloomy passage, and it soared gracefully into the center of the room, throwing the Fokii standing by the door into light. Albus breathed a sigh of relief when he saw that it was still closed.

The Fokii screeched at the sudden light, holding its hands by its face. The light of the Patronus glinted off of the silver strip of steel it was carrying – some sort of knife. But the knife was even shorter than its claws; why would the creature need to use it?

It seemed to be singing in the light, and as Albus looked closer, he saw that it was *rotting* as he watched – the corpse to which the fungus had attached itself was reacting to the light from his Patronus, and it seemed to be hurting the creature, perhaps even killing it.

Albus aimed both of his wands at the Fokii and shouted, “*Expelliarmus itero!*”

The plant and the knife came dislodged from the Fokii’s hands, and it stumbled backwards, screeching more.

“*Stupefy!*” yelled Albus immediately afterwards, not willing to waste any time.

The Fokii was blasted backwards; it hit the sealed door and crumpled to the ground.

The impact on the door was a large one, but Albus didn’t expect the entire passage to start shaking. But that’s what happened – followed by a deafening roar that echoed throughout the castle, even louder than the still shrieking alarm. Albus’s head suddenly began pounding, and images of the green woman began flashing through his mind – she was howling in pain – he could barely think through the barrage on his mind. Finally gaining control over his body again as the sound began to subside, he threw his hands over his ears to block out the last of it. He tensed as he looked at the door, certain that it was about to open – and too late did he realize that he had lost sight of the Fokii.

He turned around, searching every part of the passage, but the Fokii was nowhere to be found. The rumbling stopped, as did the roar from behind the iron door. He glanced back, making sure it was still shut, before he looked down at the plant that the Fokii had been carrying. It had already wilted, and in a few seconds, it had faded into the ground and disappeared completely. Not a root or a leaf or a tendril remained from the plant.
The knife, however, had remained.

Albus leaned down and picked up the knife. He turned it over in his hand, examining it; it looked like nothing out of the ordinary. Still, he pocketed it to show someone else later.

He turned back towards the stairs and saw movement coming back down the stairs towards him.

Seized by panic, his arm flew up almost by itself towards the stairs and he impulsively shouted, “Stupefy!”

A wand came up and there was a flash of pink light, and Albus’s Stunning jet was nullified. His Patronus threw light onto Wilcox’s apprehensive face as the Headmaster slowly came into view in the hidden passage.

“Albus?” he asked nervously.

“Oh, Merlin, I’m sorry, Professor,” gasped Albus, clutching his chest as the Patronus faded. “You scared me. I thought you were the Fokii coming back.”

“The what?” asked Wilcox, speaking very softly and very carefully.

“The Fokii,” said Albus. “It ran down this passage – I thought it was going to open the door and release–”

Wilcox’s face made Albus more nervous than the Fokii – he looked absolutely horrified.

“Open the door?” he said breathlessly. “But – how – I don’t understand – that door is sealed–”

“You’ve been here before?” asked Albus.

“After you came to me about the hidden passageway, I found this,” said Wilcox quietly, as if he was afraid that someone was listening.

“The same way I found it?” asked Albus. “Just by noticing the streaks on the wall?”

“Yes,” said Wilcox.

“Have you tried to open the door?”

“I checked to see if it could be opened by magic, but I did not actually attempt to open it,” said Wilcox. “No spell can open that door. But firstly, are you okay, Albus? Were you hurt?”

“No. I wasn’t. I just chased the Fokii because I thought it–”

“Are you sure it was a Fokii?” said Wilcox. “That’s a really serious thing to claim. Fokii are highly dangerous creatures, and they haven’t been around for centuries.”

“Yes, I’m sure!” declared Albus.

Aidan, Alec, and Exo suddenly appeared at the foot of the stairs, breathing sighs of relief when they saw Albus standing intact.

“This is getting extremely crowded for this tiny hallway,” said Wilcox, turning and gesturing them out. “Let’s get out.”

“Are you sure, Professor?”
“I’ll put security spells around this door,” said Wilcox. “Nothing’s getting in here again. For now, I want us out of this cramped and foreboding place.”

They slowly exited the hidden hallway, keeping all eyes open for an attack from the shadows. None came; it appeared that the Fokii had fled, or else it was still somewhere in the castle, but not here.

“The Fokii was carrying a plant, sir,” said Albus. “And a knife.”

“It was carrying a what?” asked Wilcox quickly.

“Some sort of a plant,” said Albus. “It had a small red flower. It dropped the plant inside the corridor. It also dropped a knife—”

“Never mind about the knife,” said Wilcox. “Why did we leave without collecting the plant? It’s still there if it was dropped, isn’t it?”

“No, sir. It faded into nothing after it was dropped; there’s no trace of it there.”

Wilcox frowned, and gestured them to keep moving. “I don’t know much about plants, but I only know a few of them that wilt and fade to nothing when separated from contact with living creatures after being picked. Describe the plant to me?”

“It had a green stem that traveled upwards in spirals,” said Albus. “There were a few tendrils growing out at random places and a few thin leaves. Then there was a tiny red flower at the top, and that’s really all there was to the plant.”

“I’ll have to run this by Professor Longbottom,” said Wilcox, sounding almost sick. “He’s our authority on plants.”

They stepped into an unused circular classroom; it was empty.

“My office,” said Wilcox as they reached the center of the room.

The walls around them began to rotate, and Albus recalled Wilcox’s shortcut from the lower levels to his office. The circular walls turned halfway around; the open door moved to the other side of the room and an opening appeared with the rushing sound of wind on the other side.

“Whoa,” said Alec and Aidan; Albus had been through this before, and he was sure that Exo, as the Headmaster’s son, had also traveled this route. Wilcox put a hand behind Alec’s back and a hand behind Aidan’s back, guiding them to the new exit; Albus and Exo followed him. They stepped through the threshold, sucked upwards as if through a straw with the feeling like he was traveling like he would with Floo Powder, hurtling through a tube until the sudden downward plunge left them in a small, one-door room; Wilcox opened the door to reveal his office.

“Wicked,” said Alec.

“A Headmaster needs to get around,” said Aidan with a shrug.

The main door to the Headmaster’s office was already being pounded when they got inside.

“Professor Wilcox!” came a shout that sounded like it was from James. “Professor! I need to tell you something important, sir, are you in there?”

Professor Wilcox opened the door just as James was about to give up and leave. James turned
around and waved at Albus, looking extremely surprised.

“What is it?” asked Wilcox, sounding like his fuse was running short.

“The creature left the castle, sir,” said James. “I saw it leave. But, er, I have a question.”

“Then ask it.”

“Was that creature… Mr. Crouch?”

Wilcox stared at him without saying a word.

“The former Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation?” added James.

“Why in the hell would you suggest that?” asked Wilcox, putting a hand over his face as he tried to comprehend everything.

James looked at Albus and mouthed, *The map said so.*

Albus blinked and nodded. James was telling the truth – apparently he had found the creature on the Marauder’s Map, and saw it leave the castle.

“He’s telling the truth, sir,” said Albus. “It left.”

Wilcox looked back to Albus, then back to James. “If you say so.” He sighed, a bit shaken. “That’s good to know. But… about your accusation—”

“They never recovered his body, did they?” asked James. “It had been buried near Hagrid’s old cabin, transfigured into a bone, but someone or something found it and dug it up? Right?”

“No,” said Wilcox. “His body was never recovered.”

Wilcox glanced at Albus, and Albus knew what he was thinking. The Fokii could take control of a corpse. And they could restore the corpse to its original state, even if it was Transfigured – the magic might have even preserved the corpse and made it better.

“Did someone bewitch his corpse?” asked James. “Was that – was that an Inferi?”

“That was no Inferi,” said Wilcox. “I’ll explain to you later – for now, leave us, please. I need to question your brother about his convenient placement in these events.”

James nodded and gave a meaningful look to Albus before he left. It was clear he expected Albus to tell him everything afterwards… which he probably would. It was also very interesting to note that the Fokii, when human at least, showed up on the Marauder’s Map.

Wilcox placed a hand on his desk to steady himself as he placed a hand over his eyes.

“The Fokii got Barty Crouch,” he groaned. “Good Lord. Fokii in the Forbidden Forest. I never would have thought… Even when the mulunctapolii came back, that still wouldn’t have brought back the Fokii Fungus…” He massaged his scalp. “And how did you know that they were Fokii? How long ago did you find out and when were you planning on telling me about this?”

“Wait,” said Albus. “I thought Litinia was going to tell you.”

Wilcox looked up. “Excuse me?”
“Litinia,” said Albus. “The portrait in the History of Magic classroom with the eyes that are one blue and one purple–”

“I know who Litinia is – what did you mean, she was going to tell me?”

“She’s the one who told me about the Fokii,” said Albus. “She said they were around in her time. I told her about a Fokii that robbed a weapons shop down in Hogsmeade, that’s probably where it got the knife–”

“That robbery was by a Fokii?” asked Wilcox.

“I asked her because I’d seen something swinging around the trees in the Forbidden Forest, and it matched the description that Mr. Swait gave about whatever robbed his store. Do you think the knife it stole is important or–”

“And Litinia was supposed to come to tell me about this?” interrupted Wilcox. “Surosch, will you…”

“I’ll go check for her,” said the ancient man named Surosch in a portrait to Albus’s left, leaving his frame.

“Surosch Bolorant was the Arithmancy professor while Litinia was teaching, and became the Headmaster several years before her death, so he knows her best,” said Wilcox. “She’ll talk to him, if no one else. Albus, do you know anything else about this incident?”

“I saw the Fokii before it happened,” said Albus. “Scouting the castle, maybe. And then it robbed the store and took this knife–” He extracted the knife from his pocket and displayed it to Wilcox. “Is it important?”

Wilcox gave it a quick glance. “No,” he said. “But I’ll return it to Mr. Swait for you.” He took the knife and placed it on his desk.

“After the robbery, it came here while we were all in Quidditch,” said Albus. “I saw it vaulting along the ceiling, carrying the plant and the knife. I chased it down the passageway… and I Disarmed it of both the things it was carrying…”

“Thank God,” said Wilcox. “Who knows what could have happened.”

“And then the roaring started, and I was seeing visions of a green woman in my head. And then the Fokii was gone and that was when you–”

“Visions of a green woman?” asked Wilcox.

“It looked like she was in pain,” said Albus.

Wilcox nodded, but his eyes were hiding something.

“Perhaps we should get you to visit Madam Birchbaum again,” said Wilcox. “You’re seeing things?”

“I’m not sure it’s accidental,” said Albus confidently. “Professor, do you know any details about this whole thing that you’re not telling us?”

“Of course I do,” said Wilcox. “And seeing how you phrased that question, I think you know that I can’t tell you.”
“Can you at least tell us if it has anything to do with what I think it does?”

“And what is that?”

Albus cleared his throat.

“Dismiusa.”

Wilcox cleared his throat back.

“I couldn’t say.”

Albus stared into his Headmaster’s eyes, attempting to decipher them, but it was impossible.

“Stay away from that door from now on,” said Wilcox. “You have no idea how dangerous it could be.”

Before Albus or his friends could respond to this, Surosch Bolorant popped back into his portrait, out of breath.

“Litinia is gone, sir,” he wheezed. “And no one has seen her since yesterday. She disappeared from her portrait after talking to Mr. Potter, and she has yet to return.”

Wilcox stiffened as he stared at Professor Bolorant, and the silence that followed inside the Headmaster’s office was pounding at Albus’s ears louder than the roar from under the school.
Dear Albus,

I can’t say these recent events don’t make me nervous. I don’t want to lie to you, even if it might make you feel better to hear that I was calm. But honestly, I’m sort of glad about what happened. Thankfully, no one got hurt, of course – but because there was a breach in the defenses of the castle, now there will be better defenses, and it won’t happen again.

Your notes on the strange activity of the plant life at Hogwarts are interesting. I think there’s a potential explanation presented by the emergence of the Fokii. The reappearance of the mulunctapolli has sent the natural world reeling; they’ve reintroduced at least the Fokii fungus to the environment, so they may have had other effects. This is just a wild guess, of course, but you expressed some concern, so maybe you should bring this up with Professor Longbottom. He might know more.

I’m not worried about your safety at Hogwarts, especially not when Helio Wilcox is around, but your safety outside of the castle is what worries me. Please take care when you’re outside the walls. If you go to Hogsmeade for Christmas with Janelle like you told me earlier, just be extra careful. Go to Professor Wilcox if you need anything.

Your visions are also most peculiar. I’d say that, from the way you described it, this sounds like you’re witnessing something that’s happening right now; I would know, after all. But remember that you may not be seeing things exactly as they are. In many cases, the person who sees such things is seeing them in a sort of mental code that you may have to decipher to discover the true meaning. The woman in pain could symbolize something. I only suggest that your dream is symbolic rather than real because I don’t know of anyone with green skin; that’s rather peculiar.

I know how it must feel – literally, I know how it feels because I’ve been in your exact situation – but I have to ask you not to get involved in these affairs. You did an excellent job staving off the Fokii in whatever it was attempting to do. You seem to be saving our sorry behinds more than any of the Aurors in the office. You are an extremely talented wizard. Your skills, even at your young age, are far beyond all but the best wizards in the Auror office... but even the best Aurors are sometimes killed.

Stay safe and stay strong. Everything will be okay, I promise. I wish we could see you for Christmas, but it’s safer this way. Maybe your mother and I will visit Hogwarts if we have an opening. See you soon.

-Dad

P.S. You should think about setting up a security question system with your friends so that you can always be sure it’s them. It would also be good practice.

Albus folded the letter back up. He’d read it many times over the three weeks since it had been sent to him. He’d written a letter to his father detailing everything that had occurred in the Fokii incident, and had received a reply the second morning after.

Now they were one week into December. It was a frigid Monday morning; winter had been rapidly approaching for days. Despite this fact, many of the trees were still vibrantly green and had lost very few leaves, and the Forbidden Forest even seemed to be getting taller than it was when Aidan pointed it out at the time they arrived.
Albus kept a close eye on the forest, wanting to make sure that no Fokii were hovering near the edges, but also keeping an eye on its growth. Professor Longbottom had only just given Professor Ramanu his notes on the growth of the plants in his greenhouses, and Professor Ramanu had not yet begun evaluating them; she had said she would contact Albus while she worked so that he could watch. So, either she didn’t realize how urgent of a matter these notes were and hadn’t gotten to them in the day since she’d had them, or Professor Longbottom had requested that she not include anyone else in the process.

Meanwhile, Aidan was doing extensive research on Fokii. When Albus explained to Rose what had happened, she also began hitting the library often after class to try to find books on Dark fungi. She didn’t cooperate with Aidan in the investigation, but rather sought to discover something before him. Everything was a constant competition between those two, but Albus was glad for the extra motivation.

Wilcox had given an announcement to the school detailing what had happened, and instituted a rule that no student was ever to leave the castle alone, and preferably in groups of three or more. He didn’t say if any points would be taken from students found wandering outside the castle by themselves, but the prospect of being eaten alive by a corpse was likely enough to keep everyone in tight-knit groups anyway.

And the siege drills had gotten more serious. They had continued the siege drill process from last year. At the beginning of this year, Wilcox had apparently stated that they would not be as frequent as they were. Albus had been unconscious for this, but several of his friends confirmed it. But Wilcox had gone back on his word, and the teachers informed the students that siege drills would go back to being once a month.

Albus didn’t see Wilcox around as much anymore. He wasn’t at as many of the meals, wasn’t walking around the school as much, and according to Exo, seemed holed up in his secret room more than usual. Exo still hadn’t discovered where this secret room was, but he vowed he would by the end of his Hogwarts schooling.

Wilcox was, however, present at dinner today. He wasn’t eating, so Albus was curious to see why he was present.

Gil was sitting next to him – Gil didn’t have much free time as a highly involved seventh year, but still made sure to fulfill his mentoring duties by talking to Albus about how things were going with P.J. or Scottie. Since dinner was currently Gil’s only real free time, they had decided to eat and talk.

“So,” said Gil after he’d finished most of his food so that they could chat uninterrupted. “How is mentoring working out for you? Do you like it? Do you feel you’re doing well after almost the end of the first term?”

“He still won’t tell me his name,” said Albus.

“Have you asked any of our teachers?”

“I have. They think it’s hilarious and won’t say. Does everyone know but me?”

“You were the only one unconscious during the Sorting…”

“Exo wasn’t and he doesn’t know!”

“Exo was probably asleep. I was pretty much asleep by the P’s, too, don’t worry.”
“Well, then, how did you find out?”

“He told me.”

“What?” shouted Albus indignantly. “I’m his mentor!”

“Good evening, students!” bellowed Wilcox from the front. He was standing in front of the High Table with an unfamiliar man.

Albus paused and looked up at him. Gil stuck the last large forkful of pasta into his mouth during the interruption, and then looked up to watch.

“I’d like to introduce you to a very good personal friend of mine,” said Wilcox, gesturing to his side. “This is Isaac Loft, everyone. He and his wife, Aeona Loft, are working with Erin Mason down in South Africa to open up the Loft-Mason School of Sorcery. You may recognize his daughter, Eloa Loft, who has been sitting in on various Hogwarts classes in the past few weeks. I’d like to also take the time to introduce you to Rosco Loft, Isaac’s son.”

Wilcox gestured towards the other side of Isaac Loft, and a young man who looked like he might have just recently graduated his magical institution walked up onto the stage. His hair was very short, his stature was very impressive, and his muscles bulged like he had consumed his weight in Re’em blood. He had smooth, dark skin and big brown eyes like his sister Eloa, and he was wearing a black and white scarf that appeared to be giving his shoulders a massage as well as warming his neck.

Albus turned around towards Gil to make a comment on Rosco’s remarkable physique at about the same time that Gil dropped his fork. Albus watched his mentor’s face carefully, and after a few seconds in which Gil was doing nothing but gazing at Rosco, he was very pleased to conclude that his mentor had a crush.

As Professor Wilcox kept talking, Gil kept staring at Rosco, continuing to ignore the sauce-covered fork slowly sliding down the front of his robes.

“Rosco will be touring the premises to get a feel of how a school might be outside the walls of its classrooms – please forgive any intrusions he may make upon your common rooms or dormitories…”

“Intrude to your heart’s desire,” murmured Gil; Albus wasn’t even sure if Gil realized he’d said that out loud.

“They’ll both be around a while, but I’m not here today to just talk about them – I’m also here to talk about you students.”

Albus settled in to listen intently.

“We have a wonderful opportunity for seventh year students at Hogwarts,” said Wilcox, and Albus was slightly disappointed. “The Loft-Mason School of Sorcery will be opening in the coming year, and they need students to test the amenities there. We would like to ask for seven volunteers from Hogwarts’ seventh years to attend the first half of your second term’s classes at the Loft-Mason School of Sorcery in South Africa, under their teachers and with their equipment and facilities. You will stay on target with any classes you are in – I know many of you are highly occupied with studying for your N.E.W.T.s, so don’t worry that you may fall behind. You will also receive payment for the services you provide to the young school. Isaac Loft will now tell you a little bit about the school, and you can decide whether you wish to attend your classes in a different
Albus kept an eye on Gil during Isaac’s speech about the Loft-Mason School of Sorcery. Gil seemed very interested in the possibility of attending the school, but it was apparently mostly derived from his fascination with Rosco. He wasn’t exactly keeping it secret, either—he was visibly staring at Rosco for extended periods of time and sighing. Perhaps he was hoping that Rosco would look over at one point and notice, but Rosco was scanning the crowd as a whole and did not focus on one person most of the time.

After the speech was given, Louis ran up to Isaac, and Gil walked towards the front to submit his name. After a short discussion with Isaac, Louis had a bright look on his face as he also entered the queue to submit his name as a candidate.

Albus trotted up to Louis. “Hey,” he said excitedly. “You’re thinking about going to that school?”

Louis nodded triumphantly. “Caspar’s going!” he said. “I just had a conversation with Isaac—Caspar’s last letter said that he might be attending classes in the Loft-Mason School of Sorcery, and I didn’t make the connection until this little announcement today! I asked Isaac and he said that there was a student named Engodska attending from Durmstrang. They have seven from Durmstrang and seven from Beauxbatons going as well. So I’m going to get to have classes with my boyfriend for a couple of months!”

“That’s wonderful!” said Albus. “How about you, Gil? Think you might be eligible to go?”

“I’ve worked very hard in my classes so that I can be selected for opportunities like this,” said Gil quietly. “I think my grades are good enough.”

Behind Gil, Albus could see what Gil couldn’t—Rosco was taking a long look at Gil’s vividly pink hair, and an amused smile teased his lips.

Albus waited for Louis and Gil, and then walked up to the dormitories with them. They were laughing and chatting like old friends, and Gil seemed even cheerier about it than usual.

Albus recalled Louis’s words to Gil: “You’ll find someone.”

It would certainly depend on Rosco’s personal feelings, but perhaps Gil had now found someone.

They approached the portrait hole to Gryffindor Tower.

“Vaudeville,” said Gil to the Fat Lady.

“Quite correct,” said the Fat Lady, and the portrait swung open.

“Hold it!” called a deep voice from below.

Rosco Loft was bounding up the stairs towards them. He waved a hand and flashed a grin as he climbed up towards the entry to Gryffindor Tower.

“I’d like to examine the common room, if you don’t mind,” he yelled up, not the slightest bit winded from all those stairs.

“Sure,” said Gil, breathless (but not from climbing the stairs). “That’d be—WATCH OUT—!”

Rosco’s leg came down on a trick step on the staircase; his leg went all the way through and he did a rather painful-looking half-split, yelping out in pain and grimacing as he turned over on his back.
“That’s one of the trick steps,” said Gil, running down to meet him. “Sorry I didn’t warn you in time…”

“Not to worry,” chuckled Rosco. “I was vaulting up them two steps at a time. You didn’t have an opportunity to slow me down…”

Gil arrived at Rosco’s step, helped extract his leg, and performed a handy little spell to help it mend and reduce the pain. Rosco gave him a thankful little nod and a wide smile, and knocked him gently under the chin; Gil blushed and his shoulders moved slightly higher, but he looked absolutely jubilant.

“Your shoulders seem a little tense,” said Rosco, unwrapping his scarf and draping it around Gil’s neck instead. “Here, relax. This scarf is the greatest.”

Gil positively melted into the sensation of the warm scarf.

“That’s what I thought,” laughed Rosco, putting a hand behind Gil’s back and guiding him inside. “You should loosen up. Nothing to be tense about.”

They all walked into the common room, where James, who was in his sleep clothes, was talking to Barry. His shirt was red and gold stripes for Gryffindor, but his pants were pink and yellow polka-dots, a pair he’d magically elongated after begging them off of Ginny; they were the warmest pants he’d ever felt, and he didn’t care what they looked like.

Rosco, however, pressed the pads of his fingers to his temples and cringed. “Please tell me you’re not wearing that monstrous mishmash in public,” he fussed.

Gil nearly swooned on the spot.

Albus hung back as Louis bumped Gil with an elbow and whispered something that, from his lips, looked like “Go for it.”

Rosco hung back as well and nudged Gil to get his attention; Albus pretended to be occupied elsewhere, but kept an ear open.

“Boyfriend?” muttered Rosco, gesturing with a nod towards Louis.

Gil shook his head no.

“Good,” whispered Rosco into Gil’s ear with a sly little grin.

Albus felt his stomach surge with elation as a telling grin plastered itself across his face; James noticed, and as Albus passed him to get to his own dormitory and retrieve his material for Diwand Spells, he heard James mumble to himself, “Go get ’im, Gil!”

The thought of romance made him realize he hadn’t written to Janelle in a couple of days since he’d gotten her last response. He made a mental note to write another letter after he’d returned from Diwand Spells. He couldn’t wait to see her for Christmas.

The day after the next, a notice had been posted in the common room before anybody went down to breakfast.

_Students selected to attend the Loft-Mason School of Sorcery for ten weeks in the second term:_

_**GRYFFINDOR:** Louis Weasley, Gillian Gartrive_
“Excellent,” said James, rubbing his hands together as he appeared behind Albus to read over his shoulder. “The only Hufflepuff going on the trip is their team’s captain, and he’ll be out on the day of our next match!”

“They won’t have a captain?” asked Albus.

“Right. They’ll have to use their first reserve Seeker. I’ll ask around and find out who that is.”

Albus smiled; whoever it was, they wouldn’t be a match at all for James. The starting Seekers weren’t even good enough to beat him, let alone some reserve player.

“Hey, Al,” said James. “Remind me what you said the plant looked like? The one that the Fokii was carrying, I mean?’’

“Oh,” said Albus. “It just looked like an ordinary plant, just a stem and a few leaves and a little red flower on the top.’’

“Any distinguishing characteristics at all to the plant?”

“The stem was coiled like a spring,” said Albus. “Other than that, no.”

“How thick was the stem? And how large were the coils – like, what was their diameter?”

“Why are you wondering?” asked Albus.

James shrugged. “No reason.”

“The coils were about this thick,” said Albus, making a circle with his thumb and forefinger. “The stem itself was about as thick as my thumb.” His heart picked up speed. “Why – did you see the plant somewhere else?’’

“No, no, I didn’t,” said James. “Don’t read too much into my questions… don’t worry about it. Just curious.’’

But he gave a little wink at Albus when he left.

Wondering what that was all about, Albus strolled down to Herbology, his first class of the morning. He and Exo met up with Aidan as they were headed down to the greenhouses. Together they meandered down to the greenhouse where the day’s class was scheduled, and together they stopped and stared at the sign on the door.

TODAY’S CLASSES CANCELLED
PLEASE REREAD CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT IN YOUR BOOKS IN PREPARATION FOR TOMORROW.

“That’s rather strange,” said Aidan. “Professor Longbottom’s never cancelled a class before now.”
“So what’s the reason?” asked Exo, walking forward and checking the underside of the note; there was no other information.

“It must be an emergency,” said Aidan. “Family? But I feel like Professor Wilcox would have mentioned that at breakfast, though. This must have just come up.”

“What could have come up since breakfast?” asked Albus.

**SMASH.**

There was a shattering sound from inside the greenhouse. Albus, Aidan, and Exo looked upwards just as several other students arrived behind them and gasped.

Pieces of glass suddenly began raining down on them; everyone covered their heads and several people screamed. When the glass stopped falling, Albus looked up once more; a large brown tendril of some plant was rising through the top of the greenhouse. Initially Albus had assumed that it couldn’t be a tree trunk, as it was growing too quickly, but further analysis told him he was wrong – it was simply a tree trunk growing at about a foot every second. As he watched, however, it suddenly halted in its ascent, and rapidly shrank back down through the hole it had punched in the top of the greenhouse.

Several seconds later, Professor Longbottom, sweaty and red-faced, opened the door of the greenhouse and looked out; he must have heard people screaming.

“What are you doing standing around here?” he huffed exasperatedly, slamming the door behind him as he addressed the students. “There’s no class today – go! It’s dangerous to hang around the greenhouses when you aren’t supposed to!”

“Is everything all right, Professor?” asked Mia from the back of the crowd around the greenhouse, with great concern.

“Everything’s lovely,” said Professor Longbottom in the least convincing manner possible, his shoulders tense and the corner of his mouth twitching. “The Verdusthorn and the Venomous Tentacula are acting up, is all. No, that’s absolutely nothing to worry about—”

The next startling sound was a blast like a popping balloon; there were suddenly cracks in the glass all around the greenhouse. Professor Longbottom looked over his shoulder at the damaged structure and swore loudly.

“Thank goodness you weren’t in there,” said Skye, shaking.

“I’ve got to take care of this,” said Professor Longbottom. “Everybody, out of the Herbology area!”

“You’re not going back in there?!” demanded Mia, close to a panic.

The students all backed away instantly when Professor Longbottom reopened the door to go back into the greenhouse. Whatever happened inside there that cracked the glass, no one wanted to be a part of it.

Most of the class had now arrived to see what was going on, and most of them jumped about a mile high into the air when a small stick covered in tiny thorns suddenly rolled out the door in the small gap of time that it was open. It started tumbling towards them. Professor Longbottom reappeared at the door a second later and drew out his wand to cast a rope around the escaped plant. He hurled it backwards into the greenhouse and slammed the door behind him again.
“Interesting,” said Aidan slowly.

“Very interesting,” corrected Albus.

“Very unsettling,” amended Exo.

“All of the above,” stated Aidan.

“Anyone know what five to the fifth power is?” asked Professor Ramanu. “Think about it for a little while – use that trick I told you – Albus?”

“Three thousand one hundred and twenty five,” responded Albus.

“Right, and does anyone know the only potion requiring this number?” Nobody was raising their hands but Albus. Even Lucas, Rose, and Aidan were looking impressed by his ability to answer this question.

“Albus again?” called Professor Ramanu with a smile.

“Genesiers’ Juice, which promotes regrowth of lost limbs, requires three thousand one hundred and twenty five hairs from the Bursting Starfish,” replied Albus.

“Precisely. Five is a number whose powers you will often see in spells. Five is the number of the human body, corresponding to the number of fingers and toes; it’s therefore highly common for a potion dealing with the body to require twenty-five stirs, or one hundred and twenty five, or even six hundred and twenty-five. In the case of Genesiers’ Juice, an incredibly complex and powerful potion that allows a lost arm to grow back if taken immediately after the loss, it requires a bit more punch to the number five, and so five to the fifth power is required. And although this potion is extremely powerful, can anyone tell me why it’s not very widely used? ... Albus, yet again?”

“Since the potion has such a short window of time for when it can be effective, by the time most people get access to the potion, it has already been too long, and they can no longer regrow the lost limb.”

“Excellent! Twenty-five points to Gryffindor for your adroitly phrased answers.”

Most of the class had zoned out, but Albus was still wide awake and ready to answer any question thrown at them by Professor Ramanu. The rest of the class was forcibly woken by a surprise quiz, which had them complete a number of difficult mathematical computations regarding the creation and administration of certain potions. Potions classes overlapped a lot with Arithmancy, since Potions were the main application of this course; perhaps this was why Albus was doing so well in Arithmancy, since he excelled at Potions and was deeply invested in the subject.

“If you’re not a very mathematically inclined individual,” said Professor Ramanu, “don’t worry. You can make up for poor scores on the pop quizzes by submitting written reports on the involvement of Arithmancy in the construction of certain approved potions; I’ll ignore your quiz scores if you hand two of those in by the end of the term.”

With that, the class was dismissed, but Albus hung back; out of the corner of his eye just a bit earlier in the lesson, he’d seen Professor Longbottom lurking near the door of the classroom, waiting for class to be let out. After most of the students had filed out swiftly, Professor Longbottom crossed the room and walked up to Professor Ramanu.
“Evening, Neville,” she said cheerily. “May I help you?”

“I was wondering if you’d gotten around to looking at my request,” said Professor Longbottom, choosing his words carefully while Albus was within earshot.

“Oh, no, I haven’t,” said Professor Ramanu. “I’m terribly sorry – I was putting together several quizzes and I got busier this week than I expected–”

“It’s not a problem, Janet, don’t worry. I just wanted to add a little note about something that occurred today…” His eyes drifted nervously back towards Albus.

“Don’t worry about Albus,” said Professor Ramanu. “I’ve enlisted his help in evaluating the abnormal growth rates; he’s going to be my assistant.”

Professor Longbottom clenched his teeth as he took in a deep breath. “Janet… I’m not entirely sure that’s appropriate for the situation…”

“Oh, I said don’t worry about him,” insisted Professor Ramanu. “He’s a prodigy in the subject, you know that? He’s far better with numbers and with the theory than I was at his age… He might be able to help, and it’ll definitely make things a lot easier if I have someone around to keep the books while I’m working. Would you mind if he was there with me while we figure things out? I’ll get on it tonight, if I have Albus’s help.”

Professor Longbottom glanced at Albus and nodded. “All right. I trust you to keep any of your findings confidential, Albus.”

“Of course,” said Albus eagerly.

“It’s dinner time,” said Professor Longbottom, gesturing towards the door. “Shouldn’t you be getting down to the Great Hall for food?”

Albus could tell Professor Longbottom was trying to get rid of him to tell Professor Ramanu something important or classified, or both, and he knew he wouldn’t win the battle anyway. He nodded and exited the classroom in the direction of the Great Hall. He stayed for a while with his ear near the door, but Professor Longbottom was whispering as he scribbled additions to his notes, and it was impossible to hear him.

After about half a minute of picking up zero percent of what Professor Longbottom was saying, he supposed he should leave before he was discovered eavesdropping, and after a satisfying dinner he left for Alternative Artifact Magic.

When he walked in, he sat in the front next to Alec, who was earlier than usual and looking perkier than usual, smiling around the classroom and drumming his fingers on the table.

“What’s got you in such a good mood?” asked Albus.

“Mia,” said Alec. “I’d almost forgotten – I need to congratulate her!”

Alec and Mia were still dating. They’d been together for so long… Albus couldn’t even remember whether it was first or second year that their romance started. And they were so young. It was pretty inspiring.

“Congratulate her on what?” asked Albus.

“Didn’t you hear?”
“Evidently not.”

“Mia’s the first reserve Seeker on the Hufflepuff Quidditch team,” answered Alec gleefully. “And since Captain Lindley is going off to Africa next term, she’ll be the Seeker facing off against Gryffindor!”

“Oh,” laughed Albus. “So that’s who James is gonna cream!”

Alec glared at him playfully. “Mia gets creamed by no one,” said Alec. “Mia does the creaming herself. I hope your brother likes cream.”

“Actually, he loves cream, now that you mention it.”

Mia walked into the room and gave a little wave towards Alec. Alec darted over and kissed her, and then started congratulating her; she blushed and sat down looking greatly pleased. Albus wondered how good of a Seeker she was.

“Albus!” called Aidan, running into the room. He ran to sit next to Albus in the front, and a large book dropped from his arms onto the table. “Look what I found!”

The book was entitled, “The Unclassified Darkness: Modern Translation.”

“A book on Fokii, the creature who crashed the castle,” he said proudly.

Aidan opened the book around three quarters of the way and started impatiently flying through pages.

Suddenly Rose burst into the room.

“Albus!” she called, charging in; she was also carrying a thick book. “Look what I found!”

She dropped the book on top of the book that Aidan had brought. It was entitled, “Scandals! The unwritten history of an embarrassed world which didn’t want its shameful parts showing in public.”

“A book that contains a few little secrets about Litinia Darstary, our portrait who flew the frame,” said Rose proudly.

Albus and Alec looked at each other.

“Albus, look what I found,” said Alec, pointing to Aidan and Rose, who were raising eyebrows at each other. “Two nerds, who’ve been spending way too much time in the library.”

Aidan pushed Rose’s book off of his. “I got here first,” he said as Rose puffed up her cheeks crossly. “I get to show my discovery first.”

He started flipping through pages again, soon stopping at a chapter break; he pointed to a section title.

Dark Mukes.

“Mukes?” asked Albus curiously.

“It’s Greek,” said Aidan. “Greek for ‘fungus.’ They didn’t properly classify fungi until long after the Fokii were gone, so I knew that looking for information on fungi was a dead end. No one would have known it was a fungus. So I checked out a few books on unclassified Dark magic, and I
He flipped forward, turning the page from a section on “Sporous Air-Eaters” to a section on a creature entitled “The Fokii.”

Interest piqued, Albus scanned the first few lines.

*The Fokii are a curious species. They seem to form from corpses which are passed in close proximity by mulunctapoli. At the current time of the publication of this anthology, it is unknown whether the Fokii are animal, plant, or neither.*

*The Fokii are solitary creatures which tend to avoid human contact.*

“Hogwarts is full of human contact,” said Albus, looking up from the book.

“I was interested in the same thing,” said Aidan. “When you talked to Litinia, did she seem surprised when you told her that there were Fokii near the edge of the forest? Did she say anything about Fokii usually staying out of sight?”

“She did not,” replied Albus.

Rose shoved the book away from Albus. “Class is going to start soon and he needs to see my book,” she said haughtily. She yanked it open and flipped through to a section near the front.

**SILDAND AND LITINIA DARSTARY.**

*Scandals galore here! Did you know that Sidland Darstary, the man responsible for hunting the mulunctapoli down to extinction, killed his wife shortly after the deed? And that he then killed HIMSELF directly after THAT? SCANDALOUS!*  

“The writing style is a little… odd,” admitted Rose upon observing Albus’s face. “But after all, this was written by Rita Skeeter’s grandmother…”

“I remember Litinia mentioning her husband’s murder-suicide to me,” said Albus. “I think she mentioned this in my first year.”

“All right, class, let us begin!” announced Professor Pratley.

“I’ll read this and get back to you,” said Aidan, placing the book inside his bag.

“Me, too,” said Rose, closing up her book and storing it in her bag. “The section is long, so it might take me awhile, especially with the upcoming exam in this class on our Rotation day. I’ll lend it to you when I’m finished.”

“Same with mine,” said Aidan.

“Take your seats please, Aidan and Rose,” said Professor Pratley. “Okay, friends. Who can tell me what I’ve said will be on the short exam on Friday?”

Holly raised her hand. Albus opted not to raise his; she always gave him death glares whenever he stole her opportunity for an answer.

“Yes, Holly?”

“Floral and faunal artifact magic,” she said.
“Correct. Now, as you all know by now, or else are going to fail the short exam, floral and faunal artifact magic is enacting Transferral upon animal and plant materials. You will be doing this for the first time during the practical portion of the test on Friday, but don’t worry – it’ll be just like using a wand, except drastically different. But if you know the theory then you should be fine.”

Albus glanced over to the back of the room. Eftan and Scorpius were still sitting at separate tables in the far back of the room, quietly and diligently taking notes. He wished they would at least talk to someone, even if it wasn’t each other. All he wanted was for them to have friends.

They mostly reviewed for the exam that was in two days, and when they were finished, Albus immediately set off for the Arithmancy classroom he’d left just two hours ago. Professor Ramanu was sorting out papers that had Professor Longbottom’s findings on them, and she seemed to have just started working out equations to represent them.

“Allbus,” she said happily. “I need you to sort out Professor Longbottom’s growth charts by date and graph them on the blackboard over there, will you?”

“Of course,” said Albus.

He walked over to the desk at which Professor Ramanu was pointing. He checked the dates on top of them, putting the current day’s date on the bottom and stacking backwards from there.

“He seems to have missed a few days,” said Albus as he sorted.

“Yes, that would be Neville,” sighed Professor Ramanu. “Dearest young man, but I don’t think he’d ever taken Arithmancy, or he’d know that every single ounce of information possible is necessary when you’re extrapolating out of the unknown. Last time he came to me, he’d just been making estimates of the growth… I had to tell him to go back and start it all over again, the information was useless. Not many people realize how thorough the investigation must be.”

“I realize,” said Albus, organizing papers through to the origin point of the notes, which was the first day of classes.

He brought the organized papers to the blackboard, where Professor Ramanu had already drawn an outline for a graph.

“The data isn’t as complete until early October, when I advised him to start keeping better track of the numbers,” said Professor Ramanu. “But it should be enough to plot a rough graph of the three months it’s been since Professor Longbottom noticed there was something funny going on in his greenhouses. Plot away, Albus – I’ll be writing an equation from the usual growth of these plants, the information on which Professor Longbottom was so kind as to find me. We’ll compare the current growth rates to the usual growth rates and see if we can find anything interesting.”

Albus went through the graph, plotting the different points based on how much the plant had grown that day. He found himself having to cast the Jumping Charm on himself so that he could reach the upper parts of the blackboard to plot the more extreme points in the sequence.

When he’d finished, the graph looked like three rolling hills with different-sized needles jutting out the top. It would have looked like a fairly simple graph if not for those major fluctuations at the peak of each wave.

“Almost sinusoidal,” observed Professor Ramanu.

“Almost what?” asked Albus.
“Don’t worry,” said Professor Ramanu. “I would have been quite surprised if you had known what ‘sinusoidal’ meant. It means that the graph is in repeating waves, the y-coordinate determined by the pattern of movement along the circumference of a circle.”

“But there are those high points on every peak.”

“Yes – the outliers. Very odd. The rest of the graph appears to fluctuate normally with the moon phase – it’s slightly less than a month in between peaks.”

“How many things in magic correlate to the phase of the moon?”

“A lot,” said Professor Ramanu. “We can’t rule out human interference and we can’t rule out plant interference.”

“Can you graph the usual plant growth?” asked Albus.

“I’ll do that on the other side of the room,” replied Professor Ramanu. “I can’t do it on the same graph – the line would be indistinguishable from a straight line, because it’s so small compared to the current growth. Neville was right – there seems to be quite a strong outside influence.”

Professor Ramanu crossed the room and drew a different graph. The intervals on the margins of this graph were much smaller than on the previous one. She plotted what a normal graph would look like, and then stepped back.

“Do you notice anything?” she asked.

Albus glanced back and forth between the two graphs. “The peaks start earlier. It’s like our graph was shifted a few days forward before being stretched.”

“Excellent. Well observed. That is what I’m noticing before anything else. Our plants are currently growing quite a bit faster on the half moon than on any other moon phase. The third quarter, to be precise – the half moon after the full and before the new.”

“The half moon? What’s so special about the half moon, compared to full?”

Professor Ramanu shrugged. “Many scholars believe the half moon to be just as magically significant as the new moon and the full moon. What is so special about a completely white moon or a completely black moon? When the moon is between worlds – half light and half dark – then perhaps there is something special to be found on earth at these times, as well.”

“Like halfway between the worlds of plant and animal?” suggested Albus gently.

Professor Ramanu twisted her mouth as she thought. “Perhaps,” she said. “I’ll consider it.” She shook her head. “But if that were the case, I would also expect the fluctuations to increase in the first quarter moon… and that is not the case.”

She turned back to the graphs.

“Roughly estimating due to the incomplete data, and excluding outliers, we are looking at something along the lines of a constant multiplier of twenty-five or thirty-five. The slight sine function of usual plant growth is exacerbated by the multiplier, but that still doesn’t explain the massive local maxima…” She flipped through some more papers, creasing her brow. “But this doesn’t make sense. The spikes are different each time, as if there was an element of randomness. Albus, would you mind calculating the ratios between the true value of the point and its expected value if it wasn’t an outlier? You’ll need lines of best fit… Redraw the graphs on a separate piece
of parchment and use my Guesstimator.”

She waved her wand; across the room zoomed a funny-looking ballpoint pen with a protractor on the end opposite the tip, which deposited itself into Albus’s hand.

“I’ll definitely do that,” said Albus, “but I also have some remaining homework that’s due tomorrow…”

“I’ll write you a note to excuse you from any assignments,” said Professor Ramanu without hesitation.

Albus grinned to himself and set to work.

Professor Ramanu asked for Albus’s help running calculations and equations on Thursday and Friday as well. Albus loved the excuse from homework; he preferred this sort of work to writing essays any day. It was practical, it was useful, and it actually had applications to what was really happening right now. On Friday, Professor Ramanu said that she was very close to learning about the source of the plants’ growth.

Friday was also when they took their Alternative Artifact Magic exam. It was the most interesting exam Albus had ever taken. They were given, at the start of the class, a bouquet of flowers and a box of animal horns, claws, feathers, fur, and the like. They were then given an exam sheet on which they had to write their choice of which material they would use as a wand substitute for several tasks. The questions were simple; they only asked which artifact would best be suited to Disarm an opponent, which artifact would be best if you wanted to turn a needle into hay, and which artifact one would use to produce a mild Stinging Hex. They were allowed to test out the materials while they worked, but they were given only five minutes to answer these three questions.

As Albus recalled, roses were best for Charms, fig branches were best for hexes and jinxes, and fur braids were best for Transfiguration. There were many other small details about the alliances of different objects towards different types of magic, but all that needed to be done besides the quick written portion was that, at the end of the class, Professor Pratley called each student in separately, and had them test the materials they selected on their exam. Marks were to be given based on how effectively they could cast the chosen spells.

“So, Albus,” said Professor Pratley. “You’ve chosen a rose with which to Disarm me. Would you mind explaining your choice before we begin?”

“Well,” he said, “roses are the best plant material for casting Charms. The Disarming Charm would therefore best be executed with a rose.”

“Could you offer any elaboration as to why a rose might be best for Charms?”

Albus tried desperately to remember what they had learned in their first few lessons.

“Er… A rose has… thorns.”

Professor Pratley nodded. “Go on.”

The clutching at straws had apparently worked – he’d grasped onto a memory without realizing it. “The thorns of a rose provide the best channel for a Charm, because, as befits a spell that changes the characteristics of an object, the spell itself has volatile Kinesis. A Charm needs room to… I’m sorry, I can’t remember the word for it. It needs to… spaz out a little bit inside the wand… like, the
spell forms kind of... erratically – Oh! Enerracity. It needs to have... formational Enerracity. That’s what the thorns and stuff do. Yeah. Sorry about how badly I worded that.”

“Fantastic,” said Professor Pratley. “The informality of your answer is inconsequential; I can see you’ve studied. Here – now try to Disarm me.”

She handed him the rose.

Albus took the rose by the end of the stem. It was awkward to hold; the stem was limp, but he knew it would become rigid once he tried to cast a spell.

“Expelliarmus!” he cried, treating the rose as if it were any other wand.

The rose straightened out horizontally, and from the flower burst a conical ray of pink light, tapering as it travelled towards his teacher. The circular base of the cone was formed by the flower, and the beam of light travelled outwards from every petal of the rose. The distance of the spell was hard to control, and it didn’t reach Professor Pratley; the endpoint of the cone of light only reached halfway.

“Control it,” said Professor Pratley, holding her wand out. “Dilate the beam; focus the endpoint on my wand! You can do it!”

Albus strained to expand the range of his spell. It was like focusing the light of the sun through a magnifying glass. He channeled his energy a bit heavier into the rose, and the end of the cone of light expanded outward slowly until it struck Professor Pratley’s wand, which dislodged itself gently from her hand and clattered to the floor.

“Beauteous!” she cheered. “That was fast, Albus. Just exercise this ability like you would with any other kind of magic. Once this skill is mastered, you may well be able to use a rose to Disarm someone even more effectively you would with a wand, though it may be hard on your body to make a habit of it, and roses aren’t good for much more than Charms. All right… on to turning a needle into hay, using, as you suggested… this bundle of fur.” She held up a long braid of cat hair, and Albus set to work.

The exam was very exhausting, both mentally and physically – it wasn’t easy at all to use plant and animal pieces to cast spells. Wands must have been created to ease the process of channeling magic through animal and plant materials, because without wand quality material, it wasn’t much easier to channel magic through a random object than it was to do it with one’s bare hands. All in all, the A.R.M. students were very glad when the weekend arrived; Albus was especially glad, because Professor Ramanu was nearing an answer for Professor Longbottom.

On Saturday morning, before Albus left to see Professor Ramanu, Rose gave him the book she’d been reading on Litinia, and said she thought it was really enlightening onto some possibilities of why she still had not been seen since Albus talked to her. Aidan also gave Albus the book on Dark fungi and told him to read it as soon as possible.

Albus didn’t know which he wanted to read first. He felt as though the danger presented by the Fokii was more compelling than the runaway portrait, though, and so he flipped open The Unclassified Darkness: Modern Translation during a break from working with Professor Ramanu.

_The Fokii are a curious species. They seem to form from corpses which are passed in close proximity by mulunctapoli. At the current time of the publication of this anthology, it is unknown whether the Fokii are animal, plant, or neither._
The Fokii are solitary creatures which tend to avoid human contact. Their life begins when they infest a corpse and take it over, and their life ends when the corpse rots, turns to a skeleton, and eventually falls apart around them when the bones turn to dust as a reaction from the Dark magic involved. They are invisible to the peripheral vision of the naked eye: they can only be seen through direct vision, if the observer has directed their gaze precisely on the position of the creature. They will sneak up, unseen, behind a wandering animal, and bite into the flesh, tearing off a large piece for consumption. The light of a Patronus, however, will begin to reveal them even in the peripheral vision if the Fokii is exposed to it for a lengthy period of time, and basking a Fokii in that light will accelerate the roting process that eventually will be the end of the Fokii’s life. It will keep trudging on until it is a skeleton, and from there until it has collapsed into a pile of dust, no longer able to animate the corpse. The association with death, the nature of their existence, and their reaction to Light magic such as the Patronus Charm categorizes these devilish beings as Dark organisms.

The Fokii seem to appear wherever a mulunctapol has traversed the general area where a corpse may be found. If there are no mulunctapoli in the area, the Fokii are unable to propagate, and will eventually disappear from a region once all of the corpses have rotted away. The process of roting is like a timer set on the life of a Fokii, determined by how long after death the corpse is reanimated, how long the creature lived in its actual life, and the expected lifespan of the creature’s species when alive. The Fokii are not confined to the possession of human corpses; any deceased animal will make an acceptable host. A fresh young human corpse may last up to five years, though in its later life it will become skeletal before disintegrating completely. But even so much as a skeleton may last for a year if it is not damaged before or after the possession – especially if the lifespan of the deceased creature in question is very long. Fokii also have the intriguing ability to Untransfigure their host in order to possess the original form of the body. In the only known case, the body had actually been strikingly well-preserved due to the Transfiguration, and the Fokii lived a long life with its host… happily ever after, one might say, if they are capable of emotion.

There are only two known ways of destroying a Fokii. One is to barrage it with the light of a Patronus or multiple Patronuses for as much time as it takes for the body to rot into a skeleton and from there until the bones turn to dust. The other is to drive an arrow (or some other projectile), tipped with pollen of the Moly plant, through the heart of the Fokii’s host animal. If the animal in question has multiple hearts, all of them must be pierced, but the creature will lose some strength with each heart that is eradicated. It is easy to see the heart through the Fokii’s translucent skin – unless, of course, it remains invisible in your peripheral vision.

Albus looked up. “Professor Ramanu?”

“Yes, Albus?”

“Is Professor Longbottom growing any Moly, by any chance? I didn’t see it on the list of unusual growth in his plants.”

“Oh, he says that one is growing at a normal pace, if not slightly slower,” said Professor Ramanu. “Actually, he mentioned to me recently that he’s started growing more of it than usual. I wonder why.”

“Hm, yeah, I wonder,” said Albus, knowing exactly why Professor Longbottom was doing that… They needed a way to combat the Fokii. And if it was growing slower than usual? It could be that whatever was behind the growth of the plants was also behind the Fokii, and it didn’t want the plant that could kill the Fokii to be growing very quickly.
He closed that book and opened the *Scandals!* Book. Maybe he’d read a little bit of each at a time… He was too curious about Litinia’s past, and why she may have fled.

**SIDLAND AND LITINIA DARSTARY**

Scandals galore here! Did you know that Sidland Darstary, the man responsible for hunting the mulunctapoli down to extinction, killed his wife shortly after the deed? And that he then killed HIMSELF directly after THAT? SCANDALOUS!

We’ll start with the late thirteenth century. Sidland Darstary wed a beautiful woman named Litinia, whose families were in the wandmaking business at the time. She seemed perfect for him… perfect for SCANDALS! She married him, but soon afterwards, she left for a teaching position at Hogwarts, during which she barely saw him! And as if only to add to his discomfort, rumors began circulating… that Litinia Darstary, young and fair professor of Herbology at Hogwarts, was bunging the Headmaster, Professor Surosch Bolorant! So much scandal, I feel as though I am being viciously tickled!

Headmaster of Hogwarts Surosch Bolorant said nothing about these allegations. To be fair, he never really discovered that there had been allegations against him about this… but he should have known there would be, because he was doing the deed, wasn’t he? Of course he was! SCANDALOUS!

Dearest Surosch Bolorant was the first wizard not born in England to become Hogwarts Headmaster. Perhaps his exotic Egyptian looks were appealing to Litinia. All that is known is that the other teachers at Hogwarts at the time recalled them spending long hours in the Headmaster’s office together! WE know what they were doing, tee-hee-hee!

Sidland Darstary apparently knew, too! And evidently he wanted to piss off his wife as much as he could. Litinia was known to be an avid magical conservationist, one of the first to advocate for the cessation of dragon-hunting as a sport, and as soon as the mulunctapoli started becoming more active for reasons unknown in the early fourteenth century, Sidland volunteered to be the one to exterminate them.

A call had gone out for someone who could completely eradicate the species. Since the mulunctapoli seemed to be impossible to control, they asked the world if there was anyone who could do the job. Knowing that his wife would flip shit if he was involved in purposefully hunting a species to extinction, Sidland somehow found a way to destroy every single mulunctapoli in existence. He trekked into the Forbidden Forest where they bred, and took revenge on his wife through the swift destruction of all mulunctapoli. No one knows how he was able to track and kill all of them, but track them and kill them he did, leaving the couple’s baby girl, Elanoa, in the hands of his sister in France, now that neither parent was at home. (Elanoa eventually married Jacobus Pondemetit, but died giving birth to their only child, Perenelle, in 1334. Jacobus passed away five years later. Perenelle went into the care of Jacobus’s parents, but her grandfather died when she was eight and her grandmother died when she was nine. Distraught by the tragic deaths of her parents and grandparents, Perenelle became obsessed with alchemy and the question of immortality, which is how she met her husband Nicolas Flamel.)

Litinia had fled, left the country in shame due to her affair with the Headmaster and due to the fact that she murdered all of her extended family, who had been destroying forests in search of good trees for wand wood. (Note: Admittedly, the courts never convicted her or anyone else for these murders, but honestly, we all know that she killed them because they were bad for the environment.) She had been gone for some time before the last mulunctapol was killed, but when she learned what her husband had been doing, she must have gone after him to try and stop him,
because Sidland emerged from the forest some time later, carrying the corpse of his wife, explaining that he’d killed all the mulunctapoli. He had also been bitten by a mulunctapol and was left a Squib, a traumatic event which likely brought on the insanity that led him to kill his wife. After magizoologists secretly confirmed that there were no mulunctapoli left in the wild at all, he painted the portrait of Litinia which now hangs in the History of Magic classroom at Hogwarts. Then he threw himself into an active volcano. SCANDALOUS!

Albus closed the book. There was more – what he’d read was just a summary, and there was an entire chapter on the gritty details of this juicy story – but he couldn’t read too much at a time; he felt like he was reading a Rita Skeeter article. Then again, Rose did warn him that this book was written by Skeeter’s grandmother. He turned to the “About the Author” page to find a woman who did not share her name – it was written by a woman named Suzie Mozz – but she greatly resembled the pictures of Skeeter that Albus had seen in the Daily Prophet. Skeeter still wrote for them from time to time, and Aunt Hermione always complained that Skeeter had never learned anything from what Aunt Hermione and her friends at school had tried to teach her.

He wondered how many of those allegations had been true. Had Litinia really been having an affair with Professor Bolorant? Had she really killed her entire extended family? He’d never gotten the impression that she was a violent person or a temptress or any sort when he’d talked to her portrait in the past. Did her husband really exterminate the mulunctapoli to get back at her for the affair? And if she really did try to confront him while he was performing his work, did he really kill her? What was the confrontation like, and why did it end with Litinia’s untimely death?

“Oh!” yelped Professor Ramanu, leaping from her desk. “Oh! That’s it! Seventy is the sixth-degree constant! The sixth-degree constant is seventy! That’s it!”

“What?” asked Albus, slamming his book shut and racing over to see her calculations.

“And it’s still early in the day,” said Professor Ramanu. “I may well have this done by today! Albus, look!”

Albus looked, but it was extremely difficult to analyze. Professor Ramanu’s calculations were scribbled in tiny handwriting all over the surface of a giant piece of parchment; he didn’t know where anything began or ended. She was the messiest worker Albus had ever seen.

“My apologies for the current state of affairs on my desk,” she said understandingly. “But look here.”

She pointed to a calculation wedged in a tiny space between two other calculations, which used a lot of advanced mathematics that Albus couldn’t even begin to comprehend, including something that looked like a long capital S, a funny-looking lowercase d, and a bunch of random letters used as a lot of different variables. They had only just been introduced to algebra this term, and though they had progressed rather significantly in the subject, Albus never suspected they might get to a point where they used this many different variables in the same equation. She looked like she was running out of possible letters to use, in fact. And anyway, who the heck decided to put letters in math? As if math wasn’t already evil enough.

Professor Ramanu pointed out the long capital S symbol. “Integration,” she said. “And differentiation,” she added, pointing to the rounded lowercase d. “My sixth years always hate calculus. They call it Voldemath.”

After a long explanation of her methods, which proved impossible for Albus to follow, she got to the point.
“I can use this equation I’ve created,” she eventually said, pointing to her end result, “and compare it to famous equations and known constants corresponding to certain causations and similar events… in short, I may be able to determine the point of origin and the nature of the source of the object or power that’s affecting these plants. It all depends on how much data I’ve been given to begin with. So it may not be exact, considering that Professor Longbottom did a little bit of rounding and couldn’t measure everything himself, but it should yield some result that I can give him. From here on, it will be a little theoretical and you probably won’t be able to follow me very well…”

You already lost me at Voldemort, thought Albus.

“But if I have a result, I’ll keep you around after Monday’s class and I’ll give you a brief rundown if you’d like.”

“I’d love that,” said Albus. “Thank you so much, Professor!”

“I love to see a student so engaged,” said Professor Ramanu. “I will thank you as well, for your enthusiasm which has kept me even more content in my work. Now, go enjoy this cold yet beautiful Saturday. I hope it snows soon, don’t you?”

Albus was about to respond when a shout echoed throughout the hallways.

“THE FOKII!” bawled the voice of a terrified first year boy. “THE FOKII – AAUGH – IT’S BACK!”

Albus ripped out both of his wands; Professor Ramanu grabbed hers and vaulted over the desk with surprising agility. They both ran into the hall; following the sound of the screams, they turned two corners before seeing a Ravenclaw first year sprinting down the hall, trying to escape from something invisible that was following him and carrying a small flower that greatly resembled the one carried by the first Fokii.

Albus aimed his wand and was about to focus on the intruder when suddenly a great pain struck his head, like his brain was pressing against all sides of his skull, trying to get out. He collapsed to the ground on his back, convulsing, and scraps of thoughts flew through his head – there was a knife, and then a shoe, and a little red flower, and something else – a green liquid flowing around his field of vision – a thousand plants and animals tearing apart the remains of a ruined castle, and the dead body of Helio Wilcox, his eyes staring up into the canopy of trees where the sky should be–

“ALBUS!” barked Professor Ramanu.

Albus was jarred out of his thoughts for a second as Professor Ramanu placed a hand under his head and lifted it off the ground, but then he was suddenly plunged back into whatever foreign mind was influencing his. He saw the green woman again, and it was clear above all else that she was in high distress. Her pain was his pain, and fire seared through his veins, and he couldn’t move his arms or legs, he was being held completely still by some unnatural force but he didn’t feel like struggling–

And then the spell was broken, and he ripped himself out of his trance, sweating so much that Professor Ramanu’s hand was wet when she extracted it out from under his head and stared with great concern into his eyes.

“Albus?” she asked quietly.
“I’m okay,” breathed Albus. “I’m all right. Where’s – where’s the Fokii?”

Professor Ramanu jabbed a thumb down the hallway; Albus flipped himself onto his stomach swiftly in case he needed to jump into action, and Professor Ramanu was taken aback for a moment at the sudden recovery, but placed a hand reassuringly on his shoulder.

Professor Wilcox was down the hallway, staring at someone sitting on the ground in front of him – was that James?

“Your brother has quite the sense of humor,” said Professor Ramanu, seething.

Albus squinted. They were far down the hall, but Albus could see the Invisibility Cloak next to James, along with a flower which resembled the description that Albus had given his brother, and hadn’t realized until now why James wanted the description.

James admitted that he hadn’t planned on being caught – he was just about to duck away and let the teachers think the first year was hallucinating. But then Professor Wilcox, looking like he was in the middle of a war, unleashed a terrifying barrage of spells that left James motionless on the ground right before Professor Longbottom showed up with a bow and arrow. Professor Longbottom almost shot the arrow into James’s chest, but thankfully Wilcox realized he wasn’t a Fokii when direct visual contact didn’t bring the intruder into sight.

It was uncharacteristic of James to do something so petty and alarming, but Albus later found out that James had lost a bet with Freddie, and had been told he needed to imitate the Fokii and scare a first year into peeing himself. The good news was that James won the bet – the first year did indeed have an accident. The bad news was clear, and far outweighed the good news – James was to be severely punished.

Professor Longbottom took one hundred points from Gryffindor, and then banned James from Quidditch for the rest of the year. He also gave James Saturday detentions until the end of the year.

“I think Professor Longbottom knows that my friends and I are Loki, Pokey, Polo, and Pent,” James explained under his breath to Albus in the common room the next day when he described the punishments. “He made it clear that the punishments were so strict because he wanted to ensure I didn’t pull any more panic-inducing pranks again, on any scale. He had that look in his eye like he wanted me to guess what he was really talking about. I think it was his way of discreetly saying ‘I know what you’re up to, and it had better stop right now.’ I think Loki, Pokey, Polo, and Pent are retiring… or, at least Pokey is.”

It took a moment of sad reflection on James’s behalf before Albus realized what this meant for himself, too. James was the Seeker on the Gryffindor team… so obviously, this meant that Albus, first reserve Seeker, would be taking his spot in the Quidditch matches against Hufflepuff in mid-February and against Ravenclaw in late May.

“You’ll do great,” assured James, patting Albus on the shoulder before he got up forlornly.

Suddenly, the crushing weight of the realization was dropped on Albus’s shoulders: he had never considered that it might happen before his sixth year, but Gryffindor’s chances at the Quidditch Cup probably depended now on his ability to catch the Snitch. He felt suddenly short of breath.

“Stage fright?” asked James, noticing Albus’s reaction when he turned back before departing the room. “When I first got on the team and realized I was going to play a match, it freaked me out, too. Don’t worry, it’ll go away. Stay loose and stay practiced, and you have nothing to worry
Rather than alleviate his fears, this placed further burden on Albus in the form of higher expectations. Albus tried to calm himself, and asked James about the practice schedule. He would need to keep up his flying skills if he was to beat Hufflepuff.

At least he didn’t have to face the highly talented Jason Lindley, who was to be replaced by Mia Moon while he was in South Africa with Gil and Louis. Albus didn’t know how dangerous Mia could be on the field, but he vowed to be more dangerous.

“So,” said Professor Ramanu, “those are what are called imaginary numbers. Any questions on this topic?”

Sylvester Alamandrine raised his hand.

Professor Ramanu gestured towards him. “Yes, Sylvester?”

“Is it okay if this question is on all topics in Arithmancy in general?”

Professor Ramanu seemed surprised by this query.

“Well, I suppose that question would be applicable at any point in your career,” she responded.

“Okay,” said Sylvester. “So, I was wondering about all these calculations we keep having to do by hand. In Muggle schools, there are these machines called calculators, which can do all of the–”

“I know about calculators,” interjected Professor Ramanu, “but for the sake of not having to explain them to the entire class, let’s skip discussing what they can do, and I’m pretty sure that whatever your question is, it can be answered thusly: the reason you aren’t using calculators right now is because Muggle technology doesn’t work in Hogwarts, due to all the ambient Kinesis.”

“No, I know that,” said Sylvester, “but I heard from an older student that eventually we can learn spells that work out all of these calculations for us?”

The room was dead silent. Almost all of the students in the room who hated math – so, almost all the students in the room – were giving Professor Ramanu death glares.

Professor Ramanu gulped.

“Er, well… yes, I mean, eventually, you can learn those…”

“What?!” bellowed Jude Ingram. “You mean we would have always just been able to wave our wands and all of this math would be done? Is everything we’ve learned about mathematics pointless?!”

“Absolutely not!” declared Professor Ramanu. “Of course it’s not useless – you won’t always be able to use those spells, you need very special equipment to set up the numbers before you cast the spells on that equipment, and that’s how you do the calculations the short way, but it’s very useful to learn the long way–”

“How is it ever going to be useful?” demanded Juniper Smith.

“You won’t always have the equipment to do the work for you. The spell only works if you have the correct contraption for the job to calculate the correct way–”
“Of course we’ll have those!”

The class grew out of control until the bell rang, and when Albus hung back to see Professor Ramanu, she looked severely frazzled.

“Every class eventually finds out that we’re doing things the long way,” she sighed. “Hello, Albus, what can I do for – oh, of course. Professor Longbottom’s request. Forgive me.”

“I forgive you,” said Albus with a smile.

Professor Ramanu took out her folder, which contained many more papers than a first glance would suggest. She began pulling out the papers at the end of the folder, and reading off the results.

Much of it was complex and indecipherable from its mathematical code, but when it was in English, it was incredibly impactful.

“Now, you see here that the sixth degree constant is seventy,” said Professor Ramanu. “The prime factors of seventy are two, five, and seven. Two is the number of plant life, five is the number of human life, and seven is the most magical number.”

“What’s the number of fungi?” asked Albus.

“Four,” said Professor Ramanu. “Fungi are more closely related to animals than plants, actually, and four is closer to five than two. But don’t get too hung up on these associations – there are many others. Two isn’t just the number of plants, for example. It is also the number of strength, the number of endurance, the number of direction, the number of energy, the number of love, the number of family, the number of times I am NOT going to tell you to leave those alone…”

“Sorry,” said Albus, taking his hands away from some other folders that Professor Ramanu had on her desk.

“Right, then, here’s the punchline. This equation, this sixth-degree equation representing the underlying fluctuations of the plant growth, satisfies Tang’s law of subterranean influence as well as Patel’s Proximity Equation, Usmiro’s Human Influence Determination Matrix, and Adtail’s Exanthropomorphic Diagram. That, combined with the clear influence of Biberic Digressions, Lunar Heartbeats, and Reverse Decay–”

“Er, Professor?” interrupted Albus meekly.

“Yes, yes, I’m sorry, you’ve probably heard of less than half the words in that abstract I just dumped upon you. Well, the bottom line is this: due to the undeniable presence of Harkley’s Singularity–”

“Professor…”

“Yes, yes, I’ll skip it, sorry. The baseline is, the Mesopotamian Chart Graph–”

“Professor!”

“I made that one up… my apologies.”

Albus laughed and leaned back in his chair.

“Based on my findings, I can say with ninety-eight percent certainty that whatever is causing
Professor Longbottom’s plants to grow with such rapidity has its origins – and its current residence – somewhere underground, in close proximity to the castle if not under it.”

Albus perked his head back up.

“And that’s not all,” she said proudly. “I’ve also determined that the growth is the result of a weak form of human magic… but, whatever is casting that magic is either an artifact created by humans, or an entity that ceased to be truly human around at least seven hundred years ago.”

Albus’s jaw dropped.

“It could be magic imbued in a place, or an object, that has just recently been released,” she said. “Or, it could have been active seven hundred years ago as well, but was simply too weak to be noticed.”

She flexed her arms and cracked her knuckles, then stored the papers safely back inside her folder.

“But whatever it is,” she finished, “it’s getting stronger every day.”

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“Tell it to me again,” said Rose as she and Albus walked down to Herbology two mornings later.

“I told you everything that Professor Ramanu told me,” said Albus.

“I want to hear you say it again.”

“She said that the source of the overgrowth could even be under the school,” said Albus. “I think it’s probably the same thing as whatever’s moaning and groaning down there. Because that never used to happen, either, and now the groaning is gaining strength, too. Then Professor Ramanu said that it might be human – or used to be, seven hundred years ago.”

“And you think it’s…”

“Dismiusa,” said Albus, but more quietly. “I don’t see anything else it could be. The legends of Dismiusa begin almost exactly seven hundred years ago!”

“But maybe it was something else,” said Rose. “Something that people confused with a forest deity like Dismiusa. Something else that’s under the castle grounds.”

“It still can’t be good,” said Albus. “If it’s connected to the Fokii, too, it even made Litinia run and hide, didn’t it? That can’t be–”

Rose grabbed his arm unexpectedly, and Albus almost ripped out his wand; he sighed. He’d been on edge all week since his unexpected dive into visions on Saturday, after which he’d spent all day in the hospital wing being reevaluated. He was fine, but these sorts of sudden jolts, like Rose grabbing his arm, weren’t helping. But then she said something that made him realize why she was so wound up.

“Albus,” she gasped. “What if Litinia is Dismiusa?”

Albus stopped short in his tracks.

The words of Professor Ramanu floated through his head once more.

_Whatever is casting that magic ceased to be truly human around at least seven hundred years ago._
Ideas were flying through his head at record speed. Professor of Herbology – friend of nature – the perfect profile for a vengeful forest spirit. Taking revenge on her wandmaker family for destroying the woods… going after her husband to stop him from killing the mulunctapoli, which were called the “servants of Dismiusa” in that book Wilcox had consulted in Albus’s first year… Was this when, and why, the legend of Dismiusa first came about?

But it just didn’t feel like the right conclusion.

“That doesn’t make sense,” said Albus finally as they started walking again. “Her husband killed her. Sidland Darstary carried her corpse out of the woods. Could he have killed her if she was that powerful?”

“Maybe she took mercy on him because he was her husband,” said Rose, “but he knew he had to kill her because she was killing people, or draining their magic with the mulunctapoli? So he pretended to be on her side, then killed her when she wasn’t expecting it? Maybe that’s even why he killed all the mulunctapoli – to make sure she didn’t rise again! Didn’t the legend say that the mulunctapoli were her servants, who would go out and drain wizards of magic, then deliver the magic and feed it to her so she could be powerful again?”

“Yes,” said Albus, “but she apparently didn’t have a problem with killing the rest of her family, so why would she have had a problem killing her husband?”

“Well, maybe she loved him and not them,” answered Rose. “You don’t choose the family you’re born into, but you choose your husband.” She tilted her head and pursed her lips. “Well, you didn’t choose in the Muggle world, but I’m pretty sure that witches could choose their own marriages even at that time. And Albus, have you finished reading that Scandals! book yet?”

“No,” admitted Albus. “It was kind of weird. I didn’t know what to believe out of what it claimed.”

“It claimed,” said Rose, “that Litinia was to be sent to court for experimenting with Dark magic, but the charges were dismissed out of respect when she died. Albus, a warrant was issued for her arrest – she was accused of experimenting with Fokii!”

Albus nodded. “Then that has to be at least part of the reason of why she ran away from her portrait once I told her that a Fokii had been spotted,” he said. “But it still doesn’t prove she’s an all-powerful nature deity. And… we’re assuming so many things. A thought process with this many assumptions usually doesn’t lead us to the right answer.”

They walked into view of the greenhouses; they were still distant, but they could already tell that the students in their class were gathered outside again.

“Herbology hasn’t been cancelled again?” asked Rose with worry.

Albus ignored the gathering of students and kept thinking as they walked. If all of these strange events were really due to Dismiusa… then it wasn’t somebody combining their soul with hers, as in the legend. If that were the case, what master plan was her controller trying to accomplish with these recent events? It wouldn’t make sense. She was rising on her own – she was gaining strength… maybe trying to free herself.

“Why would Dismiusa rise again now?” asked Albus. “What’s changed?”

But although Rose didn’t readily respond to this query, the answer presented itself to him almost too easily.

“The mulunctapoli?” he guessed. “The Sandbloods used the mulunctapoli to find her? Maybe one
of the Sandbloods – combined his soul with Dismiusa? Can Squibs even do that?” He tried to slow himself down to catch up to his thoughts. “Maybe they have a wizard under MM doing it for them… Or maybe she is just rising on her own, but then, what’s caused her rise? Did something disturb her?”

Again, Rose said nothing, but Albus found himself speaking aloud, and the answer he provided for his own question filled him with dread.

“Wilcox and Valon have been mapping the forest,” he whispered.

“You don’t think they stumbled across her?” breathed Rose. “Woke her up?”

“I don’t know,” said Albus. He still just didn’t understand how it could have started in the first place, though. Dismiusa was an all-powerful forest spirit. Litinia was a Hogwarts professor who died before she was forty. How would she have achieved–


The name burst from his mouth before he realized it wasn’t a possibility.

“Nicolas and Perenelle Flamel?” asked Rose. “What about them?”

“Litinia’s granddaughter was Perenelle Flamel,” said Albus. “But Litinia died when her daughter, Perenelle’s mother, was a baby, so the Flamels and their Philosopher’s Stone couldn’t have been involved in keeping her alive… It wasn’t around yet, not for another… probably fifty years, at the very least. Or was it? I guess we don’t really know anything – this was seven hundred years ago, after all.”

“But we’re getting somewhere, maybe,” said Rose. “You could ask Dumbledore’s portrait in the Headmaster’s office – he was good friends with the Flamels, wasn’t he?”

“And ask a few questions of Surosch Bolorant at the same time,” said Albus, nodding. “Maybe I’ll visit the Headmaster soon. I’ll need to come up with a reason to visit him, though… but it shouldn’t be hard, with what’s been going on.”

“Make an appointment about your head,” suggested Rose. “That’s been worrying all of us anyway.”


“Waiting,” said Rose.

“I still don’t know how Litinia could have achieved so much power in such a short life she had before Dismiusa came about,” said Albus. “But… the legend is that Gallen Ingot combined his soul with Dismiusa’s, isn’t it?”

“That’s what Professor Longbottom said,” replied Rose.

“Then maybe… Maybe Litinia was the first to do it.”

He and Rose exchanged glances.

“She was the Hogwarts Herbology teacher,” said Albus quietly. “Do you think…”

“That she noticed something like what Professor Longbottom is noticing?” finished Rose for him.
“And that she asked Professor Bolorant, who was the Arithmancy teacher, for help evaluating what was going on, just like Professor Longbottom is asking Professor Ramanu?” added Albus.

“And that they subsequently spent long hours together alone figuring it out, giving people the impression that she was having an affair?” continued Rose.

“And that she and Bolorant uncovered Dismiusa, and that she combined her soul with Dismiusa’s, and that the mulunctapoli going extinct when Dismiusa disappeared wasn’t a coincidence, and neither is the fact that they’re both back now?” concluded Albus.

They were out of breath from the excitement of their discoveries when they finally approached the Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs from their year, who were still waiting a good distance away from the greenhouses.

“He didn’t cancel Herbology again?” asked Albus to Aidan, who was standing far away from the entrance to the greenhouse.

Then Professor Longbottom sprinted by, toting a stretcher behind him.

Aidan turned towards them; his face was white. “Not until just now, I think,” he said hoarsely.

Albus and Rose peered at the stretcher; on it was Mia Moon, clutching her arm and grimacing.

“The plants must have gone wild again,” said Albus, watching Professor Longbottom race the stretcher all the way up to the castle. “But… if Professor Ramanu’s calculations were right, there shouldn’t have been an escalation today.”

“Maybe that was just about the growth of the plants,” breathed Rose, “and not about their aggressiveness.”

“I have some reservations about attending Herbology any time in the near future,” whispered Aidan.
Herbology was scheduled for a classroom inside the castle until at least the end of the term. The greenhouses were closed down temporarily; Alec said that from Ravenclaw tower, he could see Professor Longbottom down there every day after classes were over, trying to control the vegetation inside.

Mia was injured, but not too seriously; she was back in classes by the next week. She had been jabbed by a young Stingwood, a tree with stinging roots. Professor Longbottom had been traumatized by this incident, blaming himself for the injury, even though Stingwoods had never been known to pursue prey on their own at that age. The poison wasn’t fully developed, though, so Mia survived, but only because Professor Longbottom got to her before the tree injected her with too much. Afraid that he might not get there in time if something like that happened again, he shut down the greenhouses and brought tiny and tame plants into the castle for classes instead.

“Mimbulus Mimbletonia!” he announced in their Herbology class on the next Monday morning, which kicked off the last week before the Christmas holiday. He was showing off a gray cactus which boasted boils instead of spines. It was pulsing. “This is a very rare plant from Assyria. It’s one of my favorite plants. This one I bred from a specimen given to me by my Great Uncle Algie.”

“Is it dangerous?” asked Emily Watson nervously.

Professor Longbottom shook his head no. “It’s completely harmless. It shoots out Stinksap as a defense mechanism, but that’s not poisonous and has never been known to cause injury to–”

Without any provocation, the boil on the very top of the cactus split open, and splattered its rancid sap directly into Professor Longbottom’s eyes.

He gave a shout of pain as the room quickly became overtaken by the scent of manure, and rapidly cleaned his eyes off with a frenzied spell. He Conjured a box around the Mimbulus Mimbletonia and levitated it to the side of the room, still blinking his eyes vigorously and making very weird faces as his eyes watered furiously.

Everyone in the class was sitting very still as Professor Longbottom finally gathered himself in the front of the room. He cast an air-freshening charm and stood with curled fists in the center of the room.

“Right,” he said calmly. “I suppose we’ll do without the real-life model today and Wednesday and Friday and possibly forever. That’s fine, then.”

He began teaching them about the Mimbulus Mimbletonia without holding the plant, which was wiggling under its box.

On Friday, Albus was second to finish his Modern Magical Instruments exam; Lucas was first. Despite their truce (or, rather, mutual agreement to ignore each other), he still found himself keeping score with the American. Lucas usually finished tests faster than him, but Albus’s practical examination scores seemed to be slightly higher.

This wasn’t a practical exam, though; in Modern Magical Instruments, they had been studying modern wandlore. It was fascinating – he’d finally learned all about the recent developments in wand maturation, and how the recent developments of wand maturation had made using two
wands more of a possibility. He was looking forward to the second half of the year in this class even more, though. They would be learning about other artifacts for spell-casting used in other regions – namely, rods, staffs, and scepters. Professor Norton had also introduced them to magical artifacts called Gauntlets, which were metal gloves empowered with characteristics similar to wands. They were the most powerful ways to cast magic, but only extremely skilled wizards could control them. Professor Norton promised to bring in an old gauntlet passed down by her family, as well as numerous modern rods, staffs, and scepters with which they would already be allowed to cast spells. He was extremely excited to practice using a scepter.

“Yes!” announced Alec as they left the class. “Last class before Christmas holidays – done! What do you guys want to do?”

“Well, right now I’m going to Wilcox’s office,” said Albus.


“And I want to ask Wilcox about other stuff,” said Albus. “I want to ask him about everything, in general. He was always most open-minded to theories on… you know… Dismiusa.”

“You and Rose have built a pretty solid case,” said Aidan. “I do think you should at least warn Professor Wilcox about the possibility while you’re there…”

“Don’t worry, I plan to,” assured Albus.

He broke away from Aidan, who headed to the Hufflepuff dormitories. Alec joined him for the journey up to the seventh floor, but broke away to roam towards Ravenclaw Tower while Albus trekked to the Headmaster’s office.

He stepped in front of the gargoyle that blocked the spiral staircase.

“Pokémon,” he declared resolutely.

The gargoyle jumped aside and the staircase began moving.

There were definitely perks to being great friends with the Headmaster’s son – one of them was always knowing the password to the Headmaster’s office.

He stepped onto the staircase and let it carry him up. According to Exo, his father would probably be in right now, unless he was in his secret place. Albus grabbed the knocker on the door, hoping that Wilcox was still around.

He was promptly yanked right onto his face inside the office when the door flew open, and Wilcox stared down at him, blinking in confusion.

“Haven’t you ever heard of knocking, Professor?” asked Albus, lifting his face off of the ground.

“You’re the one at my door,” said Wilcox, further bemused.

“No, I mean – I was just about to knock, and then you could have opened the door after I knocked,” said Albus. “…Sir.”

“I didn’t know you were there,” said Wilcox. “I was just about to head out.”

“What? You are?”

“Yes, I needed Professor Valon’s consultation on a certain matter that needs our attention. But
you’re welcome to wait in my office for a little while – I should be back very shortly.”

“Perfect,” said Albus – he had also hoped to get some alone time with the portraits so that he could ask Bolorant and Dumbledore about Litinia and the Flamels.

He stepped into the office as Wilcox left.

The portraits all appeared to be asleep – but then, they always did. But Albus knew they were probably only pretending. He stepped in closer to the Headmaster’s desk, and crept behind the desk, sitting in Wilcox’s chair and turning it around to face the three largest portraits – Professors Dumbledore, Snape, and McGonagall.

“Er – ex-excuse me – Professor?” said Albus timidly.

Every portrait in the room opened its eyes to look at him.

“Oh – s-sorry,” he said. “Professor Dumbledore, sir?”

Dumbledore’s bright blue eyes seemed to pierce through the paint of the portrait and bore straight into his skull as the old man smiled down at him.

“Hello, Albus,” he said warmly.

“Hello, Albus,” responded Albus with a laugh.

“Albus Severus, I believe?” said Dumbledore, glancing slyly over towards Snape.

Albus looked over at Snape, on the left. Professor Snape’s nostrils flared, and he didn’t show a hint of a smile, but something in his expression conveyed a fleeting feeling of positive emotion.

“What is on your mind?” asked Dumbledore.

Albus turned back to the Headmaster of his father. “I had a question I wanted to ask you,” he said. “You knew the Flamels… didn’t you, sir?”

“I knew Nicolas and Perenelle, yes,” said Dumbledore. “My, my… is this what I think it is? An expedition for answers to the mysteries you are encountering?”

“How very like your father,” muttered Snape. “And his father before him.”

“But Lily’s eyes,” said Dumbledore. “And I sense Lily’s keen intelligence in young Albus. I suppose a propensity for mischief is only necessary for your survival. Am I right, Albus Severus – are you here to investigate Litinia’s disappearance?”

“Yes,” said Albus, surprised. “How did you know?”

“Not long after Litinia… flew the coop… you’re inquiring about her granddaughter. I sense a slight connection here. Did you come here for Professor Wilcox at all, or simply as a means to hold a discussion with me and one Professor Bolorant?”

Surosch Bolorant flicked an eyebrow upwards as he stared at Albus from his own portrait.

“Well… I also did want to talk to Professor Wilcox about my head,” said Albus.

“Professor Wilcox already seems to be quite fascinated with your head, Potter,” said Professor McGonagall, speaking her first words of the night.
“He does?”

“He’s been consulting Professor Dumbledore all term, searching for a solution to the fact that the aperture in your mind seems to be healing slower than usual.”

“He’s trying to solve it for me?” asked Albus. “Why is it such a high priority for him?”

“I believe it is related to a worry I once had about your father,” said Dumbledore. “Your father had a breach in his mental defenses as well, and I was worried about what might try to worm its way in.”

“A breach in my mental defenses?” asked Albus. “But I haven’t been attacked. I don’t think so, anyway. I’ve just been – picking up on things.”

“You never know if you’re really seeing,” said Dumbledore, “or if you’re only witnessing what others want you to see.”

Albus silently pondered this. “I’m only seeing these visions occasionally,” he said. “Usually only when there’s an uproar – when there are noises echoing through the castle, or someone’s pulled a prank to make everyone think the Fokii’s come back…”

“Instances of high emotional stress,” said Snape. “Your mind reopens like tearing off a scab. You should learn to guard it with more efficiency.”

McGonagall snorted at Snape’s criticism. “The boy has undergone an unprecedented level of stress,” she scolded. “I’d like to see how you would have fared under the circumstances. Operating the Marionette’s Medicine at thirteen! It’s a wonder you were able to pull off the mental control necessary to sustain the potion’s effects.”

“A wand of silver lime, isn’t that right?” asked Dumbledore. “I heard much about your wands last year when they were – er – misbehaving.”

“Yes, silver lime,” said Albus. “And ebony is the second.”

“Core of Devil’s Snare in the silver lime,” said Dumbledore. “A probing mind. Excellent for school. Harder for Occlumency. You see, you’re quite adept on picking up signals… but because your mind is more open to these signals, it is also more vulnerable to the less welcome signals, such as Legilimency.” He smoothed his beard. “We should wait for dear Helio to return before we get too further involved in this matter… But you had questions for us old bags?”

Albus smiled. “Yes. I was wondering if Nicolas Flamel was the first to create a Philosopher’s Stone, or if there were others before him.”

“Nicolas was the first,” replied Professor Dumbledore. “As far as we know.”

“And the Stone only grants immortality when you drink the Elixir of Life, correct?” asked Albus. “You have to continuously drink it?”

“That is correct.”

Then I doubt she was sitting around with a rock in the forest, knocking back Elixirs for seven hundred years, thought Albus.

“You’re not going to ask me why I’m asking you these sorts of questions?” asked Albus.
“Nope,” said Dumbledore cheerfully.

Albus found himself laughing again.

“Did the Flamels ever mention Litinia to you?”

“On several occasions,” said Dumbledore.

“In what context?”

“Simply speaking of her as inspiration. They did not ever get the pleasure of knowing her, of course, so there was very little small talk in regards to Perenelle’s maternal grandmother. It was mostly about how Litinia’s success inspired Perenelle to have success of her own.”

Albus hadn’t expected he would find any dirt on Litinia through Dumbledore, but it had been worth the questions, of course. But now he had to ask Bolorant a few questions before Wilcox came back.

“Thank you, Professor,” said Albus.

“Dear boy, it is always a pleasure,” said Dumbledore.

“Professor Bolorant?” asked Albus, turning to his right to face the wall holding Bolorant’s portrait. “I had a few questions I wanted to ask you, too, if you don’t mind?”

“I do not,” affirmed Bolorant. “Ask away.”

“You knew Litinia,” said Albus. “When she was at Hogwarts. Right?”

“Right.”

“And Litinia had a good relationship with you.”

Bolorant reddened. “Yes,” he said slowly. “A very good, platonic friendship.”

“Did you ever notice anything unusual happening in the Forbidden Forest?”

“The Forbidden Forest is packed to the brim with unusualness,” replied Bolorant.

“But… more unusual than… than usual.”

“By definition, unusual is usually more unusual than usual,” noted Bolorant.

“Yes,” said Albus, “but more unusual than the usual unusual.”

“Wouldn’t unusual for unusual be… usual?” puzzled Bolorant.

“No,” said Albus. “I mean, unusually unusual in that it’s unusual even for more unusual than the usually more unusual than usual. I mean… what?”

“Don’t ask me what you just said,” chuckled Bolorant.

“Let me try again, without using the word ‘unusual’ an unusual amount of times,” said Albus. “What I’m trying to ask you is, was there ever a point in your time at Hogwarts when the plant life around the castle was acting the way it is now? The greenhouse life expanding, the tree line taller, thicker, closer, greener—”
“It’s all right, I knew what you were asking from the start,” admitted Bolorant. “And yes. It did happen just as you are describing it, just as it is happening now. And naturally I have already disclosed this to Professor Helio Wilcox.”

“It has happened in the past?” said Albus.

“Yes, but not to this extent,” said Bolorant. “This is still unprecedented.”

“And did Litinia ever ask you about this?” said Albus. “You were the Arithmancy professor. Did she ever ask you to evaluate the unusual growth of the plants?”

“Well, yes,” said Bolorant. “In fact… she did.”

Albus felt his brain lock into gear with the new information and run with it.

“And she wanted you to help her find what was causing it?” he pressed.

Bolorant nodded.

“You did do the thing properly, didn’t you?” laughed Dumbledore.

“Your father would be quite proud,” said McGonagall with a tight-lipped smile.

“That is hardly a commendable sentiment,” scoffed Snape.

Albus gave a smile towards Dumbledore and a raised eyebrow to Snape before turning back to Bolorant. “What did you find out?” asked Albus.

“I was unable to pin the source at the time,” said Bolorant. “It was unlike anything I’d ever seen before.”

“And how did Litinia react to this?” asked Albus.

“By looking for it,” said Bolorant. “I warned her and begged her, but she insisted upon wandering into the forest alone, even at a time when disappearances due to mulunctapoli were at an all-time high and the forest was off-limits to all persons. She never came back until her husband went in to look for her and carried her body out of the forest.”

“But her husband didn’t go in to look for her,” said Albus. “He went in to exterminate the mulunctapoli.”

“Or,” offered Dumbledore.

“Or….” said Albus. “...that’s just what he told the Ministry, so that he would be allowed into the forest at a time when it was off-limits?”

“Excellent deduction,” said Dumbledore.

“But then, why did all the mulunctapoli disappear?” asked Albus. “If he really went in to look for her, and found her body, he probably wouldn’t have bothered with the mulunctapoli… Unless… she wasn’t dead when he found her. Litinia did say her husband killed her.”

“Yes, Litinia’s portrait, which was painted by Sidland himself and so contains his memories of her, has confessed that her husband killed her,” said Bolorant.

“So then, did Sidland put her down because she was mad with power?” asked Albus. “And when
“Dismiusa disappeared… the mulunctapoli disappeared?”

“Excuse me?” coughed Bolorant.

“What?”

“Did you just say, ‘Dismiusa?’” asked Bolorant. “And that Litinia was ‘mad with power?’”

“Well,” said Albus, blushing, “it’s kind of a theory I’ve been entertaining–”

“Mr. Potter, I hope you haven’t seriously ascribed these goings-on to such a ludicrous fairy-tale as Dismiusa,” said Bolorant. “Or connected it to Litinia!”

“I thought – I thought that was where we were going with–”

“This entire discussion, you thought we were discussing the habits of a rampant forest deity?”

“Well, yes,” said Albus. “We were talking about the odd growth rates of the plants, and the disappearances in the forest…”

“The Forbidden Forest has always been a strange place, with many unexplainable occurrences,” said Bolorant, “but I am a man of the magical sciences, and I find it highly distressing that any facts I’ve supplied to you could be attributed to such fiction.”

“But, what about the disappearances that were happening at the same time as the increase in the plant activity? You said yourself you couldn’t pinpoint the source–”

“At the time,” huffed Bolorant. “I said I was unable to pin the source at the time! However, it became obvious later. The mulunctapoli can control plant life, Mr. Potter. The rapid growth of their surrounding vegetation occurs when they are agitated – it is a defense mechanism. Making their local flora grow at a higher rate provides more cover for them to hide! This time around, they are being agitated further than they were last time – it is unprecedented. But it can still be explained. The Sandbloods are harvesting the blood of the mulunctapoli! This is agitating the little creatures, and they are responding by trying to create more cover. The greenhouses are too close to the forest, and this is why the plants are growing and attacking!”

Albus’s head was pounding. He wasn’t satisfied with this explanation, and he knew there was a reason for his dissatisfaction, but he was having trouble grasping onto the train of thought in his mind while Bolorant continued.

“I thought, this whole time, that you were a remarkably intelligent young wizard reaching the truth completely on his own, so I allowed you to think freely without interference. I apologize – I had no idea I was further misleading you. The mulunctapoli have caused this mess and Professor Wilcox is working as hard as he can to fix it–”

“I thought there were no more mulunctapoli in the forest?” asked Albus. “All of the expeditions to find them came up short!”

“Professor Wilcox has not entered the forest recently. I suspect they’ve returned.”

Albus wasn’t giving up. “What about the Fokii?” he insisted.

“The mulunctapoli bring the Fokii fungus as a parasite on their bodies!” retorted Bolorant. “But actually, it is more mutualistic than parasitic; the Fokii benefits the mulunctapoli indirectly, since it attacks everything it sees except the potential host of its offspring, resulting in a safer environment
for the mulunctapol. In fact, the mulunctapoli may even *create* the Fokii fungus for this purpose, as they create other wildlife for similar purposes – so even the sudden return after seven hundred years is still quite explicable!"

“But why was the Fokii trying to get under the school?” demanded Albus. “Why did it go out of its way to steal a knife and a plant and try to sneak down the hidden corridor under the dungeons? Professor Ramanu, who teaches your subject, sir, said that whatever was causing the plants to grow was located somewhere underground nearby! So what’s been groaning under the school?”

There was silence in the room.

“The cryptic behavior of one Dark creature is not enough to convince me of this lunacy,” said Bolorant. “I do not make attempts to understand the minds of the evil. As for what may or may not be under the school, none among even the Headmasters in this room can claim to know all of the secrets of this castle. I suggest you don’t expect yourself to outdo every Headmaster in history combined.”

“Surosch!” snapped McGonagall. “Have some manners, will you?”

“I refuse to indulge his wild fantasies,” pouted Bolorant.

“Albus has an interesting point,” said Dumbledore. “Has Professor Ramanu informed Professor Wilcox of this matter?”

“No,” said Albus. “I don’t think so, anyway. She probably left it to Professor Longbottom to do what he wanted with the information; I’m not sure what he did.”

“Perhaps *you* should tell Professor Wilcox,” said Professor Dumbledore. “Having all of the available details can only ever help to evaluate the situation.”

At that moment, Albus heard the very faint sounds of footsteps on the spiral staircase.

“Thank you, Professors,” he said, and then scurried out of the Headmaster’s chair before Wilcox found him there.

A few seconds later, Wilcox entered the room, and smiled at Albus’s presence.

“So, my boy,” he said. “What can I do for you?”

Albus smiled back. “I just wanted to ask you a few questions. About what’s been going on with my head. You know.”

Wilcox winced.

“Ah, yes,” he said. “Your little problem… Regretfully, Albus, though I’ve been looking into solutions for the entire term thus far, I still have yet to find any way to fix this other than by waiting.” He sighed. “Sorry. Your wounds will heal in time – unless they keep getting reopened, which is what’s been happening. Unfortunately, I think you’re going to keep getting flooded with these random scraps of thought until the source is plugged up.”


“No idea,” said Wilcox. “But you’re the one mentally connected to it, aren’t you? Perhaps you can give us some idea?”
Albus glanced over at Bolorant’s portrait. The old man rolled his eyes.

“I’ve been having visions,” he said. “Every time something stressful happens – even a false alarm – I get these visions of a green woman. She’s in pain.”

He glanced back at Bolorant’s portrait to find that the old wizard was now looking at him with interest.

“A green woman,” repeated Wilcox. “In pain?”

“Yes,” he said. “I’m sure of it. I’ve been told it may be a visual metaphor by Professor Birchbaum, but I just don’t think so. Her screams sound like – they sound like the same noises that are coming from under the castle, but higher-pitched.”

He only made this connection as he was saying it, but his conversation flowed as if he’d planned to say it all along.

“Fascinating,” said Wilcox, rubbing his chin. “Well, if that were true… I would highly recommend you stay away from that hidden passage in the future… Getting closer to the source will only exacerbate your problems with the visions, if that truly is the source. Once was enough.”

“Twice,” said Albus.

“What?”

Albus cringed; he’d forgotten that he hadn’t quite mentioned this in full to Wilcox. “Er… I kind of… discovered it in my second year.”

“In your second year?”

“Yes,” said Albus. “Remember after the first groaning incident, when I asked you to look for hidden passages down in the dungeons?”

“So you actually did discover it that year – and you went down there?” asked Wilcox.

“Yes,” said Albus.

“What were you thinking?” exploded Wilcox. “I thought you just noticed it! You went down there?! Do you have any idea how dangerous that could have been?!”

“He has plenty idea of the danger involved,” said Snape, “but seeing as he is a Potter, he opted not to care in the slightest what devastation on himself or on others his actions might bring.”

“Albus, honestly, I am trying to keep you as safe as possible while you are under my care,” said Wilcox, “but if you keep crawling down the first dark and foreboding tunnel you encounter, then ‘as safe as possible’ may end up turning into a question of how many pieces of you I can recover!”

“I’m sorry,” mumbled Albus.

“I am, too,” said Wilcox, rubbing his forehead with his eyes squeezed shut. “Forgive me for shouting; the stress of this year so far is killing me.”

“I understand,” said Albus. “I also understand that I really shouldn’t have gone in there the first time.”

Wilcox’s eyes snapped open.
“Hold up,” he said. “How did you find this passageway? How did you open it?”

“I didn’t find it,” said Albus. “Gimmick did.”

“Gimmick?”

“My cat. He meowed at me one night until I followed him to the dungeons… then he started to pace in front of the wall where the passage was. I looked at the wall and I noticed—” He cut himself off, realizing something strange about his memory.

Wilcox’s eyes were aflame. “Noticed what?”

Albus frowned. “I noticed a streak on the dusty wall where there was no dust. It looked like someone had already dragged their finger across it. I traced the streak all the way, and then the wall just… melted. But I don’t understand. Who traced it before me?”

Wilcox didn’t blink for the longest time. “Perhaps,” he said softly, “our Fokii friend was not a stranger to the castle. The mulunctapoli have been around since three years ago at the latest, so perhaps the Fokii have been around that long as well… Maybe this is just the first time we’ve caught him.”

“That’s a frightening thought,” said Albus. “What do you think it’s trying to do down there?”

“I couldn’t even fathom a guess,” said Wilcox.

As usual, trying to decipher Wilcox’s gaze yielded no results. He was inscrutable.

“Goodness, how did we get to this discussion from talking about your head?” laughed Wilcox. “Albus, I have some work to do, so I will wish you a Happy Christmas and ask that we pick this discussion up again later. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” said Albus. “Happy Christmas, sir.”

“See you at the feast.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Albus left the office and descended the spiral staircase in a somewhat low mood. He had been intending to ask Wilcox if he thought Dismiusa had anything to do with the forest, but Bolorant’s telling-off made him feel very self-conscious about the theory.

Was everything that was occurring simply a result of the disturbance of mulunctapoli in the Forbidden Forest? He supposed it was the only logical explanation. The explanation he’d been defending so vigorously was that an ancient forest-dwelling being of immense power was the one moaning under the castle and making Fokii run around the halls while the students were at Quidditch. If that were true, then what was she trying to accomplish by this? If she was an all-powerful spirit, she would be wrecking everything. She wouldn’t be having a tiny temper tantrum and making taller trees… would she? What was the meaning to all of this?

Nothing seemed to make any sense… so maybe that was it. It wasn’t the work of some master plan. It was the work of the natural environment, which to the human eye was as disorganized and random as Alec writing a History of Magic essay. And that was all there was to it. There was nothing supernatural occurring here. Why was he so eager to defend the least likely possibility?

He climbed up to Gryffindor Tower and went straight to bed, but he hit his pillow smiling – after
all, tomorrow was the scheduled Hogsmeade weekend, and Janelle was coming to visit.

“So I talked to the Grey Lady,” said Alec. “She said she’d never heard of the passageway you found. She doesn’t think her parents built it – she hadn’t been underground in that area, but none of the ghosts remember that passage until recently. And they would remember it best – they can’t pass through that door or into the chamber behind it, which is really weird.”

“Okay,” said Albus, not really paying much attention – he was looking around the streets of Hogsmeade for Janelle to show up.

“How far does the anti-ghost area extend?” asked Aidan.

“It only encompasses a small little chamber,” said Alec. “Barely bigger than one of our classrooms in the castle. As far as they can tell. It’s also really dark down there, so Helena says it would be hard to see anything else even if there was more.”

“Did you say something about Helena Ravenclaw?” asked Rohan Otica, the Auror who was assigned to watch Albus on this trip. “I was in Ravenclaw, too, when I went to Hogwarts.”

Albus shuffled over to Rohan when Alec, Aidan, and Exo started discussing how ghost-blocking magic worked.

“Hey,” he said to Rohan. “I was wondering if you could answer a question for me…”

“I’ll certainly try,” said Rohan.

“One of the riddles to the Ravenclaw door in my first year was, ‘What happens when an unstoppable spell meets an unbreakable shield?’ Do you know the answer?”

“Oh, that one’s fairly simple,” said Rohan. “It – wait, you’re a Gryffindor, aren’t you?”

“Well, yes,” said Albus, “but the question is three years old and it hasn’t–”

“Sorry,” said Rohan, holding up a hand. “Ravenclaw’s honor – we don’t tell anyone else any answers from the door.”

“Oh, come on!” Albus begged.

“It could be reused, even after three years,” said Rohan, shrugging. “You never know. I’m not saying.”

“Rohan!”

Albus looked over to see Lucy, Uncle Percy’s younger daughter, running towards them – or, more specifically, running towards Rohan.

“Hey, can you come away with me for a minute?” she whispered in his ear.

Rohan blushed. “Er, Lucy… I’m kind of in the middle of a job…”

“Only a minute,” said Lucy. “You guys can take care of yourselves for sixty seconds, yeah?”

“Why do you need Rohan?” asked Exo.

“I want to give him his Christmas present,” said Lucy.
“Do you know him?”

“Yeah, a little better than most people,” said Lucy, glancing him up and down.

Albus suddenly remembered who had the lion Patronus to match Lucy’s lioness – it was none other than Rohan, the Auror he’d seen going head to head with Coral Envix towards the end of last summer. Lucy was dating him.

“Can you walk with us instead?” asked Rohan. “Hey, baby, I’d really love to get that present as soon as possible – I think I know what it is – but I’d get fired if Venin saw me leaving my mission, and he’s here, too, with James. Can we maybe walk and talk with your cousin and his friends, and skedaddle after they head back to the castle?”

“All right, I won’t make you ditch,” said Lucy. “You’re so dedicated, Ro.”

Albus sidled up next to Lucy after Rohan ran to catch up with his other three friends, who had already started walking. He and his cousin walked just behind the others. “Hey,” he said. “I never really heard why you dumped Kat?”

“Oh, he was boring and tedious,” she said. “Rohan is fun and bombastic… and massively hung,” she added under her breath.

“And massively what?”

“Never you mind,” she said. “Besides, Kat and I still have benefits, I’m just not his girlfriend anymore.”

“Benefits?”

“We get intimate,” said Lucy.

“I thought that’s what boyfriends and girlfriends were for,” said Albus. “Getting intimate? Like… snogging and stuff? Does Rohan know about this?”

Lucy stifled a laugh. “Yes, of course he knows, I wouldn’t hide that from him,” she said. “And emotional intimacy is more of the kind for boyfriends and girlfriends. Physical intimacy is all in good fun. People are constantly misled with the illusion of dedication… Commitment was never truly a reality.”

“I don’t understand,” said Albus.

“You will, eventually,” sighed Lucy. “I have needs, and Rohan’s not always around. I love him, and right now I’d probably marry him, but I have to admit to myself, I’m only seventeen. I won’t waste my best years just because the alternative is opposed by a mess of outdated societal norms.”

Albus didn’t know how to feel about this, so he just shut his mouth and continued walking. Lucy sped up to catch all the way up to Rohan, and squeezed his bottom; he squeezed hers back, and then they kissed and kept walking. Albus was a little nervous about how distracted Rohan was, but then again, he didn’t really expect anything to happen while he was only in Hogsmeade. His father had been talking about how security around Hogsmeade had been stepped up, since it was so close to the school.

“Hey!” he said suddenly, waving across the way.

Janelle was on the other side of the street, walking in the opposite direction and looking around.
She was accompanied by her sister Donna, Caspar Engodska, and Rona Kendrace, the three Triwizard Champions of last year, who had apparently become friends after the tournament.

Janelle turned when she heard Albus’s shout, and lit up like a Patronus.

“What’s the first sentence I said to you?” shouted Albus across the street, following his father’s instructions and using a security question to make sure it was her.

Janelle scratched the back of her head, then pointed at him and said, “I believe it was, ‘Er,’ if I am not mistaken.”

Then she bolted across the street and nearly bowled him over with a hug the force of a raging Erumpent. She pushed her body up against his, and planted quick neat kisses on both of his cheeks and then one on his lips.

“It is under a week until Christmas,” said Janelle. “So I got you this!”

She held out a little box for him.

Albus’s heart began to race. He hadn’t gotten her anything for Christmas – how had he forgotten?

“You didn’t have to get me anything,” said Janelle quickly, reading his eyes. “This is not very much, either,” she added, shaking the box. “Just a very little present from me to you.”

“Oh,” said Albus quietly, taking the package.

“I didn’t intend for it to make you feel bad,” said Janelle.

“No, no – I’ll mail you something,” said Albus.

Janelle smiled; Albus gave her another kiss before unwrapping her present.

“A snowball?” asked Albus, looking into the box, which housed a fist-sized white ball.

“An enchanted snowball,” said Janelle. “It does not melt, firstly. And secondly, after you throw it, if you yell ‘Back,’ it will put itself together and roll itself back to you! It is supposed to last for two hundred throws. It will be quite a surprise to your friends in a snowball fight!” She hugged him again. “I was hoping it would be snowing when I visited… I do not see the snow very often. But it is so cold… might it snow today?”

“Actually, this is unseasonably mild for Hogwarts,” said Albus. “Everybody’s been talking about it. It’s too warm to snow.”

“Too warm to snow?” Janelle scoffed playfully, shivering under her light cloak. “It is horrible out here!”

“Here, let’s stop in the Three Broomsticks,” said Albus, directing her towards the inn. “I know something that will warm you right up.”

“Oh, this is the place you mentioned in your letter!” said Janelle. “With the butterbeer, right?”

“Right,” said Albus. “You’re going to love it!”

They stepped inside the Three Broomsticks. Rona, Donna, and Caspar had broken off of the group; Caspar went looking for Louis, and Rona and Donna had broken off to go shopping. Lucy and Rohan followed them in; Lucy looked a little peeved that she had to follow the lowly fourth years
around Hogsmeade, but she put up with it for Rohan. She was, however, taking great enjoyment in
watching Albus and Janelle interact.

“Five butterbeers, please,” said Albus, collecting the money from Aidan, Alec, and Exo.

“Make that six,” said Rose, jogging over to them. She placed her share of coins on the table as well. “I want to meet Janelle more officially if she’s dating my cousin.”

She was followed by an Auror Albus didn’t recognize; apparently Uncle Ron wanted to make sure his children were safe as well. He was almost as big of a target as the Potter family; after all, he was (to use his own words) “extremely famous.”

“Hi,” said Janelle pleasantly, extending a hand. “Janelle Lombard. And you are?”

“Rose Weasley,” said Rose, shaking the hand. “Albus’s cousin.”

Janelle then tried to hand Albus a few coins for the butterbeer, but he shook his head. “No, I got this,” he said. “Part one of your Christmas present.”

Six foaming glasses made their way to the friends’ table. Mia wandered over to sit with them a little while later and they shared Alec’s mug.

The conversation for some time after the mugs arrived was comprised mainly of noises indicating they were enjoying their butterbeer very much. After a few sips, Albus looked to Janelle, who was staring into her drink and swirling it around with interest.

“How is it?” he asked eagerly.

“It is all right,” she said, earning her an incredulous gape from Alec. “It certainly does warm one up quite well, I will admit!”

“Well… that’s good,” said Albus, amazed that she wasn’t fawning over the drink like everyone else he’d ever met.

“Hey, Janelle,” asked Alec. “Where is France?”

“Where?” she asked, slightly offended. “What do you mean?”

“Where is it, in relation to us now?”

“A-Across the English Channel,” she said, frowning. “Northeast of Spain-”

“Are you sure it’s not on a different planet?” asked Alec.

Janelle recoiled slightly. “Do I look like an alien?”

“If you don’t love butterbeer more than life itself, you’re clearly not from Earth,” responded Alec.

Janelle laughed her signature laugh: she let her head fall facing the floor and she giggled with a closed smile. Albus loved it when she smiled.

Suddenly, there were two loud explosions at the other end of the room.

In under a second, Rohan and the unfamiliar Auror had already pulled out their wands and extinguished the fire, and were looking for a perpetrator. Albus stared across the room and squeezed Janelle’s hand under the table, taking out his wand with his other hand. He gripped it
tightly, waiting for something else to happen.

“Finish your drinks, kids,” said Rohan, glancing back for a moment. “I’m going to judge it dangerous to stay here.”

Albus reached for his butterbeer, but he only grasped air. He looked back at the table, and Janelle was looking puzzled, too. Their butterbeers were gone.

Looking over towards the exit, Albus saw Red Pierce and Asher Pierce leaving the inn, clanking together two glasses of butterbeer with crafty grins on their faces.

Albus ground his teeth together as Janelle looked at him curiously. “Are you okay?” she asked. “And where did our drinks go?”

“The Pierces,” said Albus. “They’re a bunch of pureblood-crazy gits. I really can’t stand them. I think they just stole our butterbeers.”

“Seriously?” asked Exo. “What’s wrong with them?”

“Who are the Pierces?” asked Janelle.

“They’re the classic anti-all-things-Muggle pureblood family,” said Rose.

“That was Red Pierce and Asher Pierce,” said Albus. “Their father Algam was murdered by an insane Muggle man in King’s Cross. I would have felt bad for them, but they’ve gotten even worse as a result, I think. And their mother murdered the man who did it, and she did it with a lot of Dark magic.”

“Ooh,” said Janelle, shivering. “My uncle was killed with Dark magic when I was twelve. My aunt insisted that the funeral should be open casket, so that people could see what had happened to him and hopefully prevent people from turning to Dark magic. It was horrible. Absolutely horrible, what had happened to his body.”

“I’m sorry,” said Albus. “Was your uncle killed in action – was it his job?”

“Yes, he was a Lumineur,” said Janelle. “Like your Aurors.”

Albus couldn’t imagine Uncle Ron dying in action. It would probably scar him forever if that occurred.

“Come on, then,” said Albus. “Let’s go see the Shrieking Shack. You’ve got to see that while you’re here.”

Janelle glanced back at the Aurors, who were still cautiously eyeing the area where the explosion had happened. “Does this happen very much to your family?”

“No always,” sighed Albus. “Sometimes we’re kidnapped and tortured instead.”

After Albus had shown Janelle as much as he could of Hogsmeade, Donna arrived to escort her sister back. Janelle kissed him and then told him she could come and visit for Valentine’s Day as well. Albus agreed without a moment’s pause, and already was beginning to form ideas about where he could take her. Madam Puddifoot’s might be a good idea…

He looked up the date of the next Hogsmeade visit and wrote it to Janelle. On Monday morning at breakfast, he received a short response from Buteau:
Albus,

I can certainly come to Hogwarts on the Saturday thirteenth of February. I can’t wait to see you again!

Missing you dearly,

Janelle

Albus grabbed out another piece of parchment and began penning her another response; after Janelle had left, he had run down to Weir’s Curiosities on the main street of Hogsmeade and picked her up a dozen Curio Coins. They were the main product of the shop; the company distributed them as a kind of currency. Weir’s Curiosities was also a gaming center, and winning games got you more Coins. Albus knew Janelle had a taste for magical luxury, as she’d grown up in a household where her parents could not cast spells, so he figured she would appreciate this gift: Anywhere in the world, a person could flip a Curio Coin in the air and request a service, such as a frozen treat, an article of clothing, or even a short massage, and the coin would disappear and fulfill your wishes in some way. It could transport an ice cream bar to your hand, zap a cute new outfit onto you, or manifest a pair of hands from thin air to rub away your aches and pains.

As he finished penning the response, Rose, sitting next to him, passed over the day’s Daily Prophet. She and Exo were among the few fourth year Gryffindors who had stayed for the Christmas holidays. In fact, the three Gryffindors, Alec, and Mia were the only students in their year who had remained. Nobody wanted to stay in the castle with all that was going on around it. It just didn’t feel as safe anymore.

“Hey,” she said. “Read this. You might be interested.”

Albus took the paper; Exo leaned across the table to read it upside-down. Rose was pointing to a smaller story tucked into the corner. Alec leaned over from the Ravenclaw table, and he read the story over Albus’s shoulder.

**HOGSMEADE MAN ESCAPES FROM LOCAL PRISON**

Elbad Swait, 46, of Hogsmeade’s Bait-‘n’-Switchblade Hunting Lodge, escaped from low-security prison Sunday morning.

Swait was found guilty for the possession of minor illegal weapons. At the time of his escape, he was being held in the Crouch Correctional Facility.

“At the time of his escape, he wasn’t being held anywhere,” said Alec, laughing. “At the time of his escape, he was just outside the Crouch Correctional Facility.”

“Why name a jail after the man who assisted one of the most infamous and disastrous jailbreaks of all time?” asked Albus. “That’s just asking for jailbreaks.”

“Careful,” said Alec. “Mr. Crouch is lurking around the Forbidden Forest with a bloodlust… You don’t want him to hear you insulting him.”

Swait was found guilty for the possession of minor illegal weapons. At the time of his escape, he was being held in the Crouch Correctional Facility. He was receiving a visitor for Christmas, a brother by the name of Rudolph Swait, when he made an escape unnoticed by staff until head counts that afternoon. Rudolph Swait is believed to be an accomplice.

If anyone has seen either of these two men or has any other information, send an owl to:
Albus put down the newspaper. “That’s the guy who accused me of stealing his knife.”

“My dad has that knife now, right?” asked Exo.

“Yes, I gave it to him,” said Albus. “He said he’d see it returned, but Swait was in prison and it might have been illegal anyway – he seemed really upset that it was lost, and wanted to find it ‘before someone else found it.’ I guess Wilcox still has it.”

“Unless it got confiscated as evidence or something,” said Exo. “But I guess nobody but us knows he has it.”

“There’s another interesting bit,” said Rose, turning the *Prophet* to the previous page.

**AURORS TO BE STATIONED AT HOGWARTS**

In a move considered by many to be “unsurprising” and “a predictable pander,” the Auror Office has opted to station three Aurors on the grounds of Hogwarts as a security guard at all times. This order goes into effect for the coming school term.

Gerald Stenet, Head of the Auror Office, says of this new development: “Safety is the goal in every action we ever take and in every plan for every action we ever make. We will ensure the safety of our youth at any cost.”

Aurors Alana Falagair, Rohan Otica, and Clayton Slater have volunteered for the positions. Their duties involve no more than being stationed at Hogwarts in case of an emergency and accompanying students to Hogsmeade village to watch for trouble there as well. Professor Helio Wilcox, Headmaster of Hogwarts, has made a heavy push for this extra security in recent months, and his wish has been granted.

Some members of the community believe the extra manpower to be a gratuitous expense, as many of the teachers of Hogwarts are also skilled in combat, but most Aurors, the most outspoken of whom are those who have volunteered for the job, disagree.

“Of course it’s a good idea,” said Clayton Slater, age twenty-eight. “A lot of people have deemed the extra guard to be unnecessary, or have accused my fellow volunteers and I of being too young and inexperienced. But I believe that no amount of protection is too much, and I also believe that it is the more recent graduates of Hogwarts who best remember how to navigate the school, and who are fresh out of training with all the tactics still in our heads. We still have our fast reflexes and our full physique, and I am a strong supporter of the well-known doctrine of ‘better safe than sorry.’ Playing with the lives of hundreds of our youth, I prefer to be safe, thank you very much.”

“Helio Wilcox hasn’t made a misstep yet as Headmaster,” said Alana Falagair, age thirty-four. “And I think this is another good move. It doesn’t matter to us if the public thinks they’re being played. We don’t care if the general opinion is that we’re trying to make people think their kids are safe, because the point is that they will be safe; the point is that we are caring for them, and we will be there when we are needed. Let people think what they’re going to think, but let the Aurors do what they need to do to protect your children. That’s all we ask. Yes, our resources are being used wisely.”

“I would love to return to Hogwarts,” said Rohan Otica, age twenty-three. “It’s where I spent my best years. I won’t be sitting around all day doing nothing; I will be conversing with old friends, both teachers and some students whom I knew when I was a Ravenclaw Beater. We’ll make our presence known in the school, and not only will everyone be safer, but they will also feel safer, knowing that we are stationed in the castle indefinitely until the impending threats are abated.
“People have the right to feel safe in their own school.”

“Yeah,” said Albus. “I’ll bet Rohan wants to come back. His girlfriend is here.”

He was a little creeped out by the age difference – Lucy was seventeen and Rohan was twenty-three – but Lucy seemed very cavalier about most things involving relationships. Regardless, they did seem to be very happy together, so who was he to judge?

“I’m really relieved there’s going to be more security,” said Exo. “The general state of things just seems unstable, and it doesn’t give me much peace of mind that now even the environment is threatening us.”

“My mom hates Alana Falagair,” said Albus. “I’m not really sure why. I mean, Alana seems kind of ditzy sometimes, but… she really does seem to work hard at her job.”

“Oh, and according to the weather page,” said Rose, “Hogwarts just finished up with the warmest autumn season it’s ever experienced. But with the winter solstice upon us, suddenly it’s freezing. Anyone else find that really interesting?”

“Is it gonna snow?” asked Alec. “I want a snowball fight, but there has to be snow first.”

“It’s probably going to snow today, actually,” replied Rose.

Albus rolled up his letter and handed it to Buteau along with the package containing his Curio Coins for Janelle. “I’m going to show Buteau up to the Owlery, where he can take a quick rest before flying all the way back to France,” he said. “Especially if it’s going to snow.”

He walked with Buteau to the Owlery. As he walked, he passed Nearly Headless Nick, who was scanning the portraits along the walls.

“Evening, Nick,” he said. “I don’t suppose you’ve found Litinia yet…”

“We haven’t had a whisper of her whereabouts,” said Nick. “I’m a sight worried. Of course, she could just be visiting a portrait of herself in a different location… but I don’t know of any other portraits that have been painted of her. Perhaps I’m wrong.”

“If she’s run away to a different portrait, is there any way to know? Or do we just have to wait until she gets back?”

“We just have to wait, I’m afraid,” said Nick. “We could always station someone inside her portrait to listen. If she’s in another portrait of herself, anyone inside her portrait can sometimes hear her talking faintly, like she’s in the distance, even though we can’t follow her… so we might be able to confirm whether she’s hiding outside the castle. But the problem with this strategy is that we don’t want to scare her away if she tries to come back, so we don’t want to post a sentry in her portrait.”

“Let me know if you get any new information on where she might be,” said Albus.

“Will do, Albus.”

Albus climbed all the way up to the Owlery and found Buteau a nice perch next to Thoebl, James’s owl.

“Just leave whenever you’re ready to fly,” said Albus. “If the weather’s good.”

Buteau affectionately rubbed his beak against Albus’s shoulder and then jumped into a large
birdhouse, huddling with the other birds for heat.

It was freezing in here, since the Owlery was open to the outside air. Albus looked out at the grounds. Hardly any leaves had yet to drop on the trees of the Forbidden Forest; it was probably due to the exceptionally mild fall season.

From this perch, he could see the greenhouses. One of the greenhouses had cracked badly, and there was a thick brown root sticking out a fracture towards the bottom of the structure. The root was wiggling violently – he could see that even from this height. Someone whom he assumed was Professor Longbottom was moving from greenhouse to greenhouse, checking up on the plants.

A small movement caught his eye, and he noticed that finally, on the week of Christmas, it was starting to snow. More and more flakes filled the air as the sky became increasingly gray. He stayed to watch the serene sight. It was a spattering of flakes, then it was a flurry; the wind picked up and the snow began to stick where it landed.

With a great whooshing sound, and a rumble that shook the tower on which Albus stood, every single leaf on every single tree in the Forbidden Forest suddenly cascaded to the ground at once.

Albus stared at the Forbidden Forest, which was now entirely bare where it had been vibrantly green several seconds earlier. He gaped for a moment or two, and then turned to the greenhouses to see that the root he’d been observing had fully retracted back into its habitat. Professor Longbottom was standing outside scratching his head in confusion.

Was this the mulunctapoli, too?

Because it really seems like something much more powerful, he thought, biting his lower lip in apprehension.

Then, out of the blue, he started to laugh.

His head began pounding and he was seized by utter jubilance, on the verge of jumping up into the air and clacking his heels together with joy. He clutched his heart, unable to stop himself from smiling, and he felt like someone was pouring hot liquid inside his brain.

If he collapsed unconscious now, like he’d done during the Sorting ceremony and after James’s prank, no one was going to find him for a long time. He had to find someone, and fast.

He descended to the seventh floor of the castle, cackling madly to himself, and once he left the stairs, he sprinted as fast as possible towards Wilcox’s office. He was so addled that he was unable to even slow down and he ran full force into the gargoyle that guarded the entrance to the Headmaster’s office, almost budging it.

“Whoa, there!” yelled the statue. “Calm down, ya little buck! You get through here with a password, not a full-body tackle!”

“P-Po–” Albus started, but he dissolved into laughter and was unable to complete the three-syllable password.

“I didn’t think I was that funny,” remarked the statue.

Within the minute, Wilcox had climbed up the stairs; he saw Albus at the entrance to his office and waved. “Hello, Albus,” he said cheerfully. “Forgotten the password, have we?”

His broad smile was wiped away when he saw Albus turn to look at him, laughing like a madman
but with bulging eyes that dictated he was out of control.

His entire body abruptly twitched, and his head felt like someone had landed an intense blow on the back of his skull. He lurched forward, feeling suddenly nauseous, and his manic glee morphed into panic.

“P-Professor,” he sputtered before slamming face-down on the stone floor and blacking out.
“Good morning, Albus,” said Madam Birchbaum’s voice. “Your early Christmas present was a nice night’s stay in the hospital wing.”

Albus rubbed his eyes as he slowly woke. Gimmick was laying on top of him again, as he usually did when Albus was in the hospital wing. “What happened?”

“Professor Wilcox said he was lucky to run across you when he brought you down here unconscious, and asked to be notified the second you woke up,” she replied, folding up a paper airplane. “You’ve been unconscious all night, but that was partially our fault.” She waved her wand and sent the paper airplane on its way, presumably to Wilcox. “You see, we kept you sedated for a little while to let your mind rest. Dreamless sleep does wonders for a brain that just needs to relax. Now we get to the hard part.”

“The hard part?”

“Preventing this from happening again,” said Madam Birchbaum. “Professor Wilcox will explain. He will also help with the preventative training. Don’t be nervous; it’s not going to be painful, just a little difficult. Basic Occlumency.”

“Oh,” said Albus. “That’s good. I’ve been wanting to learn Occlumency.”

“It will be quite basic,” said Madam Birchbaum. “Just enough to help you throw off the hold of these random emotions and visions that seize you. If you want more advanced practice, you should probably ask your father for tutelage over the summer.”

“I think I will,” said Albus.

“I would deem that prudent. As of now, you’re not in any danger – well, I mean, you’re always in danger, being a Potter – but not from your own mind. In the future, however, that could change, and you ought to exercise caution.”

Wilcox rushed into the room, clutching the crumpled paper airplane.

“Goodness, that was fast,” said Madam Birchbaum, turning to greet Wilcox. “He’s not going anywhere, you know.”

“I know, but I wanted to make sure he was okay,” said Wilcox. “Hello, Albus. Have a good night’s rest?”

“I wouldn’t know, Professor,” said Albus honestly. “I wasn’t conscious.”

“But are you well-rested?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good,” said Wilcox. “You will need to be. Have you talked with Madam Birchbaum very much yet about what happened?”

“She told me a little bit about what happened to me,” said Albus.

“That’s all well, then. I’d like you to describe what you think happened. Cynthia…”
“Yes, I’ll stay and see if I can give any further diagnosis,” said Madam Birchbaum. “But don’t expect anything. I’m not a psychologist.”

“Maybe we should get Dr. Varnisse up here,” suggested Albus. He liked her very much and had been hoping he would see her again soon.

“That,” said Wilcox, “is an excellent idea. I know her fairly well and she is marvelous at her job. If anyone can help you, she can… Should I call her up and wait until she’s here before I begin?”

“No, I think we can get started,” said Albus. “I wouldn’t want this to happen again and ruin my Christmas…”

“Well, the training is going to stretch throughout the entire Christmas holidays, unfortunately,” said Wilcox. “Even two weeks isn’t really enough, but if we work hard, it could prove to be enough of a window through which we can squeeze enough basic Occlumency to allow you to refute these foreign influences on your mind. I’ll personally see to your success.”

Albus smiled. “That’s kind of you, Professor, but you have a lot to worry about right now…”

“I’m actually going to be under a lot less stress for a satisfactory period of time, thank goodness,” said Wilcox, audibly relieved.

Because the Forbidden Forest and the greenhouses suddenly went quiet? wondered Albus, though he kept this theory to himself.

“We’ll start after lunch today,” said Wilcox. “Do you feel well enough to bring yourself to the Great Hall for breakfast?”

“Yes, absolutely,” said Albus, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. Gimmick jumped down and alternated staring at Albus and Wilcox.

“Then find your way up to my office at around one o’clock,” said Wilcox. “We’ll get going on those Occlumency lessons as soon as we can. We don’t want this happening again, now, do we?”

“Oh, of course I love it,” quipped Albus. “Collapsing in the hallway is great fun.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it,” said Wilcox. “One o’clock, my office. Occlumency.”

“Got it,” said Albus, and he followed Wilcox out of the hospital wing and to the Great Hall, where breakfast was just being served. Only a couple of people were already downstairs – Exo was one of them. Albus took a seat next to him.

“What happened?” asked Exo tentatively. “I heard that you fainted.”

“It wasn’t really fainting,” protested Albus. “It was more of blacking out.”

“So you did go unconscious, then?”

“Yeah,” said Albus. “I started hysterically laughing and couldn’t stop. I went to try and find your dad, but thankfully, he found me first, right as I was hitting the floor.”

“Well, the rest of the school was nowhere near as relaxed as you were, comatose in the hospital wing,” said Exo. “Mia was freaking out; apparently she’s confident she saw a Fokii near the castle while she was out having a snowball fight with Alec.”

“Really?”
“Everyone thinks she hallucinated it,” said Exo. “Or at least, didn’t really see what she thought she saw. But she’s pretty convinced.”

Albus knew how it felt to be certain about a thought and to be totally dismissed.

“I’ll believe her, if no one else does,” said Albus. “Long as it wasn’t James this time.”

“No, I think James has learned his lesson,” yelled James from down the table before returning to his own conversation with Barry.

“So, did you fix the problem with your head?” asked Rose. “What did Madam Birchbaum do?”

“She didn’t do that much,” said Albus. “I don’t think there’s much that can be done, except what Exo’s dad offered to do. He’s going to teach me Occlumency.”

“Occlumency?” asked Alec. “Hey, can I come for the lessons? Then you won’t be able to read my mind anymore like you did to Desulgon first year.”

“Oh, yeah,” said Albus, taking out his silver lime wand and examining it thoroughly. “That hasn’t happened in a while.”

“Which is why I want to learn how to fight you off, because you’re due for another one soon,” joked Alec.

“Oh, and Dr. Varnisse might be coming up to the castle to see me soon,” said Albus.

“Oh, good!” said Exo. “You’re not having me on?”

“No. Have you been wanting to see her?”

“I always want to see her. She does wonders whenever I’m feeling down.”

“Are you feeling down?” asked Albus with concern.

Exo shrugged. “I’m not exactly, er, jumping for joy… But I’m not depressed, either… I don’t know, she just always helps, even when I don’t know I need help.”

“It’s good to have someone like that,” said Albus.

“Oh, and Albus,” said Rose. “Did you happen to notice how all the trees dropped all their leaves at pretty much exactly the same time?”

“Yeah,” said Albus. “Right after it started snowing. That was weird.”

There was silence at their table as they all recalled the ominous event.

“I can’t wait for the Christmas feast,” commented Alec, oblivious to the tension as usual.

Albus finished eating, and then enjoyed a few one-sided games of Wizard’s Chess with Alec. Alec couldn’t concentrate on more than one thing for more than a few seconds at a time, so he made a lot of novice mistakes.

“As fun as this has been,” said Albus, placing Alec into a checkmate after only seven moves, “I have to get to Wilcox’s office so I can learn Occlumency.”

“I’ll come with you,” said Alec, jumping up.
Albus shrugged. “I guess you can ask him if he’ll teach you, too.”

“That’s my plan,” said Alec, walking up. “What else have I got to do all through our Christmas holidays? Snog Mia, I guess, but besides that, seeing as we did that for an hour yesterday…”

Albus felt a little pang of jealousy that Janelle wasn’t around as much as Mia. If she were, he’d be snogging her for an hour too…

Memories of his kisses with Janelle floated to the front of his mind, and he shook them away – not because they were unpleasant (they were some of his best memories and what he often used to form a Patronus), but because Wilcox was going to be invading his mind in a short while, and he didn’t really want anyone intruding on that memory. It was very private.

He and Alec ascended the spiral staircase past the gargoyle and knocked on Wilcox’s door. Wilcox answered with a happy smile, but gave Alec an odd look when he noticed his second visitor.

“Can I join in on Occlumency lessons, Professor?” asked Alec.

Wilcox sighed. “Alec, my boy, I apologize, but these lessons for Albus are more out of a necessity than a Christmas present.”

Alec frowned, already annoyed.

“I’m going to be expending a lot of effort just to teach Albus,” said Wilcox. “It’ll take twice as much effort to teach someone else as well, and I’ve got a lot on my plate…”

“You won’t teach me because you’re too busy eating?” sputtered Alec.

Wilcox staggered backwards. “Excuse me?” he coughed. “I have things to deal with besides eating, too!”

“You said you had a lot on your plate,” said Alec.

Wilcox shook his head. “I really need to remember not to use metaphors around you.”

“You’re a shape-shifter?” gasped Alec.

“Metaphors, not metamorphs,” corrected Albus.

Wilcox laughed. “My apologies again, Alec, but unless you’re also having visions of strange green women, I’m going to have to request that you either wait patiently while Albus is having his lessons, or head back to your dormitory now…”

“Wait, sir, but I am having visions of green people,” said Alec, holding up a hand.

Wilcox stared him down. “Excuse me?”

“I am, and it’s torturing me,” said Alec. “I have a headache, Professor. Such a headache.” He started rubbing his head and sniffling.

It was obvious that Alec was lying, but it was still fun to try and see him convince Wilcox.

Wilcox walked right up to Alec and looked down into his face, and suddenly Alec’s eyes went unfocused. For a brief moment he teetered off-balance, and when he finally gained his footing again and his eyes locked back in place, Wilcox stepped back.
“Liar,” said Wilcox, grinning.

“Hey, wait, you read my mind before I could get ready!” pouted Alec. “That’s cheating!”

“No, that’s your first lesson,” said Wilcox. “You should know that you won’t always be ready when someone reads your mind. And they won’t be as kind as I am, either – I purposefully avoided looking at any memories. I respected your privacy and only focused on whether you were being truthful. Albus won’t be so lucky, unfortunately for him – in order to get a good lesson, I’ll have to try to penetrate his memories.” He nodded. “Have a good day, Alec.”

Simmering, Alec stormed out of the room.

“He is a rather gifted student, if a little lazy,” said Wilcox, “if I’m hearing correctly from Professor Desulgon. It’s too bad I don’t have the time to train both of you – I would have loved to do so.”

“Maybe Alec can learn it at home,” said Albus. “Why doesn’t Hogwarts offer a course in mind magic, anyway?”

“Difficulty of the course, along with privacy issues,” said Wilcox. “Not every parent wants their child forcibly subjected to a mind-reading. It can also hurt a fragile mind.”

“It won’t hurt me, will it?”

“You should be fine, as long as you learn fast,” said Wilcox, taking out his wand. He directed it at Albus’s head. “Shall we begin?”

Albus blinked rapidly. “Wait, wait, I’m not ready–”

“I’ve already given you far too much warning for this to be a practical example,” said Wilcox, lowering his wand, “but I guess it’s better to start easy. Anyway, let me explain. This is what I think is the most effective way to learn Occlumency. It’s how I learned it. Listen: Right now, I actually don’t want you to fight back against my probing.”

“You don’t?” asked Albus, confused.

“No,” said Wilcox. “Instead, I want you to pay close attention to what you’re feeling. You will be immersed very deeply into your memories. You won’t just be remembering – you’ll almost be reliving them. It’ll take a lot of effort for you to even recall that the spell is being used on you. Whereas for me, it’s like I’m inside a Pensieve containing your scattered memories. Those memories are only connected as strongly as the caster can control you with the spell. I can force you to remember what I want you to remember, if I’m utilizing Legilimency with the proper intentions. I’m not going to do that now – I’m just going to take a back seat and let your memories play by me like a movie out of its intended order. This first time you experience the spell… try to find me.”

“Try and find you?”

“You’ll understand what I mean once we’re in,” said Wilcox. “So. Are you ready?”

Albus shrugged. “According to you, I shouldn’t be…”

“Right you are,” said Wilcox. “Then, Legilimens!”

“That’s cheating,” laughed Albus, taking Alec’s queen back off the chess board.
“It’s only cheating because you noticed,” said Alec, moving his bishop. “Checkmate, by the way.”

Albus stared at the board.

“What?” he said.

“I’m no ordinary cheater,” said Alec, holding up one of Albus’s knights. “You were too distracted by my queen’s reappearance to notice the disappearance of one of your knights.”

“And he moved a pawn, too,” shouted Albus’s king-side castle.

“I had to sit on the knight to shut it up,” said Alec. “I’m surprised you didn’t notice.”

“I’m surprised, too,” said Albus.

“What’s a bask-a-ball?” asked Roxanne.

Albus looked around. Uncle Ron’s house was to his left; Freddie and Roxanne were to his right, staring at a deflated ball that had drifted down the stream into Frost Pond from a nearby Muggle home.

His brow wrinkled. Something was wrong…

“What do you think of Slade?” whispered James. “Isn’t he creepy?”

Albus glanced back at James. They were alone in James’s room, but James was even younger than Albus right now.

“Wasn’t I just playing chess?” asked Albus aloud. “And then at the beach?”

“Yeah, he does kinda remind me of a spider, too, now that you mention it,” said James, chuckling.

“I didn’t say anything about a spider,” said Albus.

“Muggles say that glass is actually moving like a really thick liquid,” said Rose. “It’s always moving, just so slowly that we could never see it.”

“Where’s James?” asked Albus, looking around King’s Cross.

“My dad made me miss class again,” grumbled Exo.

“Your… dad?” asked Albus. He glanced around. “Where’s your dad, Exo?”

He scanned the ceiling, which suddenly morphed into his house’s ceiling again. His mother was in the other room with a couple of her friends from the Holyhead Harpies Quidditch team. Albus fought to keep his thoughts intact.

“Professor Wilcox?” shouted Albus.

He whirled around and looked up at the staircase across the room. His Headmaster was sitting on the stairs, looking down at him.

“That was fast,” said Wilcox.

Albus suddenly found himself breathing against the stone floor.

Wilcox lowered his wand. They were back in the Headmaster’s office. Technically, they’d never
left, but it felt for all the world like they had Apparated into Albus’s memories.

“You pulled it off quickly,” said Wilcox. “It’s annoying to feel someone poking around in your head, probing through your thoughts, especially when it’s a presence you subconsciously know is a big problem. But with training, you can learn to locate the disturbance. You seem to have a knack for it already – you were looking for me for a while, but then you suddenly turned and looked straight at me without even knowing where I was beforehand. I have to commend you for that. It took me almost an hour and a half to fight off my first intruder.”

“Wow,” said Albus, laughing. “And how long was that? Thirty seconds?”

“Fifty-three minutes,” said Wilcox.

Albus stared. “You’re joking.”

“Honestly, I’m not,” said Wilcox.

“Afraid he’s serious, lad,” piped Armando Dippet from his portrait.

Albus suddenly became aware that he was extremely exhausted.

“It’s difficult to perceive time when you’re not in control of your memories,” said Wilcox. “When your brain is reconstructing different parts of your life, and your consciousness comes in short disconnected bursts, you can’t put together accurately how long it’s been going on, since you can’t remember what came right before any given point. Unless, of course, you train yourself. Which is what we are doing now. Ready for another go?”

“I’m… bushed,” said Albus. “Can we take a break?”

“I’m sorry, but no,” said Wilcox. “We don’t have much time to do this. Trust me, the fatigue is fleeting, and it won’t affect your performance unless we really push you. You’ll only feel it once we’re back out of your mind. You can rest here for a while after our lesson if you want; we can have a chat.”

Albus concentrated as Wilcox raised his wand again. He shut his eyes tightly.

“Legilimens!”

Albus focused his mind as hard as he could on what he was doing.

“Did you do it?” he asked, opening his eyes.

He was standing in the hidden passage under the dungeons. The Fokii was standing there, holding its plant and knife, staring him down with menace.

He watched himself lift his wands and Disarm the creature, and then send a Stunner at it, but he still was fully aware that this was a memory. The feeling was very odd. He centered himself again, and he turned around.

“Well, well, well,” said Wilcox, who was standing at the edge of the hallway on the other end of the narrow corridor.

As the roaring started to shake the school again, Albus felt as though the floor had been dropped under him, and he crashed back into Wilcox’s office, but this time, he was still standing.

“Now, that,” said Wilcox, “was thirty seconds.”
“Really?” asked Albus, hopping with excitement.

“My second time took six minutes,” said Wilcox. “It’s not uncommon for the time to drastically decrease… but it is uncommon for the time to decrease that much.”

Albus collapsed into the nearest chair and stared up at the ceiling with a smile.

“Albus, I am continually impressed by how gifted a student you are,” said Wilcox. “Tomorrow we’ll have another go, and if you’re still able to fight me off in under a minute, we can get to the tricky part. I’ll start trying to extract specific memories from your head, and we’ll have a little tug-of-war.”

“Sounds good,” said Albus, still smiling.

The memory of the Fokii, though, wasn’t leaving him alone. Now that it had surfaced once, it kept resurfacing.

“I can’t get my mind off of the Fokii,” said Albus.

“That can happen,” said Wilcox. “Once a thought comes back up, it can begin to plague you. But that’s what memories do… That happens all the time naturally.”

“Professor, are you worried about the Fokii?” asked Albus.

Wilcox breathed very deeply.

“They’re a problem,” said Wilcox. “But we have the means to destroy them now. Professor Longbottom has been growing moly. Moly is a beautiful little white flower with a black stem. It houses powerful protective abilities against Dark sorcery. Its pollen can be used to poison a Fokii, and kill it with a high enough dose.”

“But it’s growing slower than usual,” said Albus. “Isn’t it?”

Wilcox smiled. “Now, how do you know that?”

“Professor Ramanu has been evaluating the growth in the greenhouses,” said Albus, hoping he didn’t just incriminate his Arithmancy teacher. Hopefully Wilcox wasn’t as tentative as Professor Longbottom to let students know this information.

“You certainly know how to utilize your resources,” said Wilcox. “Yes, it’s growing a little slower than usual, but that’s to be expected. The mununctapoli can control the growth of plants, as you’ve probably noticed in the greenhouses already. They like having a lot of vegetation around. But they also like having Fokii around – so they don’t like having Moly around, because it repels the Fokii. The Fokii protect the mununctapoli by attacking anything that comes into their areas of the forest, so the mununctapoli like having them around, and that’s why they carry the Fokii Fungus with them.”

“But Professor, you didn’t answer my question,” said Albus.

A snort of contempt came from the direction of Phineas Nigellus Black’s portrait. “How very rude,” he scoffed.

“No, he’s right,” said Wilcox. “I avoided his question deftly. Gee, I should be a politician. But he noticed, so it’s only fair I answer. I’m definitely worried.”
“You are?” said Albus. If Wilcox was worried, the situation was very bad.

“Well, it would be absurd to be perfectly content,” said Wilcox. “I mean, considering what’s buried out in the Forbidden Forest? Acromantulas, for one…”

“Oh,” said Albus, suddenly remembering his father’s stories about Hagrid’s spidery friends. “Right… Shouldn’t you go dig up Aragog and move him or something, so he doesn’t get… zombified?”

“Oh, we tried,” said Wilcox. “But he wasn’t there when we dug up his grave.”

Albus blanched.

“Yes, as soon as we confirmed the return of Fokii, and realized what it meant for us here, we tried to move everything that we knew was buried in or around the forest. We brainstormed what might be here. Absolutely, there would be forest trolls and the like, and there’s no way we would be able to find all the troll corpses to protect them from the Fokii Fungus… Thestrals… Werewolves, though not the kind that would infect anyone with a bite, thankfully… There’s no way a Dark Fungus could affect a unicorn, even a deceased one, due to their natural Dark-repelling nature, so we don’t have to worry about that…”

Albus gasped.

“Professor Wilcox!” he choked. “Professor Dumbledore’s body – it’s–”

“–surrounded by protective enchantments,” said Wilcox, smiling. “Don’t worry. We thought of that. Albus Dumbledore’s body isn’t getting moved, not by neither man nor beast… and certainly he’s not moving his body by himself.”

Albus breathed a sigh of relief; Dumbledore’s portrait chuckled to itself.

“The teachers of Hogwarts have also been warned that they may have to cast as many Patronuses as possible at any given moment,” said Wilcox. “That should keep any Fokii away, even an Acromantula. We should be fine. Also, I think the problem is momentarily at bay, giving us more time to prepare.”

“Why’s that?” asked Albus.

“Winter,” said Wilcox. “The mulunctapoli hibernate. So do the Fokii, since they can barely move their bodies when it’s cold outside. We finally broke out of the mild weather and into the winter, and activity in the forest dropped drastically overnight.”

“That’s good, I guess,” said Albus. “But what about when spring comes?”

Before Wilcox could answer, a burst of light struck his face; Albus turned around to see a crocodile Patronus lying on the floor of Wilcox’s office.

The crocodile opened its mouth and spoke with Professor Valon’s voice.

“Undead troll in the dungeon,” it grunted. “Thought you ought to know.”

Then the Patronus turned and sailed back down through the floor.

Wilcox and Albus glanced at each other, and then they both sprinted down out of the office and down the stairs.
“It’s winter,” said Professor Wilcox, shaking his head. “They should be inactive.”

“This one was probably already on its way to the castle,” said Professor Valon. “They don’t immediately go to sleep after one cold day. It takes a few wintry nights for them to understand they should go back to sleep.”

The dead undead Fokii troll was lying in front of the Potions classroom with an arrow through its heart. Professor Longbottom was with Professor Valon and Wilcox as Albus finally caught up with his headmaster, who had leaped the railing and dropped seven floors instead of taking the stairs.

“Moly did the trick,” said Professor Longbottom. He was standing next to two of his Patronuses, a pair of large pandas that were pawing the ground. After he looked around and seemed satisfied that there wasn’t another Fokii nearby, his Patronuses faded. “Professor Valon sent his Patronus after the creature first, but it took the addition of my two Patronuses to distract it from its walk towards the… towards the you-know-what.”

“You can say it out loud,” said Wilcox. “Albus knows about the hidden passage – he’s the one who discovered it.”

“Are you now?” asked Professor Longbottom, laughing. “You know too much for your own good.”

“Well, his interferences may have saved us more than once,” admitted Wilcox, “so I’m not going to be the one to send him away for this discussion.”

“The troll was carrying some sort of plant,” said Valon. “But it disappeared when the troll died. Red flower, just like the other one.”

“Was it carrying a knife?” asked Albus.

“Not this time,” said Professor Longbottom.

“Did you happen to see what the plant was?” asked Wilcox.

“I’d never seen that plant before,” said Professor Longbottom. “I know a lot of plants that resemble it, but none of them are Vivacents like that one. Vivacent meaning, if you take it out of the ground, it will only exist as long as a living thing is holding it.”

“Could you do some research on that for us?” asked Wilcox.

“I already have,” said Professor Longbottom. “I researched it when it was described to me. I have no idea what it is.”

“Goodness gracious,” sighed Wilcox. “But good to see that the moly is working.”

“Neville tipped an arrow with the pollen and fired it crossbow-style from his wand,” said Valon. “We’ve got to remember that one.”

“Indeed,” said Wilcox. “Anything else effective against them?”

“Stunners knocked them backwards, but didn’t actually stun them,” said Valon. “The Impediment Jinx worked like a charm, though. ...Well, it worked like a jinx, I suppose. Point is, it worked.”

“Fire should be particularly effective as well,” said Professor Westerling, coming up behind Albus. “Seeing as they’re controlled by a Dark fungus.”
Professor Desulgon followed close behind Professor Westerling. “What’d I miss?” he asked. “I mean, obviously I missed a troll… but what else?”

“Oh, good,” said Wilcox, clasping his hands together. “All the Heads of Houses. I’m going to need you all to give an announcement to all of your students when they come back: Make sure that any student who can cast a confident Patronus is ready to respond to a Fokii incident. According to most sources I’ve uncovered, it takes two hundred and fifty-six average Patronuses to rot a fully healthy Fokii to dust in under a minute. So, obviously, the more the better. We can get a task force going.” He started swatting at his face vigorously; Albus looked over to him and realized that a hoard of flies had started coming towards the Fokii corpse. “How many Patronuses can everyone here simultaneously cast?” he asked.

“Two,” said Professor Longbottom. “Took me ten years of practice to get one, and fifteen more to get a second, but apparently that was well worth it. I’ll start working towards a third; apparently more is easier once you have a second.”

“Four,” said Professor Westerling confidently, but he was the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, after all.

“One,” sighed Professor Valon.

“Eight,” said Professor Desulgon.

The other professors all raised eyebrows.

“What, you don’t believe me?” teased Professor Desulgon, extracting both of his wands. “*Expecto Patronum itero!*”

Four great white prehistoric birds burst from Professor Desulgon’s left-hand wand, followed by four from his right. The other teachers looked on, impressed; Professor Westerling looked playfully envious.

“Panda,” said Wilcox, pointing at Professor Longbottom. “Crocodile,” he said, gesturing to Professor Valon. “Spider monkey,” he said with a nod to Professor Westerling. “And apocalyptic monster bird of nightmares,” he said, finishing with a flourish towards Professor Desulgon as the eight Patronuses faded. “That makes fifteen from you – I can provide one, and that will be sixteen. But the more the merrier. Have you ever tried casting multiple Patronuses, Albus?”

“No,” said Albus, swatting a returning onslaught of flies. “Should I?”

“I guess you could if you wanted,” said Wilcox, “though even Merlin himself had to practice for nine years before he could cast multiple Patronuses. It’s not easy.”

“But wandlore is far better now than it was back then,” said Professor Desulgon.

“By the way, I know Paragost can cast two Patronuses,” offered Professor Westerling.

“What’s Professor Plinky’s Patronus?” asked Albus.

“He’s got a koala,” said Professor Westerling.

“What’s your Patronus, Professor?” asked Albus to Wilcox.

“A shark,” said Wilcox, slapping at a fly on his arm. “But let’s focus on numbers. I know your brother can cast one, correct?”
“Yeah,” said Albus. “So can Lily.”

“Really? At twelve? That’s seriously impressive.” Wilcox started counting on his fingers. “That makes twenty-one. Know anyone else who can cast a Patronus?”

“Louis can,” said Albus. “But he’s going to South Africa for most of next term. Lucy can, too. And Kat Sinclair.”

“Miriam Walker,” said Professor Westerling. “Evangeline Merra. Travis Hurst. Kana Macmillan. And Fran Gentry. Those are the seventh year Hufflepuffs that I know.”

“Okay, we’ll make a tally when everyone comes back,” said Wilcox. “I didn’t think it would be that many.”

“I told you, it’s the wandlore,” said Professor Desulgon.

“I suppose it is,” said Wilcox. “Modern wandlore is why I implemented the A.R.M. program, anyway.”

“What is with these damn flies?” growled Professor Valon, swatting something in front of his face. Albus looked over and saw another swarm of insects around the Potions master’s face. They were thickest in front of Albus, Valon, and Wilcox.

“That’s what forest trolls do,” said Wilcox. “They attract a lot of flies.”

“Even in winter?” asked Professor Desulgon.

Wilcox crinkled his nose. “That’s… an excellent point.”

“Ow!” cried Albus, slapping a hand to his arm. A spot of blood came off on his hand, even though he’d missed the fly. It had bitten him.

“Expecto Patronum!” called Professor Desulgon again.

This time, a single bird flew out from his wand. It landed on Professor Desulgon’s shoulder; in its light, all of the flies suddenly disappeared.

“Good lord,” said Professor Desulgon. “They’re Fokii flies.”

“They can animate something that tiny?” asked Albus, scratching his arm nervously. “Is this going to get… infected or anything?”

“Same chance of getting infected as any other wound,” said Professor Longbottom. “Don’t worry about it. They were just hungry.”

“Ugh,” said Albus. “At least flies can’t open the hidden door.”

“They weren’t bothering me,” said Professor Westerling.

“Me, neither,” said Professor Desulgon.

“I didn’t see any,” said Professor Longbottom.

Wilcox stroked his chin. “Maybe you repelled them for some reason without realizing it… Perhaps there’s some natural Fokii repellent? That some people possess and some people don’t?”
“I’ll see what I can come up with,” said Professor Valon. “Neville, I could use some Herbology expertise?”

“I’m your man,” said Professor Longbottom. “I’m going to recommend Moly before anything else.”

“Albus, you should head back to your dormitory,” said Wilcox. “It might not be safe out here; there could be more flies, trolls, or anything in between.”

“How did it get in here?” asked Professor Desulgon.

“The Fokii are highly intelligent,” said Professor Westerling. “It can solve problems nearly as well as humans, if not better in some cases.”

“That’s troublesome,” said Wilcox. “Off you go, Albus. Same time tomorrow.”

“All right,” mumbled Albus, turning back to the dormitories.


“I’m over here, chief,” said a voice from down the hall.

The Auror who had been guarding Rose, whom Albus had not recognized, was approaching them. Albus recognized the name from the Prophet article, though – he was Clayton Slater. Alana Falagair and Rohan Otica were behind him, also investigating the disturbance. Alana’s hair was now highlighted, rather than fully blonde or brunette.

“All right, these are our Aurors who are to be stationed at Hogwarts,” said Wilcox with a relieved smile. “They just arrived today, right before this incident – now that’s what I call some fortunate timing. You already know them, don’t you?”

“Just Alana and Rohan,” said Albus.

“Clayton Slater,” said Clay, extending a hand to shake Albus’s.

“Clay, why don’t you get acquainted with Albus by escorting him back to his dormitory,” said Wilcox.

“Sure thing, boss,” said Clay. “Come now, Albus.”

“Thank you, Clay,” said Wilcox. “Oh, and how many Patronuses can you cast at once, everyone?”

“Two,” echoed Rohan.

“Only one, I’m afraid, chief,” said Clay.

“That’s all right – one is impressive enough,” said Wilcox. “Alana?”

“One,” said Alana, turning redder than even her intensely red lipstick.

“No reason to be embarrassed about it,” said Wilcox. He continued talking as Clay escorted Albus out of the dungeons. “Okay, and who else can cast a Patronus? I know Charlie can. Ephron, too, I think? Hm…”

Albus gave Clay a once-over. The young Auror was a very average-looking man. His hair and eyes were colored like amber. He was well-toned, and his young body already had a few scars. The
most prominent was on his neck.

“If you don’t mind me asking,” said Albus, “how did you get those scars?”

“I love it when people ask me,” said Clay happily, not bothering to fake modesty. “This one,” he said, gesturing to the long slash on his neck, “was from a Dark spell cast by none other than the infamous Walden Macnair. During the late stages of the Dark Revival, he and a few other of Ingot’s supporters found a Muggle house that was suitably secluded – mine – and tried to take it by force to hide out there for a while. Trouble is, they didn’t know I was a Muggle-born wizard. I fought them off at the tender age of thirteen, in much the same way that you fought off all those Sandbloods at thirteen.”

“How’s that?”

“In Extremis,” said Clay. “They noticed I was a wizard and slashed my throat first with some sort of Dark magic. I knew right then that I had to do whatever it took to protect my family. My parents, my older brother and my younger brother were all in danger. I had to fight off the intruders as long as I was still breathing, and maybe it would be enough to give them time to escape or call for help. And I fought until what would have been my second-to-last breath if Obydin Auchland hadn’t stumbled upon us.”

Albus recalled that Auchland had earned his position as Head Auror due to a swing in popularity right after he had the fortune of stumbling upon a large group of Ingot’s henchmen right before Ingot was deposed.

“Auchland and Chinch by themselves took out six of our eight attackers,” said Clay. “Then your father showed up, too, Albus, and Macnair and Greyback fled. Neither of them was found until Greyback was confirmed dead after the Lunar Eclipse festival, but Macnair may still be out there… we haven’t heard a whisper from him at all, though. I think he’s dead. Anyway, Auchland did the best he could at the time to mend me, and then I went to St. Mungo’s for a few days until I stopped bleeding.”

“Wow,” said Albus.

“Most of the rest of these are from torture,” said Clay, pointing to his arms and legs. “I was captured by the Sandbloods for a while. They knew my history, so the method of torture they opted to use on me was to cast Dark spells on me.”

“Why did they torture you?” asked Albus.

“For information.”

“Couldn’t they just give you MM?” he asked. “Doesn’t that make you tell them whatever they want you to tell them?”

“Yes, it’s the only flawless truth serum out there, and it wasn’t even invented to be a truth serum,” said Clay. “So I guess they were running low, or they didn’t want to use it if they didn’t have to.”

“I guess it would be a really good thing to know if they were running low,” said Albus. “Did you tell them anything?”

“Not a peep,” said Clay proudly. “I held out until I was rescued. By Alana Falagair, in fact. I’ve somewhat made it my oath to protect her… so now I’m here, because she’s here.”

They had reached Gryffindor Tower.
“Are you allowed to know the passwords to our common rooms?” asked Albus.


“Absolutely,” said the Fat Lady, swinging the portrait door open.

“I know all the passwords, except for Ravenclaw’s,” said Clay. “Ravenclaw’s questions are highly confidential, but Rohan can get in there, so he’s got that common room covered. He’s the only one who can get into Ravenclaw and I’m the only one who can get into Hufflepuff, seeing as I’m a Hufflepuff.”

“Only Hufflepuffs can get into the Hufflepuff common room?”

“That’s right.”

“Thanks for the walk back,” said Albus. “See you around, I guess.”

“See ya, champ,” said Clay, and he began walking back down towards the dungeons.

Albus dragged himself into the common room; he was exhausted from the Occlumency lesson and then the sprint down to the dungeons.

On the down side, the Fokii might still be active, even though it was winter.

On the up side, it was almost Christmas.

He laid himself down for a nap. He would need to have all the energy he could get for his Occlumency lesson tomorrow.

Albus woke up on Christmas day to find that it had snowed about a foot. He leapt excitedly out of bed and charged to the common room to find his Christmas presents laid out for him.

There were more gifts than usual from his parents; they probably felt bad for asking him to stay over Christmas. There was also a small, thin package from James, something that was almost certainly a book from Rose, and a few other things from his friends and family.

James’s thin package intrigued Albus the most, especially since it read “Don’t open when anyone’s watching” on the bottom. Albus took it back to his dormitory and opened it quickly while Exo was still asleep.

He pulled out a piece of blank parchment.

James had bequeathed unto him the Marauder’s Map.

Albus excitedly stowed the map in his rucksack and ran back out to continue opening his presents.

He got the usual round of gifts – chocolate, books, joke shop equipment – and nothing excited him as much as the first present. Albus opened the book he’d gotten from Rose – *Exactly Three Times Five Times Seven Reasons to Study Arithmancy*, which held a lot of very interesting facts, and took the coveted armchair by the fire.

James wandered down some time after Albus had finished unwrapping everything, and he looked around to see if his gift had been unwrapped yet.

He shimmied closer to Albus, and speaking quietly so the few other Gryffindors in the common
room wouldn’t hear, he asked, “Did you get mine?”

“Yeah,” said Albus. “You’re giving it to me full time?”

“Yeah, my friends and I have practically memorized it,” said James. “So we may ask to borrow it every once in a while, but it’s yours now for however much you want to loan it to us. Besides, I don’t think I’m pulling any big pranks for a while.”

“Right,” said Albus. “Forgot about that.”

“Use it as you will,” said James. “Happy Christmas.”

“You, too!”

Albus turned back to his book; today was the only day he had off of Occlumency lessons, since it was Christmas. He wrote a letter to Janelle and looked forward to the feast, but really, he was almost upset that he didn’t have Occlumency lessons to look forward to. He was progressing faster every day. Soon, he wouldn’t have to worry about those strange visions anymore – unless he wanted to.

He peered into the fire, suddenly realizing that something was wrong.

Wilcox’s face was staring at him from behind the flames.

He broke through the memory, his stomach on the floor, panting.

“That wasn’t as good as your other attempts,” tutted Wilcox. “I now know every present you got for Christmas last week.”

“Sorry…”

“Don’t be sorry, just try to improve.”

“Yes, sir.”

“What was that blank piece of parchment?” asked Wilcox curiously. “You seemed very pleased to unwrap that present.”

Albus blanched. “It – oh – that was a joke product from Uncle George’s shop. James had it for a while and I really envied it…”

Wilcox gave him a skeptical look. “It seemed very important to both of you.”

“It was,” said Albus.

“Well, I’m not going to pester you about it anymore,” said Wilcox. “Nor am I going to try to read it out of your mind in any of our future sessions – that would be very inconsiderate of your privacy. But I will try to read everything else. Just try not to think about it while we’re having lessons, or else it’ll be in the front of your mind and I may not be able to help seeing it. If you don’t want me poking around anymore, the solution would be to improve your skills as much as possible as quickly as possible.”

“But classes start again the day after tomorrow,” sighed Albus. “Are we still going to continue?”

“Of course we’re going to continue,” said Wilcox. “Until you have Occlumency committed to memory, no pun intended. We’ll go through this next week and the week after that until you have a
few successful sessions in a row, and that will be our indication that you’re ready to fight off the visions, because those will be far easier to fight than my Legilimency. So if you can throw me out, you can definitely throw out the visions. And if you keep practicing at home, eventually you’ll be able to throw off anyone.”

Albus nodded and departed back to his dormitory.

James wasn’t around when he returned – Rose said he’d gone out to play “Hog and Seek” with his friends, which was James’s version of “Hide and Seek.” Albus remembered this game because James had once told him that he played this game with Barry, Gavin, and Marco many times, but had conveniently forgotten in the beginning of his fourth year to tell them about the Marauder’s Map, and they were constantly amazed at how unnaturally good James was at finding them. Albus decided to wait for his brother, to tell him that Wilcox had seen the blank parchment in his memory. Albus needed to make sure that if James ever took the map back, that he didn’t let Wilcox see the blank parchment, otherwise he was sure to get questions.

But James didn’t return that night. Albus was in the common room, reading until late, and consulted the Marauder’s Map when his brother wasn’t back by midnight. James was sitting in front of the Potions classroom.

Albus read for another hour, and then consulted the map again. James still hadn’t moved from his post. Another hour passed as Albus read, waiting for his brother out of curiosity. It was two o’clock in the morning and James still hadn’t moved when Albus checked the map again.

Worried that his brother might have fallen asleep under the Invisibility Cloak – or worse, been injured under it – he was about to leave Gryffindor Tower to find him when he noticed Wilcox and Valon striding towards the Potions classroom.

James stepped barely to the side, and Albus breathed a sigh of relief that his brother was conscious. James appeared to make an attempt to slip inside the classroom, but Wilcox and Valon must have closed the door too quickly, and he instead pressed himself against the door.

Albus watched the map with sleep creeping slowly into his eyes for fifteen minutes. Finally, Wilcox left the classroom, but Valon stayed.

James followed their Headmaster further down into the dungeons, until finally they reached some sort of end point. Wilcox stared at the wall for a moment, and then he stepped inside the wall and disappeared off the map.

Albus almost choked on his own breath. James followed off the map shortly after, and Albus realized what had happened – they had gone into the hidden passage where lay the iron door that the Fokii seemed to be so interested in.

This time, only five minutes passed before Wilcox reemerged, followed by James. James followed Wilcox all the way until their headmaster reentered his office, and then James turned around and headed up to Gryffindor Tower.

Albus waited in the common room until the portrait hole opened up by itself, and closed by itself.

“Hi, James,” he said pleasantly. “What’ve you been up to?”

A hand reached out of nowhere and pulled off the Cloak. “I’m guessing you’re already becoming very friendly with my Christmas present,” he said, sounding incredibly out-of-breath.

Albus nodded sleepily.
“I was tailing Wilcox,” said James. “I saw him and Valon talking a lot with whispers at dinner, and then again in the hallway. So I threw on the Cloak and listened for a bit, but I only caught the end of the conversation when Wilcox told Valon to meet him in the Potions classroom at two o’clock in the morning. I went down there, too, but I couldn’t get inside without being noticed, so I tried to listen through the door. It’s a thick door, so I didn’t hear much. But then Wilcox came outside, and he opened up the hidden passage. He was carrying a bunch of little white flowers with black stems.”

“Moly,” said Albus, nodding.

“I thought so,” said James. “Wilcox kept running his hands along the iron door, casting spells at it, and he kept whispering, ‘No way in… no way in…’ and then he scattered the flowers everywhere and walked out.”

“He tried to get in?” asked Albus.

“I think he was making sure the Fokii couldn’t get it,” said James. “I don’t think they can. That’s a good sign. I don’t know what’s behind there.”

“I don’t think anyone does,” said Albus. “I hope Wilcox doesn’t try to find out.”

“I think he’s smarter than that,” said James. “Anyway, I came back here after Wilcox went to his office.”

“I know,” said Albus, shaking the map in front of him. “Mischief managed.” The map faded again.

“You’re undertaking a quite healthy level of snooping, Al,” said James, giving him a thumbs-up. “Keep it up.”

“Thanks,” laughed Albus as he stowed the Marauder’s Map in his bag and brought it to the dormitories so he could finally go to bed.

“So, I was thinking about what the hidden door could possibly be hiding,” whispered Rose at breakfast the next morning.

“You don’t have to whisper,” said Albus. “Wilcox is way over at the High Table. He won’t hear you, and you’re not breaking any rules by guessing, either.”

“I’m whispering because it feels like a whispering situation,” said Rose quietly. “I was thinking: what if that underground chamber was where Litinia was doing some experiments? Where she was keeping Fokii and mulunctapoli?”

Albus nodded. “That’s a really interesting thought,” he said. “You think maybe that’s where they came from in the first place?”

“It could even be a nest of something,” she said. “What if the Fokii are trying to go feed the mulunctapoli babies?”

“Oh, we really would not want those hatching inside the castle,” said Exo, looking a little queasy at the thought. “I don’t want to be turned into a Squib.”

“Mulunctapoli only bite you and drain your magic if you threaten them,” comforted Rose.

“Yeah,” said Albus, “and Fokii always avoid highly populated areas, like the inside of Hogwarts.”
“Oh,” said Rose. “Right.”

“Honestly, I’d be worried about them either way,” said Albus. “You never know.”

One owl flew into the Great Hall. There were so few students staying for the Christmas holidays that there had been hardly any owls flying in for the morning mail. The other students would be returning today, though.

Albus didn’t recognize the snowy owl, but it was headed for him, Exo, or Rose, judging by its trajectory. It flew right at them, a small scroll tied to its leg, and it landed right in front of Exo.

For a moment it stared at him, and then it took off again, and landed next to Wilcox instead.

“What was that all about?” asked Exo. “It looked like it was for me. Did the owl mistake me for my dad or something?”

“No idea,” said Albus. “Your dad seems very interested in whatever the letter’s about, though.”

Wilcox was staring at the letter, turning it over and looking at both sides. After a few glances over the entire scroll, he lifted himself up from his chair and walked towards Exo, holding the parchment.

“Looks like it is for you, after all,” said Albus.

“Oh,” said Exo. “My dad set up a rerouting system through the Owl Offices at the Ministry. All owls will take a detour and run the letter by my dad first, if the letter has any enchantments on it or anything. Dad wants to protect me from people who don’t like werewolves…”

A look crossed his eye as though he’d had a sudden thought, but his father reached the table before he could voice that thought aloud.

“Exorian,” said Wilcox. “Would you mind coming with me for a moment?”

Exo glanced down at the letter. It appeared, from the few glances that Albus got, that the letter was blank. Exo nodded and stood up, throwing a last look at Albus before he left the room.

Albus finished his breakfast, discussing new theories with Rose. He was draining his pumpkin juice when Wilcox and Exo walked back into the Great Hall; Exo looked like he’d just won the lottery.

“Albus, I’d like you to join us outside the Hall for a moment,” said Wilcox, gesturing him over.

Albus nodded, placing his juice back on the table, and he got up to follow the Wilcoxes out of the Great Hall.

When the door shut behind them, Wilcox unrolled the scroll and shook it out for Albus to see. It was blank on one side. Wilcox turned it over; it was blank on the other side.

“Does this mean anything to you?” asked Wilcox.

“Er… not sure,” said Albus. “Is it supposed to?”

Exo was giving him frantically significant looks. What were those for?

“My son tells me that I should give him this letter,” said Wilcox, “despite the fact that it has a sealing enchantment on it that I can’t identify. The enchantment seriously worries me, but Exo tells
me it’s a spell his pen pal in Ireland has invented so that they can communicate in private. I’ve never heard of this pen pal he claims to have, but he says you know of the pen pal. Is this true?”

Albus looked over next to Wilcox, where Exo was screaming something with his eyes that Albus couldn’t decipher.

Wilcox looked over at Exo, and Exo’s face went back to normal. As soon as Wilcox turned back to Albus, Exo’s eyes went aflame again.

And then Albus realized what Exo was so excited about.

He had sent a letter to John Solomon.

Albus straightened up rigidly and nodded to Wilcox. “Yeah, I remember your pen pal,” he said to Exo. “It’s been a while since you two have written, hasn’t it?”

He hoped the deception was casual enough to fool Wilcox.

“Why haven’t you told me about this pen pal?” asked Wilcox.

“I… it never came up,” lied Exo.

“And this is the first time a letter has been rerouted to me,” said Wilcox. “How do you know it’s your pen pal writing to you with a secret spell, if they’ve never done this before?”

“Well, he hadn’t done it yet, but he told me he was going to do it, last time we wrote,” said Exo.

“All right,” said Wilcox, holding the letter out to Exo. “Decode it.”

“I can’t,” said Exo, looking a little worried. “Not – not when you’re watching. I don’t want anyone else to read the letters. Albus hasn’t even read the letters, he just knows that I have a pen pal, is all.”

Wilcox looked from Exo back to Albus, and back to Exo.

“All right,” said Wilcox. “You’re taking years off my life with this constant worrying I do about you, you know. Your letter had better be worth the trouble…”

“Thanks, Dad,” said Exo, snatching the letter rather hurriedly.

As soon as Wilcox walked back into the Great Hall, Exo bolted up the stairs.

Albus followed him quickly. They were alone in the dormitories – they were also the only fourth year boys left, so they could be sure no one would interrupt them until the Hogwarts Express returned. Albus opened the Marauder’s Map next to them to make sure that hadn’t happened yet, and then Exo spread out the small scroll on his bed.

“Thank God he didn’t look at it after I took it,” whispered Exo.

Albus peered over to the letter.

There was a small signature on the bottom right corner, which had certainly not been there until Exo touched the parchment. It was a small J.S. with elegant calligraphy.

“John Solomon,” breathed Exo, brushing a finger against the initials.
As he did, a large outline of a paw print appeared across the entire scroll.

Exo looked over to Albus, eyes bulging.

“Go on!” said Albus eagerly. “Place your hand there!”

Exo slammed his hand onto the letter with probably more force than he intended, and words started to appear when he removed his hand.

Exo’s hands were shaking, which made the paper hard to read as Albus jumped onto his bed next to him and looked over his arm.

Young Exorian Wilcox,

I could not believe my eyes when your owl soared into my hideaway delivering your letter. I don’t get much mail nowadays, as you might expect.

I already knew you are a werewolf. I used to be on excellent terms with your father. But my work has cost me more than I can ever hope to gain back, including the friendships that have ended because I am believed to be the worst criminal since the days of the Dark Revival.

It brought tears to my eyes to know that you escaped the nightmare of the festival. You don’t remember, but we met once, briefly; I visited your home when you were only just born. I cried for days when I learned that Chrianna had been killed and that you had been afflicted… In fact, it is partially what spurred me harder to develop the cure. I knew the horrors that were undergone by the werewolf condition, but it is impossible to fully understand the impacts it has on a person until you are acquainted with an afflicted person or the relatives.

Let me get to the point. You asked me whether I could cure you and whether I would be willing to find you to do so. Yes, I can cure you, and yes, I will cure you. If I had not been able to confirm that you were in fact in attendance at the Lunar Eclipse Festival from statements made by your father, I might have feared that you were only inviting me out into the open so other people could capture me… but you were at the festival, so you saw the ritual I performed, and you experienced the effects, and so you know that I am genuine. And so I will make you an offer. Meet me on the night of May 26th – the date of the next Lunar Eclipse – on Moutohora Island in New Zealand, near a small hill called Kimberly’s Peak. You won’t find it on any Muggle map, since the island has restricted Muggle access, so be sure to consult a map from the Wizarding World. My apologies for the run halfway around the world, but the eclipse will not be visible in Europe. Find some transportation which cannot be tracked, and arrive as close as possible to 11:11 P.M. New Zealand time (which translates to 11:11 A.M. at Hogwarts). Arrive any earlier and you risk someone finding you; any later and we will have missed our opportunity of this lunar eclipse.

Time stamps to remember: The eclipse begins between 8:47 and 8:48, but when you first transform back due to the eclipse, you will be disoriented and unable to focus your mind, probably not even enough to remember who you are until the eclipse leaves the Earth’s penumbra and enters the umbra. Therefore I suggest you avoid the transformation entirely, by only embarking on your journey when the eclipse has already begun. Arrive on the side of the world where it is night no earlier than 9:45, or you will end up transforming in the middle of your journey. Then you must find me by 11:11, because this is the time of the greatest eclipse; we only have a fourteen and a half minute window before the total eclipse is over, and I would be unable to help you until the next eclipse. I can only postulate one way to arrive so quickly in such a short amount of time: the Loch Stock Liner. But you may need to come up with a cover story that won’t arouse their suspicion, especially since you will appear grievously ill during the day of the full moon. Do not magically disguise yourself – the Liner will detect this. Do not bring any powerful magical
artifacts – the Liner will detect those, too. But this letter will be fine.

I apologize for not writing to you sooner. The precautions I needed to take were extensive. I still debated sending this letter now, because it will not do you any good until late May anyway, but I wanted to put your mind at ease. I understand the pain you have experienced in your short life and I want to help you live without this illness. Together we will cure you.

Make sure this letter is not seen. But keep it with you until the date of your departure; you will need it to find me. When you arrive near Kimberly’s Peak, fold this letter into a paper airplane and throw it, then follow. Make sure you are not seen when you leave to find me, and especially make sure you are not followed. Do not bring anyone else, not even if they claim to trust me; they could know that you contacted me, and they could be using you to find me.

And you know that you will help me, possibly even greater than I am helping you. Once you are cured, you can show the world how I have liberated you from your disease, and I will be liberated from my prosecution. And after that, together, we can wipe the condition out of humanity forever, and every werewolf in the world can be cured. This is far more important than you or me – this is about the world. So be cautious, be careful, and I hope to see you this May.

JS

“It’s his handwriting,” said Albus, trying to keep his voice steady. “I remember from a letter I read that he wrote to my father.”


“I’m coming with you, of course,” said Albus.

Exo looked up from the letter quickly.

“I promised, remember?” said Albus with a smile. “I promised I’d go with you to find the cure, and I said I wouldn’t break the promise even though it didn’t work out the first time – that if you ever went in search of the cure again, that I would come with you.”

Exo’s eyes began to water again.

“Albus… it could be dangerous,” he said.

“Right,” said Albus. “I forgot. I’m not accustomed to danger in my life.”

Exo laughed. “True.”

Albus sighed. “I don’t know what to think, though. Part of me is worried that… that the Siren Song Charm is on this paper, too. Remember? The ones that convinced us to go to the Lunar Eclipse Festival in the first place?”

Exo shook his head. “You didn’t feel what I felt,” said Exo. “That spell that Solomon was casting… it was doing something to me and to everyone else that it wasn’t doing to you. And besides – Solomon was friends with your parents and with my father. He was a great man; he gave lectures about defending against the Dark Arts! He–”

“I’m not worried that Solomon is evil,” said Albus. “I’m worried that he’s being controlled.”

Exo shook his head. “The Muggles shot at him, Albus,” he said. “They wounded him. Why would they have done that if he was under their control?”
“Now that I think about it,” said Albus, “who would be controlling him? He’s a master of Defense Against the Dark Arts; he couldn’t be Imperiused, he’d be able to fight it, so there’s no way they could control him to the extent of putting together this festival... So the only other way would be with MM. But only the Sandbloods have the MM, and the Sandbloods aren’t after werewolves – they’re after wizards. And the Lunar Eclipse Festival happened before the Sandbloods came onto the scene... and I’m sure they would have taken credit for that disaster if they could have. Man, the more I think about it, the more obvious it seems.”

He looked over at the Marauder’s Map; a flood of names was now entering the castle. A large number broke off for the dungeons, more near the kitchens, and the remainder started up the stairs.

“You should put that away,” suggested Albus. “Other people are coming.”

Exo was quavering as he clutched the letter so tightly that Albus was worried he was going to rip it; he continued to stare, only looking away to wipe his eyes as they continued to water.

“Exo!”

“R-Right,” stammered Exo, stuffing the letter into his bag. It was the first time he’d let go of it since taking it from his father, and the letter wiped itself blank once again like the Marauder’s Map when it was removed from his touch.

Out of curiosity, before Exo buried it deeper beneath his belongings, Albus touched the paper; no initials appeared in the bottom corner, and no paw print appeared in the center.

“Maybe it only opens for werewolves,” said Exo, wildly grinning.

“Exo, I can’t believe this!” shouted Albus, hugging his friend tightly. “I can’t believe what this means for you. After this year...”

“I’m never going to transform again,” breathed Exo, looking at his hands and feet.

The students on the stairs climbed seven stories and split in half for Gryffindor and Ravenclaw. Albus looked for familiar names. There came “Lucy Weasley,” “Roxanne Weasley,” “Freddie Weasley,” “Lucas Lotor,” “Jonah Baxter-Thornton,” “Ebenezer Brzunejsky” (the map probably hated trying to spell his name), “Parker Pullman,” “ Prescott Pullman”–

Albus stared at the map. How had he forgotten he could check this resource?

Suddenly it all made perfect sense – P for Prescott, shortened to Scottie. A great weight was lifted off of his mind, the clouds parting and the heavenly light shining through as he finally figured out how the hell P stood for Scottie.

“Oh, I gotta go,” said Albus. “I’m supposed to be meeting your Dad for Occlumency lessons before lunch.”

Exo’s head snapped upwards again.

“ What?” he yelped.

“Occlumency lessons,” said Albus. “I have them every day, remember?”

“Oh, no,” said Exo, clutching at his face. “Albus...”

“What?” said Albus, just before he realized, and he felt his heart drop several feet.
Wilcox was going to be reading his mind in a few minutes.

“I’ll call in sick,” said Albus quickly.

“No,” snapped Exo. “He’s not stupid. If he notices that you’re skiving off lessons minutes after he saw you healthy in the Great Hall, he’ll know it’s because you’re trying to hide a memory you don’t want him to see – and the only memory that could possibly have changed your mind about lessons so quickly is this letter that he’s already suspicious about!” He clenched his fists, which started to quiver. “You’ll just have to… have to do it this time. You’ll have to succeed in blocking him out this time.”

“I don’t know if I can,” said Albus quietly.

“You have to,” said Exo. “You have to do it for me. For every werewolf in the world.”

Albus pressed a hand over his eyes. “This is going to be in the front of my memory. It’s going to be so easy for him to find. The harder I try to not think about it, the more energy I’m spending on that memory and the easier it’ll be to see!”

“I believe in you, Albus,” said Exo. “You’re an insanely talented wizard. You can do this. You can make it through Occlumency lessons this time without letting my dad see a single thing in your memory. I know you can.”

“I don’t know,” said Albus.

“Believe in yourself,” said Exo. “Occlumency is all in your mind, right? So if your mind believes it can accomplish the task – it’s your mind that’s going to respond!”

Albus nodded as the sound of the portrait hole being opened hit their ears, followed by drifts of countless voices returning from the holidays.

“Go now, before he starts getting suspicious,” said Exo.

Albus raced out of the room, trying to keep his thoughts on anything but the letter he’d just read; but of course, trying to force it out of his mind only kept it in the front as he remembered what he was trying to block.

He barely noticed the walk up to the Headmaster’s office, or the start of the lesson. Before he even realized anything had happened, Wilcox was pointing his wand into Albus’s face.

“You seem distracted today,” noted Wilcox.

“Am I?” said Albus, trying to shake off the nerves of what might happen if a certain memory (which would remain anonymous) was noticed in today’s session.

“Quite. You want a few minutes?”

Albus shook his head. “No,” he said.

“You’ve really got to focus,” said Wilcox.

“I’m fine.”

Albus tensed his muscles. Waiting would only make him dwell on his fears.

“Are you ready?” said Wilcox as always.
“As I’ll ever be,” said Albus monotonously, bracing himself.

I can’t have negative thoughts, said Albus to himself. I can’t have fears. He’ll notice those, and it’ll lead a trail straight to what I’m afraid of. I have to kick out the fear. I have to replace it with something stronger. Bravery. Gryffindor courage. If I can kick out the fear… I can kick out anything. Including Wilcox.

“All right, here I go.”

I can do this, thought Albus, steeling his mind, and he looked Wilcox defiantly in the face as the word was shouted and the spell was cast.

“Legimens!”
“You mastered Occlumency?” asked Aidan, his jaw dropping. “Already?”

“No, not at all, not really,” laughed Albus. “It’s just… I kind of got the hang of it at just the right time. Wilcox saw the letter in my memory – but he only saw it blank. He didn’t see the writing on it.”

“So Solomon’s secret is still safe,” said Aidan, frowning.

“You still don’t trust him, do you?” asked Albus.

Aidan shook his head. “I don’t know what to think about him, so I don’t think it’s a good idea to take the chance.”

Albus sighed to himself. This was how Aidan had been last time. Granted, he had been right last time… but that wasn’t Solomon’s fault. As Professor Longbottom started drawing diagrams of plants on the chalkboard, he started wondering how he could explain his convictions to Aidan.

“I bet you’re thinking of defenses for Solomon’s case,” guessed Aidan. “Albus, I don’t care how many reasons you can conjure to support his innocence. You still won’t be able to think clearly about the issue. The Siren Song Charm will still be in effect until its caster dies or removes the spell himself.”

“Is there any way to check for the Siren Song Charm?” asked Exo, looking up.

Aidan shrugged.

“I’ll look for one,” said Albus. “Maybe we can test the letter that Exo was sent.”

Professor Longbottom cleared his throat to start class just as Clay burst into the classroom, sweating and grinning like a madman.

“I know you were told our presence wouldn’t be a disturbance or an interruption at all,” said Clay, panting. “But this is an emergency request from Professor Wilcox. Class is cancelled, kids – your Herbology professor has some work to do.”

The class was completely silent. No one rose from their seats; they couldn’t tell if Clay was having them on.

“But you can all stay, because you can all hear this news, too,” said Clay. “The whole world gets to hear this news now!”

He handed a piece of parchment to Professor Longbottom, who looked it up and down and turned with a surprise back to Clay.

“You… want me to grow Freezerburn Figs?” asked Professor Longbottom. “These can only be handled by the most skilled of Herbologists… I don’t know if I could handle them. And I’d have to grow them in a separate location – they senselessly obliterate any other plant life in the area. Why do you need these?”

“Because they’re one of the ingredients,” began Clay dramatically.

“Ingredients to what?”
“A potion,” continued Clay at an excruciating pace, “a most special potion—"

“Get on with it, Clay, if this is really that urgent!”

“Right, sorry,” said Clay. “This potion can be dispensed as a gas, and it will act as an indicator… an indicator as to whether specific people in the area are under the influence of the infamous Marionette’s Medicine.”

Jaws dropped all around the room.

“You what?” shrieked Rose in delight.

“Yeah, go on,” announced Clay. “Feel free to applaud!”

A cheer of immense volume erupted inside the Herbology classroom. People were hugging each other and jumping up and down in joy. This was one of the most important moments in the new war that was blooming – now no one could use MM against a person from the Auror Office, for example, without being noticed. Assumedly, there would be constant drug tests.

“That,” laughed Professor Longbottom through tears, “is the best news I’ve had in a while. But, Clayton, you must know that Freezerburn Figs have such a low yield… Less than one percent of the crop that you plant ever makes it to a mature age.”

“Which is why we need every possible Herbology expert growing them,” said Clay. “We’ve already tested and confirmed the ability of the plant, and Aurors Potter and Weasley apparently ambushed the entire Auror staff with the gas to make sure no one was on MM before they made this message public.”

“Was everyone clean?” asked Professor Longbottom nervously.

“Of course,” said Clay. “We’d been trying for an antidote to MM, but instead of the cure, one of our researchers stumbled upon this possibility. We told the researchers to hurry it up as much as possible – the disappearances of Ministry workers took a huge upturn again recently. But that’s stopped since we made the discovery public. We think the Masterminds are afraid to let their MM puppets walk around when they could be ambushed at any time and tested with the gas.”

“Did you bring any figs with you?”

“Yes,” said Clay, patting his bag. “So, we need you to start growing them as soon as—”

Before he finished his sentence, Professor Longbottom had already grabbed the bag of figs and was rushing out the door to find a place to plant them.

Albus had better progression in his next Occlumency session. He successfully avoided the problematic memory in its entirety.

“You’re just unbelievable, Albus,” said Wilcox. “You kicked me out so fast I barely saw anything.”

Albus grinned. “So, after I make sure I have this ability down… what’s left for me to learn?”

“Oh, this?” laughed Wilcox. “You’re barely scratching the surface. It’s still impressive, but if you’re aiming to be a true Occlumens, you’re perhaps one step there out of fifty.”

Albus frowned. “It takes that much time?”
“The body is meant to heal itself, but the human mind was never built to prepare itself for an assault from the outside,” said Wilcox. “When you’ve only ever experienced your mind being affected from the inside, it’s very difficult to sort out how you should react to this type of threat. And if Occlumency was really as straightforward a discipline as you’ve studied in the past couple of weeks, everyone would learn it. You still did this part faster than most people would, though, so be proud of that.”

“Thank you, Professor.”

“You’ll have another lesson tomorrow,” said Professor Wilcox. “Professor Desulgon will be holding your lesson for you. Ten o’clock, in his office.”

“With Professor Desulgon?” asked Albus. “Why?”

“It’s for a couple of reasons,” said Wilcox. “Firstly, I’m going to be a bit busy tomorrow. But there is another reason, which would probably make me relinquish the lesson to someone else anyway: You don’t know what it’s like to be attacked by anyone but me, for one. You only know how to beat me in this game. If you were studying chess, for example, and you and I played every day, you might eventually learn what my strategies are and you would become very good at defeating me… but that doesn’t make you a good chess player. It only makes you good at beating me. When faced with another player, you may suddenly find that the strategies you’ve used aren’t working anymore. So it’s good for you to exercise this muscle with a lot of different people, because the person attacking your mind won’t always do it in the same way I do. It would do well for you to attempt finding a universal way to repel everyone, rather than just repel me – this will be how you can fight off the visions and emotions. So you will try and defend yourself against Professor Desulgon, and then I’d suggest keeping up your practices by studying the theory and working with your father next time you see him.”

“Understood, sir.”

“Then I will see you tomorrow.”

Albus set off back to Gryffindor Tower, where Exo was waiting up for him.

“Did you let anything slip today?” he asked anxiously.

Albus shook his head. “Nope. Not a thing.”

Exo pumped a fist and fell back in limp relief onto one of the armchairs.

“I don’t know how you can do it, Albus,” said Exo. “My dad tried teaching me Occlumency two summers ago, but I was awful. I think I just made myself worse.”

“That’s what my dad said happened to him when he was learning from Snape,” said Albus. “He thought Professor Snape was just a horrible teacher, but maybe that just happens.”

“Well, that makes me feel a little better,” said Exo. “Anyway, with Occlumency lessons and all… do you have any time to practice flying? For your Quidditch matches coming up?”

“I have weekends off,” said Albus. “There will be early morning practices all throughout the month before the match, too.”

“Wow, you’re going to be busy,” laughed Exo. “You’re so busy lately I haven’t even heard you scheme at all about trying to help Scorpius and Eftan become friends.”
“Oh!” blurted Albus, slapping a palm to his forehead. “Merlin, I totally forgot about that.”

“Do you even know what you’re going to do?”

“I don’t know,” said Albus honestly. “Maybe just try to start another conversation like last time… It almost worked, maybe it will work more each time.”

“How are you going to do it?” asked Exo. “Knock Eftan’s books out again? That might get them suspicious, of each other if not of us, if it happened again.”

“No… I’ll think of something… I’ll ask James for the Cloak tomorrow morning. Maybe I’ll have something figured out by the end of Wandless Magic. Eftan and Scorpius are still always the last ones to leave.”

“Well, don’t let that distract you from your Occlumency,” said Exo. “Or Quidditch… or classes…”

“I won’t,” promised Albus. “But I do think that helping my friends is more important than helping myself right now…”

“You’re such a Gryffindor,” teased Exo.

Albus crinkled his nose. “Actually, I think that’s more of a Hufflepuff trait.”

Exo sniggered. “The Sorting Hat should’ve put you in Hufflepuff.”

Albus shrugged. “I’ve got a little bit of everyone. And I’m not that ashamed if I’m a little Hufflepuff – Clay is a Hufflepuff, too.”

“Clay is pretty cool,” agreed Exo. “Well… I’ve got to get to sleep now. I’m still riding on a low from that full moon last week.”

Albus frowned. “You’re still feeling that?”

“Yeah,” sighed Exo. “The full moon was Wednesday, early morning… it’s Tuesday night, almost a week later, and I still feel like hell. I really can’t stand what my condition does to me, Albus. I… I want to be cured.”

“The full moon was Wednesday morning?” asked Albus, suddenly remembering something important. “So then the first quarter moon would be…”

Exo thought for a moment. “I guess tonight,” he said. “Or maybe tomorrow night?”

“Tomorrow night, I think,” said Albus. “Full moons are a little over four weeks apart, so it would be a little over a week for each quarter of the cycle.”

“Why does it matter?”

It matters to Professor Ramanu, thought Albus, and her theories about what’s under the castle, and when it’s scheduled to get active again…

“Our first lesson of the semester is on Effection,” said Professor Skower. “Somebody tell me the definition of Effection. Zabini.”

“Provoking different effects in objects using wandless magic,” answered Jasmine Zabini.
“That response was mediocre enough that I’ll accept it,” said Professor Skower.

It was really a wonder anyone ever answered his questions anymore; the response was always like that.

“Lotor, please lower your sycophantic hand,” declared Professor Skower. “I know you know the definition by heart. Just mumble it to yourself or something if you can’t help shouting it out loud. I’ll just work with Zabini’s definition. Effection is the art of provoking the desired basic effect in the desired effectible object using wandless magic through the hand as a medium, though some extremely powerful wizards in the past have been able to perform the dreadfully exhausting ocular magic, simply through the eyes. Note that I emphasized basic effects, because this is not Disarming or Summoning without a wand. Those fall under the category of Major Spellwork, which you will most likely not attempt in your Hogwarts career. It is extremely difficult and extremely imprecise to cast real spells – less so to try and provoke specific effects in objects known to be prone to these effects, which we call effectible, but still quite abstract and difficult. You will receive perfect marks if you get a fifty percent success rate by the end of the term… it’s simply that difficult.

“Now, what kind of effects are we talking about? We’re talking about catching fire, growing cold, bouncing higher… a lot of Charms, but some Transfiguration as well, and even some jinxes, hexes, and curses…”

The class then had a group discussion on how previous knowledge would apply to what they were learning now. The “group” discussion was mostly comprised of Professor Skower correcting even the minutest of errors, and consistently informing them that their opinions were wrong.

Albus wasn’t paying much attention when the class was nearing its end, though. He had a plan. When everybody but Scorpius and Eftan left, he would hide under the Cloak and run back in, then whisper a spell that would shut and lock the door. He knew he could pull off Colloportus well enough to make it impossible for just one of Eftan or Scorpius to open the door – they would have to cast the spell together. They would probably just assume it was Abby Quinn or Jasmine Zabini picking on Eftan if Albus was stealthy enough about it.

The class was let out after a short speech from Professor Skower, detailing that they had forgotten everything over the holidays and they should review everything they’d learned in the past three terms before their next class so they could have a proper discussion before their double period on that Friday.

Everyone left grousing amongst themselves about Professor Skower’s idiocy. Albus ducked under his table while Aidan, Alec, and Exo provided cover, and then slipped on the Invisibility Cloak. The others left; he stayed behind.

Sylvester Alamandrine was the last other student to leave, and then Professor Skower marched out of the room with haste. Eftan and Scorpius were alone.

Or so they thought.

Albus raised a wand to the door, ready to whisper the spell before the sound of the loud crowd of students had completely disappeared. He didn’t want his whisper to be heard, or it would ruin everything he’d hoped to accomplish, so he needed to move quickly while he still had outside noises to mask the quiet sound of his incantation.

“Good Lord, I wanted to stab myself in the ears that entire lesson,” moaned Eftan.

Albus froze.
“I know,” said Scorpius, wandering over and putting his belongings down next to Eftan while he finished packing them in his bag. “I initially found it hard to believe that one man could possibly be so infuriating, yet here he is in all his glory.”

“All his inglory.”

“Is that a word?”

“Probably.”

“It is now.”

“If only to describe Skower.”

“He should have stuck with selling cleaning supplies.”

Albus was finding it difficult not to keel over and topple noisily to the floor as Eftan laughed heartily at Scorpius’s joke.

“At least this class isn’t a colossal waste of my time,” drawled Scorpius. “Like Astronomy.”

“Yeah, we do learn some pretty interesting things,” said Eftan. “Imagine being able to shoot fire out of your eyes.”

“I would not complain about the ability…”

“They should have an entire class devoted to that. Why are we taking Astronomy and not heat vision?”

“Excellent question.”

“Well, I suppose I’m going to go study for this class again and learn every goddamn definition by heart,” puffed Eftan.

“Professor Skower will ask you for your hand,” mused Scorpius.

“Want to join?”

“I am going to sleep, but thank you for the offer,” replied Scorpius politely. “I’ve been exhausted all throughout the holidays; my dad was having a row with his parents basically every night. This makes it very hard to sleep.”

“What about?”

“Who knows?” snorted Scorpius. “Whatever they can find to yell about is the basis of the evening’s argument.”

“Night, Scorp.”

“Good night, Griffiths.”

The two left the room and headed in opposite directions, leaving Albus in the room, slowly sinking into a sitting position while his lips slowly stretched into a wide-mouthed smile.

He sat and chuckled to himself for a while, and then lifted himself up from the classroom floor and opened the Marauder’s Map.
Just curious as to what everyone was doing today – especially Wilcox, on the night that the forest might become more active again – he whispered, “I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.”

The map seemed to ink itself in faster this time, as if it knew his words were more true than usual. He scanned over Wilcox’s office; the headmaster was not in his room.

_I wonder if he’s by the dungeons_, thought Albus, lifting the folds of the map to observe the lower floors.

But he noticed before he got there that Wilcox’s dot was walking alongside Professor Valon’s dot. They were headed up the stairs, just about to reach the second floor where the Wandless Magic classroom was, and where Albus saw his own dot.

Albus peered out of the classroom and saw Wilcox and Valon heading up the flight of stairs leading from the second floor to the third. He shimmied out the door quietly and ran with as little noise as possible until he was almost behind them, then copied their steps up the stairs to mask the sound and listened as closely as possible to the hushed conversation they were having.

“Now, of course,” Wilcox was saying, “you’re going to be busy brewing the MM-indicating solution. Right?”

“Yes. But not until the Freezerburn Figs are full-grown.”

“Yes, of course. But I hope you’re not too busy to help me with…”

“No,” interrupted Professor Valon. “It won’t affect that.”

“Glad to hear,” said Wilcox. “We have to let everyone know there’s nothing to worry about, after all. So, tonight is an important night.”

“The Severing,” whispered Professor Valon, nodding.

Both professors were quiet for a while. Albus racked his brain as they climbed up to the fifth floor. Had he ever heard that term before? What was “the Severing?”

“Are you ready to take this on?” asked Wilcox. “We’ve only minimally tested this theory.”

“It will work. I know the theory.”

“Well, it had better work,” said Wilcox. “Or else the castle could go under siege from the forest.”

“At least you’ve been making them do their siege drills.”

“Yes, good thing.”

“Tonight should be the last night we have to deal with it, then,” said Wilcox. “Just get ready for some possible appearances of Fokii.”

They finally reached the top of the stairs, and started heading along the seventh floor.

“What do we do if they show up?” asked Professor Valon. “We can’t cast adequate Patronuses to actually affect them.”

“I’ve stashed some Moly,” said Wilcox. “Hopefully we won’t have to use it, but just in case… I stored it inside your cabinets so it will be easier access from the dungeons.”
They had reached Wilcox’s office.

“I should go collect the pollen from those, then,” said Professor Valon. “Let’s continue this chat some other time.”

“Are you sure? I just made you walk all the way up here from the dungeons.”

“I’m sure.”

“Then let’s continue this conversation tonight,” said Wilcox. “Back in the classroom. Half past three tonight, I’ll head down there.”

*Three thirty in the morning?* Albus wondered to himself, pondering what might be the reason for going so late.

“I will see you in a few hours, then,” said Professor Valon, turning around and walking straight past Albus, back down the stairs.

Albus tried to follow Professor Valon back down as Wilcox returned to his office, but Valon was moving too quickly for Albus to follow stealthily.

What was the Severing? Why were Professor Valon and Wilcox going to be out at night, without the other teachers or the Aurors? Why were they keeping secrets? He knew that they had been friends in school, so maybe they trusted each other more… but at the very least, they knew they could trust Professor Longbottom, too, and he’d already fought the Fokii with them. Now they were going to have a confidential conversation in the Potions classroom?

But nothing was confidential while he had an Invisibility Cloak.

One thing was certain, though… He’d been surprised at how much information Wilcox was giving him about the situation, when it didn’t really seem like students should know very much. But he’d been wrong: Wilcox wasn’t telling him the important stuff at all. He wasn’t even telling the other Hogwarts or Ministry staff.

What reason could they possibly have?

Remembering that he had to get to Professor Desulgon’s classroom for his Occlumency session, he left, hoping that the buzz of ideas in his brain – and the fact that he’d just eavesdropped on his Headmaster – would not be picked up by Professor Desulgon.

“Albus!” cried Professor Desulgon jovially. “How good to see you outside of the classroom for extracurricular development again. How has the beginning of your eighth term been going along?”

“Fine,” said Albus. “I’ve been wicked tired, though.”

“You’ve had a lot to deal with,” said Professor Desulgon. “The least of which isn’t Occlumency. So Professor Wilcox tells me you’ve advanced pretty far in your training already. Let’s see how you match up against a real master Legilimens!” He puffed out his chest.

“Are you?” asked Albus.

“Er, no,” admitted Professor Desulgon. “I didn’t spend much time on the subject. I will definitely be able to test your abilities, though, at probably the same level as Professor Wilcox has been testing you. I’m not sure how much of a Legilimens he is. Are you ready now?”
“Professor Wilcox has been telling me to always be ready,” said Albus. “So, yes, I’m always r–”

“Legilimens!” shouted Professor Desulgon, his wand out in a flash.

It was a bit different than Professor Wilcox’s spells – instead of being completely immersed in memories that switched without notice, he felt as if he was in a maze of bubbles of different memories, blending together in certain places like colors. He wondered if the way people read minds differed by each person.

There were dozens of memories simultaneously passing his vision, but some were more in focus than the others. Possibly times of more defined emotion. He saw himself skating on Frost Pond with James, Rose, Lily, and Hugo; he saw the blank letter that Exo was holding with anticipation; he saw himself holding hands with Janelle as he walked through Beauxbatons; he saw himself under the Invisibility Cloak, following Wilcox and Valon–

That memory suddenly jumped into focus, as if Professor Desulgon had reached out and seized onto it.

“Tonight’s an important night.”

“The Severing.”

No! shouted Albus inside his head, trying to throw Professor Desulgon out. I don’t want you to see that!

“Half past three tonight, I’ll head down there.”

“I will see you in a few hours, then.”

NO!

Albus ripped his mind out of the grasp of Professor Desulgon; the images of his professors became blurry and their voices slurred and became incomprehensible. A moment later, he was staring at the ground.

“Albus?”

Professor Desulgon’s voice was extremely timid.

Why do I always have to do something I never want another person to know – right before I have my mind read? thought Albus, anger boiling up inside him at his failure to keep it secret.

“Albus, how long ago did you spy on Professor Wilcox with an Invisibility Cloak?” asked Professor Desulgon.

Albus breathed irately through his teeth and did not answer.

“That memory looked extremely fresh. When did this happen? ...Please, Albus, I’m not upset with you – I’m concerned about what Helio and Zayn are doing.”

Albus looked up.

“They’re always whispering to each other,” said Professor Desulgon, his gaze sharpening like a cat’s. “Everyone’s been wondering what they’re up to. I know Helio is a paragon of virtue, but he and Zayn have just been acting so… shifty lately. Secretive. Like they’re plotting something. I feel as though us teachers have a right to know, because we’re pretty sure it has to do with the problem
in the forest."

Albus cleared his throat. “That memory was… er… it was from today, sir. Just before I got here.”

Professor Desulgon nodded. “That’s what it felt like, from how crisp and clear that memory was,” he said. “So they are meeting tonight?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, this is part of why I’m discussing this very confidential information with you,” said Professor Desulgon quietly. “Otherwise I wouldn’t be telling a student this. But… I’m not going to be the one to eavesdrop on them. Helio already thinks I’m too nosy in his business. So, I’m not going to tell you to break the rules or anything, but… I’m not saying anything to anyone else, either, so if you really wanted to leave your dormitory and wander around the castle tonight at, oh, say half past three in the morning… then I couldn’t really stop you, now, could I?”

Albus couldn’t believe what Professor Desulgon was putting him up to.

“Just… if you do happen to stumble across something having to do with Helio’s secrets, if you could… pass that along,” said Professor Desulgon, nudging him. “I won’t say anything to anyone about you eavesdropping on the Headmaster if you won’t…”

“I’m not saying I will,” said Albus carefully, “but if I do, I’ll let you know.”

Professor Desulgon nodded. “Thank you, Albus,” he said. “These are dangerous times – it’s no time to keep secrets from each other. But sometimes exceptions have to be made. I apologize for the suggestion, but…” He sighed. “Helio is making me extremely nervous. I can’t possibly fathom what he thinks he shouldn’t be telling us, while we’re all freaked out of our minds that an army of Fokii is building up in the forest.”

“I understand,” said Albus.

He understood even more than he was letting on to Professor Desulgon, too. In fact, he thought he knew what Wilcox was discussing in secret with Professor Valon.

“Anyway,” said Professor Desulgon, professionally composing himself once more, but looking slightly ashamed of the discussion he’d just held, “again?”

“Again,” said Albus, readying himself for the attack, hoping he wouldn’t disclose too much else.

At a quarter past three in the morning, Albus lifted himself silently out of bed and crept out of Gryffindor Tower under the Invisibility Cloak. Holding the Marauder’s Map in front of him, he walked down towards the Potions classroom. He could see Wilcox pacing in his study, and he kept a close eye on the Headmaster to see when he would leave.

Eventually, Wilcox walked out of the office – but he went through a door that wasn’t on the map, and he vanished from view.

Frantically, and confused, Albus flipped around the map to look at the Potions classroom – and there was Wilcox, standing next to Valon, ten minutes earlier than he’d expected.

“Damn,” muttered Albus, running towards the classroom, hoping he could still hear through the door, or that the door had not yet been closed, though that was a long shot…
He flipped a few flaps down on the map to find himself, and he suddenly noticed that Professor Westerling was headed up the stairs in his direction.

Albus stepped to the side of the staircase to let Professor Westerling pass. He shoved his hands inside the pockets of his cloak and pressed himself against the wall to make himself as slender as possible. He didn’t want Professor Westerling to bump into him.

Their Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher meandered to the bottom of his staircase and slowly ambled past.

But he stopped halfway up and looked up the stairs suspiciously.

Albus held his breath and waited, as Professor Westerling took out his wand.

A swooping sensation fell over his body. He looked upwards out of instinct, and through the translucent fabric of the Cloak, he could see a little red-orange halo floating above his head, with a trail of vapor leading back to Westerling’s wand.

A second swift nonverbal spell from Westerling caused a gust of wind to whip up the staircase, and Albus’s Invisibility Cloak flew off his body and settled up at the top of the staircase.

“Oh!” said Professor Westerling. “If it isn’t the other Potter brother! I thought it was James I was hearing under there.”

Albus stood rigid out of shock.

“Did he lend the Cloak to you?” asked Professor Westerling. “Don’t worry, Albus, I won’t tell your Head of House on you or anything. I like taking the night shift, and when I find a student out of bed, I make them choose: you can go tell your Head of House that you were out of bed tonight and take his given punishment, or you can keep me company as I make my rounds. So, what say you? Want a little walk and talk?”

Albus’s shoulders dropped. “I guess so, considering the other choice.”

He knew he should be as compliant as possible. If Professor Westerling asked him to turn out his pockets… He hadn’t wiped the Marauder’s Map. It would be plainly visible to anyone.

“Well then, let’s go fetch your Cloak,” said Professor Westerling cheerfully. “I won’t confiscate it. Just, as I said, a little walk and talk will do. Though for some reason, many of my students seem to perceive this as more of a punishment… I guess I’m boring. Ah, well, as long as it deters you from doing it again.”

“Mm-hm,” said Albus, very much wanting to slip under the Cloak and escape again as they picked it back up, but knowing this would probably not win him any points from Professor Westerling.

“So tell me, Albus, have you been keeping up with Don’t Do Dark?” asked Professor Westerling. “I remember you were one of my students who applied and joined the group. Have you done any other work with them yet, besides just sign up because I was offering extra credit?”

“Er…”

“My son started that group,” said Professor Westerling proudly. “You know, he was only sixteen when he started it. He worked on the group for four years to perfect it. It was during the Dark Revival that he first had the idea. He wanted to—”
“Er, Professor?” interrupted Albus. Every second he was here was a second of Wilcox’s and Valon’s conversation he couldn’t hear. “I… er… I need to…”

“What?” asked Professor Westerling. “You have some pressing appointment at nearly three thirty in the morning?”

“Yes,” said Albus quickly.

Professor Westerling chortled to himself. “My boy, that was sarcasm.”

“But my answer wasn’t.” said Albus. “I have – Professor Desulgon gave me permission to be out here, so if you could just – you know – let me go again–”

He sighed and pressed a hand to his face as he realized how much this resembled the worst excuse Professor Westerling had probably ever heard in his life.

“So Professor Desulgon is your pressing appointment.”

“Yes,” said Albus firmly.

“Can Professor Desulgon confirm this?” asked Professor Westerling, amused.

“Yes, he can, actually!” said Albus. “He told me to meet him tonight.”

The idea just occurred to him that Professor Desulgon could release him from Professor Westerling’s boring grip.

“Well, let’s go run this by him, shall we?” asked Professor Westerling, gesturing to Albus. “Or have you changed your mind about who’s given you permission and why?”

“No, I haven’t,” said Albus, following Professor Westerling. “Let’s go.”

They marched down the stairs and turned the corner. Professor Desulgon’s office was just ahead, and they turned into the first room on the left.

“Hello, Dalton!” said Professor Westerling.

Professor Desulgon was asleep on his back on a comfortable-looking futon that had been shoved into the corner of his office. He was hugging a large pink and purple unicorn stuffed animal.

“Whazzat?” he asked sleepily, leaning up. “Wha – wha’s that? My shift?” He then noticed Albus standing guiltily next to Professor Westerling. “Oh – hullo, Albus.”

“He says he was out of bed for a legitimate reason tonight,” said Professor Westerling. “That he had an appointment with you?”

“We does?” said Professor Desulgon, still not fully awake.

Albus shot him a look chock-full of *Get it together!*

“Oh – righ! Yeah. Yeah, we do. Yes. Yes, Wes, we have an appointment tonight. You can… you can go. Yeah.”

Professor Westerling gave Professor Desulgon a Do-you-think-I’m-stupid look.

“Are you playing favorites now?” he sighed. “What did Albus do, that he can come to you to get
bailed out of trouble at any time? Transfigure you a whole barrel of fudge?”

“No, Wes, it’s… Merlin, I can’t think when I wake up… Augh. My brain is funking. No, you know what, you and I have been talking about this, Westley, and I think I can tell you. Go on, Albus, I want to talk about this with Professor Westerling. Skedaddle before you miss them.”

“Miss who?” asked Professor Westerling.

“Wes… have you noticed Helio and Zayn acting… odd?” asked Professor Desulgon, rubbing his eyes as Albus slipped the Cloak back on and prepared to leave the room. He slipped his hand inside his pocket to get the Marauder’s Map, but before his hand clasped around it, he felt a sudden drop in the pit of his stomach.

He clutched his chest and breathed heavily. He was suddenly biting back the urge to scream.

He tried to force the presence out of his mind, like he’d been taught in Occlumency, but it was so much harder. He felt as though he were a one-man army being barraged from all sides by the enemy. His vocal chords started to shudder, and his mouth opened wide as the scream built up inside him.

“So you’re having *Albus* spy on them for you?!” Professor Westerling was shouting. “That’s… that’s so incredibly unethical!”

“I just don’t understand how the secrets they’re keeping can ever have any positive connotations,” said Professor Desulgon. “Why can’t they tell us? We can help – we can bounce ideas – why don’t they trust us with this information? Lives are at stake, Westley. Everyone’s life in this castle is at stake, and they’re not giving us all the information. I smell something rotten going on around here; something fishy. There’s rotten fish everywhere. I don’t like what I’m smelling.”

Albus was finding himself fighting the random emotions that were pummeling him. He was stuck in limbo – he was right on the verge of screaming, and yet he was able to stop the scream from leaving his throat.

“I… I’ve been smelling it, too,” whispered Professor Westerling, sounding suddenly as if he was about to burst out crying. “It reminds me of… of when my brother…”

“You don’t have to say it,” said Professor Desulgon.

“I have a confession to make,” said Professor Westerling. “I asked Geri for some of the–” He stopped mid-sentence. “Albus, are you still here?”

“What?” asked Professor Desulgon. “Albus, are you eavesdropping on us now?!”

“I hear you breathing,” said Professor Westerling. “That’s how I heard you last time. You can’t hide it, Albus. You’re… actually, you’re breathing very loudly right now… Albus, are you okay?”

Albus couldn’t speak – he was afraid it would come out in a scream. He also couldn’t move his body to take the Cloak off. He panted louder, trying to draw attention, and then the Cloak was flying off of his body again, and abruptly he lost control.

He whirled around to face Professor Desulgon and Professor Westerling, and roared, “COME TO ME, MY MINIONS!”

Professor Desulgon and Professor Westerling glanced at each other with eyebrows raised to their peaks.
“Are you… referring to us?” asked Professor Desulgon.

Albus’s head was then suddenly slammed with the traumatic force of running full-force into a brick wall. His eyes rolled up inside his head and he dropped like a stone as his legs gave way beneath him.

Albus was growing very tired of the dramatic blackouts he was constantly experiencing. The last one, though, interested him to no end. He had been consistently informed that Dismiusa was not an option for an explanation, but what else could possibly have caused him to shout, “Come to me, my minions?”

That rumor had spread phenomenally fast. Soon everyone knew that Albus had called Professor Desulgon and Professor Westerling his “minions.” It was becoming a source of great amusement for the Slytherins, who were constantly asking Albus when he was going to turn Professor Valon into his minion, and what his first act would be as dictator of Hogwarts.

Thankfully, most Slytherins shut up quickly after the complete and utter thrashing handed to them by Ravenclaw in the next Quidditch match – four hundred and thirty to zero. Albus wasn’t looking forward to facing Ravenclaw, but all he had to focus on was the Snitch. If he could catch it fast, the rest of the game wouldn’t matter. He brought James out with him onto the field and practiced chasing golf balls that James was enchanting, and spent a lot of time every morning improving every aspect of his game play. Before he took on Ravenclaw, he had to beat Hufflepuff, or it wouldn’t matter.

He was so busy that he didn’t really have time to brush up on his dueling; on the last Friday of January, the first meeting of the Dueling Club, Lucas won the Gryffindor’s tournament again to take the place in the next month’s Dueling Tournament. The Valentine’s Day Hogsmeade trip, the Quidditch match, and the Dueling Tournament were all evenly spaced by about a week each; Albus had a lot to look forward to in the coming month of February.

Until then, he was busy with Occlumency more than ever. He didn’t want to faint again. He wanted to learn how to control what was going through his mind.

But what he didn’t tell Wilcox or Professor Desulgon or Professor Valon or anyone else who was assigned to read his mind was that his motives weren’t to block out the thoughts completely. He just wanted to experience them without fainting.

Ever since that last night he blacked out, the night Professor Valon had called “the Severing,” he knew he could control the urges to act strangely. It was entirely possible to restrict his body’s reaction to the feelings while still analyzing what was happening inside his mind. He wanted to keep experiencing the fleeting thoughts flying through his head… because only then would he be able to truly know what was causing them. Maybe one day, he would see the green woman again – any maybe he could figure out who she was. All he had to do was learn how to control his thoughts when they were under siege, and who knew what he could figure out by observing what was going on in his head? He’d already had one chance – the pain in his head struck again on the next quarter-moon – but all he felt was pain, and a feeling like his head was split in half twice at the same time.

At least he thought he knew what was going on with Wilcox now, even though he’d never gotten down to the Potions classroom to listen in on his conversation with Professor Valon. It wasn’t as obvious to Professor Desulgon, or Professor Westerling, because they thought they were secure in throwing out this possibility.
Wilcox wasn’t sharing his ideas because everyone would think he was a lunatic if he told them his theories.

Wilcox thought it was Dismiusa.

“Valentine’s Day is in the air,” commented Albus, looking around the snowy town of Hogsmeade.

“In the air?” asked Aidan, scowling at a couple who were snogging in the middle of the street. “Isn’t it more of a presence on the ground?”

The boy snuggled himself closer into the girl’s chest and playfully nipped at her ear, and Aidan posed another question: “Why is the world so fascinated with eating each other’s facial extremities?”


Janelle was standing across the street, waving to him. She marched forward across the street, but Alana stepped in front of Albus.

“You know you still have to utilize the security question system,” said Alana, shrugging. She checked her pocket, and her eyes flashed momentarily.


“What was the first sentence I said to you?” asked Albus.

“Just ‘er,’” said Janelle, smiling and continuing to walk forward towards Albus.

BANG.

A jet of red light blasted from Alana’s wand without warning. Janelle’s body toppled into the snow face-first, and she was still.

As Alana placed Shield Charms all around them, Albus leaned over the body. “I can’t believe it,” he said numbly. “I really can’t believe it. I didn’t think the security question system would actually ever do anything.”

“Your friends were already impersonated once,” observed Alana. “Obviously, don’t step outside the Shield Charms until we know there are no others around. I’ll call up Rohan and ask him to send out a spell checking for magical disguises in the area… he’s better at that than I am.”

“Send him a Patronus,” suggested Albus.

Alana looked around. “He’ll probably have heard the commotion. He’ll get here soon enough and he’ll know what to do without me telling him.”

“Wait, Albus,” said Exo, clearly in the dark. “I thought that was the correct answer to your security question system.”

“Not completely,” said Albus. “But I’m not allowed to diverge to anyone, except Janelle and my personal guardians, how the question is supposed to be answered.”

If the person in front of him had truly been Janelle, she knew how important it was to answer the question in the way they’d agreed… but this person didn’t do anything right. Janelle wouldn’t have just said “Er” in response to Albus’s query. She was supposed to say the exact sentence. “I believe
it was, ‘Er,’ if I am not mistaken.” She was also supposed to scratch her head before answering, and then point at him while saying the answer. This prevented exactly the sort of situation that had currently almost occurred: Someone was watching Janelle and Albus to learn the answers to their security questions.

“You’ll have to change the question again once you really do find Janelle,” said Alana. “Remember?”

“Yeah,” said Albus. “I think I see her now – Clay is checking her to make sure she’s not an imposter. Looks like it’s her.”

“Oh, good, there’s Rohan, too,” said Alana, very relieved. “He’s casting the wide-range concealment detection spell. That’s a very difficult spell to pull off, you know. He’s cute and smart.”

It was probably meant to be an innocent, joking comment, but Albus wondered if he should take it seriously. Alana wasn’t interested in Lucy’s boyfriend, was she?

“No one in disguise nearby, Alana,” said Rohan. “Doesn’t mean that there aren’t plain-clothes agents, of course, so stay alert. I’m going to go take whoever this is into custody. Would you mind taking Rose and her friends with you?”

“I could keep an eye on them for you, sure,” said Alana.

“My guess is the Imperius Curse on this poor person,” said Clay, walking over to them with James and his friends. “They wouldn’t have sent someone who they would miss… they probably knew he or she was going to be captured, the question was whether they would be captured before or after the job was finished.”

“They’re going to need a lot more Aurors when Lily and Hugo come through,” muttered Alec in Albus’s ear.

“Thank goodness it was before and not after the job was finished,” said Alana. “All right, Rohan… take ‘em.”

Rohan lifted the limp body of the Janelle impersonator onto his back and then Disapparated with a crack.

Alana and Clay tensed in reaction to the sound; Albus assumed they were trained to respond immediately to the source of any Apparition. Rose, Pallie Bell, and Dorothy begrudgingly joined Albus, Aidan, Alec, Mia, and Exo, and then Janelle trotted over once the Shield Charms were let down.

“Albus, security question!” hissed Rose as Janelle walked right up to him.

“Rohan already confirmed there was no one else in disguise,” said Albus.

“Oh. Right.”

Janelle hugged him tight around the waist. “Ooh, that was unsettling,” she muttered. “Seeing your own form, Stunned on the ground like that… It was like an out-of-body experience.”

“I know what you mean, Janelle,” said Exo. “In our third year we studied boggarts, and Albus’s boggart transformed into my dead body.”
“Oh?” said Janelle, looking proud of Albus for his noble fear.

“It also turned into your dead body,” added Rose.

Janelle turned to Albus, looking pleasantly surprised. “Really?”

“Well, yes,” said Albus, turning a little red.

“That is so sweet,” she said, hugging him tighter.

Albus hugged her tighter back. He would have loved to go to Madam Puddifoot’s with Janelle, but there weren’t enough Aurors to spare.

There were never enough Aurors to spare…

Albus took Janelle on another typical Hogsmeade date. But even typical in Hogsmeade was always great. Aidan, Alec, Mia, and Exo even consented to join James and his friends with Clay for enough time to let Albus and Janelle go alone (well, alone with Alana) into Madam Puddifoot’s tea shop. Alana sat awkwardly by herself a few tables over while Albus and Janelle had a nice little date. She was constantly on the watch, of course – the fake Janelle had spooked her, and the Marionette’s Medicine or the Imperius Curse wouldn’t be detected by Rohan’s spell – but she did have a quite reliable Pocket Sneakoscope that she consistently checked, and from what Albus could tell, it didn’t seem to be going off.

“This is a very nice place,” commented Janelle. “But, the naked baby flying above our heads is creeping me out.”

“Yeah, it’s kinda weird,” laughed Albus. There was a small enchanted Cupid doll fluttering on its glistening golden wings around the room, which was occasionally hooking little arrows with heart-shaped points and letting them fly into peoples’ backs.

“Is it going to jab us with those?” asked Janelle, peering over her shoulder as it passed.

Albus looked down at the little menu in front of them.

Love Arrows – Increase your libido! Remind yourself how to move your body and reigneite that old burnt-out wick. Six Sickles a shot. Do not attempt flying afterwards, or in addition to increased risk of crash you may find yourself doing interesting things to your broom handle. Must be 17 or older to order.

“I think we have to order it specially,” said Albus. He looked up just as an arrow flew into the back of a seventh-year facing him from the next table over; Albus distinctly saw his pupils dilate as a wide smile stretched across the boy’s face. He reached across the table and gripped the hand of his date even tighter.

“I’d never want anything like that,” said Albus. “If you have to fake the feelings, why bother?”

“Oh?” asked Janelle, prompting him to continue.

“Yeah,” said Albus. “I mean, when I’m with you, I just feel… I feel… naturally good. It just makes me happy to be around you. Do you know what I mean?”

Albus had never had success talking to girls, but his heart was storming out of his mouth unimpeded today.
“I know exactly what you mean,” said Janelle. “Because I feel it, too!” She tilted her head and smiled.

Albus leaned forward to kiss her, and she leaned forward to meet him. The table had seemed awkwardly small at first, but now Albus knew why – they didn’t have to lean as far to do what everyone who entered Madam Puddifoot’s was expected to be doing. Except Alana, who, when they leaned back into their chairs, seemed to be signaling them frantically. Janelle turned around as Albus looked over to their guard, and Alana pulled the Pocket Sneakoscope out of her pocket. It was lit, spinning and whistling, drawing some attention from nearby tables. Someone untrustworthy was nearby.

Albus took Janelle’s hands and climbed out of his seat, ready to escort her behind Alana if they needed to get out, but then the door opened and the untrustworthy person herself walked in.

Albus walked over to Alana and patted her on the shoulder. “It’s okay, Alana, it’s not a threat. It’s just Holly Glissendale.”

“What, do you know her?” asked Alana.

Albus exhaled deeply. “Oh, boy, do I know her.”

Janelle glanced up curiously.

Holly’s shifty eyes met Albus’s.

“Oh, hello, Albus,” she said pleasantly.

Albus was taken aback by the manner in which she spoke to him.

“Who’s this?” asked Holly, gesturing to Janelle. “What happened to that girl you were snogging last week in the Transfiguration classroom?”

Janelle twitched for a moment, and then her eyes fell back upon Alana’s pocket, which was still lighting up and buzzing. Thankfully, she immediately picked up on the blatant lie.

“Holly, is it?” asked Janelle to Albus.

Holly huffed and looked away.

“Ah, yes, Albus had mentioned you,” said Janelle softly. “He said that he used to be very good friends with you, but that you grew very cold and distant from him after I invited him to the Yule Ball. It’s a real shame. From what he said about your friendship before I showed up, I feel as though I would have really liked to have been friends with you.” Holly snorted, and Janelle turned to Albus. “I think you owe her an apology.”

“What?!” said Albus, backing away. “I owe her an apology?”

“Yes, you were an idiot and you led her on,” said Janelle calmly. “Why do you think she is mad at you? She wouldn’t be this hurt if she had not been under the belief that she would be in my place right now. Her expectations would not be crushed if she had not had any. You need to apologize to her for upsetting her.”

Holly narrowed her eyes, and tried to sneer, but she couldn’t help the slight smirk that teased her lip.
“I… er… I’m sorry, Holly,” said Albus quietly.

“Yeah, well…” Holly huffed. “Apology… accepted.”

Albus stared at her.

“That was a very nice apology, Albus,” said Janelle. “See? Maybe you two could even be friends again soon.”

“How did this happen?” asked Albus, gesturing towards Holly. “She hated me for an entire year, and now… she’s accepting my apology, just like that?”

“It is not very hard to hurt a girl’s feelings,” lectured Janelle. “It is not very hard to hurt anyone’s feelings. But it is also not very hard to fix your mistakes if you are genuine in your efforts. I assume you did not attempt to fix any damage. Obviously if you fail to make any repairs, everything is still going to be broken!”

“I didn’t know,” muttered Albus.

“That is nonsense,” said Janelle. “You lost a friend; of course you knew something was wrong.”

“Keep her around, Albus,” laughed Holly. “If only for the common sense you so grievously lack.”

The Sneakoscope died in Alana’s pocket.

As Alana took out the Sneakoscope and flicked it with her fingernail to see if it had broken, Albus smiled at Holly, and for the first time in a long time, she smiled back.

The door opened again, and Lucas Lotor walked into Madam Puddifoot’s, caught sight of Holly, and walked over, putting an arm around her shoulder.

As Albus gawked, Lucas whispered something in her ear; Holly shook her head and said, “No, it’s all fine, actually.” She waved goodbye to Albus and Janelle, and took Lucas’s hand as he led her to a table across the room.

Albus and Janelle spent a bit more time in Madam Puddifoot’s, and then it was time for Janelle to go. She kissed him as she often did – once on each cheek and then once on the lips – and then she departed to go with her sister Donna, who was picking her up.

“Are you going to see Janelle again before the term ends?” asked Alec, who joined Alana again with Mia, Aidan, and Exo.

“There’s another Hogsmeade weekend coming up in mid-April,” said Mia.

“Yeah, we talked about that,” said Albus. “I wanted to go to Beauxbatons, because Janelle is always coming here and that’s not fair to her. But the Aurors say it would be better if I stayed out of areas that I’m not completely familiar with, unless I bring all of them, and that would just be weird.”

“Awkward third, fourth, and fifth wheels,” quipped Alec.

“Where are we going to go now?” asked Aidan.

“I’m headed back,” said Albus. “I need to go practice.”

“Practice Quidditch?” laughed Alec. “You’ve been practicing every second of free time you have!”
“Don’t listen to him, Albus,” warned Exo. “Of course he doesn’t want you to practice – he wants Ravenclaw to win the Cup.”

“We’re going to win regardless,” said Alec, “which is why I think practicing is pointless for Albus!”

“And he wants his girlfriend to beat you,” added Exo.

“She’ll beat him no matter how much he practices,” boasted Alec.

Albus smiled back at his friend. Alec didn’t know just how much Albus had improved during his practice these past couple of weeks. It would only be seven days until they found out who the victor would be. The thought made him slightly seize up in terror, but his Occlumency classes weren’t just helping him shake off foreign thoughts; they were also helping him shake off his own. He was casting the fear out of his mind as effectively as he was casting Wilcox out.

Of all the weird things Albus had experienced in his schooling, one of the weirdest was hearing Barry Dunbar, their Quidditch announcer for four years, declare Albus’s name to the roaring stands.

“And here’s the Gryffindor Seeker, Albus Potter! James Potter’s little brother takes his spot today, as James is suspended from Quidditch for the rest of the season. The hopes of Gryffindor rest, as they have since James arrived, in the hands of a Potter! Most professional analysts – by professional analysts I mean me and my friends sitting in the Gryffindor common room – predict that unless Silva Brightstar can hold off all three Greengrass triplets in the match against Ravenclaw, Gryffindor’s best shot is going to be whether Albus Potter can find the Snitch fast. Let’s see him in action, in Hogwarts’s first ever Quidditch match in which neither team’s Captain will be playing! While James Potter is suspended, Jason Lindley is all the way in South Africa!”

“Line up!” yelled Madam Duopold. “Clean game, no funny business… no funny business at all… don’t even attempt any slightly amusing business.”

She threw the Quaffle high into the air.

Albus, highly concerned about what had just happened, stayed on the ground. Every other player also remained on the ground.

The Quaffle plummeted back down and smacked into the ground with a soft WHUMP.

Madam Duopold threw her arms into the air. “What the hell are you doing?” she groaned. “I threw the Quaffle!”

“Yes,” said Roxanne patiently, “but the Bludgers and the Snitch are still in the box.”

Madam Duopold looked down. “So they are,” she said, crinkling her nose. “Sorry, everyone. I should have… Oh, goodness me. My head.”

She pressed a hand to her temple, and Albus suddenly felt a sharp pain rip across his own forehead.

“I’m sorry,” said Madam Duopold. “I haven’t been feeling well. Forgive my forgetfulness.”

She seemed to notice Albus react to the headache, and she gave him a funny look.

Madam Duopold released the Snitch and the Bludgers, and then she threw the Quaffle into the air
“Okay!” came Barry’s bellow back across the pitch. “After a bit of confusion, we’ve finally started our match. Roxanne Weasley makes the first excellent Bludger move, bashing it right in front of Bell’s Quaffle toss, which makes it nearly impossible for the Keeper to catch – no, young Helen Foster cannot handle it! Weasley and Bell must have practiced that sweet move a lot in practice, lucky for them the Bludger was in the right position! A combination of luck and surprising skill gives Gryffindor the first score and it’s ten to zero while Hufflepuff takes the Quaffle…”

Albus tried to use his mental training to shove the morning’s pressing thought into the back of his head: *why was Madam Duopold connected to his head?*

He knew he wanted to find the Snitch first… his headaches had been going on for the entire school year and it probably wasn’t an urgent matter right now of all times. But he was continually distracted by the confusion brought on by his simultaneous head pain with the Quidditch coach.

He alternated watching Mia and scanning the pitch for the Snitch himself. He carefully observed the rounds that Mia was making, and then continually stayed in front of her while she made her rounds – that way, he would see anything before she saw it. But then Mia changed her mind when she saw Albus in front of her, and she changed directions.

“Our two fourth year Seekers are looking like a professional pair up there right now. Gryffindor takes another goal – ninety to ten! The Leigh sisters seem to have greatly improved, as has Bell, but they’re also getting a ton of help from Beaters Roxanne and Freddie Weasley, who are so attuned to one another it’s like they’re siblings or something! They’re going to need all the help they can get from the Greengrasses – MIA MOON SPOTS THE SNITCH!”

*No, she didn’t*, thought Albus, after his heart skipped a beat. *She’s trying to draw me off – I was in front of her before she saw it, and I would have seen it… right?*

“What is Albus Potter doing – he’s not even reacting! He’s just chilling up there – oh, I see! Mia Moon comes out of her dive empty-handed. It was a diversion, but Albus saw through it.”

Albus looked across the field at Madam Duopold, who was rubbing her forehead. He saw her wand poke out of her sleeve; she cast some sort of incantation on her head, probably forcing the pain away with magic…

But if one were to force pain away, where exactly did that pain go? What if there was some sort of a mental connection? Would the pain go instead to the person whose mind was connected to yours?

Albus shook his head and reminded himself to look for the Snitch – but just before he looked away, he saw it zip several feet over Madam Duopold’s head.

He rocketed forward and zoomed over Madam Duopold’s head as well, coming on the Snitch from an angle. Barry was shouting something, but Albus forced everything else out of his head and focused only on the Snitch… except he kept getting the funny feeling that he was leaving his head open for something else by pushing everything out.

Five seconds later, the Snitch appeared to notice him coming, and it changed directions; he swiveled his trajectory, aiming right into the stands, and accelerated with his last possible burst of speed; Mia was nowhere to be seen, and his fingertips were half an inch away – a quarter inch–

Brightness burst across his vision and a pain filled his head like a screwdriver in his brain. He
couldn’t see, hear, or feel – all he could do was close his hand and hope that he’d caught the Snitch, because he couldn’t feel it, but then he waved his arms and legs freely and was surprised to find that he was no longer on a broom.

The massive migraine subsided and he regained his senses just in time for him to see his body flying through the air almost horizontally due to the speed he’d had on his broom, which was sailing over the stands as he started plummeting downwards directly into them.

Someone leapt from their seat and shouted “BOLSTRA!”

Albus felt like he’d crashed into a very soft pillow, but crashed nonetheless; his neck jammed into his spine and he felt something snap in his leg as his head ended up jammed through a seat into the wooden underside of the stands. The Cushioning Charm, however, had probably saved him life-threatening if not life-ending injuries. He felt his head pulled out of the stands and he looked to his side; clutching her wand against her chest was Holly.

“Well, that was impressive,” said Lucas with a grimace, standing next to her.

Albus felt tiny wings beating against his closed fist.

“You’re lucky you didn’t snap your neck!” crowed Madam Birchbaum. “Physical injuries are easily remedied by magic, but if you die instantly then I’m sorry but there’s nothing I can do!”

“It wasn’t my fault!” protested Albus. “I was getting the Snitch and I sort of blacked out, except I was seeing brightness, not darkness, and I couldn’t see, hear, or feel anything. It was like my brain was Stunned.”

“That’s odd,” said Madam Birchbaum, pursing her lips.

“Why?” said Albus, feeling as though he knew the answer.

“I sent someone to St. Mungo’s just before you arrived,” said Madam Birchbaum. “She described a similar sensation – the exact same one, in fact. Dottie Duopold. She fell off her broom the same time you did. I thought that was just a coincidence.”

“She fell off her broom?”

“Yes, apparently a spell she cast to rid herself of a migraine did not work,” said Madam Birchbaum. “She should have come to me with a migraine that bad – it doesn’t sound normal. You should have come to me, too!”

“I have, several times,” said Albus. “It was never this bad until that fall.”

“So Occlumency hasn’t been working?”

“No, it has. That was just… super unexpected and I didn’t have time to react.”

“Your mind is still slightly scarred open,” said Madam Birchbaum. “I was hoping it would have closed up by now…”

“Is there any reason Madam Duopold would have her mind scarred open, too?” asked Albus. “I mean, we’re the only two who felt that. It can’t have been a coincidence, but then why only her and no one else?”

“Madam Duopold recently lost her sister,” said Madam Birchbaum sadly. “Just this past month.
She’s been complaining about headaches ever since, but none of the potions I’ve given her have been helping. At least one good thing has come out of this: we know it’s not just you… there really is just something in the air, so to speak. Some ambient energy that’s affecting those people with mental trauma, physical or emotional. ...On further thought about all this, I should probably ask Professor Wilcox before I tell you these sorts of things…”

“I won’t tell anyone,” said Albus.

“Yes, so I think Madam Duopold will be taking a leave of absence,” said Madam Birchbaum, “so someone else will have to referee the next Quidditch match if she doesn’t come back this year.”

A knock came at the door.

“Oh, that’ll be your admirers,” sighed Madam Birchbaum. “I’ll let them in if you’re okay?”

“Yeah, I feel fine, as long as I don’t get another headache,” said Albus.

Madam Birchbaum frowned. “If you do, push your pillow off your bed.”

“What, so I can lie down flat? Will that help?”

“No,” said Madam Birchbaum, heading to the door. “When your pillow leaves your bed, a little alarm goes off. It’s the hospital wing’s method of getting help to students who can’t vocalize an immediate need for attention. And I have a feeling I won’t be able to hear you after I open this door…”

She unlocked the door, and in rushed what seemed like the entire Gryffindor House, cheering for him.

Albus grinned. His crash had obviously been worth it.

Albus skipped the Dueling Tournament; Madam Birchbaum advised him against being around loud noises and bright flashes for the next week. Instead, he sat in the common room and waited for everyone to come back and tell him the results.

Lily won the second years’ tournament, Lucas won the fourth years’ tournament, and the heinous Asher Pierce had taken the seventh years’ tournament, but only because Louis was outside of the country at the moment. Ravenclaw cleaned up house this time rather than Gryffindor; Albus was partially glad he didn’t watch it, except for missing his sister’s performance. He wanted to ask Rose how Hugo did, but she was nowhere to be found. In fact, even the next day, he didn’t see Rose at all – according to Pallie, she was in the library and had been all day for the past few days. He didn’t exactly know why she had decided to spend every second in the library that wasn’t spent in class, but he didn’t question it. Her reasoning, though, was revealed to him on Sunday, when she came to lunch looking extremely excited.

“Albus,” she said, her eyes twinkling as she sat down next to him. “I found something – I finally found a book in the library on Dismiusa.”

“What?!” exclaimed Albus, almost leaping up. “We looked for one of those for a long time in our first year… I didn’t think – wait, then where is it? Do you have it?”

“It’s in the Restricted Section,” said Rose.

“Oh.”
“I’m trying to think of a way I could convince a teacher to let me check it out… but I can’t think of any. Can you?”

Albus sat in thought. “Give me a day or two. Maybe I’ll think of something.”

“I just can’t shake the feeling that the legend is at least very partially true,” said Rose. “That’s why I want to check out this book.”

“I do, too,” said Albus. “What’s it called?”

“It’s called *The Descent of Dismiusa*. You’ll know it by the cover – it has a picture of a green woman on the front.”
“This is absolutely ridiculous,” muttered Rose as she rolled an iron coin across the floor.

Professor Allira was watching carefully, eyes as wide as a hunting cat’s. She observed the iron coin as it wheeled towards the middle of the room. Then, right before it was about to pass over the edge of the drawing of a circle that Professor Allira had painted on the floor of the Divination classroom, the iron coin made a strange little turn to the right and flopped over to its side.

“Oh, dear,” said Professor Allira glumly. “Didn’t even make it into the circle.”

“Should I try again?” asked Rose.

“No, it has nothing to do with how you rolled it,” said Professor Allira.

“It has everything to do with how I rolled it. It could be completely explained by physics.”

“It can be completely explained by psychics,” agreed Professor Allira. “Glad to see you are opening your mind at last!”

“I said physics, not psychics!” burst Rose.

“The coin did not enter the circle for a reason,” said Professor Allira. “I’ve drawn one hundred and eighty four lines inside that circle; whichever lines the coin passes over, and whichever lines it lands on, determines the future of your financial situation for the rest of your life. But because of your pitiable inability to connect with the metaphysical, you are unable to penetrate the mysteries in the future and I can unfortunately say nothing about your future financial well-being… though I would have liked to…”

“Yeah, well, there’s a bunch of things I would have liked to say about you,” muttered Rose out of the corner of her mouth, lifting herself up and walking next to the painted circle to stare at the lines, thoroughly unimpressed.

Albus was next; he rolled the iron coin with less force than Rose, but it still reached the circle and settled right on the outside rim.

“Oh, goodness,” said Professor Allira. “You’re going to be stricken with poverty. You’ll have absolutely nothing. Constantly on the move, depressed and poor even in spirit, with very little left to live for–”

Rose walked forward in irritation and kicked the iron coin across the room; it struck the opposite wall and bounced off, then rolled back towards the painted circle. It settled right in the middle.

“Oh!” exclaimed Professor Allira. “It’s a sign! You will be very rich indeed–”

“IT’S NOT A SIGN, IT’S MY FOOT!” screamed Rose.

When the class was dismissed, Professor Allira was looking slightly agitated. Albus walked up to her and smiled at her to try to warm her back up.

“I thought today’s lesson was – fascinating,” he lied.

“Oh, good,” said Professor Allira, sounding relieved. “At least you do.”
“Er – don’t mind Rose,” said Albus. “She’s just a little… close-minded.”

“I can see that,” said Professor Allira.

“I had a question for you…”

“I know,” said Professor Allira. “Something having to do with your visions?”

Albus had to catch hold of his thoughts again, he was so startled.

“Yes, actually,” he said.

“I do not wish to brag about my possession of the ability,” said Professor Allira. “The Inner Eye does not normally see trivialities – I simply realized while I was eating this morning that you would come to see me about your visions today.”

“That’s impressive,” complimented Albus, this time truthfully.

“Thank you, Albus,” said Professor Allira. “Yes, it’s almost like remembering the future. For a Seer, the future is as a forgotten memory, of which we are constantly attempting to grab hold…”

“I have a silver lime wand,” said Albus, holding up his first wand. “I was told it was indicative that the possessor may be a Seer?”

Professor Allira shook her head. “Seers often possess silver lime wands, but the possessors of silver lime wands are not normally Seers. The gift is so rare that even though most Seers hold wands of silver lime, they still form a very small percentage of the holders. And I apologize, but if you were destined to open your Inner Eye wide to the mysteries of the future, other Seers can sense this. Dearest Sybill Trelawney knew from the moment I walked into my first Divination class that I was in ownership of the noble ability, as well as the fact that I would be her successor in this very classroom… But you wanted to ask me a question?”

“Yes,” said Albus. “You see, I’ve been having these visions when I have some of my headaches… Visions of this green woman.”

Professor Allira’s eyes widened dramatically. “Go on!” she cooed.

“In my visions, I usually see her in pain. I’m kind of… feeling her pain, too.”

“In pain… My goodness, Albus Potter, I wonder what this means… I’m afraid that as of now, I am in the dark…”

“Well, I might be able to find out,” said Albus with caution; now was the time he had to place his words carefully. “A friend of mine said there was a book in the Restricted Section of the library with a green woman on the cover.”

Professor Allira seemed taken aback. “Is there?!”

“I looked at it myself this past weekend,” said Albus, “and it looks exactly like the woman in my visions. I was wondering if you might give me permission to check it out – even if it doesn’t exactly tell me what I’m seeing, maybe it could give suggestions as to what my visions are symbols of…”

“Yes, yes, of course,” said Professor Allira. “Well – what is the title of the book? I shall write you a note at once.”
“It’s called, ‘The Descent of Dismiusa,’” said Albus, hoping that this divulgence wouldn’t cause
her to doubt the viability of his request.

Professor Allira hesitated. “Hm,” she said. “I would have to assume, Albus Potter, that you will
find nothing of substance in the book – but it still may help you to interpret symbolism in many
ways, so I shall grant you permission.” She took out a small slip of paper and scribbled the title of
the book on it, along with her signature. She started to hand it to him, but then stopped.

“What?” asked Albus, starting to worry.

She took the note back. “Er… how does one spell the name ‘Dismiusa?’”

“So she gave you the permission slip, just like that?” asked Rose as they entered the library.

“Well, she did take it back for a moment to correct her spelling,” said Albus.

“What, she can’t psychically determine the spelling?”

“All she asked is that I tell her if I draw any conclusions about my visions from the book,” said
Albus. “But I don’t really plan on following through on that… and it wasn’t exactly an
Unbreakable Vow, either – she just shouted it at me when I left the room, and I didn’t answer, so I
guess I’m not contractually bound to tell her…”

“You would have found a loophole either way,” said Rose.

They approached Madam Kohl, and Albus handed her the permission slip.

“I’ve got permission to take a book out,” said Albus. “From the Restricted Section?”

Madam Kohl adjusted an ancient-looking pair of glasses and peered down at the note distrustfully.

“What is your business in the Restricted Section?” she asked.

“What is your business in my business?” replied Albus respectfully.

Madam Kohl huffed. “Fair enough.” She waved her wand, and the rope across the entrance to the
Restricted Section lifted itself up. “Be quick about it. Also, don’t open or remove any books other
than the one listed on your permission slip, or you’ll regret it…”

“Duly noted,” said Albus. He took back the permission slip, and he and Rose wandered towards
the Restricted Section.

“There,” said Rose, pointing to the shelf where she had previously shown Albus the book she’d
discovered. “The thin green one.”

Albus plucked the small book from its shelf. “That’s the one,” he said.

On the front, there was a picture of a green woman. It didn’t look exactly like the woman Albus
had been seeing in his visions, but then again, how many people would have been able to survive
seeing her up close? Dismiusa also looked very calm in her drawing here, whereas Albus saw her
only in pain in his visions.

“We’ll have to read this together with Aidan sometime,” said Albus. “And maybe Exo would want
to read it, too. I don’t know if Alec would want to voluntarily read a book, though.”
“Sure, definitely,” said Rose. “Come on, let’s get out before Madam Kohl drops a bookshelf on us or something.”

“I gotta go to Occlumency right now, though,” said Albus.

“Still taking that?”

“Yeah, well, I’m still getting my mind assaulted. But now I can block out any of the teachers. Professor Westerling and Professor Valon have helped, too, so I can try blocking different kinds of Legilimency, since everyone does it differently. Wilcox said this will be my last session of normal Occlumency if I can do well again. After this, he’s just going to try attacking my mind to try and black me out, like what’s been happening all throughout this year, and I’ll see if I can resist that. If so, I may be able to prevent myself from blacking out in the future.”

“That might help your chances in the next Quidditch match,” agreed Rose. “But I have a bit of a problem with the thought of you flying again, anyway…”

“What?” asked Albus.

Rose tightened her shoulders and twiddled her thumbs. “Albus… I’m just… The times that you’ve had these headaches and blacked out… They were randomly scattered all throughout the first term. But then, it just happens to occur – right when you’re taking a risky dive towards the stands? The chances of the blackouts happening at times that would potentially kill you are slim to none, if they’re happening randomly.”

“What are you suggesting?”

“I think that by this point, whatever’s been making these emotions – Dismiusa or not – has figured out that it’s penetrating your mind,” said Rose, “and it’s targeting you.”

“Targeting me?” asked Albus.

“Yes,” said Rose. “I think that last attack on your mind was planned – timed to perfection to try and kill you.”

“I don’t know about that,” said Albus. “If that were true… I mean, these visions… They’re connected to the green woman, I know it. Like you said, Dismiusa or not, I really think there’s a connection to this green woman. And she’s in pain. She needs help, I think. Why… why would she try to kill one of the only people she can apparently communicate with?”

“Because you stopped the Fokii from opening that door,” said Rose simply.

Albus’s Occlumency lessons grew harder and more exhausting, but yielded good results. He felt confident in his ability to ward off the mental attacks now. The only problem was that the last attack was so sudden and swift that he didn’t have time to react to it; he hoped the rest would be more like the previous ones, though he knew the attacks could easily get worse.

At least he was now at the point where he didn’t have to accidentally give away important details of his undercover work, like the fact that he and Rose had checked a book out of the Restricted Section entitled The Descent of Dismiusa. If someone really tried to probe his mind with malicious intent, Albus probably wouldn’t be able to stop them, but that was the sort of ability he would learn over the summer from his father.

In the Gryffindor common room the next night, Albus finished up his Muggle Studies essay on
how Muggle “motion pictures” differed from magical moving pictures. The essay made him wonder even more about Litinia. Unless they happened to stumble across her other portrait, which could potentially be anywhere in the world at the moment, there was no way they would be able to find her. But why was she hiding?

“You finished?” asked Rose, shaking around the book they’d agreed to read when Albus finished his essay.

“Yeah,” said Albus. “Let’s get to it.”

Rose opened up *The Descent of Dismiusa* to the first page and they began to read.

*THE DESCENT OF DISMIUSA*

*by Gurt Gershwin*

**STORIES:**

1. *The Catalyst*
2. *The Awakening*
3. *The Descent*
4. *Return to Rest*

They read through all of Story 1: The Catalyst, which talked about a mysterious woman who experimented to great degree with the forms of natural magic in the early ages of the world. She invented a mechanism that could control all nature, but the construction of this mechanism did not go as planned; it backfired and imbued her with its power until she became one with nature, losing her original mind in the course of the procedure. She turned into a vengeful deity of sorts, a spirit, and called herself Dismiusa. Inside her lair was a boggart, of whose presence she was not aware, and this boggart was also barraged with energy until it became a creature which could also control nature; this was the first mulunctapol. But the process left her so wilted that she buried herself in the ground, waiting for a day when the mulunctapoli, her servants, would multiply and cover the Earth completely; once the mulunctapoli had drained enough wizards of their magic, they would channel it into her body, and she would awaken.

“How would it multiply if there was just one of them to begin with?” asked Rose.

“I don’t know,” said Albus. “I’m not sure how accurate this all is anyway, but it’s all the information we have, so it’s our best guess right now, I think.”

The next day, they read all the way through the second story of the book: The Awakening, and the third story: The Descent. According to the book, Dismiusa had no intention of destroying anything – that is, until she saw the horrible things that wizards began to do to the natural world in the early 1300s. She started taking them into the forest, never to be heard from again. Eventually she began sending out her servants, including Fokii, mulunctapoli, and a whole host of animals that Albus had never heard of, such as Clatterangs, Whirlworts, Hellhunters, Suttirfiujits, Cravants, Ivvixens, Vulupi…

“Hey, I know what that one is,” said Rose, pointing to a name of one of the animals that served Dismiusa: *Warkabull*. “That’s the animal that looks like an elephant with a stone wall on its head.”

“Oh, yeah,” said Albus. “Professor Allira gave me that card on our first day of Divination.”

“Those other ones, though,” said Rose. “I’m not sure what any of those are. I wonder if they’re even real.”
“Maybe Dismiusa made them herself,” said Albus. “She did have power over nature. Maybe she could cross-breed her own animals or something.”

Turning back to the book, they read about how these animals wreaked havoc on anyone who was harming nature – wandmakers were most at risk because of the methods they’d begun employing recently of burning down entire forests to find good wand wood trees, as the bowtruckles would fly through the air to escape, and the wandmakers could track the area of the forest from which they were fleeing.

“Hey, wait,” said Rose, interrupting again. “That Scandals book said Litinia murdered her entire family, who were all in the wandmaking business.”

“You think it was Dismiusa instead?” asked Albus.

“It makes worlds of sense.”

“Maybe Litinia and Sidland Darstary both went into the forest to find Dismiusa,” said Albus, “as revenge for the murder of her family!”

“And Litinia didn’t make it,” said Rose. “Maybe Sidland screwed up and felt bad for her death…”

“And then killed himself?”

“We might be onto something…”

“Let’s finish the book tomorrow, though,” said Albus, yawning. “I’m really tired, and it’s really late.”

“Yeah, let’s do that…”

“Read what?”

Albus looked over across the common room; James was standing there, leaning against the wall.

“Nothing,” said Rose quickly. “None of your business.”

“My brother and cousin are sneaking around without me?” James pressed a hand to his chest. “I am so terribly offended.”

“Good night, James,” said Albus.

James shrugged and turned back to his own dormitory, but Albus had a feeling that in the future, they should keep an eye on the Marauder’s Map to make sure James wasn’t under the Invisibility Cloak nearby when they were reading.


Rose placed the book onto their table in the library, next to the Marauder’s Map, where Albus was watching for anyone eavesdropping on them. She opened it to a bookmarked page, and they began to read again.

In this chapter, the author described how the destruction of the mulunctapoli weakened Dismiusa, as she couldn’t consistently utilize her power unless her servants were draining wizards and transferring the magic into her body. So she went back to sleep when all of her power was gone, not knowing if she would ever awaken again.
“But the mulunctapoli have come back,” said Rose. “So of course she would rise again now. You know, it really makes a lot of sense—”

“Someone’s coming,” said Albus, remembering to check the Marauder’s Map. “Mischief Managed.”

“James?” asked Rose, hurriedly stuffing the book back into her bag. She concealed it just as Professor Longbottom walked up to their table, but thankfully, he wasn’t looking at Rose; he was looking at Albus.

“I’ve got a message for you, Albus,” said Professor Longbottom. “From Professor Wilcox. Do you have a moment?”

“Yeah, I do,” said Albus, taking his apparently blank parchment off the table.

“Professor Wilcox says that Dr. Varnisse will be arriving at Hogwarts tomorrow for an impromptu session with Exorian,” he said. “He seems to think there’s something Exorian isn’t telling him recently, and hopes that maybe he could disclose these things to Dr. Varnisse.”

_Well, you’re out of luck there,_ thought Albus, biting his lip. _Exo’s not going to tell anyone about our upcoming trip to Moutohora…_

“And Wilcox wanted to know if you’d like a session with her,” said Professor Longbottom. “She’s not that much of an Occlumens, or a Legilimens, but she did get her degrees in the workings of the mind, and he thinks she might be able to help you close up that mental wound that Madam Birchbaum keeps mentioning…”

“Oh, really?” said Albus, brightening. “Yeah, I’d like that a lot!”

“Good, then,” said Professor Longbottom. “I’ll send a Patronus your parents’ way to make sure they give their permission. Of course they’ll give permission, it’s just for sake of courtesy that we’re asking… We don’t want to charge them for something they had no idea was going to happen. So be available tomorrow at 6:00 P.M. for Dr. Varnisse to accommodate you, if that works? Or would you like to go before Exo?”

“No, that’s fine,” said Albus.

“It may be later, if Exo wants to go a little long in his session,” said Professor Longbottom. “So, just keep that in mind as a general time.”

“Will do,” said Albus. “Thanks!”

“Have a good weekend, Albus, Rose.”

“You too,” said Albus and Rose together.

As Professor Longbottom walked away, Rose sighed. “Do you think we’ll be having Herbology classes back inside the greenhouses anytime soon?”

“I don’t think so,” said Albus. “And besides, Professor Longbottom cleared out all of the plants that are normally there and started growing Freezerburn Figs in there to help make the indicator potion for MM.”

“Oh, yeah,” said Rose. “Forgot about that.”
“Have they come up with a name for that potion yet?”

“Yeah – I think it’s called Oz.”

“Oz?”

“Yes, it has something to do with an old Muggle movie about a wizard – there’s a man called Oz, controlling a giant mechanical head or something, and someone discovers that he’s operating it behind a curtain. This potion is supposed to show that there’s a sort of ‘man behind the curtain’ controlling another person, so it’s named after that movie.”

“I get it.”

“Let’s finish up the last bit of the book, then, if there’s no one else coming?”

“I solemnly swear that I am up to no good,” said Albus, taking the map back out and directing his wand at it.

“That’s still one of the coolest things I’ve ever seen,” said Rose as the map turned itself back on.

“Nope, no one coming,” said Albus. “We’ve only got, what, two or three pages left?”

“Something like that,” said Rose, taking the book back out. She opened up the book to a page towards the end, and they finished the quick read.

But although there wasn’t much left to read, it looked to be the most important thing they’d read yet. All of this background was somewhat helpful to understand what was going on – if indeed this was what was going on – but finally, they encountered some substance: The author apparently did some spying on the centaurs, who reportedly swore an oath to prevent Dismiusa ever from returning. This oath was to be passed down through the generations, and it was why centaurs would always remain in the Forbidden Forest.

“The centaurs know about all this?” asked Rose when they’d finished.

“That’s interesting,” said Albus. “I wonder how much they still remember after seven hundred years.”

“The centaurs put a lot of emphasis on their ancestral history and their old traditions,” said Rose. “I think whatever’s been passed down, they all know by heart.”

“Maybe we could ask them,” said Albus.

“Are you suggesting we go into the forest?” squeaked Rose. “Now? With all the stuff that’s been going on?”

“We’ll take brooms,” said Albus. “Brooms will be a quick escape from anything, and they’ll allow us to find the centaurs faster.”

“No, Albus. No! What if you have another mental breakdown in the forest and you’re just sitting there unconscious?”

Albus sighed. He hated it when his cousin was right.

“If anyone goes into the forest to talk to the centaurs about it, it should be Professor Wilcox,” said Rose. “He knows the forest better than anyone.”
Albus looked up. “Or maybe there’s someone who knows the forest almost as well,” said Albus. “Someone who would be a lot easier to ask; someone to whom we wouldn’t have to give ourselves away to the teachers if we asked.”

“Do you actually have someone in mind?”

“James,” said Albus, smiling broadly.

Rose still didn’t take well to the thought of one of her cousins going into the forest, but if it was going to be done during the day, it didn’t seem to be as much of a threat. James could also cast a Patronus, which would help him against Fokii, and he stole some Moly from the Potions cupboards to take with him just in case. He also assured Rose that he could cast an excellent Supersensory Charm, and that if he ever sensed that anything was even the slightest bit wrong, he would jet straight up through the treetops on his broom, and keep going until he was way too far in the air for anything from the forest to reach him. After Exo snooped in his father’s office, found Wilcox’s map of the Forbidden Forest, and determined from the map a few locations where the centaurs could most commonly be found, James was ready to go by the next day, Saturday, more than twenty-four hours before the half-moon.

“Hey, James,” said Albus as his brother was about to leave the common room that afternoon. Albus and Rose had decided to wait for him in the common room to make sure he came back, though they didn’t think anything would happen while James was on a broom and under the Invisibility Cloak, in the middle of the day while everything in the forest was inactive. If the threat hadn’t been so reduced, Albus wouldn’t have suggested it to his brother.

“What’s up, Al?”

“When you find the centaurs, could you ask them if they’ve ever heard of anything called ‘The Severing’ for me?”

“What’s that?”

Albus rolled his eyes. “James, if I knew what it was, I wouldn’t be asking you to ask the centaurs…”

“Right-o,” said James. “But where did you hear it? In that library book you were telling me about? By the way, I’m extremely proud of you for snagging a book out of the Restricted Section.”

“No, I heard Wilcox say it to Professor Valon,” said Albus.

“Gotcha. I’ll ask them.”

“Be careful,” whispered Rose.

“There’s nothing to be careful of,” assured James. “I’ve been in the forest a lot. The centaurs aren’t as far from the castle as the things that you have to be worried about, and all of that stuff hides during the day anyway. Plus I’ve got my Supersensory Charm absolutely down; no one else in my year has it down this well.”

“Okay,” said Rose, almost inaudibly.

“Hey, it’s okay, little cousin, I got this.”

James left the common room with his broom, and a bag containing the Invisibility Cloak and the
Marauder’s Map just in case anyone was near the edge of the forest when he returned, to ensure that no one would see him flying out of the Forbidden Forest.

“He’ll be fine,” said Albus. “I heard Professor Westerling telling Professor Longbottom that the Supersensory Charm would be the best and foolproof way to thwart a Fokii’s invisibility. Apparently that’s how he keeps noticing us under the Cloak.”

“I just can’t help but be nervous about all this rule-breaking and putting-one’s-self-at-risk-for-no-reason,” said Rose.

“I think that’s because you take after your mum,” said Albus. “Definitely not a bad thing.”

James returned from the Forbidden Forest not long before Albus’s appointment with Dr. Varnisse was scheduled. He didn’t look incredibly pleased with the results of his voyage when he walked back into the common room.

“Did you find them?” asked Albus.

“Yeah,” said James gruffly. “But I might as well not have. I couldn’t get a straight answer out of them, about anything.”

“Did they say anything about ‘The Severing?’”

“That was the only straight answer they gave, actually,” said James. “They’d never heard of that before.”

“What did they tell you?”

“To leave the forest,” said James. “That I was in incredible danger as long as I was in the forest, and that Mars was bright again, or something.”

“Mars is bright?” asked Rose.

“I remember them saying that before,” said Albus. “Two years ago – after the Lunar Eclipse Festival was over. Professor Desulgon said it meant that the centaurs believed another war to be at hand.”

“So are they talking about the Sandbloods?” asked James. “Or about something going on in the forest?”

“I don’t know,” said Albus. “What else did they say?”

“ Mostly just, ‘Leave, youngling,’” said James. He made a very displeased face. “I am not a ‘youngling.’ I came of age a few weeks ago!”

Harry and Ginny were actually planning a visit to Hogwarts on Easter next month to celebrate. They still didn’t want to transport their children back and forth from the castle more than necessary, because any time they were in transit they were out in the open, so they told James they’d celebrate when they returned for the summer, and planned to surprise him by showing up during the Easter holidays. With all that was happening (like the imposter Janelle), it was hard to argue that the Potter kids didn’t need such protective measures.

“So they literally said nothing else,” said Albus.

“They looked kind of guilty when I first mentioned Dismiusa’s name,” said James. “Honestly, little
brother, I think she actually existed at some point. I have my doubts that she’s what the legends say she is, or that she’s still around now, but each new piece of information we get makes those doubts smaller and smaller.”

The portrait door opened, and James looked down to make sure nothing incriminating like the Invisibility Cloak was sticking out of his bag. Professor Longbottom walked into the room, followed by Exo.

“Albus?” he said. “Dr. Varnisse says she can see you now, if you’re ready.”

“Sure,” said Albus, lifting himself. “See you, James. Maybe we can talk more about this later, if there’s still anything to talk about?”

“Not really,” said James. “Good luck with your psycho shit.”

“Er, thanks,” said Albus, following Professor Longbottom out and down to the Headmaster’s office.

When they entered, Wilcox was not in the room. Dr. Varnisse appeared to simply be using his room as a staging area for the therapy session.

“Hello again, Albus,” said Dr. Varnisse, kind smiles appearing easily on both of their faces. “Good to see you again. Have a seat.”

“Thank you,” said Albus, sitting down.

“How have you been? Oh, and I’ve placed a handy little charm all around us – none of these Headmaster portraits on the walls will hear us talking, so don’t worry about confidentiality.”

“Oh, good,” said Albus. “So, what are we doing today?”

“I’m going to try my hand at spellwork,” said Dr. Varnisse, looking a little worried. “I don’t usually do this at all in any form, but I’m going to try a few basic low-risk procedures that may help you to block out unwanted presences such as those you’ve been feeling lately.”


“Nothing bad will happen to you,” assured Dr. Varnisse. “The worst possible result is just that there will be no result – that it won’t help. But it won’t harm, so there’s no harm in trying.”

“How does the spell work?”

“I’m going to talk to you, to try and soothe you,” said Dr. Varnisse. “I’m going to put you in a state of deep relaxation. It’ll make healing a lot easier. With any luck, I’m going to weave a web of words, and the spell I cast will sort of solidify them in your head. *Mementa* is normally a spell used to help a person remember something that needs to be remembered with high priority, but I think I can utilize it for a different function: to act as a sort of bandage, or a stitch, to actually stitch shut that wound. Do you know what stitches are, from Muggle medicine? It’s like that. It’s impossible to apply direct healing procedures to a wound that has occurred in the mind, but that’s simply because nothing in the mind is really solid – it’s all quite metaphysical. But this spell can create something almost solid, and I think it can therefore be used to act as a stitch. I will weave my words directly through the part of your brain that deals with these mental events you’re experiencing, by talking to you about the blackouts you’ve been having. This will direct my words directly to the source of your mental wounds, and I think that by weaving my words back and forth carefully, I can stitch the wound shut. There may still be some slight leakage, but it won’t be
“anywhere near as drastic, and if it works, you should heal much faster. Does this mean anything to you, what I’m saying?”

“A little bit,” said Albus. He could somewhat picture the process in his mind.

“Good. We’ll get started, okay?” said Dr. Varnisse.

“Okay.”

“Lean back in your chair.”

Albus rocked his chair back and forth. “It doesn’t lean.”

A quick nonverbal spell from Dr. Varnisse turned his chair into a full reclining chair; he instantly felt much more relaxed already.

“All right, Albus. Just follow along what I’m saying and think about every word carefully. Think about how it applies to you. Mementa.”

What happened next was describable only by the strange feeling that there was a solid object floating around in his thoughts. He instantly took each of her words to heart.

“You can repel these strange emotions that have previously overcome you. You have the power to do so. The power is only in your mind, and it is your mind. Nothing else can take that power away from your mind. Mementa.”

Albus felt a slight movement, like a worm sliding around inside his head.

“You are solely responsible for what happens inside your head. These unnatural emotions have found a way to penetrate your defenses, but you can simply find a way to rebuild those defenses stronger. Mementa.”

The worm slid around again inside his brain. It was an uncomfortable feeling, but he knew it was helping, and it wasn’t hurting; it was just odd.

“Your mind will heal. Thoughts leave the worst kind of scars, but they heal the strongest. The will to overcome your troubles is the Dittany of the mind. Mementa. It is very difficult to force your own mind to do something that seems impossible, but believe me, Albus Potter: it is not impossible. When there is a will, there is a way – especially when the solution depends solely on the will. Mementa. You are one of the strongest individuals I have ever had the pleasure of meeting, in terms of willpower. You have survived against all odds in the past, and you can certainly end this unfortunate affliction with your extraordinary ability; believe me when I say it. Trust me on this. Mementa.”

Dr. Varnisse’s words echoed ceaselessly in Albus’s head. He could barely hear anything else.

“That’s the conclusion of our little session,” said Dr. Varnisse. “See? Fast and painless. I know you’re feeling a little overwhelmed by echoes of my speech right now, but those feelings will subside. You will still hear my echoes faintly throughout most of your daily activities, but they won’t be distracting — they’ll just be there, to remind you that you have healing to do. You will hear the echoes up until the point where you have realized that your mind has successfully healed. And if this process has worked for you, that would be extremely exciting for the medical world, too, as this has never been attempted before in the past! How do you feel?”

“Confident,” said Albus. “Extremely confident.”
“Excellent,” said Dr. Varnisse. “I may get these procedures published!” She looked absolutely thrilled. “But of course, that’s not all I’m here for. If there’s anything you’d like to talk about, feel free to do so. I have the rest of the day free for this… My schedule is your schedule.”

“Should we let Professor Wilcox back into his office, though?” laughed Albus.

“Professor Wilcox isn’t here at the moment.”

“Not here?” asked Albus. “Where is he?”

“I’m so sorry, but I don’t think I can tell you that.”

“Okay,” said Albus. “Well… I do have something I wanted to talk to someone about… You won’t tell anyone at all about this, right?”

“Right,” said Dr. Varnisse. “Not a soul. Fire away.”

Albus began to explain his theories about Dismiusa’s involvement in the current state of affairs at Hogwarts, now that he finally has a non-judgmental ear to hear his thoughts. He kept glancing over at the portrait of Bolorant, but Bolorant couldn’t hear their conversation due to Dr. Varnisse’s charm. All of the portraits were currently pretending to be asleep, as well.

“And, well, just now James went to go talk to the centaurs,” said Albus. “Definitely don’t tell anyone that – he’s not supposed to be anywhere near the forest – but we did take a lot of precautions–”

“Hold on,” said Dr. Varnisse, holding a hand up in confusion. “Just a moment. You didn’t say that your brother went into the forest to talk to the centaurs?”

“Yeah,” said Albus sheepishly. “I know that was probably not a great idea, especially seeing as how we got absolutely no information out of it, except–”

“I’m just surprised to hear that, is all,” said Dr. Varnisse. “Because that’s currently what your Headmaster is doing.”

Albus blinked. “What?”

“He’s in the forest,” said Dr. Varnisse. “Talking to the centaurs.”

Dr. Varnisse’s words were ringing in Albus’s ears for the rest of the day, but they stopped after the very first day. The reason for this, Albus already knew. The half-moon had come the very night of their therapy session. Albus felt something try to intrude of his mind, but it appeared to give up in the attempts.

Dr. Varnisse’s spell had worked.

The centaurs, of course, had mentioned to Professor Wilcox that they had just spoken with James Potter earlier, and James got a private meltdown from Professor Wilcox. A letter was written to Harry and Ginny explaining what James had done, and Albus was expecting at least a Howler. Instead, though, it was only a very worried note that was sent to James. Harry and Ginny both wrote that they understood James’s inner desire to know what was going on and to get involved, but they were essentially begging him not to do so.

“Have you noticed the forest?” said Aidan as Albus walked into Herbology the Monday after his
Saturday session with Dr. Varnisse.

“No,” said Albus. “What about it?”

“It’s expanding again,” said Aidan. “But outward this time, instead of upward. It’s actually closed the distance almost a quarter of the way to Earle’s cabin.”

Albus looked out the window, but the window wasn’t facing the forest. “That’s… not good…”

“They might have to actually go out and drive back the forest soon,” said Aidan.

Professor Plinky squeaked to clear his throat. “Attention, class!” he said. “Today we will be learning a nonverbal spell! The only nonverbal spell you’ll learn before your sixth year, in all likelihood. Does anyone know what spell I’m referring to? Yes, Miss Weasley?”

Albus remembered James mentioning learning this in Charms two years ago, right before Rose said it out loud. “The Bubble-Head Charm.”

“Correct; five points to Gryffindor. This spell is very useful in many situations – if the room is filled with smoke from a fire, or if you’re underwater, you can always breathe fresh air; pollutants will not pass through the bubble around your head. Fists will pass through, though, so please don’t try punching each others’ bubbles to test them out; I’ve had students knocked out that way in the past. Now, this is a rather unusual spell in the way it is executed: Hold your wand vertically, straight up, and blow hard on the tip. Imagine that your breath is filling up an expanding bubble upon your wand, and your imagination will become a reality. You must also—”

“What’s that stupid clicking sound?” bellowed Riley from the back. The entire class fell silent for a moment. Riley was right – there was some sort of strange clattering. It wasn’t that quiet, either – the clicks were continuous and coming so fast that they were overlapping each other. It was almost like rain, but not quite; a quick look outside the window told Albus it was still sunny. He couldn’t determine the source.

“It sounds like… like a bunch of fingernails tapping on a desk,” said Mia.

“Or a bunch of pencils being dropped,” said Candice.

“What’re pencils?” asked Riley.

The clicking faded away.

“What the hell is going on in this place?” whispered Aidan to Albus.

“Louis! Gil!” exclaimed Albus, jumping up from his seat in the common room the following Saturday; the seventh years who had gone to the Loft-Mason School of Sorcery had finally returned. He hugged his cousin and his mentor. “How was South Africa?”

“It was exotic,” said Gil.

“Gorgeous,” said Louis.

“The school could use some work, though,” said Gil. “Maybe we’re spoiled because of the excellent education we get at Hogwarts, but most of the teachers there always seemed distracted and not completely interested in what they were teaching us.”
“But they liked getting us out and about,” said Louis. “We went to a natural reserve and saw wild
Erumpents. They even had Nundu cubs!”

“Nundus?” asked Albus, startled. “Aren’t those extremely dangerous?”

“They are,” said Louis. “No currently living natural predators, and it takes about a hundred wizards
to Stun a normal full-grown one. But the wizarding world has been working for a while to make
them less dangerous. They carefully track all the Nundus, and when they have cubs, wizards will
go and detoxify them so that their breath isn’t deadly anymore. Then they’ll train them not to attack
humans. It’s really working – there hasn’t been a Nundu death since Eldon Elsrickle in the 1600s,
and that one was his fault.”

“How was everything else?” asked Albus, trying to subtly figure out whether Gil was involved with
Rosco now.

Louis cleared his throat. “It was…”

He and Gil gave each other glances.

“Kind of awkward, actually,” said Gil.

“Ackward?” asked Albus.

“Headmaster Loft was really kind of cold towards us,” said Gil.

“Oh,” said Albus. “Does he… er… disapprove of…?”

“No, he was just kind of a jerk to everyone,” said Gil. “Rosco really looked up to his father, but
Isaac always made the mood of the castle… weird. It was just kind of a weird school. Erin Mason
was much better. I think she should be the Headmaster, but she’s just the Deputy Headmaster.
Yeah… Being in the school was just always one awkward situation after another. I don’t really
know how to explain.”

“You explained it well enough,” said Louis, smoothing his hair. “Everyone was always tense
because all the teachers were always tense, and I think the teachers were always tense because the
Headmaster was always tense and on edge. I was really looking forward to coming back, but it
looks like everyone’s tense here, too…”

“Yeah, what’s up with the forest?” asked Gil. “It looked taller at the beginning of this year than it
did last year, and now it looks closer.”

“We’re still trying to figure that out,” said Albus. “Professor Wilcox won’t tell us anything. He’s
looking pretty tense, too.”

“Maybe everyone’s just tense,” said Gil. “I mean, that is the climate right now. Tension
everywhere. You remember Ivan Siobor, the Werewolf Hunter? He’s picking up steam again.
When we stopped at King’s Cross to catch the train back here, they handed out newspapers for the
ride, and the front page story was something about Siobor. He killed eight people just last week…
all of them werewolves.”

Exo had just wandered into the room to say hello to Louis, his mentor, but he paled when he heard
the news.

Gil looked over. “Oh – hi, Exo. Don’t worry… no one’s going to get you in here. There’s no way
anyone is getting into Hogwarts, and your dad’s going to ensure your safety when you’re home.”
Exo nodded slowly. But Albus knew what he was thinking: Every werewolf was taking precautions, but Siobor hadn’t had a failed murder attempt yet.

“I can’t believe they haven’t caught him yet,” huffed Louis. “It’s insane. He’s one guy. I don’t understand how one person could do so much damage without getting caught.”

“Voldemort,” offered Gil.

“That’s different, he had a bunch of followers who were doing most of the work for him.”

“Well, Siobor’s got help, too,” said Gil. “John Solomon, right?”

Louis nodded. “Forgot about him.”

“But they’re on his trail now, aren’t they? I think I remember seeing something about that in the Prophet also…”

He dug inside his bag and pulled out the newspaper as Exo’s face paled even further.

“Right,” said Gil. “The Aurors found where he was hiding out… Apparently he was hiding out with someone else; they’re not sure who. Probably Siobor, actually. But they picked up his trail and they think they know where he is, and maybe they’ll find Siobor with him. They think they’ll have him within the week!”

Exo tried to fake a smile, but it wasn’t working. He turned back and went into the fourth year dormitory.

“That was stupid of me,” said Gil, running his hand through his hair. “Can’t believe I brought up Siobor around him. Sorry about that.”

“He’ll be fine,” said Albus. “We should go to lunch now… I’ll go get him.”

Albus followed Exo into the dorms; Exo appeared to be pulling himself together.

“This is my one chance,” he said softly. “My one chance to get cured, and to know that Siobor won’t be after me anymore. I really hope he gets away.”

“Come on,” said Albus. “Let’s go to lunch. Whatever is going to happen will happen, and we can’t worry about it right now.”

“I’m not hungry,” said Exo.

“Then just come and sit with us.”

Exo sighed and reluctantly followed Albus back out into the common room. They left for the Great Hall.

“I’m glad to be back,” said Gil. “I like the food here a lot better than the food there, too. The food here is made by house-elves and they always do a fantastic job.”

“The food at the Loft-Mason school is made by house-elves, too,” said Louis, confused.

“What? No it’s not, I saw the workers—”

“Caspar and I went down to the kitchens to snag a cake for his eighteenth birthday,” said Louis. “There were a bunch of house-elves in the kitchen.”
“Then what were all those workers always doing pouring in and out of the castle.”

Louis frowned. “Construction, maybe? I didn’t notice them.”

“There were a lot of men and women always going in and out of the school,” said Gil. “Not on any timetable or anything, just… Are the walls clicking?”

Albus froze and held his hands out so no one would pass him. He shushed them quickly and listened.

There was a faint rattling sound in the distance; it faded almost immediately.

“I don’t hear it,” said Louis.

“It happened in Charms on Monday, too,” said Albus. “It–”

Now there was shouting drifting from the floor below. They were on the second floor, and Albus practically sprinted down the stairs to find out what was going on.

“When I came back, there were saplings everywhere – and I could even see them growing as I stood there and watched–”

Faustulus Earle was holding Boderight’s little dog; Tippy looked scared out of his wits. Gimmick was weaving around Earle’s feet, trying to see if his friend was okay. Gimmick and Tippy often liked to play together.

“And then what happened?” pressed Wilcox. He looked over. “Albus, not now!”

“Tippy was in there – Tippy couldn’t get out – I had to rescue him, the cabin was being completely overtaken – and right after I left, by the time I got to the castle, the forest had completely engulfed the cabin! The whole process took less than a half hour! I’ve never seen trees grow that fast!”

“Hold on a moment, Faustulus – Albus, Exorian, leave now, this isn’t for your ears!”

Wilcox escorted Earle into an empty classroom and slammed the door behind them; Gimmick mewled incessantly at the door.

Albus rushed to the door that led to the grounds, leaving Exo and Louis and Gil behind him. He threw the door open and stared outside.

Earle’s cabin – which used to be Hagrid’s cabin – was simply gone. It was impossible to see it through the line of hundred-foot-tall trees that had suddenly sprung up around the cabin.

“Allus?”

Albus turned around to see Parker and Prescott Pullman coming up towards him. He closed the door in case anything else from the forest was closer than it should be.

“What’s up, Parker? Hi, P.J. or Scottie.”

“What’s going on?” asked Parker. “I noticed Earle was in the castle. He doesn’t usually come in here, what’s happening?”

“The Forbidden Forest took over his house,” said Albus. “There are just trees all around it now. He barely managed to save Tippy before it happened. Did you hear Earle?”

“I sensed him,” said Parker. “Auras, remember? Earle has been teaching me to sense auras? Only
about one in ten million people can do it, but it’s easier when you’re deprived of a different sense, like me. Anyway, I noticed that he came into the castle, and that he seemed to be really upset.”

James skidded around the corner. “Albus!” he said. “Did you look outside yet? I was just about to. Earle says—”

“–that the Forbidden Forest took over his cabin,” said Albus. “Yeah, I just confirmed that.”

“Can I see?” asked James, running to the door.

“Yeah, just… watch for Fokii or something,” said Albus worriedly, as James threw the door open.

There were now saplings sprouting even closer to the castle.

“Wait – there’s something–” shouted Albus, pointing in a direction where he saw some movement, but when he focused on the area, nothing had appeared.

“What?” said James. “Did you see something?”

“I thought I did…”

“Get back!”

Wilcox was charging towards the open door when they turned around to see who had shouted; they all cleared a path as Wilcox rushed out the door and started casting spells everywhere, uprooting every tree he could find. His spells were quick and effective, and in a matter of minutes he had cleared every tree all the way to Earle’s cabin, which was still intact but simply overgrown. Wilcox didn’t stop until there was nothing around Earle’s cabin anymore; no new saplings were sprouting. Wilcox barged back into the castle and slammed the door again before running out of view towards the Great Hall.

“I was listening to Wilcox and Earle with an Extendable Ear shoved under the door,” said James, grinning with mischievous pride. As they followed their Headmaster, picking Gil, Louis, and Exo back up along the way, James explained what he had heard. “Earle was saying that every month, right about at the end of the first-week of the month, he was sensing a strange presence underneath the castle with his aura-sensing abilities. Now, ever since last week, he’s been feeling it constantly, and it feels like it’s getting stronger!”

“This is what we come back to?” griped Louis as they finally entered the Great Hall.

Wilcox was standing tall at the Headmaster’s podium; many of the students were looking worried and exchanging loud nervous conversations.

“Please, everyone – please!” he announced loudly. “Please, quiet for a moment! Many of you have probably heard what just happened – some form of plant-based attack, likely stemming from the mulunctapoli or the Fokii, has caused the Forbidden Forest to expand outwards. I assure you, there is nothing to worry about – I’ve just taken care of the problem. I repeat, there is nothing to worry about.

Wilcox’s concluding comment made it very difficult to believe that there was nothing to worry about. In fact, it made things a lot worse. Albus even began to see things – as he reentered the Gryffindor common room after lunch, he thought he saw something almost invisible jump into the portrait hole behind him, and he kept imagining he was seeing something move around the common room; and as he went to bed that night, he thought he saw it enter the fourth year dormitory. It was extremely difficult to fall asleep.
Eventually, however, he managed to slip off into sleep, only to be woken up a few hours later with a sensation that nearly caused his heart to stop.

Someone was holding a hand over his mouth, and the person’s other hand was holding a knife to his throat.

Albus was almost about to scream as loud as he could into the hand, but a gruff voice whispered ever so softly in his ear, “For every sound you make, I’m cuttin’ out an eye. Run out o’ eyes and I take ‘em from your friends.”

His heart was pounding. The feeling of the blade against his neck – the cold metal against his skin and the serrated edge already creating a slight cut told him he was not currently in a nightmare, but in real life.

The room was incredibly dark, as it was the new moon outside, and the window was shedding no light. Albus’s eyes, once adjusted, told him that all of his friends were asleep at the moment; no one was going to help him.

“Where,” hissed the man into his ear, “is my goddamn knife?”

This accusation allowed Albus to suddenly realize that this man was Elbad Swait, who had insisted that Albus robbed his Hogsmeade shop and stolen his knife. That knife was probably now in Wilcox’s possession – it was almost certainly the knife that the Fokii had stolen, which it had carried to the door of the castle.

“Answer my question as quietly as possible,” whispered Swait. “I know it’s ‘ere. I ‘ave a trackin’ spell installed in it; no way I’m ever losin’ sight o’ where somethin’ this valuable is. I know my knife is in this castle, and I know you ‘ave it – I knew the ‘ole time it was you, you lyin’ bitch, you and your Invisibility Cloak! Where the ‘ell is my goddamned knife?! Tell me!”

“Professor Wilcox has it,” breathed Albus. “The Headmaster.”

“You expect me to believe that? You think I’m stupid?”

“He confiscated it,” breathed Albus back. It was true, but Wilcox had confiscated it from the Fokii, not from Albus.

“You’d better take me to it right now,” hissed Swait. “You’re goin’ to give me your wand, and you’re goin’ to take me to that knife, and I won’t kill you if you get me the knife. If you don’t, though, I got no guarantees about what will or won’t ‘appen to your little neck ‘ere. Got it?”

Albus was at an angle to, out of the corner of his eye, see what Swait could not. Parker Pullman had apparently woken up. Sensing an unfamiliar aura in their bedroom, possibly sensing his hostile intentions, he had slowly reached for his wand, and now he was slowly aiming it at Swait’s back. Albus wondered if he could accurately sense exactly where to cast the spell.

“I said, got it?!”

Albus was about to answer back, and Parker was about to shout a spell, when suddenly the room began to rumble.

“What’s goin’ on?” choked Swait a little too loudly, and a couple of other boys in the dormitory woke up – or perhaps it was due to the rumbling, which was growing in volume.

“Petrificus Totalus!” shouted Parker, and Swait ducked as the spell crashed just above where his
head had been.

An earsplitting alarm next blared through the castle, and the entire room lit up with lights like Christmas for a siege drill – except this wasn’t a drill.

“What’s going on?” shouted Jonah.

Riley looked over to see Swait standing above Albus’s bed with a knife, and he screamed; Swait leapt across the room and grabbed Exo’s wand.

“Stupefy!” yelled Albus, grabbing his own wand; Swait began to duel all ten fourth year boys in the room, who had all been woken by the blaring alarm and the flashing lights.

“Expelliarmus!” shouted Lucas and Albus at the same time; Swait’s knife and Exo’s wand flew out of his hands simultaneously.

“Siege drill!” shouted Timothy Taxton, the fifth year Gryffindor male prefect, slamming the door open as he raced into their dormitory. “Siege drill, everyone get into – BLOODY HELL–”

Swait slammed an arm across Tim’s chest right as Tim noticed him inside the dormitory, “Siege drill, everyone get into – BLOODY HELL–”

Swait slammed an arm across Tim’s chest right as Tim noticed him inside the dormitory, pushing him aside, and then he made a break for the door, but as Parker yelled “Petrificus Totalus!” once more, he was struck on the wrist by the spell as he turned the corner, and they heard him crash into the floor just outside the dormitory.

“What the hell was that about?!” cried Tim, picking himself up from the ground and staring with wild eyes into the dormitory. But no one heard him – the rumbling of the castle had grown to the roar of a massive earthquake. Beds were collapsing, the floor was rocking, and stones from the walls looked like they were coming loose.

“What’s going on?” yelled Albus inaudibly, as screams from their dormitory and other dormitories filled the air, and suddenly the window exploded as something punched its way through.

Albus looked over towards the shattering sound. The flashing lights from the siege alarms illuminated a tree branch that had burst its way in, right through the solid glass window, and was now slowly spreading into all corners of the room.
“WE’RE ALL GONNA DIE!”

“SHUT UP, RILEY!”

Albus made sure everyone else made it safely out of the dormitory and into the common room before he exited. Half of the dormitory was part of the Forbidden Forest by the time he exited. All of the other dormitories seemed to be undergoing something similar as well, because students in every year were crowded inside the common room. Albus shut the fourth year dormitory door behind him.

“Leave the door open!” yelled Freddie Weasley over the continuing sounds of the massive earthquake and the siege drill alarm.

“What?!” cried Albus.

Roxanne ran forward and threw the door back open that Albus had just closed. Freddie slashed his wand in a long arc from the fireplace to the door; a massive wave of fire slung itself from the burning logs and billowed into the room, consuming the trees. A shrill shriek pierced their ears, and suddenly the shaking stopped.

“Extinguo!” yelled several sixth and seventh years; the fire in the fourth year dormitory slowed down to a simmer, and then disappeared completely – but the tree branch was no longer in the room. As they watched, though, a thin pale-gray serpent with glowing red eyes slid out of one of the last remaining embers and slithered into a corner.

“What the hell?” shouted Louis, running into the room. “Immobulus!”

“Was that an Ashwinder?” coughed Gil, running after Louis. “That fire was burning nowhere near long enough for an Ashwinder to appear!”

“And it already laid its eggs,” came Louis’s reply from inside the room. “I can’t find it anymore – holy shit, it’s already laid more eggs! That’s not supposed to happen!”

“Immobulus!” shouted Gil.

“Diffindo!” shouted Louis.

“You got it!”

“What the BLOODY HELL is going on?”

The castle slowly began to shake again.

“Oh, Merlin,” muttered Lucy. “Boys, get out of that room before something else happens!”

“Everyone should stay in here by the fire!” announced Louis. “Freddie, Gil, Lucy, anyone who’s good with fire, get ready to defend the other students if anything makes its way through one of those fourteen doors. I’m going out to find Professor Longbottom, or Professor Wilcox, or anyone.”

“Shouldn’t we get out, too?” said Freddie. “No offense, Head Boy, but I think that right now it seems to be a poor idea to stay in this tiny little tower! We’d be surrounded easily.”
“But I don’t know how safe it is outside of Gryffindor Tower,” said Louis. “It could be way worse down there, which is why I’m going first. I’ll send a Patronus up here if the way is clear.”

“I’m coming with you,” said Gil immediately.

“You’re staying here to defend the other students,” insisted Louis.

“They’ve got plenty of other seventh years up here – you’re not going out there alone, you have no idea what’s out there!”

“Fine, let’s just stop wasting time,” said Louis, as the shaking once again began to grow to a roar. “Come on!”

He and Gil, wands at the ready, opened up the portrait hole.

“What have you seen happening out here?” came Louis’s voice as the portrait hole closed.

“Nothing – just a whole lot of tremors, and everybody running around wild,” said the Fat Lady as the portrait hole closed, and then her voice was too muffled to hear.

Only about thirty seconds later, a Patronus soared into the room, taking the form of a creature the size of a large cat, resembling a cross between a raccoon and a ferret; a red panda. It spoke with Gil’s voice. “Professor Longbottom says to get everyone down to the Great Hall! Split the seventh years in two groups and put half at the front and half at the back, in case defense is necessary on the way down!”

“Defense from what?” shouted Pallie Bell, but Patronuses were one-way communication, and the red panda disappeared without answering her.

“How many people can do talking Patronuses?” announced Freddie, taking command more than Albus thought his goofy cousin ever could.

Only one person raised her hand – Rose’s mentor, Jolene Ganlock. Albus wasn’t confident with his, so he didn’t raise his hand. He’d done it before, but that was a very unusual circumstance, and Aunt Hermione had said that the message sounded all garbled anyway.

“Send one down to the Great Hall,” ordered Freddie. “Tell them to send a Patronus back immediately if there’s anything we need to know about what’s going on before we leave, and that we’re leaving the second they give us the green light. And tell them that if we’re not down there within five minutes, that they should send a search party up to find us.”

“Got it,” said Jolene. She produced a Patronus without even speaking, and a silver parrot fluttered through the floor.

A few seconds passed, and then a few more, and then a silver panda burst through the floor in response.

“Start heading down in exactly one minute!” it roared with Professor Longbottom’s steady voice. “I will meet you just outside Gryffindor Tower and escort you down.”

Jolene’s parrot Patronus soared back through the floor and landed on their arm. The presence of Patronuses usually gave people a little more hope, so she kept it around as they prepared to go.

“Leave all belongings behind!” yelled Freddie.
“But all my hair products are in our dormitory!” bawled Candice.

“IF YOU GO BACK IN THERE TO GET YOUR BLOODY HAIR CARE POTIONS I’M GOING TO SHAKE YOUR BLOODY HEAD!”

“What are we going to do about him?” asked Parker, pointing over to the door of the fourth year dormitory.

Albus looked back, having completely forgotten about Swait, but when he turned around, there was nothing there.

“About who?”

“That man who broke into our dormitory, holding a knife to Albus’s throat! He’s right there!”

“Parker, you can’t freaking see!”

“I can sense a really unfamiliar aura over there; I’m telling you, he’s there!”

Albus remembered the feeling that something invisible was following him. Swait must have broken Parker’s Body-Bind; he was invisible again, and he was somewhere in the room with them.

“Homenum Revelio!” shouted Freddie, and suddenly trails of vapor leapt from his wand like embers from a hot fire; little red halos appeared over every student in the room, and one appeared floating over an apparently empty space in the corner.

“Stupefy!” roared Freddie; an invisible movement marked Swait’s jump out of his hiding place.

“Everyone, hold your wands tight! Do not let the invisible intruder take your wand – we do not want him to have a wand! Stupefy!”

A dozen more wands were aiming Stunners, but nobody could aim precisely without worrying about hitting a classmate, and Swait was able to dodge everyone’s attacks. The little halo followed him as he made a break for the portrait hole; he burst through it and charged into the hallway.

“Shit!” shouted Freddie. “I think it’s been a minute, though! Everybody follow me, stick together! Everyone that can use Homenum Revelio should stay at the edges of the group, casting it at all times and watching for halos over invisible targets! I’ll explain the complication to Professor Longbottom when we find him! Don’t let your wand leave your possession!”

“Are you sure Swait didn’t already have a wand?” shouted Albus over the shaking, which was growing even more.

“Who?”

“Swait – the man who just escaped!”

“You know him by name? What the hell kind of friends have you been making, Albus?!”

“Never mind how I know his name! Are you sure he didn’t already have a wand? He was invisible!”

“He wasn’t dueling back, though,” said Freddie. “And you can’t take a wand into Hogwarts without school security knowing immediately, so he would have had to steal one once he was already inside. Is anyone missing a wand?”

Nobody spoke up.
“All right, we’re past our time; Professor Longbottom is going to worry! Follow me outside! Keep some seventh years at the back of the pack who can cast *Homenum Revelio* more than decently! Let’s go!”

James appeared next to Albus as they were walking out. “Check the map,” he said. “Find Swait!”

“Oh!” said Albus. “Right!”

It didn’t matter if the secret of the Marauder’s Map got out – not if lives were at stake. Albus opened up the map, recited the magic words, and tried to find Swait.

“There,” said James, pointing. “Elbad Swait. He’s hiding in a sixth floor classroom. I don’t think we’ll pass him. Keep it open, though. If he’s coming, let someone know which direction!”

The pack finally dispersed onto the seventh floor in front of the Fat Lady; Professor Longbottom was there, accompanied by Gil and Louis.

“Does anyone know of anyone who is missing?” he yelled.

When nobody answered, he waved them all down the stairs. The staircases were very easy to trip on due to the constant tremors, so they made their way slowly and carefully down to the Great Hall. Albus kept an eye on Swait, but also checked to make sure Lily was in the Great Hall. All of the other Houses were already in the Great Hall, though Hufflepuff and Slytherin were closer, so it made sense.

But there was another problem: A dot labeled “Bartemius Crouch” was practically knocking at the front door of Hogwarts.

They burst into the Great Hall as Albus stowed the map again; a few moments later, most of the teachers ran out again.

“Your teachers are assessing the situation!” yelled Professor Norton from the front of the Great Hall. “Do not leave the Great Hall! If you notice anyone you think is missing, come tell us; we’ll announce the name out loud to see if that person is here! Seventh years, keep your wands at the ready, and if you are a confident fighter, stay at the edges of the group!”

Lily ran over to the Gryffindors who had just arrived. She hugged Albus very tightly, then hugged James, Hugo, and Rose, who had all drawn together.

“Is the Great Hall’s ceiling supposed to only show the stars, or does it just show whatever’s outside?” asked Hugo nervously.

All five of them looked up simultaneously. The ceiling of the Great Hall had some stars showing at the top, but they were quickly becoming obscured by thick trees that were growing at a phenomenal rate. Within the next thirty seconds, almost every student in the Great Hall was staring up at the ceiling, and within five minutes, the Great Hall’s enchanted ceiling showed nothing but the dark canopy of an immense forest. The second the last sliver of starlight was extinguished, the rumbling stopped once more, and there was complete silence for a long time. The first noise to echo through the Great Hall after the end to the tremors was a series of wolf-like howls that sent uncontrollable shivers radiating down the spines of everyone in the hall, so violently that arms went flying, and some students’ legs gave out as they collapsed right onto the floor.

Wilcox burst into the Great Hall a few minutes later, followed shortly by Professor Valon and Professor Longbottom. Most of the other teachers returned to the Great Hall right after them, but a few were still missing.
“Where’s Professor Westerling?” shouted Aidan.

“And Professor Desulgon?” yelled Alec.

“Looking for an intruder we know to be in the castle,” said Wilcox.

“What’s going on?” bellowed a seventh year Ravenclaw.

Wilcox looked up at the ceiling. “Exactly what it looks like,” he said, pointing up. “We’re completely surrounded. Trees everywhere. The entire grounds of the castle is now comprised of forest.”

“Can’t you cut or burn the trees down?” came a loud question from one of the fifth year Slytherins.

“Er… no,” said Wilcox. “They’re…” He looked over at Professor Longbottom.

“Dugroot, Verdusthorn, Stingwood, and Magmarbor,” said Professor Longbottom. “All extraordinarily dangerous specimens, and resistant to magic.”

“Can’t you cut them down manually?” yelled someone else as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

“Not if we want to keep a roof over our heads,” said Professor Longbottom.

“What can trees possibly do?” yelled Riley.

Professor Longbottom looked like he very much would have liked to snap back, “If you paid attention in class, you would know,” but this was obviously not the proper time to say something like that. Instead, he began explaining.

“Dugroot digs pits in the ground to capture animals as prey to absorb into the trunk,” he rattled off. “Verdusthorn is covered in spines that will shoot out and burst once they pierce your skin. Stingwood’s roots will notice you and will follow you until they make contact with your skin, at which point they will sting you and drag you under the ground to fertilize their soil. And if Magmarbor is punctured, or even just touched by magic, it will explode and set the entire forest around it on fire.”

The tension in the Great Hall seemed to solidify; it became hard to breathe.

“You’re all going to stay here tonight,” said Wilcox. “You’re all going to be safe in here. The other teachers and I are going to do what we can.”

“I’d believe him that we’re all going to be okay,” muttered James, “if he hadn’t just been telling us right before this all happened that there’s nothing to worry about.”

“We’ve already contacted the Ministry, and they’re contacting everyone,” announced Wilcox. “This shouldn’t last. We’re going to isolate the problem and take care of it as soon as possible. This is the main priority of the entire government right now – ensuring the safety of our students – every top mind in the country is getting to work on solving this. There’s—”

“...nothing to worry about,” finished Albus simultaneously with Wilcox, but he was feeling great skepticism towards that comment.

“I’m going to go tell Wilcox where Swait is,” said James. “I’m just going to pretend like we saw him duck into that classroom. Is he still there?”
Albus peeked at the map through his bag. “Yeah. He isn’t moving at all.”

James ran up to tell Wilcox; it wasn’t a second after that when Wilcox was already through the doors of the Great Hall, running up to the sixth floor.

Albus kept peeking at the map until he saw Wilcox and several other teachers burst into the room. They appeared to subdue Swait, but they left him in the room; they probably just locked him inside for the time while they dealt with the rest of the problem.

The teachers insisted that everyone should try to get back to sleep, but no one could close their eyes, especially watching the ceiling – the trees were still growing. It wasn’t fast enough to see, but the canopy was getting noticeably farther. By the time it was supposed to be morning – it was impossible to tell with the trees obscuring every bit of light – the canopy was so far up that they could barely even see the individual branches, and despite Wilcox’s assurances… they still had not been rescued. Albus had been watching the Marauder’s Map most of the night, whenever he thought it was safe to look without being noticed; more than once, he saw Wilcox investigating the hidden passage. He wondered if Wilcox knew what was down there.

Breakfast was served in the morning, but it wasn’t as delicious as usual. Maybe it was just the tension inherent in the situation, or maybe the house-elves who cooked for them were distracted by the fate that had befallen Hogwarts. The walls of the Great Hall had expanded to give them more room, but it was still awfully claustrophobic.

“So, I guess this also can’t possibly be Dismiusa,” said Rose as she took a few unsatisfied bites of bread. “No way this could possibly be an abnormal occurrence…”

“Are they still saying it’s just the mulunctapoli?” asked Albus. “I mean, really… if this is what mulunctapoli can do, why aren’t there stories about things like this from the time that the mulunctapoli were still around?”

“That’s a really good point,” said Exo.

Up from the floor burst a wave of silver light; the Great Hall erupted with screams for a moment before they realized it was a Patronus. When Albus turned to look, he noticed it was a stag, and he leapt up from his chair to see and hear better.

“*The situation with the Forbidden Forest is unprecedented,*” spoke the stag. “*We have no way to contact you other than Patronus, and we’ve been unable to penetrate the forest so far. There seems to be some strange barrier around the forest, like a field of magic generated by all the magical vegetation. It’s repelled everything we’ve tried so far. We can’t even walk past this barrier. We’re doing everything we can to get through the barrier. We’ll get back to you as we know more about the situation.*”

The teachers who were watching over the students sent Patronuses to the teachers who were patrolling the halls.

Wilcox was the only one who sent a Patronus back to the Great Hall; he spoke loudly so that everyone could hear.

“*The situation in the school is under control. The windows have been sealed and no plants are currently growing inside the castle. Remain calm.*”

“There’s nothing to worry about,” repeated Rose sardonically.

They waited in the Great Hall until lunch before getting any more word on the situation. As Albus
was playing chess with Alec, Wilcox burst in. He had put on a businesslike air for his entrance, but it was easy to see that he was worried. Albus turned back to his game right in time to see Alec swipe one of his pawns, which he returned guiltily.

But Wilcox didn’t stride all the way up to the High Table to make an announcement; instead, he stopped by Albus.

“Would you mind accompanying me outside for just a moment?” he whispered.

“Outside?” asked Albus, slightly shocked.

“I mean outside the Hall,” corrected Wilcox quickly. “There’s nothing inside the castle, so it’s safe outside the Hall – we’re just keeping everyone here until we know our barriers are secure. Accompany me outside for just a moment. I wanted to ask you some questions about Mr. Swait.”

“Oh, right,” said Albus; he had almost forgotten about Swait in the wake of the larger event that had taken place the previous night.

They stepped outside, to curious glances from the rest of the student population. The door to the Great Hall closed, and Wilcox grimaced as Albus took in the scene.

There were charred tree branches and dead leaves scattered all over the floor. Peeves was flying around the school laughing, sticking leaves to the walls with chewing gum as he flew.

“I really don’t know where he gets all the gum,” sighed Wilcox. “At least it’s better than what he was doing before… he was grabbing a bunch of tree branches and pretending to be a forest monster or something.”

“Well, that’s not helping,” said Albus, not really sure how to respond.

“We’ll clean this up in a moment,” said Wilcox, gesturing to the debris in general. “First, I want to ask you what happened when Swait got into your room.”

“He had a knife to my throat,” said Albus. “But he was looking for a different knife. He was convinced I had it.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I didn’t know what to say, so I told him you had it,” admitted Albus.

“He was asking me if I had it,” affirmed Wilcox. “Don’t worry, I don’t blame you. That’s what any of us would have done. What did he tell you?”

“He said he was going to make me take him to the knife, or he’d slit my throat,” said Albus, shivering as he relived the scenario.

“And then…”

“And then the castle started shaking, and the siege drill went off,” said Albus. “That was it.”

“Did he say anything about why the knife was so important?”

“No.”

“I can’t get him to tell me,” said Wilcox. “I tested it for enchantments, but it’s repelling my tests. It’s imitation goblin metal, and it’s not a bad imitation at that.”
“Did he tell you anything at all?”

“No,” said Wilcox. “He’s just griping about the fact that he got beaten by a fourteen-year-old blind kid. Does everyone seem all right in the Great Hall?”

“Yeah,” said Albus. “I mean, as good as you can hope for. Most people aren’t freaking out too bad, but there are some people who Professor Allira and Professor Rhuavone have had to calm down because they’re losing it. And the seventh years who went to the Loft-Mason School of Sorcery are really annoyed that they came back to school yesterday for this.”

Right as he finished, another silver stag erupted through the floor in front of them; Albus jumped back for a moment and clutched his heart, which was racing.

“We’ve finally assembled everyone back at the Ministry to develop a plan. No new information what’s going on with the forest, but I thought this might be some good news to share: Nine of our Aurors were late coming in to the call, but it was because they found Solomon, and after a hard battle, they got him. They got Solomon, Helio.”

The news hit him like a punch in the gut. Albus stared vacantly while Professor Wilcox’s face broke into one of the widest grins he’d ever seen.

“This is fantastic!” he exclaimed. “Come on back in, Albus, I’m going to make the announcement to the school.”

Albus walked mechanically back into the Great Hall as Wilcox ran up to the front of the hall. He barely heard Rose ask why Wilcox had brought him out, and couldn’t look at Exo’s face when their Headmaster broke the news to the school. Cheers broke out from all corners; the sound of applause had never made Albus feel so sick.
“Do you think Wilcox thinks it’s Dismiusa?” asked Rose in a hushed voice as she, Albus, and Exo huddled together in the common room. The common room was now also the sleeping area for all of Gryffindor, since they were not allowed to enter any of the dormitories, so makeshift beds were scattered all over the floor. The doors to the separate dormitories were sealed, because there were windows inside, and nobody wanted to be in the room if a tree burst through the window again.

“I don’t know what he thinks,” said Albus.

“Do you think we should ask the other teachers?”

“I don’t think we should bring it up to anyone else,” said Albus. “Wilcox is dealing with a lot right now. I don’t want to make his life any more miserable than it already is. What if we start a barrage of questions?”

“I think it’s perfectly reasonable for everyone to ask him questions!” said Rose. “We’ve been surrounded by trees for a week! A week, Albus! Seven days!”

“I know what a week is…”

“If my dad knows anything, he’s not letting on,” said Exo. “He’s completely a closed book. But he seems to think he can fix it, whatever it is.”

“And he’s been going down that hidden passage a lot,” said Albus. “It has to be related. He’s investigating it too much to not have found anything.”

“Well, it’s not like he can investigate anywhere else,” said Exo. “The doors are barricaded to prevent the tree branches from growing through them. All we have is the castle right now.”

“How much food do we have?” asked Rose hastily.

“Dad says all the food we use in a term is brought in at the start of the term,” said Exo. “There’s probably enough for a little past the end of term. And it’s still only the twentieth of March. We’re not going to be in here for three months.”

“Wow, it’s not even spring yet,” said Rose. “But it’s close to spring. Maybe Dismiusa’s power fluctuates with the season…”

“Well, I hope we’re not waiting here till next winter,” said Albus.

The portrait hole opened, and in walked Professor Longbottom.

He held up a hand to dismiss the dozens of questions that were shouted at any administrator at this point, and he looked at them all sternly.

“Professor Wilcox says that we can’t be sure exactly when the current situation will… subside,” said Professor Longbottom, choosing his words carefully. “But he stresses that all of the top minds in the country and in the world are trying to break the barrier and figure out how to rescue us. So it can’t be long now.”

So far, he had said nothing new. They’d heard everything before – Wilcox constantly said it at meals. *Stay calm. There’s nothing to worry about.* But Professor Longbottom didn’t look to be
finished with his speech yet. He looked like he was really not looking forward to disclosing the next part.

“Given this situation,” he said tentatively, “and given the fact that we’ve already spent a week just sitting around and waiting… Professor Wilcox thinks, and the Heads of House all agree, that we should make the best out of the situation, and make the best use of the time… So classes will resume as normal, starting on Monday, AND SAFETY LESSONS WILL BE INCLUDED IN THESE CLASSES, AND THEY WILL BE HELD IN CLASSROOMS WITHOUT WINDOWS TO THE OUTSIDE—”

He had started shouting to be heard, but eventually it was no use; he was drowned out by the outrage of the collective Gryffindor House. Everyone was in an uproar over the fact that classes were still continuing even in these circumstances. Rose looked pleased, but she also looked really sad for Professor Longbottom having to deal with this reaction.

“Don’t kill the messenger!” bellowed Professor Longbottom. “Classes are still critically important – especially now. We’ll be teaching you important things to know about the wildlife outside of Hogwarts, in case any of it ever finds entry – not that we’re expecting it to,” he added quickly at the mortified looks he was getting. “We’ve taken many defenses. We just think that, for the sake of knowing, you should be taught about what’s out there. Knowing what’s out there will also dissuade any of you from trying to leave at any point. Not that you would. Hopefully common sense will prevent that in the first place. Other than that, I have no news to give you.”

“You’re seriously going to make us attend class?” roared Riley.

“No,” said Professor Longbottom. “Classes are not mandatory.”

The room fell silent at once.

“Oh,” said Riley.

“But they are highly recommended,” said Professor Longbottom, “especially since we will be going over personal safety. We just felt that, in general, since we won’t be in this position forever, and since O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s are so close… that anyone who wants to continue their academic pursuits should have the opportunity to do so. And don’t forget about the fairly new Pre-O.W.L. and Pre-N.E.W.T. exams, for fourth years and sixth years, respectively. Those will come at the end of April.”

“Oh, right,” said Rose. “Oh, I hope this whole thing blows over before then!”

“You want this to end so you can take a test?” coughed Exo. “Not so that you can make it out alive – so that you can take a meaningless test?”

“It’s not meaningless,” sniffed Rose. “It makes sure we’re on target for our goals in our fifth year!”

“I just want to make sure I’m going to have a fifth year!”

Rose seized up a little bit. She wasn’t handling the stress very well – academic stress, she could handle, but life-threatening stress was taking its toll. She got up and walked to the fire, and sat right on the floor in front of it, hugging her legs.

“I didn’t upset her, did I?” asked Exo, biting his lip.

“Rose is weird about her fears,” said Albus. “She had a fear of broomsticks for a while, so every time anyone was flying, she would run to the fire in her house and sit in front of it. She always does
“But did I offend her or anything?” asked Exo, his head shrinking back slightly into his shoulders like a timid turtle.

“No, I don’t think–” Albus cut himself off and smiled. “Why?”

“Just – being a good friend,” said Exo.

“Being a good friend?” asked Albus, nudging Exo’s arm. “A good friend, huh?”

“Wha – What?”

“Do you like Rose?” muttered Albus.


Albus laughed. “Hey, don’t worry about it,” he said. “I was just curious.”

Exo huddled himself fully onto the seat of his chair and buried his face in his knees.

Albus turned to look at Rose sitting by the fire, and he grinned widely.

“Good morning, class,” said Professor Longbottom. “Nice to see you all again.”

“It’d be a lot nicer to not see trees over my head every meal,” grumbled Aidan.

“I’m glad to see so many of you,” said Professor Longbottom.

“What the heck else are we going to do?” offered Allen Tibbett.

Professor Longbottom shrugged. “Fair point. Anyway, today we’re going to talk about some… rather exotic plants. You may have heard me mention them before… especially if you were listening last week when all this first started. I’m going to be teaching you about Stingwood, Dugroot, Verdusthorn, and Magmarbor trees.”

“The trees outside the castle,” said Rose, nodding. “Makes sense that we’d learn about these in Herbology.”

“Dugroot is the first tree I’ll talk about,” said Professor Longbottom. “Now, in most other circumstances, I’d have brought in a specimen, because normally they don’t do anything dangerous when they’re just in a pot, but I have no idea what would happen if I brought one in here, so I’m not going to try.

“Dugroot is one of the Abusuants, or what are more commonly known as the ‘meat-eating trees.’ It feeds on animals. It doesn’t have to eat very often – consider the fact that it’s a tree, so it grows very slowly – but it does eat. If anyone or anything steps on the ground above its roots, the tree will sense this. It will then spin its roots in a circle without moving its trunk, so you don’t notice. The spinning of the roots through the ground shifts the loose soil in which it prefers to grow. The soil is shifted in such a way that the animals standing above the roots are sucked into the ground. The roots also rise as they turn, and if they strike the victim, they start to bludgeon it like an underground Whomping Willow, until it stops moving and eventually asphyxiates under the ground if the trauma isn’t enough. Then the body decays inside the dirt and nourishes the soil with nutrients. Dugroot is a tree only found on select islands; it usually needs to be in a sheltered area under a mountain or a cliff, otherwise strong winds would blow it out of its loose soil. Access to
these islands is strictly forbidden, as they also house a number of creatures whose company is less than pleasant, and the seeds are non-tradable materials.”

“So why are they here?” asked Mia.

“Good question,” said Professor Longbottom. “We believe that the mulunctapoli have caused the trees to grow here, with their powers over nature, as a safeguard against intruders in the forest.”

“They’re still going with the mulunctapoli story?” scoffed Aidan.

“I’ll summarize the other trees before I go in-depth on any of them,” said Professor Longbottom. “Another Abusuant is called the Stingwood, also growing outside the castle walls at present, but usually found in South America. Stingwood has little roots that protrude from the ground like little periscopes. The roots sense light, so they know where the sun is positioned, even in a dense forest. The roots recede at night. When something crosses the path of the roots, the light in that area is blocked by shadows. The roots sense the movement of these shadows, because they can sense light. If the animal doesn’t hit the roots on its own accord, the roots will slither rapidly towards the source until an encounter occurs. When an animal makes contact with the roots, small stingers shoot out and bury themselves inside the victim, pumping a nasty neurotoxin that renders it immobile. The roots then wrap around the victim and drag it inside the trunk. Tendrils inside the trunk find the openings in the body and slither inside, destroying the internal organs and absorbing all of the nutrients – I’m sorry, is this too much?”

Many people in the class looked ready to throw up at the descriptions that Professor Longbottom was giving.

“Sorry,” said Professor Longbottom. “I get a little carried away with my Herbology enthusiasm sometimes… Where was I? No, let’s not go back to where I was. Anyway, attacking the roots to try to get by a Stingwood is a disastrous idea, because the rest of the roots will start flailing around violently, spraying a horrific acid. The scent of the acid also travels through the air and acts as a signal for any other Stingwood trees in the area to start doing the same.

“Also be wary of Japanese Verdusthorn. This one was named after its discoverer, Paletan Verdus, who incidentally is the great-uncle of famed magizoologist and Hogwarts Headmaster Newton Scamander. It’s only dangerous if greatly provoked. It looks like a normal tree at first glance, just like Dugroot and Stingwood, if you don’t look at the roots protruding from the ground on the Stingwood. If the tree is touched – even a light tap will do – sharp thorns will pierce rapidly through the bark along the entire length of the tree. The thorns then slowly recede if the threat abates. The tree slowly heals around the wounds made by the thorns protruding, and the thorns retract to prepare for another act of defense. But if the tree is continually provoked, or actually harmed, half of the thorns on the tree will rocket out and severely injure anything nearby. The thorns aren’t poisonous, but they explode upon impact, so they will explode after piercing entry into your body, and the shards will blast everywhere under your skin and damage you even more, and it makes them almost impossible to extricate without a massive operation – assuming you survive. Verdusthorn is also known for another strange habit – finding its own source of water. If the sound of running water is nearby, and the tree is dehydrated, sometimes it will uproot itself. It lands with a crash on the ground, and then slowly rolls towards the stream. It does this by using its thorns as leverage – the thorns on one side of the tree will poke out and push on the ground on one side of the tree, and it will push the tree with enough force to start it rolling. If there are no trees in the way, or if it picks up enough speed to knock them down, it will roll through the woods until it finds the source of water. It then lands in that source of water and has been known to drink the whole thing dry. When it’s finished, it then slowly lifts itself upright over a period of several weeks.
“And last, but the exact opposite of least, we have Magmarbor knocking on our door at present. Normally found in Australia. This one is the worst. It’s not a tree to be tree-fled with. Ha… ha… ‘Tree-fled?’ Like ‘Trifled?’ No? …So, anyway, you can spot Magmarbor easily, so it could be considered the least dangerous – but it’s certainly the deadliest when provoked, with the most potential for destruction. Magmarbor has bright red bark. It is perfectly comfortable waiting out a forest fire. It’s fire-proof, and being immersed in flame actually assists it in producing its sap. If it is pierced, the boiling sap flows out as hot as lava. Hence the name. When it is done producing seeds, it superheats itself and explodes. The explosions blast their seeds miles away, and can often trigger those forest fires. It will prematurely explode if it is attacked, or even touched by magic.”

“Wait,” said Mia. “You’re saying that they’ll explode anyway once they’re done producing their seeds?”

“Well… yes… but that takes upwards of eighty to ninety years.”

“Yes, and an entire forest just grew overnight last week!” yelled Callista Crosenbend. “Or haven’t you noticed?!”

Nervous murmurs broke out all across the room.

“There’s going to be nervous murmurs everywhere for a while, aren’t there,” said Rose, looking around cautiously.

After Professor Longbottom calmed everyone down and assured them that the castle walls could contain such explosions, he went through each tree in detail. When he let them go, Albus left for History of Magic, which was next. He was one of the only Gryffindors there – Exo, Lucas, and Rose went as well – but most of Ravenclaw was present. Alec, of course, was not. Lucas greeted Holly with a kiss on the cheek, and he put an arm around her to comfort her; she’d been looking utterly distraught since the incident began. She wasn’t the only one not taking the recent events well. Albus felt especially bad for the first years, whose first experience at Hogwarts included being locked inside the school with dangerous exotic plants on all sides.

After History of Magic, which was boring as usual – Albus didn’t think it was possible to be bored in a situation like this, but he was proven massively incorrect – there came Defense Against the Dark Arts. Professor Westerling taught them about the Fokii.

Most of the things he talked about were bits of information that Albus already knew. He’d read some of it in the book that Aidan had found, The Unclassified Darkness, and had discussed some of the other points with other people, like Litinia. Professor Westerling also confirmed something awful that Albus had heard from Aidan – that if the Fokii sends its spores into witches’ or wizards’ corpses immediately after their death, it forms Fokii that can still use magic.

The rest of the day went fairly close to the usual, except that they didn’t have their A.R.M. class. None of the A.R.M. professors had been inside Hogwarts when the forest consumed it, except for Professor Norton, who had decided to stay the night at the castle after teaching her third year Modern Magical Instruments class. She didn’t seem pleased that she’d made that decision, but she was on constant watch and seemed to be grateful that she was here to protect her students in case it got any worse.

It still wasn’t clear whether things were going to get worse.

The main difference in their classes was that every class was in a room that didn’t have windows to the outside. Care of Magical Creatures was usually held on the grounds of the castle, but on
Tuesday, it was held inside the castle.

Uncle Charlie began class by talking about the mulunctapoli. Again, Albus had heard most of this before. But after he was done lecturing on the mulunctapoli, he started describing creatures the likes of which Albus had never heard before.

“Does anyone know what a Clattarang is?” asked Uncle Charlie.

Only Lucas raised his hand.

“Lucas?”

“Clattarangs are the ones that make the hypnotic rattle, right?” replied Lucas. “They nibble your hair and fingernails.”

“That’s right,” said Uncle Charlie. “Clattarangs only inhabited the British Isles until they went extinct in Europe, but they were rediscovered in the forests in the heart of North America shortly afterwards. They’re shaped like little balls with lampshades for heads, if any of you have seen a Muggle lampshade. They vibrate their head back and forth; it strikes their body and makes a loud rattling sound, hypnotic to anyone who hears. It makes you extremely dizzy, and if you’re exposed to the unfiltered sound for more than a minute, it causes painful earaches so bad that it’s impossible to even think through the pain. Once you collapse, the Clattarang will nibble your hair and fingernails. The noise is painful, but the creature isn’t all that dangerous, unless there are other creatures around to take advantage of your unconsciousness. Which there currently are, in this forest.”

“Wait – there’s Clattarangs in the forest now?” asked Lucas.

“Yep,” said Uncle Charlie. “We opened a window briefly, and we definitely heard the sound of a Clattarang. We had to close the window before we all got earaches.”

“But they’re only found in the Americas.”

“Not anymore, apparently,” said Uncle Charlie. “And has anyone heard of a creature called the Vulupus?”

Albus leaned back in his seat. The name sounded familiar. In fact, now that he thought about it, the name “Clattarang” also sounded somewhat familiar. But where had he heard these names before?

“Rose, m’dear?” said Professor Charlie, because Rose was raising her hand.

“They’re creatures that used to just be legend, because they were rarely seen,” said Rose. “They can take the form of either a fox or a wolf, and they have the power to strike you dumb.”

“Deaf and dumb,” said Uncle Charlie. “The Vulupus is a silent creature – it physically is incapable of making any noise at all. Even crunching on dead leaves won’t make a sound. It is also incapable of hearing. But it’s an incredibly effective hunter. If the Vulupus is looking at you, and you don’t see it, you will be stricken by a sort of power, unable to make or hear any sounds at all, just like the Vulupus. You can only break this enchantment if the Vulupus stops looking at you, or if you notice the Vulupus. The spell only works when the Vulupus sees you but you don’t know where it is. Generally, they’ll leave wizards alone because most adult wizards can do enough wandless magic to protect themselves, but they’re perfectly fine attacking Muggles and children. They’re solitary hunters, fortunately. And Rose is correct about their ability to change forms: when they’re using their intellect, which is superior to that of many other creatures, they take the form of a fox. When they’re on the attack and need to use their brute strength, which is also quite impressive,
they take the form of a wolf.”

“Is that what the howl was?” asked Riley. “The wolfish howl that had us all freaking out and falling over in the Great Hall right after the whole thing with the trees happened?”

“As I said before, the Vulupus is incapable of making any sort of sound whatsoever,” said Uncle Charlie. “It couldn’t even make the slightest noise if it jumped off a hundred-foot cliff into the ocean.”

“Then what was the howl?” asked Alec.

“We’re… not entirely sure,” said Uncle Charlie.

Albus sensed a small amount of deception in this statement.

They spent the rest of the class learning about these creatures, and then when they were finished and Albus was about to head to Ancient Runes, he was pulled aside by Rose.

“Hey, Albus,” she said. “Did those animals’ names sound kind of familiar to you?”

“Yeah, actually, they did,” said Albus.

“Do you know why?”

Something about the look on her face told Albus that he should know exactly why the names sounded familiar.

“No… why?”

Rose pulled a book out of her bag and showed Albus the cover briefly: it was *The Descent of Dismiusa*.

“Those are two of the animals – along with mulunctapoli and Fokii – which are said to be the servants of Dismiusa!” said Rose.

Albus was about to respond, but he heard a small noise that made him whip his head around. There was that clicking sound again.

“Do you hear that?” he said. He sprinted in the direction of the disturbance.

“Albus, wait!” said Rose, running after him.

“Wait, did you hear that too?” came a shout from behind them; Sylvester Alamandrine was running with them.

“The clicking sound again!” said Albus. “Coming from – I’m not sure–”

“It sounded like something else, too,” said Sylvester.

“Yeah, like a clattering sort of sound?”

“No, something else – beyond that – very faint, like I heard – a growl, or something, almost like something was angry–”

“Albus, if whatever’s making that sound is in the school, I don’t think we should *chase it!* ” shouted Rose.
“Quiet!” yelled Albus.

But he skidded to a stop when the sound faded away again.

Albus shook his head and looked back to Rose and Sylvester.

“What else did it sound like to you?” said Albus, looking at Sylvester.

“I don’t really know,” said Sylvester. “I didn’t hear it enough.”

“I didn’t hear anything but the clicking,” said Albus.

“Me neither,” said Rose. “Are you sure you weren’t hearing something else, Sylvester? Something else going on at the same time?”

“Maybe you were hearing Clatterangs,” said Albus. “Are you dizzy at all?”

“No, I’m…” Sylvester rubbed his head. “I mean, I’ve had a stress headache for more than a week now, worrying about everything… but other than that, no.”

“I don’t know what you were hearing, then,” said Albus, shrugging.

“I just don’t know anything anymore,” said Rose, putting a hand over her face.

“But Rose knows everything,” whispered Sylvester.

Most of Albus’s classes tried to teach normal material, but Herbology, Care of Magical Creatures, and Defense Against the Dark Arts focused on what was outside of the castle walls. At the end of the second week of their imprisonment in the castle, tensions were running at their peak.

“This castle withstood the Battle of Hogwarts,” assured Professor Desulgon. “It’s certainly going to withstand anything that plants can throw at it.”

But the weekend provided only extra time for the students to consider their situation. The Gryffindor common room was filled with Patronuses of parents – Patronuses were the only things that could cross the barrier. The Patronuses were both delivering messages from parents to their children as well as comforting everyone with their curious ability to lift one’s spirits when one was in their presence, basking in their light. A silver stag paced one end of the common room, and James and Albus huddled against it; Harry assured them that their mother had sent one to the Ravenclaw common room to comfort Lily. Above all else, Albus was worried about his little sister.

On Sunday evening, the door to the common room opened, and Professor Longbottom walked in again; this time, though, he was accompanied by Wilcox.

“Albus?” called Professor Longbottom, looking around the room.

Albus stood up as Wilcox’s gaze shifted to the silver stag. “Yes?”

“You’re needed,” said Professor Longbottom, gesturing to him.

Albus glanced at James, who frowned back at him with a face that said What’s this all about?

Albus gave him back a grimace that said Hell if I know.
I’m going to watch you on the map, mouthed James.

“Now, please,” said Professor Longbottom. “And Exo, too?”

Exo stood up. “Yeah, yeah, I know. It’s a full moon.”

“Is it?” asked Albus, before he remembered why he hadn’t realized: he usually kept track of the phase of the moon by way of the enchanted ceiling in the Great Hall at night, or Astronomy class, but the Great Hall’s ceiling was currently occupied by nothing but the canopy of trees, and Astronomy was not meeting – there was nothing that could be seen through the trees, and no one wanted to go near a window.

“Come on,” said Wilcox, and they left the portrait hole together. Professor Longbottom veered off in a different direction.

“So why am I needed?” asked Albus.

“One moment, Albus,” said Wilcox. “Exo, do you feel all right?”

“I’m fine,” said Exo. “Why do you need Albus?”

“We’re talking about you first,” said Wilcox. “Your matter is more pressing. Your transformation is due to happen within a few hours. I want to know if your head is all right. Has the full moon given you any headaches recently?”

“Yes, but not more than usual,” said Exo.

“Have you been experiencing any of the symptoms that Albus has been having? The fact that you’re getting headaches may mean you’re prone to the same thing he was experiencing. Have you shared any of his problems recently? I’ve been meaning to ask.”

“No,” said Exo. “I’ve been okay. Just normal headaches, you know?”

“Okay,” said Wilcox. “If you can remember tomorrow, try to let me know if you sense anything. This is also the first full moon within the barrier, so… certain effects may be amplified once you’re no longer in control of your mind. It’s typically been at the half moon that this occurs, but your mind is so vulnerable, I thought perhaps it might happen tonight to you. Try to remember.”

“Okay,” said Exo, as they arrived at Wilcox’s office.

“Let us through,” declared Wilcox.

“Sure,” said the gargoyle, and it jumped aside.

“No password?” asked Albus, looking at his Headmaster.

“The situation’s rough,” said Wilcox. “I want anybody who needs to see me immediately to be able to access my office as quickly as possible. Exo… I’m so sorry we don’t have Wolfsbane for you tonight. We were just about to restock… Professor Valon is brewing it, but it takes a month, one moon cycle, to mature, so we couldn’t have it ready in time for you to take this month…”

“I’m all right,” sighed Exo.

“We’ll lock the door tight at the top,” said Wilcox. “Come on.”

“Wait,” said Exo, crinkling his nose. “So why did you bring Albus?”
Wilcox tugged Exo’s arm. “I’ll tell you later.”

Exo gave Albus a raised eyebrow, but followed his father up the stairs.

Wilcox came down a few seconds later. “Okay, Albus. Come with me.”

“What’s this about?” asked Albus, not really expecting to get an answer.

“It’s about Swait,” said Wilcox. “I want to see if you can get him to talk about what the knife does, or about how he managed to break into the castle.”

“Me?”

“Yes. Swait has a more emotional response when confronted with you, because he thinks you stole his knife. You might be able to taunt him into giving away something about the knife. That is, if you’re comfortable confronting him. You’re perfectly welcome to turn this offer down, I know he did hold a knife to your throat and threaten to kill you and everything. If you don’t want to be in the same room as him alone again…”

“He’ll be restrained?”

“Oh, of course,” laughed Wilcox.

“Then I’m fine with that,” said Albus. “Just tell me what you want me to do. You want me to tease him, you said?”

“Try to provoke him,” said Wilcox. “It’s a long-shot, but we really have nothing else up our sleeves. Swait just won’t talk to us. But he might talk to you. We’ll be listening on the other side of the door, in case he drops any hints. Just try to get him talking about something, and he might accidentally give something away.”

“Got it,” said Albus. “So, I’m trying to just get him to slip up and say something he wouldn’t otherwise tell you?”

“Exactly,” said Wilcox. “We’ll have him ready for you in a few hours. Would you like to wait in the common room or wait with us?”

“I’ll wait with you,” said Albus.

Albus waited outside the classroom, accompanied by Professor Westerling and having a detailed discussion about Fokii with him, while Wilcox talked with Swait inside the room. Wilcox emerged eventually, but told Albus he should wait a while before entering, otherwise it would be obvious that Wilcox had sent him in. They wanted Swait to think Albus was entering of his own accord.

After a while, Wilcox glanced over to Albus. “I think he should be ready for you now.”

Albus nodded. “I’m ready, too.”

They descended to the sixth floor, towards the classroom where Swait had initially been hiding. Albus peeked inside. Swait’s arms were strapped to the table, and he was simmering.

“We’ve been feeding him and keeping him healthy, but mostly keeping him restrained,” said Wilcox. “He keeps trying to manually Disarm us whenever his hands are free.”

“How did he make himself invisible?” asked Albus. “If he didn’t have a wand?”
“He runs a hunting shop,” said Wilcox. “He had a Demiguise five-band set. Witches and wizards who hunt magical game often wear a headband, two wristbands, and two ankle bands made from Demiguise hair, and there is a spell you can cast that will make you invisible when you slide the headband down around your neck. It’s not as effective as, say, an entire Invisibility Cloak, or the Disillusionment Charm, but Swait seems to be extremely well-learned in the hunting arts. His Demiguise bands were crafted with some serious expertise; it’s almost impossible to see him. I think he did something equally special to the knife, but I don’t know what it is. We also still don’t know how he got into the castle undetected in the first place. Hopefully, you can find out.”

“I’ll try,” said Albus. “Can I go in?”

“Yes, go in whenever,” said Wilcox. “We’re going to pretend we’re not here – you should go in and pretend you came of your own accord, just to taunt him. So, go on whenever you’re ready. We’re right outside if things turn too sour for your taste, and Swait is strapped to the table anyway. Not even Resonance will break those cuffs.”

He handed Albus a knife.

“It’s Swait’s knife,” he said. “If you want to tease him with the knife itself, feel free to use it, but return it to me afterwards.”

Albus took the knife and nodded. Wilcox stepped back as Albus opened the door slowly and walked in. Playing the role, he plastered a large grin on his face and chuckled when he saw Swait. He decided to try and go for the secret of the knife first – getting Swait to go on an explanation of how he got into Hogwarts seemed more difficult.

“You,” grumbled Swait.

“Me,” said Albus. “Me with your knife.”

He took the knife out of his pocket and tried to twirl it around his fingers; it clattered to the floor.

“Whoops,” said Albus, bending over to pick it up as Swait’s face reddened so fast it looked like steam was about to erupt from his ears.

“DON’T YOU DARE SCREW AROUND WITH ME KNIFE!” bellowed Swait. “YOU ‘AVE ANY IDEA HOW PRECIOUS THAT IS?!”

“No,” said Albus, shrugging. “What makes it so special?”

“Oh, no, I’m not tellin’ you,” huffed Swait. “Nice try, though.”

Albus opened his hand and let the knife tumble out of his hand and hit the floor again.

“Whoops,” he said, bending over and picking it up again. He then dropped the knife again. “Oops! Clumsy me…”

“STOP THAT!” screamed Swait.

“Why?” asked Albus, picking up the knife and dropping it again. “It can’t be that special…”

“I’M GOIN’ TO KILL YOU WHEN I GET OUT OF THIS!”

Albus brushed off the threat with a loud laugh. “Yeah? You are? You know how many people are trying to kill me?”
“I’ve ‘unted ‘arder prey than you,” seethed Swait with venom.

“And I’ve taken down worse bad guys than you,” responded Albus.

“You’re scarin’ no one.”

“Neither are you,” said Albus, tossing the knife across the room.

Swait tried to leap up from his chair but his forearms were slammed back down on the table by his wrists being tied to it.

“YOU’RE DEAD!” he snarled.

“At least I’m not tied to a table,” sassed Albus.

He was surprising himself with how well he was able to irk Swait. The man was nearly foaming at the mouth.

“One day, you’re goin’ to regret those words,” fumed Swait.

“Yes, when ‘ell freezes over,” said Albus, mimicking Swait’s accent.

Albus was disappointed to see that Swait was starting to calm himself down.

“You want to know what it does?” said Swait, turning one of his hands so that the palm was facing up. “Stab me.”

Albus paused. “Excuse me?”

“You can’t fool me, you child,” said Swait. “I may be an idiot, but I’m not stupid.”

“Er, what?”

“I know what you’re up to,” he said. “You’ve got all your little teachy friends out there – your ‘Eadmaster too – and they’re waitin’ to see if I’ll give away the secret of me knife. Well, you know what? I’m tired of this crap. If you want to know what me knife does, why don’t you just stab me in me ‘and, and find out?”

“Your knife is me knife now,” mocked Albus. “And me hand is not going to stab this knife into you hand. Sorry to disappoint.”

“Don’t you want to know?” crowed Swait. “Stab me in me ‘and! Didn’t your ‘Eadmaster Willie Cocks tell you to get the secret out of me? Well, now’s your chance! Stab me in me ‘and and find out, won’t you?”

Albus was very confused as to how Swait had suddenly put himself in control of the situation, especially given that Swait was tied to a table.

“I don’t have to do anything you say,” said Albus.

“You do if you want to know what me knife does. What do you lose by stabbin’ me? You’ve been actin’ like you want to, or was that all a charade to ‘ide ‘ow scared you were of me that night two weeks ago?”

“You’re going to pull some trick if I stab you,” said Albus. “Your reverse psychology isn’t getting you anywhere. I’m not stupid, either. I’m not an idiot and I’m not stupid.”
“Well, if you think stabbin’ me in me ‘and is gonna some’ow unchain me from this ‘ere desk, why don’t you test it out on yourself first?”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” laughed Albus. “You really think you can get me to stab myself?”

“What do you think I could possibly gain from you stabbin’ me? Why’re you so squeamish to stab me?”

“I don’t understand what you’re trying to get me to do,” chuckled Albus.

“I’m tryin’ to get you to leave,” grumbled Swait. “There. Big mystery solved. One remains: what does me knife do? Why don’t you want to find out?”

“I’m not going to stab you.”

“What do you think I’m goin’ to do?”

“I don’t know. What does your knife do?”

“Stab me and find out!”

Albus shook his head. “It couldn’t be more obvious that this is a diversion,” he said, piecing it together. “If I stab you, you’re going to press charges against me or something. If I don’t stab you, you’re hoping I’ll leave thinking that the power of the knife has something to do with what happens if I stab something. It doesn’t, does it? The knife does something completely different that you’re trying to distract me from knowing.”

“Just get out,” snapped Swait.

Albus held up his hand with the knife again.

“Don’t,” warned Swait.

He let go of the knife with all by his thumb and forefinger.

“DON’T YOU DARE,” roared Swait.

Albus dropped the knife onto the floor again.

With a scream of indignation, Swait leapt up from the table again, but crashed back into his chair because his wrists were still strapped down.

And then Albus experienced a situation most familiar.

He leapt into Swait’s mind, unexpectedly and swiftly; the man had no time to defend, and Albus found himself in a childhood memory of Swait’s.

Swait was playing some sort of Muggle sport with a young girl as Albus watched. They were both about eight or nine. The girl looked athletic; she had a small face and pigtails. They didn’t look related. Swait was carrying the big black and white ball, and he threw it into a net at one end of the grassy field.

“That’s no fair!” cried the girl. “You can’t carry the ball, Elbad!”

“Then ‘ow am I supposed to get it over ‘ere?” pouted the young Swait.
“You kick it!” said the girl. “Like this!” She started dribbling the ball down the field.

“That’s stupid,” said Swait. “Why wouldn’t you use your ‘ands if you’ve got ‘em? That’s a waste of ‘ands, that is.”

“How do you not know how to play football? All boys know how to play football!”

A woman walked by the field. She looked like a female version of Swait; she was quite unattractive. “Ellie!” she yelled. “Suppertime at the ‘ouse. Finish playin’ with Penny and get back soon!”

“Ellie?” laughed Penny. “That’s a girl’s name.”

“Shut up,” said Swait, running towards his mother. He caught up with her before she was out of sight. “Mum, why are Muggles idiots?”


“Yes, Mum.”

No, thought Albus, suddenly snapping back into the realization of what he could do now that he was here in Swait’s mind. A memory of the knife.

Albus zoomed through a strange vortex that reminded him of outer space. He landed in a small house.

The knob on the door was jiggling. Slowly the lock slid out of position, and Swait entered the house, looking around cautiously. He was holding the knife.

Albus gawked as Swait started shoveling items from the house’s shelves into a bulging sack at his side. Thoughts coursed like lightning through his brain as he realized what the implications were of his discovery.

The knife unlocks any door.

The Fokii stole the knife.

The Fokii were headed towards the door at the bottom of the hidden staircase.

They’re trying to open the door.

Swait was now inserting the knife into a lock on a safe that had been hidden behind a picture frame. The safe door clicked open, and he started shoveling Galleons into the sack, which was now nearly full.

But Wilcox said there was no way to open that door?

No – that’s not true.

He said “no spell” could open the door.

This isn’t a spell.

Could this open the door?
“N-NO!” came a shout from within Swait’s mind, but not from within the memory. Swait had finally figured out that Albus was intruding on his precious thoughts. Suddenly Albus found himself hurtled out of the thought, and he landed with a crash against the wall on the other side of the room.

Swait was grinding his teeth, but for a man who’d just revealed the secret he was trying so hard to keep, he didn’t actually look that upset.

“No preteen is a Legilimens!” he howled.

Albus didn’t bother to correct Swait that he was not a preteen, but in fact fourteen. He just stood up and sidled to the door.

“Well, that’s your secret, then,” said Albus, grinning despite himself. “So, congratulations, I’m leaving!”

“Yeah, get out of ‘ere,” said Swait, trying to keep his cool.

“You don’t seem too torn up about this,” said Albus. “So why not just tell me in the first place and get it over with?”

Swait snorted.


“Right. You’re welcome. You’re not goin’ to tell nobody anyway.”

Albus rolled his eyes. “Obviously I am… you said so yourself at the start.”

“Good luck with that,” simpered Swait, grinning even wider than Albus.

What the bloody hell does that mean? thought Albus to himself as he left the room.

He opened the door to find a shouting match going on.

Wilcox was screaming in the faces of Professor Longbottom, Professor Westerling, Professor Desulgon, and Professor Valon – all four Heads of House. They were all shouting so loudly at each other that Albus couldn’t even hear a single one of them.

Albus held the knife out to Wilcox. “Professor!” he yelled.

It was to no avail. Wilcox was shouting too loudly: “NO POSSIBLE WAY – THERE IS NO PHYSICAL POSSIBILITY–”

Albus impatiently pushed the knife into Wilcox’s hand, and Wilcox finally turned to look.

“Here’s the knife back,” said Albus. “I know what it does!”

Wilcox’s eyes bulged. “WHAT? Wait – wait just a moment, you four!” He leaned down. “What is it?”

“It unlocks any door,” said Albus. “Professor – sir – this might be able to open the door in the hidden passage! I think that’s why the Fokii were after it! You can’t let them get to it!”

Wilcox blinked, but said nothing.
“Professor?”

“What?”

“Did you hear what I said?”

“Yes,” said Wilcox. “You said you know what it does.”

“I do!” said Albus. “And I just told you!”

“No, you didn’t,” said Wilcox, blinking again and raising an eyebrow.

“Yes I did!” said Albus. “I said it can open any door! Like the one under the school! The Fokii – Professor, are you listening to me?”

“Listening to what?” said Wilcox, looking like he was growing agitated. “Albus, can we not fool around right now? This isn’t a good–”

“Albus,” interrupted Professor Desulgon. “Look me in the eyes and tell me exactly what the knife does, in ten words or less, and don’t take more than five seconds to do it.”

Albus looked at Professor Desulgon. “It opens any locked door. That was five words.”

Professor Desulgon glanced to Wilcox. “Helio, I think it’s the Fidelius Charm,” he said.

“What?” said Wilcox, looking into Swait’s classroom. “Honestly? The Fidelius Charm? For a knife? That’s one of the most complicated charms in existence – but it does explain why Albus doesn’t seem to be saying anything…”

“You can’t hear me?” asked Albus, jarred with surprise.

“Not when you’re apparently trying to explain to us what the knife does.”

“Can I write it down?”

“No one but you and Swait would be able to read it,” replied Professor Westerling. “And anyone else Swait has told, of course.”

“Can I… mime it?”

“Don’t try that,” warned Professor Westerling. “Your limbs will seize up quite painfully. The Fidelius Charm is foolproof. There’s absolutely nothing you can do to convey to us what that knife does. We’d have to get it from Swait himself. How did you get it out of him? Professor Wilcox was listening, and Zayn and Dalton joined him, but then we were – ah – interrupted rather dramatically – and then Neville showed–”

“I read his mind,” said Albus. “But it was an accident–”

“You read his mind?” said Wilcox, impressed. “I’m going to do that right now. Whatever you’re trying to tell us, I can tell it’s important.”

He slammed the door open loudly and slammed it shut with even more unnecessary force.

“What happened out here?” asked Albus.

“Your father sent a Patronus,” said Professor Westerling in a low voice. “John Solomon has
escaped from our custody.”

Albus’s chest swelled with sudden hope; utter shock took his face over.

“I know, it’s dreadful,” said Professor Westerling. “Or… at least… it probably is. But no one quite understands the situation. You see…”

“It is currently a full moon, as you know,” said Professor Desulgon. “Solomon was broken out of his confinement not ten minutes ago – by a known werewolf named Xin Theuris. Theuris was killed while assisting Solomon, and we still have his body. But there’s a complication out of which we can’t seem to make any sense. It’s a full moon, and we knew Theuris to be a werewolf… but he wasn’t transformed.”

Albus’s heart skipped not one beat, but several, in the silence that followed.

“Theuris should have transformed,” said Professor Westerling. “It was past the time that all werewolves would have transformed tonight. The full moon is high. But Theuris was a human when he broke in to save Solomon. We think he was aiding Solomon’s shelter.”

“He was… cured?” choked Albus.

“Now, we can’t assume that,” started Professor Longbottom.

“How is that not the assumption? He was a werewolf, and now he’s not – where’s the uncertainty?” cried Albus.

“We personally haven’t seen him transform – it could have been an elaborate ruse constructed over the last couple of decades as a failsafe if Solomon was–”

As Albus was about to loudly interject, there was a sudden scream from down on the first floor. Adrenaline coursing through him, he split from the scene and charged down the stairs to see what was happening.

He reached the bottom of the stairs, and looking around, decided to run left. But then an earsplitting sound, like his ear was made of glass and being smashed by a hammer, made him whip around. Before he could even take in the situation, there were two more rapid sounds, the first like an axe hitting a tree stump, the second a deafening BANG, and a black-haired boy flew past Albus so fast that he could not be seen; he smashed into the wall so hard that he left a dent.

Following closely after him, with a ferocious snarl, was Louis Weasley, and Albus had to pinch himself. He had never, ever seen a snarl like that on Louis’s face – he didn’t even know his cousin was capable of making that face. And then Louis jabbed his wand in the air in front of him, and a billowing light flew out of it, smashing directly into the nose of the black-haired boy at the wall, who Albus now recognized as Asher Pierce. Louis’s curse shattered Pierce’s nose and sent droplets of blood flying twenty feet out.

Albus gasped as Pierce groped around quickly for his wand, which had fallen by his side, but Louis sent the wand flying down the hall and continued pummeling him with spell after vicious spell, smashing Pierce’s head into the wall so many times that he fell to the ground unconscious next to a second and larger dent.

Then Louis’s wand flew out of his hand and he suddenly lurched into the air, suspended with his toes pointing towards the floor and his back arched, and a woman was screaming.

“EXPULSION!” shrieked Professor Norton, her hair flying everywhere. “EXPULSION! I SHALL
“UNPROVOKED?” shouted Flavia Marillo, suddenly running into the scene with a few of her friends; they began screaming in Professor Norton’s face. With another loud BANG, they were silenced; they continued, however, to wave their wands around, trying to let Louis down or else undo the Silencing charm. Then more people joined in who had not been Silenced, screaming at the top of their lungs and pointing at the unconscious Pierce, who was bleeding from several different spots in his body.

Wilcox appeared so swiftly and silently that he might have Apparated if it were not impossible to do so within Hogwarts territory. “What is it?” he said softly, but still so sternly that everyone looked over at him. “What has happened?”

The students then all converged on Wilcox instead of Professor Norton, and she tried unsuccessfully to swim through them to reach the Headmaster as two dozen voices started shouting again. Madam Birchbaum appeared shortly behind Wilcox, and gasped, throwing a hand over her mouth when she saw Pierce. “Who did this?” she demanded.

As Professor Norton gestured to the floating Louis, the air was rent with the “But”s of fifty students. Madam Birchbaum started screeching back at them – Albus had never heard her raise her voice before, but now she was completely livid, shrieking about the magnitude of the injuries that Louis had inflicted upon Pierce. But then her attention was caught by someone else: Gillian Gartrive was limping towards them, his leg slashed so deeply and gruesomely that there was bone showing, and she yelped again.

Horrified, rooted to the spot, Albus tore his eyes away from the mangled leg to find even worse injuries that he had not immediately noticed. Half of Gil’s hair was singed, and that entire side of his head above his eye looked burned as well. On the other side of his head, the bottom of his ear, the part that had held his favorite phoenix feather earring, was entirely severed. He was carrying the detached chunk of ear flesh and his feather earring in one hand, and a snapped wand in the other.

Wilcox turned to Pierce, and flicked his wand. Pierce gave a stir and sat up, looking at Gil with complete indifference, and then shifted his gaze to the headmaster.

Suddenly, staring at Wilcox, Pierce showed fear. Albus dared himself to creep a little closer, seeing on his Headmaster the most dangerous face he had ever seen a person make. Wilcox didn’t look furious.

He looked murderous.

“If this is what I think it is,” breathed Wilcox, venom coating every word, “then that was the last bit of magic you will ever perform.” His wand was held loosely at his side, but lightning crackled from the tip and singed the ground.

“To the Great Hall or your dormitories,” he said, turning suddenly, then turning back towards the other end of the corridor. “Everyone out. This corridor is forbidden for the remainder of the evening. Anyone still here in fifteen seconds, apart from Weasley, Pierce, and Gartrive, will receive a month’s worth of detention.”

Albus turned after a moment’s hesitation and ran out of the corridor with the rest of the witnesses, and rushed breathlessly all the way up to the common room.
“What the hell happened?” asked James. “I was watching the map – you were in there with Swait, but there was another empty classroom with just one kid in it, and then I noticed Gil get ambushed by Pierce or something, and then Louis showed up along with like twenty other people from seventh year who were supposed to be patrolling the corridors like Wilcox requested–”

Freddie burst into the common room, more out of breath than Albus.

“Did Albus tell you?” he wheezed.

“Tell him what?” said Albus. “I don’t know anything! What happened?!”

“Asher Pierce was just expelled. For attempted murder, with Dark Magic.”

“Holy shit,” whispered James, summing everything up with surprising accuracy.

Albus looked around the common room. “Expelled? But… where is he going to go? He can’t leave the castle!”

“I guess he’s going to have to stay here,” said Freddie with dread.

“But he’s got a brother here who, at any time, could break into wherever Asher’s being kept, to deliver him a wand so he can finish what he started,” whispered Albus.

“Holy shit,” repeated James dumbly.

“I’m going to go check to see if Gil’s okay,” said Freddie, running back out.

“Me too,” said Albus, even though the strain of running all over the castle was burning his legs. He jumped back through the portrait hole and followed Freddie down the stairs again; his wand was out, just in case.

As they reached the ground floor, they waited by the restricted corridor for Gil to come back out; peeking around the corner, they could see Professor Valon escorting Asher into an empty classroom, and locking the door behind him. Wilcox was holding two snapped wands – one must have been Gil’s, which Albus had noticed was snapped (probably by Pierce), but the other was likely Asher’s. It would probably have normally been up to the Hogwarts Board of Governors to decide whether to destroy the wand, but Wilcox, emotions already running high and constrained by the fact that they were trapped in the castle, appeared to have taken matters into his own hands. Gil looked shaken but otherwise fairly okay, considering the circumstances.

Slytherins had started emerging from the corridor that led to the dungeons, to see what the ruckus was all about. Sylvester stepped up when he saw Albus already there. “What the hell happened here?” he asked.

“Pierce,” said Albus. “Asher Pierce tried to kill Gil.”


“I really don’t know,” said Albus.

Then it happened again – the clicking noises. The clattering was so focused this time as it passed by that Albus could turn his head to look at exactly where he felt it was coming from. He could even hear it over the mumbling crowd.

“Holy Merlin, what was that?!” coughed Sylvester.
“That one wasn’t nearly as hard to hear,” said Albus. “It sounded like it was right on the other side of the wall! Maybe even… inside the wall…”

Something about this rang a bell in Albus’s head. He was right on the cusp of putting it together…

“Did you hear the crackling voice that time?” said Sylvester.

“No,” said Albus, his heart picking up pace as he got even closer to an understanding.

“It sounded like a really raspy attempt at speech. I couldn’t make out any words, though.”

“You’re the only one hearing it?” breathed Albus. “Was it something only a Parseltongue could hear…?”

“What? Parseltongue? What does that have to do with…” Sylvester scratched his head. “What are you implying?”

“Potter,” called a voice from the Slytherin crowd. Albus looked over; it was Scorpius Malfoy calling him.

“What?” he asked.

“Don’t take this like I’m striking up a friendly conversation,” cautioned Scorpius. “It’s simply that given the fact that you appear to have been here longer, I’m asking you for an explanation. We’re all dying to know what the bloody hell happened here.”

“Was it another Fokii?” blurted a Slytherin from the back of the crowd.

“Fokii,” repeated Albus numbly, and suddenly it clicked just like the walls were clicking. “Oh Merlin.”

“What?” said Sylvester.

“Fokii. They… they can travel through water and solid rock to reach a host to reanimate. Even just a skeleton.”

“What are you saying?”

“The bones are still down there. You took us down there – we saw them – the bones were still down there!”

“What bones?”

“The basilisk,” gasped Albus. “Slytherin’s basilisk. The skeleton’s been reanimated as a Fokii. And it’s in our walls.”
The Servants of Dismiusa

A strong wind was blowing against the castle. The trees visible on the enchanted ceiling were bending and swaying ominously.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” said Gil.

Albus sighed. “You have to talk about it.”

“No, I really don’t. I don’t want to talk about anything right now.”

“Can you do a talking Patronus?” asked Albus. “Can you talk to Rosco?”

Gil shoved his fingers deep into his fairly long, vividly pink hair. “Rosco and I aren’t a thing.”

“You aren’t?” asked Albus, in a bit of shock. He had assumed that things had happened between Rosco and Gil at the Loft-Mason school, given that they had both seemed totally infatuated with each other when they met. But he hadn’t had much time to talk about things like that with anyone since the school went under siege. Apparently he was wrong.

“No,” said Gil. “At least, not yet, anyway. I don’t want to talk about that either. It wasn’t…”

“It wasn’t what?” asked Albus, hoping Gil would try to talk to him.

Albus saw his mentor forming the beginnings of a letter.

“It wasn’t love?”

Gil slowly nodded.

“Well, I guess there’s nothing you could have done, then,” said Albus. “But Gil, do you have anyone to talk about this to?”

Gil nodded again.

“Who?”

Gil got up and left the table.

Albus watched Gil limp slightly as he exited the Great Hall. Madam Birchbaum had done all she could, but he still didn’t have a bottom to his right ear. Gil was also feeling extremely sore because, according to what Louis recounted from the hospital wing, he had been hit with a Killing Curse. Wilcox had destroyed Asher Pierce’s wand because he’d already applied Priori Incantatem and learned that copious Dark Magic had been used, and that Pierce had attempted the Killing Curse. It wasn’t potent enough to kill Gil, because Pierce apparently didn’t have the magical ability to back up the spell even if he had the hate. But it had caused some serious damage that was hard to repair. Louis had been given detentions until the end of the year. Albus understood why this punishment was necessary – Louis already had Disarmed Pierce when he injured Pierce so badly that Pierce spent longer recovering in the hospital wing than even Gil had. Louis came closer to becoming a murderer that night by measure of wounds, but at least he hadn’t used Dark Magic, and it was initially in defense of a friend. That was the only reason Louis wasn’t locked in a classroom right now like Pierce was.

Professor Desulgon walked by with Professor Wilcox; Albus tuned in as much as he could to their
conversation as he always did. He wanted to know as much as possible at all times about what was going on – he was especially hoping that Wilcox was going to put extra security around the knife or the hidden door. Albus found that he couldn’t even suggest to Wilcox that extra security be added to the knife or door, because it was even a slight hint as to the function of the knife. The Fidelius Charm was protecting every bit of information Albus had learned about the knife, and preventing him from saying or conveying anything he wouldn’t have known if Swait’s memory hadn’t told him. And Wilcox couldn’t read Swait’s mind – now that Swait was expecting it, he was applying Occlumency at an expert level. No one could break into his brain, even when all of the teachers rotated their attempts at Legilimency to try and tire him out.

“... enchanted fire,” Professor Desulgon was saying, “so long as it’s powerful enough, would obliterate the trees before they had a chance to regenerate or even to activate their natural defenses.”

“You’re not suggesting unleashing Fiendfyre in the school, are you?” laughed Wilcox. “Because you remember how that went during the Revival, right?”

“Not Fiendfyre – Frostflame. It’s almost as powerful, but it’s a charm, not a curse. It would freeze the Magmarbor’s sap, stop any roots in their tracks, and solidify the trunks so that there would be no thorn action…”

Albus turned back and scraped his hand against the table; he reached for a piece of toast and a drop of blood dripped onto the table.

“Albus, your hand is bleeding,” said Rose.

“Oh, yeah,” said Albus, checking his hand. “That’s just a reopened scab. I nicked myself with Swait’s knife when I went into the room trying to twirl it around.”

“You should be more careful with that sort of thing,” said Rose with a cringe. “You don’t know what it does!”

Albus rolled his eyes.

“Oh – right,” said Rose. “You know exactly what it does, but you’re the only one in the castle besides Swait who knows, and you can’t tell anyone.”

“Hey, Albus,” said James, who had taken to sitting closer to Albus after the forest had taken over the grounds. He also pulled Lily over from the Ravenclaw table to keep an eye on her; the teachers didn’t protest this.

“Yeah?”

“Remember that kid I saw on the Map who was locked in a classroom just like Exo was locked in the Headmaster’s Office? Corey Brown? He’s got faint scars all over his arms. I’m pretty sure he’s a werewolf.”

“Right,” said Exo, nodding at Albus. “Eftan’s mentee. I thought so.”

“Just letting you guys know, in case you could help him,” said James, nodding at Exo. “He didn’t look too happy to have to go through that transformation without Wolfsbane.”

“Thanks,” said Albus. “Exo, have you talked to him?”

“No,” said Exo. “Fourth year Gryffindors don’t usually just go up to random Slytherin first years
and strike up conversations. I wouldn’t know how to start.”

Albus smiled. “Speaking of striking up random conversations with Slytherins, and speaking of Eftan too, I guess... can you believe Scorpius spoke up in a crowd after Gil’s incident? I’m still trying to get over that; I couldn’t believe he made his presence known. He’s usually so far in the background that he’s indistinguishable from the wall.”

“Yeah, that surprised me too when you said it,” said Exo. “Maybe he’s becoming more extroverted now that he’s started making friends.”

“Hey, maybe we could become friends with him eventually, too!”

Exo snorted. “Keep dreaming.”

Professor Longbottom walked by with Professor Westerling; Albus tuned in again.

“...contacted Hextus Horra,” said Professor Longbottom, “and their indicator plants have been going wild since this all started. In fact, the wild activity there lines up with the wild activity here with our plants – but it started even before ours.”

“That’s odd,” said Professor Westerling. “I wonder if anything like this is happening in America, too, or going to happen...”

Albus turned to Rose. “Who’s Hextus Horra?”

“Not a who, a what,” said Rose. “Hextus Horra is a school in the United States of America. In West Virginia. It’s kind of the Slytherin of America, they call it. But it’s also home to a whole host of really rare and exotic plants and the school also serves as the largest plant conservatory in the world. Tytezian’s son Dodecus was—”

“Whose son, who?”

“Honestly, Albus, pay attention in History of Magic,” groaned Rose. “Tytezian, Grindelwald’s contemporary and his American counterpart? Grindelwald never communicated with him but Tytezian was trying to become a Dark overlord in America while Grindelwald was trying it in Europe. Anyway, Tytezian began studying Dark Arts at Hextus Horra and killed a lot of people here before he was put down. His son Dodecus was ashamed of what his father had done, so Dodecus enchanted the plants at Hextus Horra to react whenever Dark Magic was happening under the mountain where Hextus Horra is located. The plants would start withering and dying if a Dark Wizard was doing things there. It was a preventative measure to ensure that no one would be able to practice Dark Arts in the school again without being noticed. That was before Dodecus was wrongfully thrown in prison, where he’s been for seventy-four years now.”

“Oh.”

“What did Professor Longbottom say about Hextus Horra?”

“Something about the indicator plants going wild,” said Albus.

“Oh,” said Rose. “The school also has ‘indicator plants’ that will start blossoming and blooming when there’s trouble afoot in the natural world. I guess it makes sense that that’s happening now, too.”

“Attention, everyone!” yelled Wilcox from the front of the Great Hall.

Attention was promptly given; everyone was eager for more information about their situation.
"In response to some concerns about creatures outside the school,” said Wilcox, “the other teachers and I have cast a powerful spell over the entire surface of the castle. If there is any entry into the school by any living creature that wasn’t in the school at the time that we cast this spell – including plants – then we will be alerted by the siege drill alarm. If you ever hear the alarm, please immediately evacuate to the nearest safe zone. If you need to be reminded of the safe zones in the school, please ask a teacher or prefect. If you don’t remember when the alarm goes off, follow someone who does remember. If you can cast a Patronus, please remain in the halls to assist defense against the Fokii, but stay between two nearby teachers at all times. We don’t anticipate the alarm will go off due to our excellent primary defenses, but it’s a precaution because some people were still nervous and still didn’t feel safe. We want everyone to feel comfortable, so we made a plan B – but please don’t take this as a sign that we don’t have confidence in plan A. We have total confidence in plan A.”

“Because there’s nothing to worry about,” quipped James.

“Thank you – that is all.”

Wilcox didn’t make any announcement regarding what Albus had told him about the undead basilisk in the walls. Evidently that wasn’t the sort of thing one would tell an already freaked-out audience. He did, however, make mention that people who could cast Patronuses might want to prepare themselves for defense against the Fokii. He simply didn’t mention which Fokii he was discussing.

“That basilisk Fokii,” muttered Albus. “It wouldn’t have eyes, right? It’s just a skeleton… and Fawkes the phoenix clawed its eyes out when it was still alive, anyway.”

“That’s… slightly comforting, at least, comparatively,” said Exo quietly; they didn’t want to spread this information and cause a panic. As of now, the only people who knew were Albus, Alec, Aidan, Exo, James, and Rose, and of course Sylvester, to whom Albus had initially voiced his thoughts. And of course, they had told Wilcox, so presumably all of the faculty had been informed. And of course, James had probably told his friends… and Rose had probably told all of her friends… and the same went for Alec and Mia… so probably the whole school knew by now. The more Albus thought about it, the more likely it seemed like there would be a panic at any moment.

“And basilisk venom is only potent for twenty-five years after the snake’s death, and my dad killed it longer ago than that,” said Albus.

“Right,” confirmed Rose.

“But the basilisk is just a skeleton,” said Albus. “So that means that it won’t last too long, right? It’ll collapse into dust pretty soon, especially if we send Patronuses after it… right?”

“Er,” said Rose.

Albus dreaded what would come after that. “What?”

“It all depends on the average lifespan of the creature in question,” said Rose. “Remember what the book on Dark Fungi said? Fokii can even occupy a skeleton for a whole year if the original creature had a long lifespan – and that basilisk was alive down there for around a thousand years before it was killed.”

“Crap,” said James.

There was a long silence while Albus wondered what to say after this. His stomach growled and he
realized he hadn’t eaten much; he’d been too distracted.

“Rose, can you pass the jam?” he asked, reaching across the table.

As his hand stretched out, the jar zoomed across the table and into his hand.

Rose stared. “Er, I think you’ve got it covered.”

Albus stared at the object in his hand, wondering how he’d accomplished this feat. A trickle of blood dripped down the side of the jam jar from the cut on his hand.

“Can you believe John Solomon escaped from the Aurors again?” said Exo for about the three hundredth time one day in Charms.

Albus laughed. “Yes, Exo, I’ve told you, I can believe that. What I can’t believe is that the Aurors still think that he can’t have invented the cure.”

“I can believe that,” interrupted Aidan.

Albus sighed. “Aidan, I just don’t see how you can deny it at this point.”

“Hey, I’m just going with the opinion of the professionals,” said Aidan. “We don’t know whether it was Polyjuice Potion, or some other disguise–”

“Posthumous analysis determined it was definitely Xin Theuris, a registered werewolf, who had died in the rescue attempt,” said Albus. “There were no signs of the usage of Polyjuice or anything of the sort, so don’t even try and bring that up.”

“Yes, but Albus, there are still other possibilities that we can’t rule out just because we don’t know them,” said Aidan.

“But Aidan, honestly, I don’t think there can physically be any other possibilities,” said Exo.

“Yeah? What about the werewolves who were supposedly ‘cured’ by Oddolweld in the eighth century? They dropped dead when the sun rose, and Theuris was killed before the sun rose, so we have no way of knowing whether he would have lived to see the sun again–”

“And that was only during a lunar eclipse,” said Albus. “First of all, the ritual could only have been performed if Solomon was present to cure Theuris earlier that night, but Theuris broke in to save Solomon while the full moon was up, and he was already fully human when he saved Solomon. Secondly, the day Solomon escaped wasn’t a lunar eclipse, so the first case doesn’t even matter! And thirdly, Theuris was a known werewolf who did not transform during the full moon, and risked his life to save Solomon’s – don’t you get that it was to repay Solomon for risking his own life and limb to help the werewolves of the world?”

“Ohay,” said Aidan, throwing his hands in the air. “All right. Fine. You have all that evidence. Theuris was cured by Solomon and he’s no longer a werewolf, and this is all the evidence you need to exonerate Solomon. There can be no possible doubt that he’s legitimate. Right?”

“Right,” said Albus, though he was sure Aidan was about to produce more cynicism towards that conclusion.

“Then answer me this,” he said with a tone of finality. “Why didn’t Theuris just show up at the Ministry during the full moon and say, ‘Hey, guess what, I’m cured, so you guys should probably
take another look at Solomon’s work?"

Albus was taken aback by the solidity of the argument his friend had just presented. Doubt began to creep back into his mind: why hadn’t Theuris done this? It seemed so obvious. He should have just waltzed in to the Ministry and let people notice that he wasn’t transforming. Why didn’t he take that route?

Exo cleared his throat. “Maybe because all the legal things would have taken forever to sort out,” he said.

“Yeah,” said Aidan. “Solomon has some pressing appointment at this stage in his life? He – oh, right, he does… with you.”

“That’s right,” said Exo. “He wouldn’t have been able to make it to New Zealand on time – definitely not.”

“But you’re one person…”

Albus snapped back into his old convictions with a single realization.

“Aidan, how many people do you think believe that Solomon is the real deal, even after a cured werewolf was witnessed not transforming during a full moon?”

Aidan frowned. “Er… not many.”

“Right,” said Albus. “And that wouldn’t have changed even if Theuris had stood in front of them waving his hands and shouting ‘I’m not a werewolf anymore.’ It’s the same conclusion – he’s not a werewolf – and yet people still don’t believe that Solomon can be trusted, that he’s a murderer. Theuris and Solomon both knew that they still wouldn’t trust Solomon even if he took the route you suggested. The only route to Solomon’s freedom was being broken out.”

Aidan shook his head. “I mean, there’s another possibility…”

“What now?” groaned Exo.

“There’s always the possibility that he fits both sides of the description. He could have discovered the cure… and be a murderer… and he could have used the cure as a way to lure in the werewolves.”

“You’re insane,” said Exo, shaking his head. “My dad knew Solomon. Albus’s dad knew Solomon. They both trusted him so much. My dad had such a hard time believing Solomon could have done what he did. Everyone did. He was one of the most respected authorities on Defense Against the Dark Arts that there was.”

“But there have been too many horrible things happening to take any chances,” said Aidan. “Honestly, Exo, I’m almost hoping that this whole forest ordeal lasts through May twenty-seventh, just so you don’t go over there to finish what Solomon started in Oddolweld Pasture.”

Exo turned away from Aidan, and Aidan turned away from Exo. Albus, sitting in the middle, just sighed and continued practicing his Bubble-Head Charm.

“Hope you boys had a great discussion over there,” squeaked Professor Plinky. “I assume you can cast a perfect Bubble-Head Charm, then?”

“I can!” volunteered Mia.
“I can make a Bubble-Beard,” announced Riley.

“That’s fine, I suppose, as long as it covers your mouth so that you can breathe,” said Professor Plinky. “Though if there were smoke and you wanted to protect your eyes, or if you wanted to see underwater and you couldn’t open your eyes underwater, it would be best that the Bubble-Head Charm encompass, as the name suggests, your entire head. Tomorrow we will check to make sure you’ve gotten this charm totally right, and then we’ll move on to—”

Every student jumped into the air with their wands out as the siege drill alarm suddenly began to blare.

“Now, calm down, everyone,” said Professor Plinky, shaking a little bit. “I’m sure it’s just a – a false alarm, perhaps a drill–”

“NOT A DRILL!” screamed a Hufflepuff prefect, sprinting down the hall. “NOT A DRILL!”

Professor Plinky cringed.

“FOKII IN THE CASTLE! NOT A DRILL! PEOPLE – PATRONUS PEOPLE – DO – DO PATRONUS THINGS!”

Albus and Lucas rushed out of the room.

“Boys! Stay by me!” wheezed Professor Plinky, galloping out behind them. “If we see a Fokii, get on the other side of me from the Fokii! Do not put yourself in harm’s way or I will force you out of that harm’s way against your will!”

“Yes, sir,” said Lucas and Albus together.

They rounded a corner towards the stairs, and they skidded to a stop as a group.

Down, below the stairs, they could clearly see what had caused the alarm. There were trees growing in the hallway of the castle.

“Merlin’s bush!” exclaimed Professor Plinky. “Trees in the castle!”

“No Fokii!” shouted up Professor Wilcox. “False alarm! Just trees! Help us get them out of here!”

“Ah, see, I told you it was a false alarm,” said Professor Plinky. “I knew—”

“WHA!” screamed Professor Westerling from below. “FALSE ALARM ON THE FALSE ALARM! FOKII IN THE CASTLE! FOKII IN THE CASTLE!”

Professor Plinky cringed again.

“Shield yourselves!” yelled Professor Desulgon. “They could be Verdusthorn trees! Frisorba Vitigida!”

Albus saw a blue spark, and then a roaring fire grew amongst the trees. A cool breeze drifted up from the flames below: Professor Desulgon was using Frostflame.

“ANYONE UP THERE WITH PATRONUS CAPABILITIES – SEND ONE DOWN NOW SO WE CAN FIND THE FOKII!” yelled Professor Westerling.

“Expecto Patronum!” yelled Albus and Lucas and several dozen other voices.
A great mass of silver light burst forth from wands everywhere. Silver creatures poured down from above and below; they all landed in the middle of the trees. Something started screeching.

Then, suddenly, a vicious wind pummeled them from below, so forceful that it blasted everyone off their feet; from the sounds above, it sounded like even people on the seventh floor were knocked over. The wind was like a hurricane, and as Albus struggled to stand up again, he found he was being blown over like a feather.

“WHIRLWORTS!” shouted Uncle Charlie.

“What the hell are Whirlworts?” yelled Lucas.

Several people had been knocked out by the gust of wind slamming their heads into the walls and the floor, and Patronuses were starting to fade.

“ALANA!” came a shout from below; it was Clay. “CAST A CORPOREAL PATRONUS – YOURS ISN’T HELPING RIGHT NOW!”

“I c– I can’t–”

“YES YOU CAN, JUST FOCUS!”

“No, I can’t–”

“NOT WITH THAT ATTITUDE, GODDAMNIT, CAST A GODDAMN PATRONUS RIGHT NOW, THERE ARE LIVES ON THE LINE!”

“Clay, you’re not helping!” roared Rohan.

The wind finally died down. Albus was able to scramble to his feet, and he got to the railing to look down below just as a form whizzed by his head, so close that the hair on her head struck his face. It was Lucy, who had jumped down from a higher level; she landed catlike on the ground and ran like a streak into the cluster of burning trees with a dome-like magical shield floating around most of her body.

“Lucy! Get out of here–”

“Not a chance, Rohan, I can help!”

“Can anyone else do Frostflame?” shouted Professor Desulgon. “Someone, loan a wand out to whoever can – Helio, you’ve got two wands! Can you do Frostflame?”

“I’m – not sure–”

Another incredibly strong wind lashed out from the main floor. Albus gripped the railing tight, but had to hook his feet around the railing too to avoid his legs lifting until he was dangling upside-down.

But as he was clinging, a horrible sound began to echo from below. It sounded like every awful noise Albus had ever heard, combined; it was a rattle that penetrated his eardrums and resonated inside his very brain. His ears started to burn and his balance was lost so badly that he almost let go of the railing; as it was, his limbs were getting weaker by the second, and he wasn’t sure how much longer he could hold on with this racket hammering his brain.

“HELIO, THERE ARE CLATTARangs TOO, THEY’LL CALM ONCE YOU COOL THE
AIR!” shouted Uncle Charlie. “GET TO IT IF YOU CAN!”

“Frisorba Vitigida!”

More Frostflame leapt out into the trees. The temperature dropped even faster, and suddenly Albus could see his breath. The noise died down almost immediately, but the wind abruptly changed directions – it was sucking them towards the ground floor now. Albus wasn’t expecting it, and he was ripped from his hold on the railing and he plummeted towards the main floor. Eight separate people plunged towards the ground with him from above, but nine separate Cushioning Charms from Professor Plinky’s speedy reactions were quick enough to save them. Albus was continuing to be sucked into the forest.

“Incarcerous!” stated Professor Desulgon, and a rope wrapped itself around Albus’s chest and then hooked around a tree, tethering him in one place. Other teachers repeated the feat for the other people who fell from above, to keep them from getting sucked into the forest growing in the middle of the hallway.

“DIFFINDO!” yelled Professor Longbottom.

A burning branch was severed from one of the trees; it opened up a view for Albus to see a horrible creature with a gaping mouth larger than an average doorway. Its teeth were moving in a saw-like motion as it inhaled; Albus saw a pair of glasses fly into the creature’s mouth and get torn apart like a piece of parchment hit with a Shredding Charm. But the branch that Professor Longbottom severed, which was still erupting with Frostflame, sailed into the mouth as well; with a shriek of pain, the wind subsided. It spat the branch back out, turned around, and bounded further back into the forest.

“What was that thing?!”

“A Whirlwort!” replied Uncle Charlie. “Even just one of those animals can inhale or exhale with that amount of force. They’ll try to eat anything that comes near them and they’ll spit it out if it’s not made of food. If we see another one, send something painful into its mouth – something burning or something sharp. It’ll stop blowing for a full twenty-four hours after you injure it. The Clattarangs can be fooled by cooling the air – when the air is made colder than normal for the season, it’ll believe that it’s almost night, and the Clattarang will go to sleep. Remember that if we see any more of those ones!”

“What do we do if a Vulupus spots us?”

“Connectivity Charms – get that going! Communication will be essential, especially if the appearance of a Vulupus is combined with Clattarangs or Whirlworts. Watch for people flying into the Whirlwort’s mouth – typically it doesn’t like the taste of human because of our clothes, but those teeth will do some serious damage before it spits you out! And remember, everyone should work to cool the air as quickly as possible if Clattarangs appear, especially if there are multiple animals, or we’ll all pass out before we can react to everyone else’s inactivity!”

Albus loosed the ropes from his body and leapt into action, holding a wand. A flash of movement caught his eye as he scanned his surroundings, and he turned in that direction. “Expecto Patronum!” he yelled again.

This time his coyote Patronus shed intense light onto a small creature hopping across the floor; the dusting corpse of a Fokii toad was leaping towards them angrily.

“Trevor!” gasped Professor Longbottom.
Eight brilliantly white Patronus birds soared towards the toad; Professor Longbottom supplied two pandas to help Professor Desulgon’s Patronuses, and four spider monkeys from Professor Westerling joined the party with Albus’s coyote. A lion came from Rohan, a lioness came from Lucy, two koalas came from Professor Plinky, and then hoards of Patronuses descended upon the toad. It was already almost skeletal, and it was not a long-living animal in the first place; the Fokii crumbled to ashes before their eyes in a matter of ten seconds.

“It’s working beautifully!” cheered Westerling. “Now let’s get the trees out of the castle before anything else finds its way in – CROUCH!”

Everyone dropped down towards the floor in a crouch.

“No – no – Barty Crouch! Senior! Patronuses, everyone!”

“I’m gonna go for it!” roared Professor Desulgon. “EXPECTO PATRONUM ITERO!”

The hallway exploded with light as sixteen Patronuses burst from Professor Desulgon’s wand this time. Everyone else’s Patronuses stampeded forth to join, and they surrounded Mr. Crouch’s carcass with a wall of light. It howled with pain like they always did at the contact with Patronus light, and it bounded up into the trees. Albus thought it was going to disappear, but then a moment later, it leapt from a hidden perch and sailed out; flaps of skin whipped out from both of its arms and caught the wind, and then it was soaring at Professor Wilcox.

Professor Desulgon slashed his wand; the Fokii was encountered by a pulsing blade of energy that smashed it into the wall so forcefully that a crack traveled up the wall. Then, from the trees, another creature sprang into action – Albus gasped as he recognized an unmistakable mulunctapol, which snarled as it opened its magic-draining jaws wide and sunk its teeth deep into Professor Desulgon’s leg.

“NO!” screamed Albus, throwing a hand out; a bomb of energy whipped out and sailed towards Professor Desulgon–

But Professor Desulgon had already cursed off the mulunctapol. He had been able to react speedily enough to smash it off of his leg before it began to drain him. Albus’s energy blast impacted the mulunctapol after it was already off Professor Desulgon’s leg, and it careened into a wall. It turned and ran into the forest.

“Albus – get back – now that you’ve injured it, it’s not going to take kindly to your presence,” warned Professor Desulgon.

“Then you should get out of here too!” protested Albus.

“Believe me, I want to! But I need to make sure that doesn’t happen to anyone else like it almost happened to me!”

Professor Desulgon continued casting Frostflame at the trees, and obliterating the trees that had been frozen beforehand. But it seemed to be taking more effort out of him after the mulunctapol’s bite. Albus began to worry that Professor Desulgon had been permanently handicapped.

They had been continuously driving the trees back from their position ever since the start of the battle, and now they were nearing the end of the hall where a door had apparently burst open, letting in all kinds of creatures from the forest. The teachers picked up the speed in freezing the trees and shattering the frozen remains.

“ALANA!” shouted Clay as Mr. Crouch’s carcass picked itself up off the floor and began running
towards them. “HELP US, FOR THE LOVE OF GOD!”

Patronuses chased down the Fokii again; it shielded its eyes and let loose a blood-curdling wail and changed direction, heading towards the forest.

“ALANA, THIS IS A LIFE-OR-DEATH SITUATION AND YOU’D BETTER CAST A CORPOREAL PATRONUS RIGHT NOW–”

“Ex- Expecto Patronum!” cried Alana, tears streaming down her face.

A large silver animal burst forth from her wand, and it pursued the carcass of Mr. Crouch all the way until it bolted out of the open door; Frostflame engulfed the rest of the trees and froze them solid. Professor Wilcox smashed the remaining trees into smithereens and slammed the door shut; the alarm immediately ceased. Everything was dead silent, except for Alana Falagair, who sank to the floor, covering her face with her hands, sobbing as her majestic silver stag leaned down to nuzzle its head against her chest.

Albus swallowed a lump in his throat as he remembered that his mother couldn’t stand Alana.

Alana’s Patronus was a stag.
The siege alarm was blaring again.

“What is it, what is it?!” cried Madam Birchbaum a few seconds later, running over to the sound of a distressed student.

“Can you make a fire somewhere in here?” wailed Rose, twitching. “It’s – it’s really cold in the hospital wing!”

“It’s quite mild!” complained Madam Birchbaum.

Rose turned away and huddled herself in a corner.

Exo ran up to Madam Birchbaum as Albus was about to do the same thing. In her ear, Exo whispered, “Rose really needs to sit in front of a fire right now. It’s how she calms herself down.”

Madam Birchbaum nodded in understanding. She set to work making a fire pit in the center of the hospital wing.

“I’d better not find any of you Gryffindors playing around with this fire!” she warned as she started up the flames. “I know we’re already in the hospital wing, but if you injure yourself out of your own stupidity, I’m giving you much less priority than the people who are out there defending the castle who need help!”

Gryffindor and Ravenclaw towers had been deemed unsafe. The Gryffindors had been moved to stay in the hospital wing and the Ravenclaws had been moved to stay in the library, which were farther from windows, and in a more central, secure location where eyes could be constantly kept on them. The Slytherins were too close to the dungeons, where a lot of the creatures kept heading once they were inside the castle, so Wilcox moved them, too; they were sleeping in the Great Hall. The Hufflepuff common room was comparatively safer, and the Hufflepuffs were allowed to stay there.

Classes had also been cancelled again. The siege alarm had been blaring almost constantly, and the activations were becoming more frequent by the day. This was the third activation of the alarm already, and they had only been just about to have dinner. Somehow, even through all the enchantments that the teachers kept putting over the main entrance, plants and animals were still getting in. This was why Wilcox had relocated them from the towers and dungeons – if the forest was breaking through the main entrance, then they weren’t safe anywhere that was exposed to the outside with windows.

It was also taking longer each time for the teachers to drive out the offenders. The siege alarm went off for a full forty minutes before it finally died – the longest siege yet. Only when the alarm stopped shrieking did Rose finally pry herself away from the fire and grab something to eat.

As all the Gryffindors seated around the dinner tables finally relaxed, the door to the hospital wing opened, and Professor Desulgon peeked in.

“No interrupting dinner, am I?!” he asked timidly.

“Well, you obviously are,” said Madam Birchbaum, “but if it’s for a medical emergency, you’re obviously allowed to do so…”
Professor Desulgon limped into the room. He was bleeding; small marks from teeth and claws were all over his leg.

Madam Birchbaum leapt up. “Goodness!” she shouted. “Dalton, get in here this instant! Somebody fetch the dittany from the medical closet!”

Louis whipped out his wand and Summoned a bottle of dittany, which zoomed over after punching a hole in the door of the closet where Madam Birchbaum kept all of her equipment. Gil ran over to Madam Birchbaum’s side and held up a hand; Louis tossed him the bottle and Gil handed it to Madam Birchbaum.

“Oh, Merlin,” she murmured as she applied the dittany. “Another bite? You know what will happen if you don’t get them off in time…”

“Yes, I know quite well,” said Professor Desulgon, grimacing. “But I have a question… I noticed a faint effect of this the last time one of the muls bit me~”

“What’s a mul?” asked Madam Birchbaum.

“Oh – sorry,” said Professor Desulgon. “We’ve already developed forest-fighter slang out there… ‘Mulunctapol’ is a word that takes way too long to shout to each other when we’re in the midst of battle, so we’ve shortened it to ‘mul.’ Where was I…?”

“You were outside fighting the forest,” said Madam Birchbaum. “That’s not a good sign that you don’t remember!”

“Merlin’s fuzzy nuts, Cynthia, I remember where I came from! I meant, where was I in the conversation – right, the mul bite. Yes, so, there’s this… Expelliarmus.”

Gil’s wand, which he was holding loosely at his side, gave a great twitch, but it didn’t leave Gil’s hand.

“Is this…”

Professor Desulgon was already incredibly pale, being an albino, but he was white as a ghost at this point.

“Is this permanent?”

“No,” said Madam Birchbaum immediately.

Professor Desulgon’s shoulders slumped in relief.

“No, it’s not permanent,” said Madam Birchbaum. “By many accounts from back when the mulunctapoli were still around, we know that the mulunctapol – mul, I like that, it’s much easier – we know the mul will drain as much of your magic as it can in one bite, but it doesn’t always succeed all the way. For example, when you cast many spells, you tire yourself out – right now, your magic is as deteriorated as it would be if you spent an entire week performing nonstop magic, but your magical energy will slowly replenish itself. It’s just like how running nonstop might tire you out until you can’t even think of moving, but eventually if you spend some time recovering, your energy will return and you’ll be at your peak strength again. If a mul drains you all the way, however, there’s no getting it back. You’ll be able to replenish, Dalton, because you still have some left… but if you have none left, there’s nothing to replenish, and you can’t get it back.”

“I don’t like to consider that,” said Professor Desulgon. “How long will I be out?”
“Out of action? I’d say no less than a few days.”

“A few days?!?” sputtered Professor Desulgon. “They really need me out there!”

“And I really need you to stay in here,” tutted Madam Birchbaum. “You are at an incredible risk. First of all, your magic is stunted, which makes you a sitting duck for another attack. Secondly, if you get attacked again, it’s going to be impossible for you to get it off, with your magic so weak – and thirdly, since you’ve already been drained so low, one more bite even lasting for a fraction of a second might very well finish you off!”

“Wouldn’t want that,” said Professor Desulgon, paling again.

“No, we most certainly would not. So no, you won’t be a Squib unless the mul finishes its job, just like you wouldn’t be a soulless hunk of flesh unless a Dementor finished its job. So for example, if you encountered a Dementor and were so depressed that you couldn’t cast a Patronus… I wouldn’t go looking for more Dementors. Stay in here until you’re better, please.”

“Sure thing,” said Professor Desulgon, sounding more than a little stressed.

“Who’s backup Head of Ravenclaw House?” asked Madam Birchbaum. “I thought we didn’t have any staff from Ravenclaw anymore…”

“Paris Evranote is… she just came in this year. But she’s not here right now.”

“Right. Did you attend Hogwarts with her?”

“No. She’s eight years older than me.”

“Did you ever study Diwandology with her?”

“No.”

“I wonder what you two could have done in the field if you’d met earlier…”

Professor Desulgon didn’t answer.

Sensing that the conversation was over, Madam Birchbaum pursed her big red lips and went to go clear the dinner table.

“Tell me if you need anything, Dalton,” she said once she’d finished. “And if you so much as tap a toe off that bed, so help me, I will use my Healer’s Privilege on you.”

“Damn healthcare system,” groaned Professor Desulgon, leaning his head back.

“What’s that?” asked Madam Birchbaum, advancing on him swiftly.

“What – no, it’s nothing, it’s–”

Madam Birchbaum reached the side of his bed and shaved his head backwards. Underneath Professor Desulgon’s neck was a large red mark that looked like a bad rash.

“What’s this?” she asked shrilly.

Professor Desulgon looked up to the heavens again and mumbled something.

“Say again?”
“It was… it was a Suttirfiujit,” said Professor Desulgon very quietly, though still not quiet enough to escape Albus’s trained ears.

“A what?”

“Suttirfiujit. Dirt Piranha?”

“Oh, my goodness,” said Madam Birchbaum, cupping a hand over her mouth. “Those aren’t supposed to be here. Are they?”

“Nope. And they’re not supposed to rocket straight out of the ground and bite you on the neck, either, but that didn’t work out so well. The devil burst right out from a tiny pile of dirt and socked me right in the neck, then sunk its little teeth in, and you know they’re mildly venomous; it left a little bit of a rash.”

“Was anyone else bitten?”

“No. Only one got in, but not that much dirt got in the castle, so they wouldn’t have had anywhere to go if more than one had gotten in. They may only be six inches long, but those fat little serpents need dirt if they’re going to move around.”

“I can’t believe that could have happened, and I really can’t believe you didn’t inform me about this!”

“It’s just a rash! They’re not venomous enough to do any damage!”

“You don’t know that! You don’t know the risk of infection! Magical viruses have been on the rise in the last fifteen years!”

“Yes, I know. Fine. Do what you will.”

“I will,” said Madam Birchbaum, fetching another bottle from the cabinet and setting to work again.

Rose cleared her throat next to Albus; Albus looked over and noticed that she was holding the book *The Descent of Dismiusa* again. She was pointing to a list of the creatures said to serve Dismiusa: among them, in addition to muls, Fokii, Clattarangs, and Vulupi, all of which they’d talked about in class, there were Whirlworts (which had also been breaking into the castle) and Suttirfiujits.

“Is it just me,” she said, “or is this getting harder and harder to deny by the minute?”

“Whatever it is,” said Albus, shaking his head, “it’s not just you.”

“I’m sorry, but it’s Ravenclaws only in here,” said Professor Plinky, who was temporarily overseeing the duties of the Head of Ravenclaw House while Professor Desulgon was in the hospital wing.

“You can’t ban me from the library!” said Rose loudly.

“We’re here to visit Alec and Lily,” said Albus. “We just want to talk to our family and friends. Professor Longbottom already gave us permission to walk down here, as long as we hurried and went into the nearest safe room if an alarm went off.”

Professor Plinky deflated slightly. “Yes, yes, go ahead. But don’t make a habit out of it. This makes it very difficult to keep track of everyone.”
“Thank you,” said Rose, taking Albus’s hand and dragging him in quickly.

Albus waved to his little sister; Lily ran over and hugged Albus tightly. Knowing he wouldn’t be able to detach his sister, and not wanting to detach her, he walked over to Alec while Rose detoured towards the bookshelves.

“Oh, hey, Albus,” said Alec, his sleepless eyes slowly blinking. “Good to see you… what brings you here?”

“Rose wanted to look up a book on Suttirfiujits,” replied Albus.

“Suttuh-whattuh?”

“Suttirfiujits. The teachers are calling them Suts, but they’re also called Dirt Piranhas. They’re a kind of fat worm-like thing that burrows under dirt—”

“I know what Dirt Piranhas are,” interrupted Alec, shivering.

“They sound scary,” said Lily.

“My mom used to read me a story about a man who had to cross a great desert but those things were after him,” said Alec. “It was the scariest story in the world and I developed a crippling fear of them. A Dirt Piranha hoard was my boggart during our boggart lesson in Defense Against the Dark Arts. What’s so important about them now?”

“They’re… outside the castle now,” said Albus, wincing as Alec’s tired eyes snapped open. “Sorry about that…”

“You’re joking,” whined Alec desperately.

Albus shook his head no.

“Aw, no,” said Lily. Albus wondered if he shouldn’t be letting her hear all of this.

Alec crumpled to the ground, hugging his knees. “Great. I haven’t slept well in weeks and now I’m not going to sleep ever again.”


“That was fast,” said Albus appreciatively.

“It does help to know your way around the library,” said Rose. She looked down at Alec. “What’s the matter with him?”

“His boggart was a swarm of Suttirfiujits,” said Albus.

“Oh, that sucks,” said Rose, opening the book. “Okay, listen to this: ‘The Suttirfiujit, also known as the Dirt Piranha, is a small and fat snake-like animal with vicious teeth. It is around half a foot in length and lives in large colonies in small portions of varied regions. Its coloration varies by habitat, changing color to match the soil; this camouflage seems unnecessary, however, as it rarely ever shows itself above ground. Its movement is limited by the fact that it cannot survive very long if exposed to the air, and it can only move through very loose soil. They are easily avoided by traveling with flight, or by moving across treetops and rocks.’ Let’s see… here it says… ‘The Suttirfiujit has the strange magical ability to see straight through dirt, but their eyes are incapable of seeing through air. It employs two main hunting methods. One method is that it will grab onto
the feet of an animal, or whatever body parts are touching the dirt, drag it slightly down so that it
can’t escape, and eat it slowly from the bottom up. The traces of venom it is capable of injecting
will paralyze a victim if enough bites are delivered. Its other method is to dig the ground out from
under its prey in a manner very similar to that of the Dugroot tree; in fact, it very much enjoys to
live around the areas where Dugroots live, because these trees dig up the soil and make it looser,
making travel easier for the Suttirfiujits. For this reason, the Suttirfiujits also enjoyed the company
of Hellhunters, and their numbers even greatly declined when the Hellhunters went extinct in the
late sixteenth century.’ Interesting.”

“What’re Hellhunters?” asked Alec.

“Probably nothing good,” said Rose, “seeing as those are also listed in The Descent of Dismiusa as
servants of Dismiusa.”

“I don’t like the sound of the name,” said Albus. “Could we find a book on Hellhunters, do you
think?”

“Those apparently went extinct a long time ago, but I’ll see if I can find anything on them,” said
Rose, dropping her book on the table in front of Albus. “There’s a small section in here mentioning
them in greater detail, but it’s only a short paragraph and it doesn’t describe them very well. And
Albus… I think it’s about time we brought this up to Professor Wilcox? We probably should have
done that a long time ago.”

“I feel like Wilcox already knows,” said Albus. “But yeah… I think we should ask him about this,
too.”

Rose nodded and set off at a brisk walk towards another part of the library.

“And what about Fokii?” asked Alec. “Do we know everything about them?”

“The teachers have to know everything by this point,” said Albus.

“They remind me of what Muggles think are zombies. Are they connected to our zombies in any
way?”

“No,” said Albus. “I don’t think so, anyway. Zombies are only found in South America, aren’t
they? I think the Muggle view of dead people crawling back out of their graves probably came
from accounts of seeing the Fokii Fungus take over an underground corpse, but I don’t think
they’re related to zombies. Zombies are just classified as the Living Dead, like vampires. The Fokii
Fungus falls under the category of the Dark Dead, like Inferi.”

“Got it,” said Rose, reappearing with another book.

“That was absurdly fast,” commented Alec.

“This one also has Warkabulls,” said Rose. “And those are servants of Dismiusa, too. But I already
know about Warkabulls. They’re the ones that have the magical stone-wall-like head growths.
They sleep in circles around their nests, setting the stone walls on their heads right next to each
other to form a long barrier. If you cross the barrier that they make, whether above or below,
they’ll notice, and they’ll go on a rampage and chase you until either you die or they do.”

“As long as they leave us alone while we’re in the castle,” said Alec.

“They’re supposedly extinct,” said Rose, opening her new book, “but hey, that didn’t stop the
mulunctapoli. And the Hellhunters are extinct, too, and these had better not come back. They were
the only known natural predator of the Nundu.”

“Nundus?” said Alec, laughing. “You must have read that wrong. That would be crazy. Nundus
don’t have any predators.”

“Not anymore, now that the Hellhunters are extinct,” said Rose, scanning the page on which she’d
arrived. “I’ll paraphrase what I read. Hellhunters are large dogs, just like the Nundu is a large cat.
Hellhunters tear up dirt in an area and make it really soft, which by the way is just what the Dirt
Piranhas like. Then any animal that passes through leaves a clear footprint. The Hellhunters make
rounds of their dirt traps to look for footprints every hour. The Hellhunter runs after the animal if it
finds footprints, and tracks it expertly by following the general direction and employing their
amazing sense of smell.”

“I guess they were named pretty accurately,” said Alec. “At least whoever named the Hellhunters
didn’t give them one of those stupidly long names that no one can pronounce.”

“When they find an animal, they take it down with their awful teeth, and drag it back to their den,”
continued Rose. “The head Hellhunter, the alpha female, sends out a call for all of the others in the
area to come share the kill – they share every kill amongst the pack. Then the alpha female bites
the neck of whichever dog caught the prey; this bite triggers growth in the animal, and the
Hellhunter gets larger. The largest Hellhunter has the privilege of mating with the den mother, so
all of them are trying to grow the most by catching the most prey. So, the larger the Hellhunter, the
more effective a predator you can be sure it is. Weak Hellhunters, who can’t catch much prey and
grow very little, are killed by the pack.”

“Why would they do that?” asked Alec, looking horrified.

“To maintain maximum efficiency and increase food supply,” responded Rose. “They want only
the best hunters to share in the communal food supply. They also eat the weaker ones to help the
larger ones grow even more. They can even hunt Nundus when they reach absolutely immense
size… but nervous groups of wizards usually track and kill them before they reach that size, to
avoid the Hellhunters barging into a village. The larger they get, the more wizards at a time are
needed to take them down. They were hunted to extinction in the late sixteenth century.”

“I thought only the mulunctapoli were purposefully exterminated,” said Albus.

“Only the mulunctapoli were exterminated because of their threat to the population,” corrected
Rose. “Other species were exterminated, like the Hellhunters, just not for the same reasons as the
mulunctapoli. People would hunt the alpha female to harvest the teeth, because just like her bite
causes her pack members to grow, it also has a steroid-like effect when you pierce a human’s skin
with one of her teeth. Quidditch players often used the teeth illegally. Once the alpha female is
killed, the group descends into anarchy, and all of them kill each other.”

“Sounds like a lovely animal to have around,” said Alec. “You think those things are in the
Forbidden Forest, too?”

“I think we should warn Professor Wilcox, just in case they are,” answered Rose. “I’m going to go
look for books on Cravants and Ivvixens now. Those are the other two animals mentioned as
servants of Dismiusa, but I’m having a harder time finding information on those ones.”

“So it’ll take you thirty seconds instead of ten?” asked Alec.

“I sure hope so,” said Rose. “I’ll be looking if you need—”
A snowy owl whizzed by Rose’s head, so quickly and suddenly that she shrieked in fright and fell backwards, knocking over a chair in the process. The owl landed on Alec’s shoulder and held out its foot.

“What the hell?!” yelled Rose from the floor, rubbing her knee.

“Sorry,” said Alec. “If all of our owls are trapped in here with us, though, we might as well use them and give them something to do... I’ve been writing to Mia so that neither of us has to go outside but Peffy can get some exercise.” He unrolled the little scroll that had been attached to Peffy’s knee and quickly scanned it over as Rose returned to the bookshelves.

“I wish I could write to Janelle,” mumbled Albus.

“Have someone send her a Patronus,” suggested Alec.

“But everything I want to say is so... confidential.”

“Learn how to do a talking Patronus,” said Alec, shrugging.

Albus raised an eyebrow. Now there was something he could work on. It would at least take his mind off the current state of affairs in the castle.

The siege alarm screeched through the castle again. As Plinky yelled to the Ravenclaw seventh years and then slammed shut the doors to the library, Albus folded his arms on the table and wondered if he would even be able to cast an adequate corporeal Patronus in an environment as tense as this, let alone a talking one.

“Practicing your Patronus?” asked Exo, walking into the small room.

“Yeah, Madam Birchbaum said I could use her office for a little bit to practice,” said Albus. “I’m trying to cast a talking Patronus.”

“Let’s see,” said Exo, looking impressed.

“Expecto Patronum!”

A silver coyote emerged from Albus’s wand swiftly. It turned around and looked at Exo.

“Bahken oo-uh gawkeek tradohpuh!” came Albus’s voice from the coyote’s open mouth, so softly that it was almost inaudible.

“What were you trying to make it say?” asked Exo.

“I was going for ‘I can do a talking Patronus,’” said Albus.

Exo laughed. “Clearly not,” he said. “But hey, that’s some serious progress. I hear it takes a real effort to get your Patronus to make any sound at all, let alone start saying words in your voice... even if they’re not real words.”

“Yeah,” said Albus. “It’ll take even longer to get him to go to a place as far as France, but if I don’t try, I’ll never know how soon I can do it.”

“That makes sense,” said Exo. “Sorry for interrupting, but you said you wanted to know if my dad popped in the hospital wing... right?”
“Yeah, I did, I wanted to ask him something,” said Albus, stowing his wand again. “Is he here?”

“Yes, he is,” said Exo. “He’s checking in on Professor Desulgon.”

Albus followed Exo back out of the room and noticed Wilcox sitting in a chair by Professor Desulgon’s bedside. Professor Desulgon was saying something about being almost fully recovered already.

“You’re not going to talk to him now?” asked Exo when Albus didn’t move from where they were standing just outside the door to Madam Birchbaum’s office.

“I’m going to wait until he starts to leave, in case he doesn’t want our discussion to be heard by Professor Desulgon.”

“You think my dad is going to tell you something that he wouldn’t tell one of the Heads of Houses?” asked Exo skeptically.

Albus had to admit to himself that Exo had a point. “Well… I don’t know if any of the other teachers have asked him as directly as I’m planning on asking him.”

“You should probably go now and just ask if you can talk to him somewhere else,” said Exo. “I don’t want to be rude.”

“Well, I know, but if a siege alarm goes off before Dad’s done talking to Professor Desulgon, then you’re going to have missed your chance to talk to him.”

Albus rolled his eyes. “Yes, but what are the chances of that? The siege alarm isn’t going to–”

The siege alarm blared once more.

Albus shoved a hand into his face as Wilcox leapt to his feet. Professor Desulgon looked like he was about to get up, but Wilcox put a hand in front of Professor Desulgon’s chest and sternly told him something; Professor Desulgon collapsed back onto the bed with folded arms and a pouting face. Wilcox rushed out of the room.

Rose had previously been in a corner of the room, where she was reading a number of books she’d taken out of the library in order to search for Cravants and Ivvixens. Upon the reactivation of the alarm, however, she left her books in the corner and migrated over to the fire, staring into it with great concern. Exo wandered over and sat next to her, but she didn’t seem to notice him.

Albus ducked back into Madam Birchbaum’s office, and took out his wand again, trying to block out the incessant noise.

“Expecto Patronum!” he said feebly.

Not a wisp of silver smoke was produced.

His muscles went limp for a moment, but he shook the negative thoughts from his head. Occlumency training was helping him do that, too. He set himself, physically and mentally, and tried again.

“Expecto Patronum!”

The Patronus he achieved wasn’t corporeal. But after all, he had been practicing for a while and he was tired, in addition to being nervous about yet another siege on the castle. He decided to give
himself a break, and he wandered out of the office just in time to see Wilcox’s silver shark Patronus burst through the floor like a breaching whale. Their Headmaster’s voice echoed through the hospital wing for everyone to hear.

“DALTON – FORGET WHAT I SAID – WE NEED YOU IMMEDIATELY!”

Professor Desulgon was out the door in a matter of a single second. Rose squeaked in fright and clutched Exo’s hand so quickly that they both nearly fell off the bench positioned in front of the fire. She rocked back and forth, talking to herself to calm herself down, and still didn’t seem to notice Exo blushing furiously right next to her, even as she gripped his hand with the apparent force of a boa constrictor, if the color of Exo’s fingertips was any indication.

Madam Birchbaum tried to stop a flood of Gryffindor sixth and seventh years from pouring out the door to assist with the defense. But Freddie Weasley blasted open the door, and she was powerless to prevent the dozens of Gryffindor sixth and seventh years, all shouting that they were of age and allowed to fight if they wanted, from slowly oozing around her.

Right before the door shut behind them, a shout from Professor Longbottom echoed through the halls: “GET TO THE ASTRONOMY TOWER! THEY’VE BROKEN A HOLE IN THE ASTRONOMY TOWER!”

Albus sat on the other side of Rose. She quickly clutched up his hand, too, and stared into the dancing flames, attempting to calm herself.

The siege alarm was still going a full hour later, during which Albus did nothing except sit with Rose to make sure she was all right and worry about his little sister in Ravenclaw. He decided he would try and convince the teachers to let Lily come stay with her family in Gryffindor – if she wanted, of course. Last time he had asked her, she was doing well in the comfort of her friends, and Alec had promised Albus that he’d look after her. But his brotherly instincts still wanted her nearby.

There was much more shouting outside the door than usual this time. People were running back and forth frantically. The door opened at one point and Gil rushed in, looking exceedingly anxious. He mentioned something quietly to Madam Birchbaum, and she nodded and allowed him into her office; she shut the door behind him and took out her wand.

“What’s going on?” asked Albus, starting to panic a little bit himself. Nobody answered him.

Five minutes later, the alarm finally shut off. Albus’s ears were still ringing, and he rubbed them to no adequate effect. The door burst open again and Louis ran in; he looked around the room quickly before Madam Birchbaum jutted a thumb in the direction of her office.

“Did he come in here?” asked Louis in a low growl.

“Gil? Yes, he’s in–”

“No, not Gil.”

“Oh,” said Madam Birchbaum. “No. We haven’t seen him.”

Louis glanced to the door. “They think he’s gone,” he said. “But I’m still not sure.”

“Who?” asked Albus, turning away from Rose to join the conversation.

Louis walked over to Albus and sat on Albus’s other side; Albus let go of Rose’s hand and turned
to face Louis.

“I’m not sure if I’m supposed to tell anyone,” said Louis under his breath. “But you should know. Asher Pierce just got out.”

Albus’s body seized up.

“What do you mean, got out?” he choked.

“I mean both of the possible interpretations,” said Louis quietly. “Asher Pierce somehow got his hands on a wand, and he’s gone – he left the castle. Red Pierce made a point to stay in Professor Valon’s sight the whole time so that we couldn’t blame him, but we think it was one of Asher’s close friends… probably Simon Smokehart. But we can’t prove anything; we don’t even have a single shred of evidence against anyone, because all of the teachers were fighting the invasion and no one was watching him.”

“How could they have let that happen?!” hissed Albus.

“I don’t know,” said Louis. “Someone stole the wand of a first year Slytherin named Corey Brown while the commotion was going on, and then we think that person blasted Pierce free and gave him Brown’s wand. They’re testing Priori Incantatem on every wand in the building to see if any of them were used in Pierce’s escape. But they think that the perpetrator probably used Brown’s wand for that part, so then the magic couldn’t be traced from his wand.”

“Shit,” whispered Albus, pulling his hair.

“Naturally, we sent Gil out of the action just in case,” said Louis. “But I don’t know if he’s going to be safe until Pierce is caught.”

“Then Pierce did… what?” pressed Albus. “He just… ran into the forest?”

“Apparently,” said Louis. “We don’t think he’s in the castle… and by that I mean that James doesn’t think he’s in the castle, because James was using a certain map that he just showed me. He said you were in on this little secret, too.”

“Yes,” said Albus. “We used it to find Swait.”

“That makes so much more sense,” said Louis to himself.

“I hope Pierce dies in the forest,” growled Albus.

“I don’t know if I hope that,” said Louis. “If Pierce was bad enough as a person, I don’t want him coming back into this castle as a Fokii.”

There was a short silence while Albus and Louis let those words ring between them.

Then, from behind him, Albus heard Rose say, “...How long have I been holding your hand?”

Louis looked at Albus with intense emotion.

“You and James are going to need to do me a favor,” he said. “You’re going to need to keep a constant eye on the map and keep looking to see if Pierce returns.”

“The alarm would go off,” said Albus. “Won’t it?”

“Not necessarily,” said Louis.
“What?” sputtered Albus. “What does that mean?!”

“It means that Professor Wilcox cast a powerful protective spell over the castle, which would set off the alarm if any living creature entered the castle which had not been already inside the castle at the time of the spell being cast,” said Louis. “Pierce, however, was inside the castle at the time of the spell being cast. He’s gone now… but he could come back, and if he was alone… no one would know.”

Albus’s heart sank. “Can’t Professor Wilcox just redo the charm?”

“Not unless he wants to disable the original charm for a few hours while he redoes it,” said Louis. “And for obvious reasons, we don’t want that to happen.”

“We’ll keep watch,” said Albus.

The door to the hospital wing opened again. This time, Professor Rhuavone, their Professor of Muggle Studies, and Rohan Otica, covered in blood, were being levitated in on stretchers.

“What happened?” asked Louis and Albus simultaneously, also standing up at the same time.

“Mul bites,” said Professor Desulgon, following the stretchers. “Don’t worry – the mus weren’t attached long enough for the effects to be permanent, but they’re going to be out of commission for a little bit, like me.”

“What happens if all of the adults in the castle end up like that?” blurted Riley.

Professor Desulgon tensed and did not answer.
Gimmick purred as he rubbed against Albus’s leg. The cat seemed to know what was going on, and he wasn’t wandering the castle anymore, but he was still his exuberant kitten-like self. His scruffy face always made Albus smile.

Positioned in the hospital wing, the Gryffindors unfortunately had to deal with seeing every single injury that befell the staff of Hogwarts and their Aurors. Professor Westerling came in almost completely paralyzed to have a Verdusthorn extracted from his spinal cord, but he was healed quickly and he went back into action. Alana Falagair came in with a mul bite and had to stay for several days. Her appearance reminded Albus of what her Patronus was, and Albus decided to bring it up with his brother. Out of courtesy, he wasn’t going to spread the rumor; he wasn’t sure how many people knew, but the word hadn’t circulated through the castle yet. Alana was so upset when she had to cast the Patronus that Albus didn’t even consider telling anyone else.

Albus waved James over to the table.

“Hey, bro, have you checked the map lately?” asked James, sitting down in the chair next to Albus.

Albus had been in charge of watching the map for Pierce during all of the sieges; James was often out fighting the forest with the teachers, and they couldn’t really stop him because he was of age.

“Yeah, and I didn’t see Mr. Crouch or Pierce on the last break-in,” said Albus.

“Check it as often as possible, of course.”

“I will.”

“So what’s up?”

“Alana,” said Albus. He felt bad gossiping about it behind her back, but he wanted to know if James knew anything more than he did.

“She’s okay, right?” asked James, looking over his shoulder at her. “She hasn’t been completely drained?”

“No,” said Albus. “But something happened one time when I was in the middle of one of the fights…”

“When were you in the middle of a fight?” asked James, looking shocked.

“One of the first ones,” said Albus. “A Whirlwort sucked me off the stairwell, over the railing, and I fell into the fight. And… Alana had to cast a Patronus.”

“Right, I heard about that,” said James. “Apparently it was a big deal, but nobody will tell me what the Patronus was. What’s that all about?”

“It was a stag,” said Albus.

James nodded in comprehension. “Okay,” he said. “I thought the reason was going to be something like that. A stag, like Dad’s?”

“Yeah.”
“Well, that makes sense,” said James. “She’s always flirting with him so bad and I don’t think she even realizes it. When she does realize it, she tries to stop herself, actually.”

“Really?” asked Albus; he had previously been too young to pick up on this.

“Oh, it’s crazy how obsessed she is with him,” said James. “I’ve asked Dad about it.”

“Oh?” said Albus. “What did he say?” This was the reason he’d brought it up with James in the first place; he was wondering if his father had any opinion on it.

“He didn’t say much,” said James. “But Mum overheard me asking, and she told me in confidence that she was recruited in the Auror Office during the Dark Revival, when she was only barely out of school and she had this gigantic celebrity crush on him. She didn’t really have the knowledge or experience or skill to contribute much to the fight back then, but Dad apparently spent a lot more time with her than he needed to, according to Mum.”

“What does that mean?” asked Albus carefully.

“She said he might have returned the feelings for a while.”

“What?!” barked Albus, and a lot of heads turned in his direction. He quieted down as he said, “Mum and Dad were already married by the Dark Revival. There is no way Dad would ever have cheated on her.”

“No, no, that’s not what I meant,” said James, waving his hands. “Mum said that she knows Dad always loved her more than anything. But she thinks he may have liked Alana a little bit. But eventually he told Alana that however much he liked her, he loved Mum more, and Alana needed to stop advancing on him.”

“He told Mum about that?” asked Albus. “I… I’m having a hard time believing that. Dad’s so much older than her…”

“It was an age difference of about twenty to twenty-six,” said James. “I did the math at one point. That’s not that much of a gap.”

“Stop it,” fumed Albus, grasping his hair. “Just stop.”

“Al, Dad didn’t do anything wrong,” said James. “Love isn’t so predictable. You can love a lot of people in your life. But true love – what Mum and Dad have? This may sound like a fairy-tale I’m spinning to you, but Mum and Dad’s love is an unbreakable bond that will never bend for anyone else. Dad might have really liked Alana, but he loves Mum more than anyone else, so he refused to have feelings for Alana. If anything, Mum and I respect him more for that. His love was tested and it came through. Mum doesn’t feel cheated or anything – she doesn’t blame Dad for anything – she just doesn’t like Alana because I guess Alana can’t take a hint.”

“So Dad is just friends with Alana?” confirmed Albus. “And Mum doesn’t like Alana because even though Dad told her that he loves Mum more, Alana’s still trying to take him away from her?”

“And the important thing,” added James, “is that Alana is not succeeding.”

“Good,” said Albus, though a pit still formed in his stomach when he thought about Alana. He was trying to let it not form for his father, but James’s defense was reminding him a little too much of Lucy’s outlook on life. A person couldn’t love anyone else but their husband or wife. How could Harry have even considered…?
“Why did Mum tell you this?” asked Albus.

James sighed. “Let’s just say Dad didn’t do a very good job of explaining it to me when I asked him, and Mum wanted to clear up some stuff.”

Albus let his head fall onto the table and groaned into the crook of his arm.

“I know, I know, it’s hard to take in,” said James. “But really, it shouldn’t be. What matters is that Dad loves Mum and he has never not loved her, and he has never loved her any less than a person could love another person. And they both know that. You know that, too, don’t you?”

“Yes,” said Albus.

Albus stared into James’s eyes for a moment, wanting to make sure James wasn’t leaving anything out of the story, and half-considering breaking into his brother’s mind to find out.

But he loved his brother, and he would never actually do that… even though he’d been considering it for a moment… just like his father may have wavered for a moment, but his love for his wife was too strong to ever betray her. And he didn’t betray her. He hadn’t and he never would.

So why did Albus still feel so upset?

A purring at Albus’s ear made him shiver and jump back; Gimmick was standing in front of him on the table, looking like he wanted a scratch behind the ears.

“Get that cat off the table!” crowed Madam Birchbaum. “That’s unsanitary!”

“Are you unsanitary, little hairball?” crooned James, picking Gimmick off the table. “Come on, ‘Mick. Off the table. Anyway, I’m going to go on patrol duty now. Take care, Al.”

“You too,” said Albus.

He glanced over to Alana’s bed.

Alana was weakened by the mul bite. Would this have the same effect as being tired, or drunk? If he were to try and channel his random Legilimency at her…

But he’d never been able to do it on purpose yet. Not to mention that the whole consideration was entirely unethical.

He decided in the end to walk over to her bed, and he decided to use the more socially acceptable method of finding out what was inside someone’s brain: asking them.

Alana looked over to Albus as he approached, and she smiled slightly. “Hello, Albus.”

“Hi, Alana,” said Albus. “How… how are you feeling?”

“I’m doing okay,” she said. “Not ideal, but okay…”

Albus’s fists were shaking a bit on their own. He tried to stop them. Despite all that James had said, Albus still couldn’t help but feel a little bit angry.

“So,” said Albus, trying to keep his voice steady. “I wanted to talk to you a little bit…”

“Oh?” asked Alana. “Go ahead.”
Albus bit his lower lip and turned his head away. He couldn’t do it. Alana was so embarrassed about the whole ordeal with her Patronus. She would probably be mortified to have to discuss it.

“About my Patronus?” guessed Alana quietly.

Albus turned around again. “Er. Yes, actually.”

“I thought so,” said Alana. “I didn’t think that would go down quietly. I haven’t cast a corporeal Patronus in public for years.”

“You like my dad.”

“I do,” said Alana, shaking her head. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” said Albus. His mind was returning to Holly, who’d crushed on him for the entire first year he’d been with Janelle. Holly had been obsessed with him, to a frightening degree. She’d even tried to wrongfully convince Albus that Janelle didn’t like him. Was this like what had happened with Alana and his mother and father?

“I don’t… I don’t really want to talk about it,” said Alana, turning on her side. “I’m not proud of some of my earlier years.”

Albus nodded. This really sounded like she might have pulled a Holly. There was one question that he really needed to get into the air, though. He wouldn’t sleep until he heard the answer.

“Did my dad ever return the feelings?” asked Albus. “Did he ever… cheat on my mum?”

Alana turned her head to face him.

“No,” she said, her eyes watering. “He never loved me.”

As she turned away again, Albus knew she had told the truth.

Albus had to accept the fact that he wasn’t yet old enough to know the entire story. Maybe someday he’d be able to fill in the details, but at least he knew the big picture; the important part was that his father never turned from his mother. But he would have a hard time seeing Alana in the same light after this. This made him feel even more conflicted: Alana was here risking her life and magic for them, yet he still couldn’t really bring himself to like her, even when she was lying in a bed in the hospital wing. Albus had to wonder if this made him a bad person.

Any distractions from the meanderings of his mind were welcome, such as when Rose finally discovered Cravants and Ivvixens in one of her books.

“They’re creepy,” she warned as she showed him the book, entitled *Mutualistic Relations and Interactions Among Magical Animals.*

Albus scanned the page as slowly as possible so that he could be distracted by it for as long as possible. The Cravants resembled red oxen with triangular heads, no tails, six legs, and teeth that protruded horizontally from the mouth rather than vertically. They were large and brutish beasts, but they were so cowardly that they only attacked an animal if that animal was alone. Even a whole herd of them would stay away from a pair of any other animal. It lived in Tasmania along with another magical animal called the Ivvixen, which Albus could only describe as looking like a cross between a tiger and a park bench. The brown-and-black-striped animal had a flat, thin, rectangular body with four stubby rigid legs and a long thin tail, and what little face it possessed seemed like it
had been crammed onto the front of the torso without bothering to add a head. The Ivvixen had a strange way of hunting: it had the power to turn anything invisible except members of its own species. Albus thought this was a strange and counterintuitive way of catching prey, but it made sense once he read on: The Ivvixen could sense heat, so invisibility wasn’t a problem for its hunting process. But other creatures were disoriented by not being able to see their own bodies, and members of a group wouldn’t know where their friends were or in what condition they were faring. Though the Cravants were extremely dull-witted creatures, Ivvixens were quite intelligent, and Ivvixens would team up with Cravants to hunt: the Ivvixens would leave one member of the group visible at a time, and since that member appeared to be the only one around, the Cravants would attack that individual; once it was killed, another individual would be made visible for the Cravants to attack. The Ivvixens let the Cravants attend to most of the prey and then feasted on the kill, but the Cravants wouldn’t chase them away because the Ivvixens always traveled in groups. They simply learned to eat with each other, because stupid as the Cravants were, they realized that more hunting opportunities came about when they were tailed by the Ivvixens.

Right as he finished the last words on the last page, the siege alarm went off again.

Albus rolled his eyes and tried to block out the noise, hoping the teachers could take care of it quickly. When the alarm first sounded, Alana sat up quickly in bed as if to get up and help, but then she remembered what had happened to her and she collapsed reluctantly back into her pillow.

The siege alarm did not subside quickly. It lasted for a full four hours, and during that time, the hospital wing received a number of new patients. A total of nine seventh year students were brought in on stretchers, along with Professor Allira, Professor Westerling, Professor Norton, Professor Ramanu, and Professor Rhuavone again. With each new arrival to the hospital wing, Albus knew they had less people who were able to defend them against the hostile takeover of Hogwarts castle, and it was getting harder and harder to breathe. Rose had her back turned to the stretchers and was staring into the fire again; it was good that she didn’t see the influx of injuries, or she might have come unraveled again.

When the alarm finally subsided, most of the students were asleep, either having learned to fall asleep even through the alarms or simply being so exhausted that they passed out even with the alarms blaring. Albus walked over to Rose and put an arm around her shoulder.

“Hi,” said Albus.

Rose didn’t answer.

Albus wondered how she would hold up in days to come. Rose was made more for a life of worrying about her test scores, not worrying about her personal safety. She was barely sleeping and barely eating.

He instead walked over to James, who had come in to check up on the others; he was standing by Professor Westerling’s bed.

“Ugh,” said Albus, walking closer.

Professor Westerling’s chest had been ripped by some sort of claw; Madam Birchbaum had healed it with dittany, but the marks were still there, clearly visible. He was also very pale.

Madam Birchbaum hurried over with a pink frothing liquid. “Drink,” she ordered, tilting the cup to Professor Westerling’s lips. “Drink and you’ll be up and fighting again soon.”

Professor Westerling downed the glass quickly, evidently not wanting to be stuck in a bed when
the next alarm went off.

“And get some rest,” said Madam Birchbaum. “When’s the last time you slept?”

Professor Westerling twisted his mouth as he considered the question. “Monday?”

Madam Birchbaum slapped a hand to her face. “It’s Thursday!”

“Yeah, I know,” said Professor Westerling. “Can’t be helped. If I don’t wake up to the screaming alarm for some reason, wake me. And let me know if the others come up with anything while I’m out. I’m going to sleep.”

“I’m going to have to wake you up in a half hour, though, to give you a second dose of Bloodback.”

“What’s Bloodback?” asked Albus.

“Replenishes blood faster,” said Madam Birchbaum. “Professor Westerling lost a great deal of it.”

“Oh.”

“Let him get some sleep,” ordered Madam Birchbaum. “Shoo, now.”

“Speaking of blood loss,” said James as they were walking away, “did you notice that your hand’s bleeding?”

Albus held up his hands. The cut from Swait’s knife had reopened and blood was trickling down his hand again.

“When did that happen?” asked Albus, running over to the basin to grab a towel. He washed off his hand, but the cut was cleanly opened again and was bleeding like it was fresh.

“Is that the cut from the knife?” asked James.

“Yeah,” said Albus. “Swait’s knife.”

“It’s not one of those cuts that can never be healed, is it…?”

“It healed earlier,” said Albus. “I probably just nicked this hand again without realizing it, and reopened the cut. I already did that once on the table in the Great Hall.”

“So, are you going to sleep now?”

Albus shrugged. “I don’t feel tired… I’ll practice my talking Patronus for a while, and then I’ll go to sleep when I tire myself out, I guess.”

“All right. Does Rose need help?”

“She was nonresponsive when I checked just now,” said Albus, “but if you could get through to her, that would be good for her.”

James walked over to Rose as Albus walked into Madam Birchbaum’s office again. Albus wondered how long it had been since Madam Birchbaum slept.

He wrapped a cloth around his hand to keep the blood from getting on his wand, and he cleared his throat. The grip on his wand felt extremely awkward with the cloth in the way; he hoped it wouldn’t affect his ability.
“Expecto Patronum,” he said, holding his wand high.

Out of the tip of his wand burst the familiar silver coyote, which whirled around backwards to face Albus.

“I can do a talking Patronus,” said the coyote immediately, with perfect clarity.

Albus’s jaw dropped as the Patronus faded back into nothingness.

“So, Albus,” said Rose, who seemed to have recovered very well overnight; James had convinced Madam Birchbaum to allow Albus to make her a Calming Draught. “James told me you showed him that you can do a talking Patronus now?”

“Yeah, I did it last night!” said Albus. “I even was able to repeat it with someone watching. Usually you can never do it right when someone’s watching.”

“That does seem to be the general trend,” said Rose. “Come on, show me!”

Albus gestured for Rose to follow him into Madam Birchbaum’s office.

“What, you won’t do it out here?” asked Rose, tagging along.

“Well, I might not be able to do it again,” said Albus.

“But you did it twice last night, so it wasn’t a one-time fluke!”

“Still. I could have been a two-time fluke.”

“Okay, fine,” said Rose, closing the door to the office behind her. “Let’s see.”

Albus raised his wand. “Expecto Patronum!”

This time, when the coyote landed in the office and turned around, its vocalization sounded like the mangled screams of a dying Jobberknoll.

Albus winced. “Told you.”

“Well, obviously with that attitude you won’t do it,” said Rose, huffing; she seemed to be back to normal. “Try it again, with some confidence this time!”

“I’m bursting with confidence!” protested Albus. “I did a bloody talking Patronus yesterday! That’s incredibly advanced!”

“Yes, and if you did it yesterday, you can do it today, too! What’s different!”

“I don’t know,” said Albus. “But I can’t say there wasn’t anything different. So I’m not really sure.”

“Albus, you’re bleeding,” said Rose.

Albus looked at his hand again. “Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me,” he said.

The cut had reopened just as badly as always. He found another cloth and wrapped it around his hand.

“Does that make holding a wand awkward?” asked Rose.
“Very,” said Albus. “But that’s how I did it yesterday.”

What had been different between yesterday and today? Perhaps it was a matter of confidence. Albus set himself and cleared his throat just as he usually did.

“Expecto Patronum!”

This time, his coyote once again stated, “I can do a talking Patronus.”

Rose clapped and jumped up and down giddily. “That was amazing!”

“I don’t know if I could do it across distances,” said Albus. “It’s one thing to make it speak when it’s in my same room, and another to send it across the country.”

“It’s a huge start,” said Rose. “I really can’t believe you could do that, Albus.”

“I’m really proud of myself right now,” said Albus, grinning. “Verdulus!”

The spell was supposed to produce a miniature shower of green sparks; it was a charm often used in celebrations. Instead, a green flare rocketed out of Albus’s wand and exploded upon contact with the ceiling, charring Albus’s hair and leveling nearly the entire office in a heartbeat.

Rose clambered to her feet and stared around. “What in the hell was that?” she sputtered.

Albus stayed where he had been knocked to the ground. “I don’t know.”

Madam Birchbaum burst into the office a second later, and gasped when she saw the damage. “What on earth?”

“I didn’t do it,” said Albus automatically, holding up his hands; he didn’t mean to freak out Madam Birchbaum, but when she saw his hand – which was gushing blood at an even worse rate than before – she screamed.

“We’re okay!” said Rose. “Albus cut his hand earlier!”

“All I did was try the Sparkler Charm,” said Albus to Madam Birchbaum as she gave him a cloth for the blood and kicked them out to start cleaning. “I’m sorry! I honestly have no idea what happened!”

Madam Birchbaum didn’t answer and slammed the door in his face.

“This is like what was happening when you got your magic back after you’d lost it for so long,” said Rose. “Even your tiniest spells had so much unbelievable power because your magic had been building up. Do you think this has something to do with the fact that you haven’t attended classes in a long time and haven’t had a chance to exercise your magic?”

“Maybe that’s why I’m able to get the Patronus to talk?” asked Albus. “But… I was at home all summer not using magic and this didn’t happen when I got back to Hogwarts. It doesn’t happen to anyone.”

“But you were practicing the Patronus at home,” reminded Rose. “So you were exercising then too.”

“I’ve been practicing the Patronus here, too. Trying to get it to talk.”

“Isn’t it?” asked Albus.

“You’re rubbing your temple a lot,” said Rose. “Have you noticed?”

“Am I?” asked Albus, realizing that his hand was indeed currently pressing against the side of his head.

It was odd, but it took until Rose pointed it out that there was a strange tickling feeling inside his brain. Oddly, it felt like he was thinking very hard about something, but was unable to determine exactly what he was thinking.

“I feel… strange,” said Albus, sitting down at the table.

Was this part of the effect that Dr. Varnisse had fixed for him? Was something pressing against his mind, trying to get in again.

“Strange, how?” asked Rose, sitting down next to him with concern.

“Strange as in… I can’t really describe it,” said Albus. “But I feel like it’s not good that I’m feeling it.”

Opening his eyes, Albus discovered that it was the middle of the night. He was wondering what had woken him up when he heard the door close quietly. He looked up; with his night-adjusted eyes, he could see someone walking towards the beds in the hospital wing. The person leaned over Professor Westerling’s bed and nudged him awake; they began talking.

Judging by the body shape – a somewhat tall man, a little bit shy of being justifiably called “plump,” Albus assumed it was Wilcox, talking with the teachers in the hospital wing.

He kicked off his blanket and waited. Wilcox talked with each teacher in turn, and when he reached the last one, Albus stood up and walked towards the door. Wilcox turned to walk to the door to exit again, but Albus intercepted him.

“Hello, Professor,” said Albus.

“Albus,” said Wilcox. “How are you doing?”

“I’m okay,” said Albus. “I had a question for you.”

“That’s fine, as long as it’s one question,” said Wilcox. “I’ve got to get back to securing the area.”

“It’s quick,” said Albus. “It’s just that… every animal we’ve seen so far… they’ve all been connected to the legend of Dismiusa, haven’t they?”

“They have,” admitted Wilcox with a sigh. “You’re on this subject again?”

“Well, yes,” said Albus. “The muls, the Fokii, the Dirt Piranhas, the Whirlworts, the Clattarangs… they were all called the ‘Servants of Dismiusa.’ And this whole situation from the forest… this isn’t something normal. It’s not natural. You have to agree with that. So, I’m just wondering… if you think it’s Dismiusa.”

“No, Albus, Dismiusa does not exist,” said Wilcox forcefully. “It is a myth, no matter how many books you read about it. I’m sorry to disappoint you, if that was a disappointment.”

“But you said yourself two years ago, that we had to prepare just in case she did exist,” said Albus.
“We have to consider the option.”

“We’re already doing all we can to prepare for anything,” said Wilcox. “Our efforts would not be able to increase or decrease regardless of whether we knew if Dismiusa was real – which she is not. May I get back to—”

“But how do you explain what’s going on?” interrupted Albus.

“The muls, Albus! The mulunctapoli!”

“They’re doing everything?” protested Albus. “What about the barrier around the forest? What about all of the other creatures?”

“Albus, the legend of Dismiusa was falsely built from the start,” said Wilcox. “People didn’t realize how much power the muls possessed. It’s not out of the question that they could do this. Everything that the mythologists say is connected to the legend of Dismiusa is here – that’s true – but that’s because everything they thought was connected to the legend of Dismiusa is actually connected to the muls! They gave a name to the power of the muls and called it a deity. There’s no such thing. All the ‘servants of Dismiusa’ are servants of the muls. That’s the legend of Dismiusa! The muls are Dismiusa, and there’s nothing else to it!”

He eyed Albus carefully as they stood in silence for a moment.

“Do you have any other questions?” asked Wilcox. “Or may I go?”

“I just… don’t think you’re considering it enough,” said Albus, as Wilcox heaved another sigh and turned to the side. “There are other reasons I have to believe it, too. What about my visions? The green woman in pain—”

“Your visions are exactly that: visions!” said Wilcox, looking like he was having a hard time keeping his voice low so as not to wake any of the sleeping students. “Visions of things that don’t exist! Albus, you’re not a Seer!”

“But the woman in my vision was the exact same one as the one on the front of the book about Dismiusa!” argued Albus.

“Albus!” hissed Wilcox, a hand over his face, getting more and more agitated. “There is no bloody forest spirit living under the castle!”

“Professor—” began Albus, and then he paused. He blinked. “When did we say anything about under the castle?”

Wilcox started to speak again, but his words caught in his throat and he stood dumbly with his mouth open, staring.

He turned and swiftly exited.

Albus waited up all night for James and Rose and Exo to wake up so he could tell them what Professor Wilcox had let slip the other night. He’d been watching the Marauder’s Map, and he’d seen Wilcox go more than once into the hidden passage. The windowless room, however, gave no determinable estimate of the time; they just had to wait for Madam Birchbaum to start slowly illuminating the room.

Rose was first to awaken when Madam Birchbaum lit the first lights. She had been given a
supplemental potion to help her sleep, and it had worked wonders. She wandered over looking very well-rested.

“Hey, Albus,” she said. “How long have you been awake?”

“Almost all night,” said Albus. “I wanted to tell you guys something.”

“What?”

Albus took in a deep breath, waiting to spill the big news he’d been keeping in since he’d woken up to Wilcox. But just as he started to form the first word, the siege alarm pierced their ears once more.

“Oh, no,” said Rose, biting on one of her nails. “We don’t have that many healthy teachers to help this time…”

“We’ll be fine,” insisted Albus as the other students started shoving their pillows over their ears. “They can take care of it this time, and then the other teachers who are in the hospital wing with us now will be back in action soon.”

“How do you know the remaining teachers can handle it this time?” asked Rose. “How do you know they–”

The alarm shut off.

All around the room, heads were poking up from the beds, looking around with puzzled expressions, and Gimmick arched his back and hissed.

“It can’t have been over that quickly,” said Rose. “Did the alarm shut off or something?”

“That can’t have happened,” said Exo, crawling over. “The only way that could have happened is if… if the caster of the spell was…”

He blanched, and Albus knew what he was thinking. Wilcox had been the one to cast the spell to create the alarm, and if it had shut off… what had happened to him?

Albus stood up and ran to his bag. He shuffled through it until he found the Marauder’s Map, then brought it to one of the patient beds in the hospital wing and drew back the curtain so that no one could see him.

Rose walked in behind him just as Albus said, “I solemnly swear that I am up to no good!”

“Albus Severus Potter, up to no good?” joked Rose. “That’ll be the day – wait, what in the–”

The map was slowly unfolding and painting itself. Rose hadn’t yet witnessed the Marauder’s Map in action; she was usually staring into the fire when the siege drills happened, and she hadn’t seen Albus check yet.

“Albus, what the hell is this?” asked Rose breathily.

Albus scanned the castle. There were a few teachers at the Astronomy Tower, and a few at the main entrance of the school, but there were significantly less than usual because many of them were recovering here in the hospital wing. Albus looked around the names, and quickly found “Helio Wilcox” amongst the other teachers.

He was running around without any assistance. He was still alive.
“Oh, thank goodness,” said Exo, appearing over Albus’s shoulder. “I was really worried for a second there. So the alarm really did just… shut off? The animals really did leave that quickly?”

“Maybe they had some sort of secret weapon that they unleashed on the forest this time,” said Rose. “But – Albus – what is this map?”

“I feel like the reason the alarm shut off early can’t be good,” said Albus, rubbing his temple. “I don’t know why I know. I just feel like I know.”

“You’ve gotten a lot of those ‘I just feel like it’s not good’ feelings lately,” said Rose. “And trapped in a single building surrounded by murderous wildlife tends to make most things not good, so you’re probably accurate. But where the hell did you get this–”

Albus gasped and jabbed a finger onto where the map displayed the Headmaster’s office. It wasn’t Wilcox in that office. Exo and Rose leaned forward to look at the name that was written on the dot he was following: Asher Pierce.

“NO!” shouted Albus, grabbing up the map and racing to the door of the hospital wing, throwing it open and running out as the wounded teachers yelled for him not to go outside. He didn’t know how Asher had gotten into the castle – in that brief spell when the forest entered, perhaps? – but he had to find Wilcox or another teacher who wasn’t incapacitated and get them on Asher’s trail. He would have to show Wilcox the map – or whichever teacher he could intercept first – but if it was necessary for them to stop Asher from killing anyone, then he didn’t care in the slightest.

Too late, after he’d already run too far from the hospital wing, he realized that he should have simply asked one of the teachers to send Wilcox a Patronus. But there was no time to lose now. Asher had exited the office and was now on the seventh floor, and there were very few teachers there; the teachers who were didn’t seem to notice him, even when he passed almost directly through them–

It was a Fokii.

Albus almost tripped over himself when he made the realization. It had to be a Fokii; it was coming so close to the teachers on the seventh floor, but they weren’t noticing it.

Asher Pierce was dead, and had come back. The Fokii were smart; they knew he wouldn’t set off the alarm. They breached the castle so that he could enter, and then the alarm went off so that the teachers would think there weren’t any intruders anymore.

As he watched, it came towards the stairs. Albus saw Professor Desulgon on the second floor on the map. He ran to the stairs so that he could yell up to Professor Desulgon, but as he watched the map, Asher Pierce’s name disappeared.

He stared at the map without quite comprehending what had happened, and then suddenly there was a loud whump to his side.

He whirled around, and when his eyes passed over the disturbed area, he caught sight of something. As his eyes focused on the Fokii, he realized: it had jumped over the seventh floor stairs, and opened its flaps of skin as a sort of parachute to survive the fall without harm.

The Fokii resembled Asher Pierce greatly; Albus wondered if the longer they stayed a Fokii, the more grotesque and distorted they became. The only difference was that its arms, legs, fingers, toes, and teeth were a little longer than usual. It was still wearing his clothes, and still holding a wand: Corey Brown’s wand. In the other hand, it held Swait’s knife. It had broken into Wilcox’s
office and stolen the knife back.

“Expecto Patr—” began Albus, holding up his wand.

The Fokii jabbed its wand viciously in Albus’s direction, and suddenly he was struck completely dumb: The Fokii had used a Silencing Charm.

A nonverbal Stunning jet rocketed towards Albus next; he dove out of the way and hid behind a corner.

He broke into a cold sweat. The Fokii had Swait’s knife. It could open the door, and could use magic. And Albus couldn’t speak, so he couldn’t call for help, and he would be utterly unable to attack, or defend himself.

He checked the Marauder’s Map. He had to find the nearest teacher, and show them the map before the Fokii disappeared off the map into the dungeon–

The Fokii was heading his way.

He held up his wand and tried to cast something, anything, but it was hopeless. The Fokii struck him with a Full Body-Bind and he fell rigidly to the ground.

Heart racing, eyes flying around, looking to see if anyone would help him, he felt a strong hand grip his collar, the cold and rough backs of the fingers brushing against his neck. He was being dragged. Where was it dragging him? Was he going to become another Fokii? No one was coming to save him; on the Marauder’s Map, he had seen no one near the dungeons, and that was where the Fokii was dragging him.

Albus tried to look at the map, but with his paralyzed body, he wasn’t able to turn his head to see it; his head and neck were fixed in position. He struggled against the curse, but it was extraordinarily powerful… Usually he could at least start to wiggle ever so slightly against the power of the curse, but he was completely locked in place. There was no breaking free.

They reached the strip of wall behind which lay the sealed door. The Fokii dragged its finger in a streak across the wall, which melted away when it removed its touch. The Fokii dragged Albus painfully down the stone spiral staircase, and then they were in the hallway that led to the door. Albus was being dragged backwards and he couldn’t see the door, but he could almost feel its presence.

The Fokii let go of Albus; he slumped and found himself leaning against the door at the far end of the hallway like a stiff board. Not wasting any time, it took the knife to the lock, and not half a second later, the door opened and Albus’s head fell backwards, hitting the stone floor with a dull thunk; he saw stars for a moment, and then he was being dragged backwards again. They proceeded down another staircase.

I’m behind the door, thought Albus, having a hard time thinking clearly about what was happening to him. Bloody hell. I’m behind the door.

What’s going to happen to me?

They reached the end of the stairs. A soft glow was coming from somewhere ahead. Albus was dragged by his collar a little further; the hallway around him was getting brighter. Then they stopped.

The Fokii lifted Albus up and turned him around.
Albus would have widened his eyes in shock, but he was unable to move them. The only physical reaction he could produce was an increased rate of breathing as he beheld the sight before him.

Directly in front of him, inches from his nose, was a wall that seemed to be made of some kind of crystal. His breath was fogging it. Behind the crystal wall, a figure stood watching. It seemed to be faintly green, with a brown wardrobe. Long, tangled hair flowed to the figure’s hips, giving the impression that it was a female.

Dismiusa, he thought, his heart sinking.

What was she doing behind the wall? Was she incapable of getting out? Why was the sealed door there if this wall prevented her escape anyway? Did someone put it there? How did she get here in the first place? Questions barraged Albus’s mind as the figure placed a hand to the glass.

She placed one finger upon the crystalline glass and traced an intricate pattern, like slanted, looping handwriting. She paused after completion, and then repeated the pattern.

The Fokii lifted Albus into a standing position. It took his hand, still holding his wand, and raised it up to the translucent wall. It held Albus’s hand in place with one hand; with the other, it made sure the wand was steady, pressing the tip against the crystal wall.

The woman behind the crystal wall traced the pattern again, and this time, the Fokii followed it, tracing along the finger’s path with Albus’s wand. She stroked through several curves and loops, and then, when Albus’s wand was done screeching against the wall, she removed her hand, and the Fokii removed Albus’s wand, and the crystal shattered instantly.

Standing behind the wall was the woman in Albus’s visions; the woman on the front of the book that Rose had discovered. It was Dismiusa.

Without even giving Albus a second glance, she walked out from behind the wall and passed Albus. The Fokii dropped him, and he fell to the ground over the shards of crystal, cutting his face and arms. He heard them leaving, and then the sound of a slamming door echoed through the hall, shutting out the last bit of light in the room and leaving Albus in complete darkness.
Hunger clawed at Albus’s stomach. He was sleepless and terrified. He had been stuck in the same position for so long that it was impossible to keep track. It could have been days, and it probably was. The only thing he could do was blink and breathe, but dust was settling into his nostrils and lungs and he couldn’t even cough or sneeze to get rid of it. His eyes were pounding from the darkness; he felt blind, unable to see a single thing. He knew that if no one figured out where he was, then he was lying on his deathbed.

Who was worried about him? Rose, James, Alec, Aidan, Lily, Hugo, Roxanne, Freddie, Lucy, Louis, Gil... and so many others. They were all probably looking for him. But even if they guessed where he was, how would they get in? The Fokii had the knife, and the only people who knew that the knife could open the door were Swait and Albus. It was impossible for anyone else to learn the function of the knife, and Swait would never tell. So no one would be able to open the door.

He was struggling against the Body-Bind, but it was unyielding. It was an incredibly strong spell. The Fokii’s magic wasn’t something to take lightly.

There were so many things no one would know if they never found him.

And what was the state of the school? What had Dismiusa done? If he emerged, would he emerge into a jungle?

And then, suddenly, miraculously, the door opened.

Albus couldn’t even laugh or cry with relief. The light seared his eyes, and he could only barely make out the forms of the people who entered. Professor Desulgon skidded in first, holding the knife. He was followed by Professor Wilcox, Professor Longbottom, and Professor Weasley. Then James, Louis, Gil, Freddie, and Lucy rushed in as Professor Desulgon took a look at Albus’s motionless body and screamed, “NO!”

Albus had never heard Professor Desulgon scream before. It was a terrifying sound, like someone was being tortured. It carried throughout the cavern and echoed through the continuing catacombs that ran past where the crystal wall had been.

“Homenum Revelio,” said Wilcox.

Albus felt something swooping low over his head; a red-orange halo burned above him.

“He’s alive!” said Wilcox. “Get him out of here!”

“Yes, sir,” said Professor Desulgon, scooping Albus up and carrying him out, map and wand still in Albus’s hand. “My God, he’s stiff – like a board – Petrified?”

“Body-Bound,” said Professor Westerling, passing Professor Desulgon on the way out. “What the hell is all this down here?”

“What in Merlin’s great name was going on in here?” breathed Professor Longbottom before their voices were no longer in range for Albus to hear.

Professor Desulgon sprinted out of the dungeons; once he was out, he conjured a stretcher, and flew it in front of him as he continued to charge towards the hospital wing. They entered to shouts of “ALBUS!” and “HE’S ALIVE!” and Albus could see Madam Birchbaum rushing to him out of
the corner of his eye.

Madam Birchbaum quickly realized that he had been Body-Bound, and quickly administered the remedy; Albus finally coughed up all the dust that had settled on him, and drained a large glass of water and requested some sort of food.

“How did you find me?” he choked; his voice was scratchy from disuse.

“Not yet,” said Professor Desulgon. “First you have to tell us how you feel. Are you okay? Anything broken or otherwise damaged?”

Albus shook his head. “Just really sore,” he said. “And my eyes hurt.”

“Yes, they’re very red,” said Professor Desulgon.

“Bloodshot?”

“Yes. Do they hurt? Do you need anything for them?”

“I’m fine,” said Albus. “Really. I just want to know what’s going on – how did you get the knife to find me?”

“Plea bargain with Swait,” answered Professor Desulgon. “We knew that the Fokii had stolen the knife back, and I suspected it may have had something to do with your disappearance, especially considering your connection to the knife in the past. We told him that we’d drop all charges against him that we were capable of dropping, if he told us what the knife did. So he told us, and that’s when Professor Wilcox put together that the Fokii must have opened the door down there. Then I went out to find the knife.”

“You what?” gasped Albus.

“I went out into the forest and tracked down the Fokii,” said Professor Desulgon. “There are ways to find missing wands, and the Fokii had Corey’s. So I… I put a Moly-tipped arrow in its heart, and took back the knife. Which I then used to open the door and find you on the ground inside. Albus… what happened?”

“Pierce is dead?” asked Albus. “…Again?”

“Yes, Pierce is dead again,” confirmed Professor Desulgon. “Are you okay to tell us what happened down there?”

“After it cast the Full Body-Bind on me, it dragged me through the hidden passage and through the door, to this wall,” said Albus. “A wall made of murky crystal.”

Professor Desulgon’s eyes shot open. He looked far too excited for the story that was being told – especially considering the fact that all Albus had mentioned was a wall.

“Go on,” he said.

“Behind it was a woman,” said Albus. “I think it was Dismiusa.”

Professor Desulgon was impossible to read. “We’ll talk about that later. What did she do?”

“She traced a finger along the wall,” said Albus. “Then the Fokii took my hand and raised the wand to the wall, tracing the path that she was drawing along the wall… and the wall shattered.”
Albus flexed his hand as he remembered; it was wet, and a small red stain that was spreading on the bed told him that his hand was bleeding again.

“She was sealed away?” pressed Professor Desulgon. “She was unable to escape on her own? But the wall shattered when you ran your wand along it?”

“Yes,” said Albus.

“Then it wasn’t…”

“Wasn’t what?”

“Nothing,” said Professor Desulgon. “Keep going.”

“She and the Fokii walked right by me,” said Albus. “They just left and closed the door behind them. And that was it.”

“Do you have anything else to report?”

“No,” said Albus. “Do you?”

“About what’s happened since you went down there, you mean?” said Professor Desulgon. “Plenty. Where should I start? ...There haven’t been any attacks since that incredibly short one, first of all.”

“What about Swait?” asked Albus. “If you dropped all charges against him, does that mean he’s allowed to walk free around the castle now?”

“Some charges, we can’t drop,” said Professor Desulgon. “Alana agreed with us to drop the accounts of possession of illegal artifacts, and breaking and entering into Hogwarts is a charge which is left to Hogwarts itself to pursue, so we can ignore that. And threatening you is a hazy realm anyway. But he did break out of prison. He’s going to serve at least a year’s sentence for that one. More likely sixteen or eighteen months, I believe. So he’s not free… yet.” He looked at the bed. “Albus, are you bleeding?”

“That happens sometimes,” said Albus.

“Is it a problem?”

“Probably not. So, is Swait going to get the knife back?”

“No,” said Professor Desulgon. “The knife is too powerful an item to let him have. We’re actually going to lock it away.”

“But there are other knives that can do what this knife does,” said Albus. “Those are all highly illegal, then?”

“At differing levels. This knife was manufactured with ridiculous capabilities. It doesn’t just unlock doors – it can cut through magical barriers as well. It’s also imbued with a power we don’t quite understand. We’ve been trying to analyze it, but the knife is a really incredible piece of work. It makes me think that it might be a whole different kind of magic entirely.”

“Goblin magic?” asked Albus. “You said it was imitation goblin metal.”

“Yes, but if a goblin had worked on it, he would have left his signature somehow,” said Professor Desulgon. “A certain number or pattern of rubies… a little mark on one side of the blade… but we
haven’t found anything yet. What we have discovered, though, is that witnesses used to see Elbad Swait hanging out with a German goblin named Harz, but one day Harz vanished off the face of the Earth. We think Swait might have killed him.”

“That might answer a question I just thought to myself,” said Albus. “I was wondering how the Fokii found out about the knife’s power if it was under the Fidelius Charm. If Swait buried Harz in the Forbidden Forest… maybe he came back as a Fokii. Would they keep their memory if that happened?”

“They have been witnessed ‘remembering’ details from their previous life,” said Professor Desulgon. “That could be the answer. But that means Harz’s body wouldn’t be in a fit state for us to determine whether Swait killed him. We’d have to try to find it out from him directly.”

“He’d never do that,” said Albus.

“I know,” said Professor Desulgon. “It’s a sticky situation.”

“Was anything else like the knife found in Swait’s Bait-‘n’-Switchblade shop?” asked Albus.

He twitched suddenly as his blood-covered fingers involuntarily curled around something cold while his hand remained under the bed.

“No,” said Professor Desulgon. “Just the—” His eyes shot open, and his hand started probing all of his pockets. “Oh Merlin. Oh Merlin. Where the bloody hell did the knife go?”

He frantically threw off his robe and hovered in the air magically, turning out all of the pockets and finding no knife, as Albus pulled his bloody hand out from under the bedsheets, holding Swait’s knife.

Professor Desulgon kept searching, starting to panic.

“Professor,” breathed Albus.

Professor Desulgon looked over.

“I have the knife,” said Albus, holding it up.

Professor Desulgon’s hands continued checking the pockets of his robes. “What is it, Albus?” he said impatiently.

“I have the knife!” said Albus, waving it in front of Professor Desulgon.

“This isn’t a good time!” said Professor Desulgon.

“What are you talking about?!” shouted Albus.

“What are you trying to tell me?!” retorted Professor Desulgon. “Albus, this is really, really bad – I’ve lost the knife! What if the Fokii have it?”

Albus was startled into the realization that Professor Desulgon couldn’t receive Albus’s efforts at communicating that he was holding the knife right there in his hand. It reminded him of when he first discovered the function of the knife, but couldn’t tell Wilcox because of the Fidelius Charm.

He somehow had summoned the knife – and that was another secret that Swait had protected with the Fidelius Charm. How many secrets did this knife have?
“Oh,” said Albus quietly.

“What? Did you realize something?”

Albus threw the knife down at the ground near Professor Desulgon’s feet. It clattered off of the ground, and then lay still.

Professor Desulgon continued searching for a moment, and then his eyes drifted down to where the knife now lay.

“How the hell did that get there?” he asked slowly.

“Me,” said Albus.

Professor Desulgon once again failed to hear.

“Are they making any progress on the outside?” asked Albus. “Trying to break through the barrier, I mean?”

“Not that I’m aware of,” said Rose. “They say it’s like no magic they’ve ever seen. I’ve been researching these kinds of barriers in the library and I’ve run into Professor Desulgon a few times. He’s looking around for information too.”

“He seemed really interested when I described the barrier around Dismiusa,” said Albus.

Rose clutched her head. “I still can’t believe it,” she whispered. “I mean, I spent the last few weeks convincing myself that she was behind this, but to suddenly know for a fact that she’s real? Good grief.”

“What were you expecting?” asked Albus.

“I don’t know,” said Rose. “I guess I was expecting to be in the dark forever about all this.”

“Not anymore,” said Albus.

James walked over to the bed, as he had done almost hourly since Albus had returned that morning. “How’re you feeling, little brother?” he asked, kneeling to be at eye level with Albus.

“I’m still fine,” said Albus, smiling.

“Good to hear,” said James, as Professor Longbottom entered the hospital wing and started walking towards Albus’s bed. “Well, if you start to feel any bad effects anywhere, don’t just assume it’s nothing – tell Madam Birchbaum, all right? I’m not going to be able to keep checking up on you because my shift for patrolling the halls is coming up soon, so–”

“No, it’s not,” said Professor Longbottom. “James, I’m going to have to request that you don’t leave the hospital wing.”

“Tonight?” asked James, looking up at Professor Longbottom.

“Indefinitely,” said Professor Longbottom with a grimace.

“What?”

James stood up.
“You can’t stop me from defending the castle,” said James. “I’m seventeen.”

“You may be seventeen, but your entire family is at risk,” said Professor Longbottom. “And your brother just got back from a terrible ordeal – you should stay here and look after him–”

“No, I should get out there and make sure nothing gets in and kills him!” interjected James, raising his voice. “You can’t do this–”

“YES, I CAN,” bellowed Professor Longbottom in a voice that quieted the entire hospital wing.

James shook his head. “I don’t understand.”

“You’re not supposed to understand,” said Professor Longbottom. “And if I see you out in the halls tonight, I’m going to have to lock you in here. Don’t make me do that. Do you understand that?”

James nodded.

“I’m sorry, James,” said Professor Longbottom. “But it’s a mutual decision by the faculty, and we can’t explain why right now. I’m really sorry.”

“What happened to the guy Dad kept telling me about?” said James in his low, dangerous growl. “What happened to the rebellious teenager who fought the Carrows, who stood up to Voldemort himself, who led the charge against evil? The man who dueled Gallen Ingot – one of the men who helped head the defeat of the Dark Revival? What happened to him?”

“He watched too many of his friends die young,” responded Professor Longbottom without skipping a beat.

James was struck speechless as Professor Longbottom solemnly left them alone, the door swinging softly shut behind him.

After three days of silence, the siege alarm was blaring again. James stood, but Professor Longbottom shot him a look that told him to stay in the room.

“And if someone finds you outside under that Invisibility Cloak,” said Professor Longbottom under his breath to James, “I’m locking you in a classroom like Swait.”

“I get it,” grumbled James.

Albus was out of his hospital bed by the time the siege alarm shut off. Eight hours passed under the alarm, and James muttered under his breath mutinously the entire time.

Rose seemed to have conquered her fears, at least; she no longer freaked out when the siege alarm went off. She read all the way through three large library books during the siege. When it was finally over, she went to Albus and opened one of them for him.

“Look,” she said. “These are fascinating theories.”

Albus glanced down at the page she was pointing to.

Chapter Three: The Number Three.

“What is this?” asked Albus, flipping to the front of the book while keeping his finger in the current page. It was entitled An Expert’s Guide to Modern Arithmancy.
“It’s a book on advanced theories in Arithmancy,” said Rose. “Most of it went right over my head… but this section was really interesting. It’s relevant for a reason: you’ll see at the end of the third paragraph.”

Albus flipped open to where he’d kept the page, and began to read.

Arithmancers know the significance of the number seven in the realm of magic (see chapter seven). But the number three is the subject of much controversy. Is it more powerful a number than seven? The short answer is no: the number seven reigns supreme in terms of the strength of its manifestations. But the number three is a crucial factor in the determinations of the workings of the universe. It is not to be underestimated.

Almost every aspect of our knowledge can be categorized into groups of three. Light is derived from shadow, glow, and cloak. Life is a contrast of life, death, and limbo. Relations are built upon masters, slaves, and equals. And humans are made of the body, mind, and soul. There are intensive studies on the workings of similar knowledge bases upon which we only know one or two of the parts. For example, Immitt Tuqube, famed magical theorist of the Magichristian community, is currently (at the time of publication of this work) formulating a theory regarding the current categorization of matter. According to Tuqube, matter does not directly lead to gas, liquid, and solid states, but instead first the hierarchy of existence passes through formation, existence, and deterioration, and then gas, liquid, and solid are functions of formation rather than of matter directly therein. Nonexistence is described to be irrelevant, as if it does not exist, then there is nothing to categorize. Tuqube’s theory looks to be met with much adulation from the world’s leading Arithmancers.

The aforementioned “hierarchy” is the name given to the sequence of trisections in the known universe. First is the universe, which itself is speculated to potentially be part of a set of three, but if so, the other two parts are quite unknown. This has led to an entire field of research known in the magical world as Cosmicology, not to be confused with Muggle “Cosmetology.” Split from the universe are the three categories of Space, Time, and Thought, all distinct but whose existences are all codependent. Space is a function of Matter, Energy, and Magic. Time is a function of Past, Present, and Future. Thought is a function of the Conscious, the Subconscious, and the Chaos, the theorized “root of all evil.” From here on, the categories are categorized; from here on, we also further entertain the most commonly accepted theories. Of the categories of Time, Past is generally accepted to be a function of what has occurred in a pattern, what has occurred randomly, and what has not occurred. Present is generally accepted to be a function of what is beginning, what is ongoing, and what is ending. Future is generally accepted to be a function of what will happen, what may happen, and what will not happen. Of the categories of Thought, the debate is ongoing; some scholars dictate that a “moral” categorization is required in each of the realms after their division by the intelligences, while others assert that the Chaos cannot be good but by accident. But it is clear that Space’s three parts are also trisected themselves, and most of these are known. Matter (to follow Tuqube’s current model) is a function of Formation, Existence, and Deterioration. Energy is a function of Motion, Station, and Teleportation. And Magic is a function of the Magical (Wizards), the Non-magical (Muggles and Squibs), and... what? Is there a third facet to Magic? Some scholars, including Tuqube on behalf of the Magichristian community, have used this as an argument for the existence of a god (or gods), and others have regarded this as proof for the existence of spirits, such as the legends of Pyron, Werora, and Dismiusa, or perhaps a category of magic separate from current awareness, such as theories on Deimancy or Devoctrices.

Albus looked up. “That made a surprising amount of sense for a book on the most advanced Arithmancy out there.”
“Well, this was published over two hundred years ago,” said Rose. “This book is an old book that Madam Kohl edited with a Compressing Charm. I mean, there are a lot of things I don’t understand in the passage, but it was pretty readable with my current knowledge base. So I thought that was interesting.”

“It was very interesting,” said Albus. “Thanks. Do you mind if I borrow this and read a little more?”

“No, not at all,” said Rose. “I already finished it. I’m also working on reading a more modern book on the matter, and it talks about some applications of Muggle science as well. The number three also shows up in protons, neutrons, and electrons, and they think that the Star category – which you’ll find if you keep reading – might have something to do with supernovae and black holes. And Celestial Wanderers are the last in the category of Planets and Stars, to be more general than just ‘Comet,’ and–”

“All right, we can talk about that after I know what you’re talking about,” laughed Albus.

“All right, we can talk about that after I know what you’re talking about,” laughed Albus.

“Okay, but we should definitely talk about it,” said Rose. “It’s fascinating.”

“We will,” said Albus, realizing that engaging herself in learning and thoughtful discussions was Rose’s new coping mechanism.

As he was about to take Rose’s book to the table to read, Professor Longbottom and Professor Desulgon walked in, wheeling Wilcox in on a stretcher this time.

“Dad!” gasped Exo, running to his father.

Albus was taken aback – it seemed like their headmaster would never be injured. Seeing Wilcox brought in that way was absolutely startling.

He pushed it out of his mind – Wilcox was fine, just slightly injured by the looks of it, and he would be out in the action again soon. Albus sat down with the book that Rose had given him as James marched over to the three professors, looking determined. Albus glanced back down and picked up where he’d left off.

_The hierarchy continues past the three facets of Matter. Debate is ongoing about where the hierarchy stops, if it does. A few facets past Matter have been accepted; Solid, Liquid, and Gaseous were traditionally considered to be synonymous with “Land, Sea, and Sky,” but analysis led by Tuqube has suggested that Solid, Liquid, and Gaseous are facets of Formation, rather than Existence. Based on the ancient theories of Draxler Cordot, Tuqube has recently suggested that the facets of Existence are Planet, Star, and Comet, and that Land, Sea, and Sky are the facets of Planet. Most focus in current research is focused on discovering the last facet of Magic, because many people are obsessed with proving or disproving theories such as those on the Devoctrices._

“I’M OF AGE!” screamed James. “I HAVE A RIGHT TO KNOW!”

“Calm down,” said Professor Longbottom sternly. “If we fear that it might compromise your safety–”

“THAT’S MY DECISION!”

“–and the safety of your brother,” finished Professor Longbottom, “which is _not_ your decision!”

James glanced over at Albus; Albus instinctively threw his head back into the book and pretended to keep reading.
Professor Desulgon walked over to Albus, knowing he was listening.

“Hey,” he said. “Are you doing okay after your incident?”

“I’m fine,” said Albus, looking for something to continue the conversation.

He glanced back down at his book and saw the word he remembered seeing twice in the passage, which he didn’t understand.

“What’re Devoctrices?” he asked, looking Professor Desulgon in the eye.

Professor Desulgon reacted to this question in a manner as if a stick of dynamite had gone off in the seat of his pants. He jumped backwards into the air and almost fell over; his eyes were wild and he looked horrified.

“What?” asked Albus.

Professor Desulgon seized Albus by the arm and dragged him into Madam Birchbaum’s office without another word.

Once they were inside, Professor Desulgon slammed the door behind them, and stood facing the door for a few seconds before turning around. Now he didn’t look horrified; now he looked scared.

“Albus, where did you hear that?” he said in a low voice.

“I…”

“Have you been taking out the Invisibility Cloak at night!?” roared Professor Desulgon. “Albus – I can’t believe you! Don’t you realize what could happen to you?! Was this why you were really outside the hospital wing when you were taken?!”

Albus was about to loudly object that he never wandered outside at night, but something told him that Professor Desulgon was giving away something important.

“Are you going to answer my question?” asked Albus.

“No, of course I’m not!” barked Professor Desulgon. “How much did you hear? Who else have you told about this?”

“I only heard the word,” said Albus.

“Have you mentioned that word to anyone else?”

“Rose knows it,” said Albus.

“Good lord,” said Professor Desulgon. “Has she told anyone? I’m getting her too.”

“Professor!” protested Albus. “We read it in a book!”

He held up the book for Professor Desulgon to see, and pointed to the word.

Professor Desulgon’s pale cheeks suddenly burned. He sat down on a chair next to Madam Birchbaum’s desk and put his head in his hands.

“Lack of sleep,” he muttered. “On edge… all the time. Can’t believe I just did that. I am so, so sorry for losing my temper at you like that, Albus.”
“It’s okay,” said Albus. “Er… why were you so upset?”

Professor Desulgon shook his head. “I’m so sorry. I thought you were eavesdropping on me and Wes. We’ve been discussing the subject.”

“You have?” asked Albus. “What is the subject?”

Professor Desulgon sighed. “I can’t exactly tell anyone else about it,” he said. “We’re trying to figure out how Dismiusa can exist. That’s all I’m going to say about it.”

“Isn’t she just… a spirit?” asked Albus.

“We don’t know what to think,” said Professor Desulgon. “But although it has a lot to do with the passages in this book you’re reading…” He knocked a knuckle against the front cover. “You’re not going to find any information on it in the library books here. You may see it mentioned, but you’re not going to find it defined.”

“Why not?”

“Because Dumbledore removed all of the books on Devoctrices, just like the books on Horcruxes,” said Professor Desulgon. “I had a little chat with his portrait last week about it.”

“But that was before you knew it was Dismiusa behind this,” said Albus.

“It was,” said Professor Desulgon, a smile teasing his lips. “And I know how much you hate not knowing things… but this is a secret that I can’t ever let slip, for reasons that I can’t ever let slip, either.”

“Devoctrices,” said Albus, tasting the word, trying to search his memory for anything similar he’d heard.

“You obviously know by now that the Devoctrix, plural Devoctrices, is a theorized type of spell,” said Professor Desulgon. “But that’s all you can know for now. Don’t discuss this with anyone else. ...Not that you could.”

“Excuse me?”

“Wes and I took a page from the book of Elbad Swait just last night,” said Professor Desulgon. “He made me the Secret-Keeper.”

Albus blinked.

“You’ve put the information you discovered on Devoctrices… under the Fidelius Charm?” he asked.

“Correct,” said Professor Desulgon. “Wes is a master of Defense Against the Dark Arts and he’s one of the few people I know who can cast a working Fidelius Charm. You’ve already had experiences with this charm… You can’t convey any information about the subject to anyone, in any way, not even by accident, until I die. And I can only reveal information of my own free will – which, regrettably, I just did. I wish I hadn’t, but that’s my mistake. But that’s why we have the charm in place.”

“Why is it that important?” asked Albus suspiciously.

Professor Desulgon opened the door. “I think that’s where I have to cut off the conversation,” he
said. “Goodbye, Albus. Please don’t ask me about this again.”

As he left, James stormed in, followed by Professor Longbottom.

“Out, Al,” he said, looking resolute. “I’ll explain later.”

“No, you most certainly will not,” said Professor Longbottom as James shoved Albus out and closed the door.

Albus fumed at the closed door, which was quickly soundproofed.

Rose looked over. “What’s going on?” she asked.

“Why does everything have to be a secret?” he shouted. “Swait’s door-unlocking knife – Professor Desulgon’s Devoctrices–”

“Why does what have to be a secret?” asked Rose. “Give me some examples.”

“I just did!” said Albus.

“No, you didn’t.”

Albus groaned and pressed his forehead onto the table. “Fidelius Charm…”

He grabbed the book again, and opened it to the page in question. He pointed at the word Devoctrices.

“Deimancy?” asked Rose, looking at the word before his finger.

“No!” said Albus. “The last word.”

“What word are you pointing to, if not Deimancy?” asked Rose.

“Read the last sentence out loud,” said Albus.

“Most focus in current research is focused on discovering the last facet of Magic,” read Rose, “because many people are obsessed with proving or disproving theories such as Deimancy or Devoctrices.”

“The last word,” said Albus.

Rose didn’t seem to hear.

It was pointless. The Fidelius Charm prevented him from making the word any more significant than any other word on the page. He groaned and slumped back in his chair.

“Is this sentence important?” asked Rose.

Albus’s heart skipped a beat; had he found a way around the Fidelius Charm? As long as Rose knew that sentence was important, she would know it was either Deimancy or Devoctrices. And she was smart – she’d figure it out.

“Yes,” said Albus, “it’s very important.”

“Oh, it’s not?” said Rose, frowning. “Why did you have me read it, then?”

“It is important!” yelled Albus.
Again, Rose didn’t seem to hear, and she waited for him to answer, looking more and more confused.

“You’re acting weird,” said Rose, standing up huffily. “I thought we were going to have a nice conversation about this book but I guess that’s not happening.”

Albus shook his head just as the door to Madam Birchbaum’s office opened again.

James waddled out looking completely transformed – he was nervous and looking in all directions like he was worried about an ambush. Professor Longbottom looked like he was going to be sick.

“What happened?” asked Albus, walking over to James.

James shook his head no and wandered to a corner of the room.

“You promised to tell me!” shouted Albus. “You promised!”

Again, James only shook his head.

And then the siege alarm sounded throughout the room again.

Albus sank onto the ground and clutched his feet with his hands. It was bad enough that they were being attacked from the outside – he’d been hoping Dismiusa would stop, now that she was free. But he felt like they were falling apart from the inside, too. He watched James walk over to his friends, Barry, Gavin, and Marco, and together they started whispering very quietly. But what would James be telling his friends that he wouldn’t tell his brother? Then again, they were all of age…

“Bloody git,” spat Albus, clenching his fists, aiming a kick at the nearest chair.

Some sort of force cloaked his foot as it swung towards the chair, and the chair blasted up towards the ceiling after the contact with his foot. It exploded and rained shards of wood that scattered around the entire room.

Everyone’s gaze turned to him again. The room would have been silent if not for the siege alarm. James eyed him most carefully.

Albus felt something trickle down his hand, and he looked down to see that the cut from Swait’s knife had yet again reopened.

“What the hell?” he whispered, looking at the cut.

Some things were starting to make sense, but others were clouding up even worse. These strange, super performances of his magic were happening ever since he had the cut. But when was it reopening, and why? It wasn’t random; he got the sense he was triggering it somehow.

He clenched and unclenched his fists, ignoring the people who were still staring at him. The cut continued to bleed slowly.

“Bloody git?” he repeated.

He was taken by surprise to see the cut start bleeding a little bit faster.

“Blood,” he whispered, and the cut split open along his entire hand.
Hey, Al,” said James the next day. “I know I gave it to you as a present for Christmas, but do you mind if I borrow the Marauder’s Map for a while?”

“Sure,” said Albus, digging into his bag. “Why?”

James didn’t respond.

Albus paused with his hand on the map. “James?”

“Routine check-ups on stuff,” said James.

“I can do that,” said Albus. “That’s what I’ve been doing. Why do you need to have it?”

“I’ll explain later.”

“No, you’ll explain now,” said Albus, trying to remain calm. “What have you and your friends been talking about that you can’t let me hear?”

“As you just mentioned, we can’t let you hear,” said James. “Al, please, just lend me the map for a little while.”

“Not until you explain what’s going on!”

“I’m not explaining anything to you!”

“Are you planning on going back out into the halls or something?” asked Albus, his temper rising quickly with how secretive his brother was being. “Why were the teachers all telling you not to go out there? What do you know?”

“Al, this isn’t a good time to–”

“To what?!” blurted Albus. “To tell your little brother something that obviously concerns his safety and well-being?”

“Albus, you’ll thank me later,” said James. “Just give me the map and be done with it, okay? You can’t understand right now.”

“Oh, really? I can’t understand right now? What’re you planning that’s so hard to under–?”

Albus’s eyes widened as he suddenly recollected what had been happening at every meal since Professor Longbottom explained the situation to James. The four Marauder friends had been surreptitiously scooping extra food from the table into bags. And why was James saying that Albus would “thank him later?” Were they planning on leaving? Finding Dismiusa?

“You’re not going out there?” choked Albus.

“No, obviously not,” shot James. “You think we want to die? Albus, please, just forgive me this one time and give me the map, okay?”

“That’s what you’re doing,” breathed Albus. “You’re packing your things to go find Dismiusa. Does this have something to do with what Professor Longbottom told you? What did he tell you – do the teachers know where she is?”

“Albus, you’re not making any sense,” said James. “And if you’re going to be like this, I don’t need your permission. Accio Map!”
“That’s mine!” snapped Albus, trying to snatch the map out of the air, but James leaned forward and swiped it like a Snitch. “You gave it to me!”

“So I can obviously take it back,” retorted James, backing away again.

Albus whipped out his wand and directed it at James’s head.

James narrowed his eyes. “Al, put the wand down.”

“Tell me what’s going on,” said Albus shakily. “Am I right? Are you going out to find Dismiusa?”

“You need to calm down.”

“That’s it, isn’t it? I’m coming with you.”

“Nobody’s coming with anyone because no one is going anywhere!” said James.

“I’m coming with you,” insisted Albus. “I’ve faced worse.”

“Albus—”

“And I’m a better fighter than you anyway!”

A flash of emotion crossed James’s face briefly. Whatever it was, it wasn't amusement. James slowly raised his wand level to Albus’s.

“You want to bet?” stated James, very slowly and carefully.

“Of course I do,” whispered Albus.

“Try me,” said James.

There was an immediate stalemate. Neither wanted to strike the first blow. Albus didn’t break eye contact with James, so he couldn’t exactly tell, but it felt like the whole room was watching furtively.

After several moments of silence, James opened his mouth; Albus tensed, getting ready to Dissipate a spell if it came at him, but James was just talking, not speaking an incantation.

“I’ll always do whatever it takes to protect my little brother,” said James. “If that means treating you like a four-year-old, then that’s what I’m going to do – especially if you’re acting like one.”

Fury blinded Albus as he called out, “Petrificus Totalus!”

James easily slashed through the spell and his wand glided smoothly back into position for his Stunner. Albus contorted his body, feeling the heat of the jet fly past his face; he whirled back around and Dissipated his brother’s Disarming Charm and cast a Stunning Spell of his own which collided with James’s Impediment Jinx in a shower of sparks. The people behind James ducked and ran as the brothers were locked into a duel.

“ALBUS! JAMES!” shrieked Madam Birchbaum as Albus Dissipated a Stunner so well that he was sure it would ripple far enough to dislodge James’s wand, but James tore himself away from his stance and threw an unfamiliar spell at Albus, the jet of which spiraled like a tornado. Albus’s Shield Charm prevented it from striking him, and he yelled out

“Circumpulso!”
James was struck by the spell and wobbled slightly, but he cast his balance long enough to melt the floor into a gooey sap that stuck Albus’s feet together when he tried to move. Albus cast a Jumping Charm on his feet to dislodge himself, and he sprang into the air, but then James froze the floor solid and it was so slippery that Albus was lifted right back off of his feet when he landed, and he crashed into the ground on his rear and was swiftly Disarmed.

“There’s more to magic than just trying to Stun things,” spat James. “The strongest doesn’t always win. Now if you’re going to be immature enough to try and duel me to solve your problems, then why don’t you just stay on your arse and let the grown-ups take care of it?”

He turned his back, and Albus was consumed by rage again as he whipped out his second wand and yelled, “Cadesempra!”

James turned and reacted quicker than Albus ever expected; his next shouted spell produced a vortex that spat Albus’s spell right back at him, and he was blasted several feet into the air; then, with a subsequent nonverbal blast from James’s wand, Albus was lifted up into the air by one leg and dangled there, blood rushing to his head.

“DO I NEED TO GIVE YOU A TIME-OUT?” roared James. “DO YOU NEED TO GO SIT ON YOUR BED UNTIL YOU’VE LEARNED BETTER? I AM TWO AND A HALF YEARS OLDER THAN YOU AND I’M RESPONSIBLE FOR YOUR SAFETY, AND YOU ARE NOT GOING TO DO ANYTHING STUPID WHILE I’M IN CHARGE. DO I HAVE TO GIVE YOU THIS LESSON AGAIN OR DO YOU UNDERSTAND?”

Albus snarled and didn’t give a response.

“Then you can stay up there until you’ve learned your lesson,” said James, walking away and bringing his friends back into Madam Birchbaum’s office.

Albus refused to talk for the next ten minutes while the spell slowly wore off and he gently descended to the ground. His head was pounding by the time he got down all the way, and he felt incredibly dizzy as he sat down at the table.

He glanced at his hand. The cut from Swait’s knife was still there, and realizing what he had forgotten, he mentally punched himself. The cut made all of his spells so much more powerful, didn’t it? All he had to do was say—

“Blood,” said Albus aloud.

The cut didn’t reopen.


The cut didn’t respond to his statement.

He groaned loudly and slammed his hand onto the table, frantically picking at the scab it had left – but when he removed the scar, he found perfectly clean skin underneath: The wound had left no trace.

“What?” whispered Albus, staring at his hand.

Exo walked over tentatively, holding some sort of string in his hand. He kept looking over nervously at the door to Madam Birchbaum’s office. He sat down next to Albus.

“Hey, Albus,” he said. “You... er... fought well.”
“Shut up,” growled Albus.

Exo sighed and uncurled his hand, showing Albus what was inside. “Remember when your Uncle George gave us free samples from his shop?” he said.

Albus looked over; Exo was holding an Extendable Ear.

“I kept mine,” said Exo. “And… I might have fed it under the door to Madam Birchbaum’s office.”

“You eavesdropped on James, Barry, Gavin, and Marco?” asked Albus, suddenly giving Exo his full attention, sidling very close to Exo. “What did you hear?”

“They were talking about… ways to fight off different animals in the forest,” he said. “And ways to get around the trees. I think they’re planning to go into the forest.”

Albus shook his head. “Why?” he asked. “Did you hear them say anything about why?”

“A little,” said Exo. “They said something about Dismiusa, and that only James could find her.”

“Only James?” asked Albus, thoroughly confused. “That doesn’t make sense.”

“I heard the word ‘prophecy,’” said Exo.

“Did you now?” said a voice from directly behind them.

Albus’s and Exo’s heads nearly collided as they both whipped around and Wilcox appeared, his Disillusionment Charm fading.

“D-Dad,” stammered Exo. “You’re supposed to be in bed…”

“And good thing I decided to get up, to eavesdrop and hear what you learned while eavesdropping,” said Wilcox. “Like son, like father, I suppose. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a little conversation to have with James and his friends.”

Wilcox left them sitting there and strode quickly to the door of Madam Birchbaum’s office. He opened it and entered without knocking.

“Crap,” said Exo quietly.

“And good thing I decided to get up, to eavesdrop and hear what you learned while eavesdropping,” said Wilcox. “Like son, like father, I suppose. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a little conversation to have with James and his friends.”

Wilcox left them sitting there and strode quickly to the door of Madam Birchbaum’s office. He opened it and entered without knocking.

“Crap,” said Exo quietly.

“I mean… I guess it’s good that James isn’t going to be going out there,” said Albus. “But… a prophecy? Was there a prophecy about James?” He frowned, feeling offended. “And how do they know the prophecy’s about James and not about me?”

“I don’t know, I only heard James say that he’d definitely be able to kill Dismiusa… even if he didn’t survive.”

“What does that mean?” asked Albus, his blood running cold.

Wilcox exited the office and swiftly walked to the door. As he passed Madam Birchbaum, he waved her over; James emerged looking outraged.

“I’m afraid I’m going to have to begin locking this door from the outside each night,” said Wilcox to Madam Birchbaum. “I apologize for this inconvenience. The doors will be unlocked only if we need to bring someone in for medical care, and if we do this, we’ll knock on the door beforehand and you need to make sure nobody else is near the door.”
“What the hell are you expecting, a prison break?” whispered Madam Birchbaum.

“Almost,” said Wilcox. “If you need to be let out, you’ll need to contact one of us via Patronus.”

“I can’t cast a goddamned Patronus!” hissed Madam Birchbaum.

“Well, we’ll station someone in here who can,” said Wilcox. “Sorry, but I’ll explain it to you later.”

“You’ve got to be kidding. You’re locking us in here? What if something somehow makes its way in here – we’d be locked in the room with it–”

“We’ll take precautions. This is one of them. Sorry, Cynthia. See you later. I have an urgent meeting to call with the rest of the defensive staff.”

Madam Birchbaum gave her typical huff before pursing her big red lips and getting back to work on Freddie, who had been wounded in the last attack as well.

“I don’t suppose I’m ever going to find out anything about what’s going on,” said Albus. “I wish I was seventeen. But I don’t understand why they think I can’t handle knowing right now. I’ve already seen more awful things than most people will see in their lives. I’m perfectly capable of coping with the truth if they’d just tell me.”

James walked slowly over to Albus.

“How’s the head?” he asked.

Albus turned his back to James and didn’t answer.

“I need your help,” said James.

“Oh, now you need my help?” asked Albus, turning over slightly.

“Yes,” said James. “Exo… go away.”

“He already knows about the prophecy,” said Albus.

James jumped at the mention of the prophecy. “What – how do – did you rat me out to Wilcox?!”

“Unintentionally,” said Exo apologetically, holding up his hands. “I sort of eavesdropped on you… and my dad sort of eavesdropped on us.”

James sighed. “Well,” he said, “first things first – I want you to take this. It’s how I always talked with Barry when we were separate, but Barry agreed that I should give this to you. You have friends in different Houses, with whom we might need to communicate long-distance.”

He gave Albus a small notepad; most of the pages were already gone.

“It’s got limited pages, so don’t waste any,” said James. “Anything you write on this one will appear on my exact copy of that notepad, including water stains and such. This will work across any distance. So I want you to get that pad to either Aidan or Alec, so that we can ask them to open our door for us when we need them to–”

“You still want to go out there?” laughed Albus. “Are you insane?”

“No, I’m not,” said James. “I’d still rather not explain, because you’re going to hate me even worse
“If I do.”

“Why?”

“Because you’ll understand the reason I don’t want you to know, and you’ll have even more hate for the fact that I’m leaving while keeping you here,” said James. “I know you too well. Knowing that you’ll hate the reason even worse than not knowing the reason… do you still want me to tell you?”

“Yes,” said Albus firmly. “I can handle the truth, James.”

James shook his head. “Okay,” he said. “Exo, I’m going to have to ask you to leave, and Albus can fill you in afterwards if he wants to.”

“I understand,” said Exo, picking himself up from the table and leaving with haste.

James folded his fingers together, then nervously unfolded them and folded his arms instead, then unfolded his arms too. He looked Albus in the eye.

“Professor Longbottom told me that during one of their staff meetings, Professor Allira suddenly went rigid and psycho, and started spouting a prophecy,” he said. “And he told me the essentials of what the prophecy said. The first was that there was a terrible evil originating in Hogwarts.”

“Dismiusa,” said Albus, and James nodded.

“The second essential,” he said, “was that the evil would be defeated by one of the sons of the man who destroyed another great evil inside this very castle.”

“Dad,” whispered Albus, and James nodded once more.

“And the last essential,” said James, his voice starting to shake, “is that…”

“Say it,” said Albus.

“That one of the sons must die if the task is to be completed.”

No matter how much Albus had been expecting something similar, it still ripped his heart out and chilled him to the bone. His breath caught and wouldn’t restart for what felt like minutes.

“And it’s going to be me who dies,” said James. “That’s why I didn’t want you to find out. Because I know you wouldn’t take kindly to it.”

“You’re right, I don’t,” said Albus, standing up.

“But I am of age,” said James, standing up with Albus and towering over his little brother, “and you’re not. It’s my decision. And it’s not yours. I’m telling you now what I’m going to do: My friends and I are going out there, and I’m going to stop Dismiusa, whether or not anyone likes it, and whether or not anyone tries to stop me. And if I have to die on the way back to save everyone in this castle, then so be it.”

“No, I’ll tell you what we’re going to do,” said Albus, seizing James’s wrist before James walked away. “We’re going to go out there, and we’re going to stop Dismiusa – and we’re going to prove the prophecy wrong.”
The Man With No Fingers

“We’re going to prove this prophecy false,” repeated Albus to his friends over the Gryffindor table after explaining the whole situation to them. “I know we can do it. I can feel it.”

“I think that’s what all the teachers are trying to do,” said Aidan. “Try to prove it false by not letting you get involved. Don’t you think it would be better to stay out of it?”

“It’s my fault she’s out there,” said Albus. “I left the hospital wing unguarded. It’s my fault Dismiusa is running free now. I thought maybe she’d stop once she was out, but it seems like she’s getting more powerful, if the lengths of the sieges are any indication…”

“How do you plan on getting out, when everyone is guarding the Gryffindors in the hospital wing?” asked Aidan. “You had to go through worlds of permission just to get us to visit you here.”

“One of you is going to have to borrow the Invisibility Cloak soon,” said Albus, “and let us out.”

“Yeah, that’s a brilliant idea,” said Aidan, a hand to the bridge of his nose. “Look, Albus…”

Albus sighed, bracing himself for Aidan’s inevitable preachy lecture about how stupid he was for plotting something like this.

“…Alec and I are coming with you if you’re going out there, but you’d better have a damn good plan before we do.”

Albus looked up.

“You’re coming with me?” he choked.

“Obviously, yes,” said Alec. “We’ve always got your back.”

“Thanks, guys,” said Albus, trying not to tear up.

“But do you have a plan?” asked Aidan.

Albus looked around; ever since his hushed conversation with Exo about the prophecy, he’d been paranoid that Wilcox was listening.

“James and I are getting to one,” said Albus. “Most of the time since our discussion was spent by me convincing him I could come, too. We haven’t really gotten to the planning stages yet. I just wanted to give you this.”

He handed Aidan the notebook.

“Hey, do I get a present?” asked Alec.

“Yeah, sure,” said Albus. “I’ll get some Toupee pops for something like our old signaling system from second year. Aidan, when you come out under the Invisibility Cloak to get me and James – it won’t be for a couple days until we have a solid plan – you’ll use the Toupee pop so that Alec knows we’ll be coming to pick him up soon.”

“Hey, why can’t I get the Invisibility Cloak?” asked Alec. “Don’t you remember what happened last time Aidan was supposed to wake us up and collect us under the Invisibility Cloak?”
“Don’t remind me,” said Aidan, flushing. “I’m not proud of how I went about doing that.”

“You’re in the library, and that’s a lot farther and closer to the main door,” explained Albus, “so it would be easier for us to pick you up on the way out than for you to walk over here and then walk back with us.”

“Okay,” grumbled Alec.

“What does this notepad do?” asked Aidan, flipping through it.

“It’s blank, for now,” said Albus. “I have the other one. Whatever you write in yours will show up in mine, and the other way around, no matter where we are. That’s how you’ll signal me when you’re coming.”

“Got it,” said Aidan.

“Time for bed!” announced Professor Longbottom. “Everyone non-Gryffindor, out of the room now, please; find an escort back to your current common room, and find the nearest classroom or teacher if the alarm goes off.”

“All right, I’ll talk to you later, Albus,” said Aidan, waving the notepad before stuffing it into his bag. The bottom corner of the top page got crinkled, and it crinkled on Albus’s copy of the notepad, too.

“Hey, be careful with it,” said Albus. “And write small, and only when you need to – it has a limited number of pages.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” said Aidan. “See you soon, Albus.”

“Bye.”

The door was closed behind them, and it was relocked by Professor Desulgon on the outside.

James was talking with his friends now that his girlfriend Tabby had left. Exo was talking with Rose by the fire. Albus decided to take out the book that Rose had found, *An Expert’s Guide to Modern Arithmancy*, and read it to kill some time.

He started near the end, reading a bit of Chapter Twelve on the number twelve. It explained that groups of dozens were also very important, and that twelve divided the number of degrees in a circle, the number of Zodiac signs, the number of inches in a foot and the number of feet in a mile, as well as the number of seconds in a minute, minutes in an hour, hours in a day, and months in a year. The definitions of these measurements weren’t innately formed because of the number twelve, but rather the definitions were decided upon because of the dedication of the world to the number twelve. Half of the chapter had to do with Biblical references to the number twelve, as Albus observed while flipping through.

He turned back to the chapter on the number seven. Much of it was based on theories he’d learned in Arithmancy, but there was also a large amount of new information he’d never considered. He flipped forward a chapter, to Chapter Eight on Tuqube’s Eight Arguments for the Eradication of the Muslim Community from Magic.

Albus’s eyebrow arched a sight higher than it had in his life so far as he did a double-take on the chapter name. Wasn’t that a religion that existed in both the magical and the Muggle worlds? Why eradicate it? What had happened?
The book listed some pretty awful things that the Magimuslim community had done, but it was starting to seem awfully one-sided. Albus was willing to wager that whatever the author’s alliances were, they’d done things that were just as bad. He flipped through to the back of the book to see if there was a page about the author.

In the back was an old sign-out card. There were very few names on the list; it looked like a list of students who had previously checked out the book. Rose’s name was the sixth and last on the list, but it looked like there was writing on the back; Albus turned the card around. The top name caught Albus’s attention first: Albus Dumbledore. The “A” was written with the sign of the Deathly Hallows.

The Deathly Hallows… there were three of those, weren’t there? Albus flipped back to Chapter Three, and quickly found a subsection on the Deathly Hallows. It was very short.

>The Deathly Hallows do not exist. The sort of power suggested by the story tempts the suggestion of a power that humans are not capable of possessing; the thought that they were given by Death himself is probably a misinterpretation of the appearance of Satan, and it is doubtful that any artifacts given to the brothers would be spread out into the world after their deaths; assuming it is the work of Satan, God would not allow any kind of magic other than his own to return souls from Heaven, as an example of proof.

Albus wondered what Dumbledore would have found interesting about this book, if not the section on the Deathly Hallows. This section was far too small to be important to Dumbledore’s search for–

His eyes drifted down further as he thought, and three sequential names caught his attention quickly: Gadolen Ingot, Aezar Wilcox, and Tom Riddle.

He did a triple-take. Who was Aezar Wilcox – any relation to Helio Wilcox? And who was Gadolen Ingot – any relation to Gallen Ingot? But how many Ingots could there be? And it could have been a different Wilcox, but something told Albus it wasn’t a coincidence. Not many things were turning out to be coincidences recently.

And why were they all looking at this ratty, bigoted book? What information was it hiding? He was glad Rose had discovered the book, but he was aggravated at the surfacing of yet another batch of unanswered questions.

Exo wandered over at that moment, so Albus decided to see if he could start getting somewhere with his new information.

“Hey, Exo,” said Albus. “Do you know an Aezar Wilcox? Is that a family member of yours?”

“Yeah, that was my grandfather,” said Exo. “Why?”

“He also checked out this library book that Rose found,” said Albus, showing Exo the card.

Exo took the card and looked at the name. “Ooh. Tom Riddle’s on here too.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Albus. “Did they go to school at the same time?”

“Yeah, my dad’s dad knew Voldemort in school,” said Exo. “They weren’t in the same year, but they were close. But he ran away when Voldemort started gaining power because he didn’t want to join and he knew he’d be asked. He found my dad’s mom wherever in Italy he went, and they got married there and moved back here when Voldemort fell… but then Voldemort came back and made a point to kill my grandparents personally for not supporting him the first time. Dad was
twenty-three at the time, and he wasn’t living at home, so he wasn’t killed… but Voldemort tried to find my dad. He never did. Dad was hiding in Egypt until Voldemort was gone.”

“Quite a family history you’ve got,” said Albus quietly.

“Yeah, what with Gallen Ingot coming later on,” said Exo. “My mom’s family was all Slytherin too, but they were neutral in the Wizarding Wars… not quite so much in the Dark Revival. Speaking of Ingot, who’s Gadolen Ingot? Did Gallen Ingot misspell his name or something?”

“I don’t think it was Gallen Ingot – he wasn’t as old as Voldemort, but Gadolen Ingot is listed in here before Tom Riddle,” said Albus. “Maybe Ingot’s father?”

“Wonder what interest Ingot’s father would have had in the Trinities,” said Exo.

“The what?”

“The Trinities,” said Exo, pointing to the author’s name on the cover. “Troy Diemen was one of the founders of the Darkriver Trinity Church.”

“I’m not familiar with them.”

“Don’t be. They’re psychos.”

“But who are they?” asked Albus. “I’m really interested in this.”

“If you insist,” said Exo, shrugging. “I think my granddad Aezar might have had something to do with them. Dad still has all of his parents’ stuff and he goes through it every once in a while. There’s lots of books by Troy Diemen in there. The Darkriver Trinities are a sect of the Trinities. Do you know about the regular Trinities?”

“Can’t say I do.”

“They’re people who believe in a sort of magical god kind of like the Christian God, with the belief that he only grants magic to those who are worthy. It’s weird. They don’t discriminate against Muggle-borns: just Muggles. Along with any other religions. And then the Darkriver Trinities are like the super-crazy of the bunch. I’m really glad my dad didn’t get involved with them like my grandfather.”

“What sort of crazy things do they do, specifically?”

“They’re not really around anymore, thank goodness. But they used to be pains in the arse. They wouldn’t do things like openly kill Muggles for show, but they kept trying to plot ways to exterminate Muggles all at once.”

“Ugh,” said Albus. “Would that even be a possibility?”

“No, they’re just super-psycho, like I said. They believed that all of the universe could be explained with the number three, and used some convoluted logic to show that this meant that wizards were superior or something. They also believed that there was a way to tap into the divine, and use divine magic to wipe out Muggles… what were those spells called again…?”

“Devoctrices?” asked Albus, his heart leaping at the connection.

Exo didn’t react; he just tapped his foot on the ground and stared up at the ceiling. Albus remembered that he couldn’t openly discuss this type of spell.
“Hold on, I’ll remember it,” said Exo.

“What letter does it start with?” asked Albus, trying to encourage Exo.

“I’m thinking,” said Exo.

“Does it start with a D?”

Exo didn’t hear.

“I think it starts with a D,” said Exo, scratching his head. “Hold on, maybe it’s actually in here?”

He took the book from Albus.

At risk of influencing Exo’s ability to find the word in question, Albus abstained from comment or gesture while Exo flipped to Chapter Three. Maybe, if Albus stayed out of Exo’s search entirely, Exo would find it on his own, and then perhaps he could confirm Albus’s suspicions…

“Oh, here it is,” said Exo, pointing to a word on the page. “Deimancy.”

Albus deflated.

“Though I think ‘Devoctrix’ may have been used interchangeably with Deimancy. No, actually I think Deimancy was the name for just casting spells of godly power or otherwise invoking the powers of the magical gods, and the Devoctrix was just an ancient name for a spell that transcended the current categories of power. Dad has a couple of books on them at home – oh, that was it! The Darkriver Trinities were always trying to create the ‘Darkriver Devoctrix,’ which was something that was apparently proven possible through the theories of their Arithmancers. The Darkriver Devoctrix was the legendary spell that could supposedly kill every Muggle at once.”

Albus blanched; why the hell was Professor Desulgon interested in this?

“Don’t worry,” said Exo, noticing Albus’s color change. “I seriously doubt anyone actually takes this sort of stuff seriously.”

“So why put a freaking Fidelius Charm on the definition?” wondered Albus aloud.

“Did you want to know anything else?” said Exo, again failing to hear. “I don’t really know how much I know but I could ask Dad anything you wanted to know.”

“I’ll give it some thought,” said Albus. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome, Albus.”

But Deimancy was a term used interchangeably with “Devoctrices,” thought Albus. Would the Fidelius Charm prevent me from learning about Deimancy because of the relationship – or is Deimancy slightly distinct from Devoctrices, enough that I can ask about Deimancy without the Fidelius Charm’s protection kicking in?

He decided to ask Wilcox when the Headmaster took his next trip to the hospital wing.

And there’s something else I should ask about, he remembered suddenly. If we’re going into the forest, we’re going to need all the help we can get…
discussion, lest Wilcox suspect that James was still trying to get out. When Wilcox looked ready to
leave after his visit to the teachers, Albus approached him again.

“Hello, Professor,” said Albus.

Wilcox turned around. He didn’t look so happy to see Albus, but considering his nasty
eavesdropping stunt earlier, that wasn’t a surprise.

“Hello, Albus,” said Wilcox. “What can I do for you today?”

“I wanted to know what you knew about Deimancy,” blurted Albus, not really expecting Wilcox to
hear. He had a back-up plan in case the Fidelius Charm kicked in, but the arch of his Headmaster’s
eyebrow told him that Wilcox had heard quite clearly.

“I see,” said Wilcox. “Where did you hear that?”

“Your father apparently checked this book out when he was here,” said Albus, revealing An

Wilcox chuckled. “I’m not even surprised at this point,” he said. “You have a miraculous gift for
seeking out details, Albus. I’m not entirely sure how you came about this book, or what it has to do
with the current situation, but…”

Albus was a little disappointed to hear that it didn’t have anything to do with the current situation,
but he kept an ear open in case it told him something about whatever Professor Desulgon was
hiding. He couldn’t tell anyone what Professor Desulgon was hiding, but that didn’t mean other
people couldn’t unknowingly tell him… If they didn’t know whether it related to Devoctrices, there
was no reason the charm would stop them.

“Deimancy is the archaic art of summoning the powers of the spirits or gods – or just one God –
while casting spells. It supposedly required incredibly complex motions and energies. But that was
just a cover for the fact that they never actually worked. Since they were supposedly so immensely
difficult, the fact that they never worked was attributed to the fact that people never did them
correctly.”

“Invoking powers of the spirits?” said Albus. “Does that maybe have something to do with
Dismiusa?”

“Oh, that’s what you’re on about?” asked Wilcox. “Honestly, Albus, don’t listen to the Trinities.
These are the same people who swore that, if you abstained from potion use for your whole
lifetime, you wouldn’t develop magical diseases like dragon pox and Harbingitis. They’re
lunatics.”

“It’s just that there are a lot of things recently thought to be impossible, which are turning out to be
real,” said Albus.

Like a cure for werewolves, he added silently.

“Well, Deimancy may have some roots in magical theory,” said Wilcox, “but whether or not it’s
controlled by magical gods is yet to be determined, I suppose. I guess you can’t disprove it. But
more likely…”

“More likely, what?” asked Albus.

Wilcox nodded. “Sorry… just had a thought. Go on?”
“What was your thought?”

“Can’t answer that,” said Wilcox.

Albus moaned.

“Sorry about the secrets – I understand it’s painful,” said Wilcox. “But you’re going to have to get over that.”

“I’ll try,” mumbled Albus.

“Anything else?”

“Yes,” said Albus. “I’d like to see Swait again.”

“You want to talk to Swait?” snorted Wilcox. “That makes one of us.”

“I think I can get some more information out of him,” said Albus. “I have a few ideas of things to ask him.”

“If you insist,” said Wilcox.

“Can I have the knife again?” said Albus. “The taunting worked pretty well last time.”

“Yes, but he’ll probably have his mind on the guard against your prodigious Legilimency skills,” said Wilcox. “Or did you have something else in mind?”

“Something else,” said Albus.

“All right, I won’t ask,” said Wilcox. “You’d probably have been more specific if not for the Fidelius Charm, so I’ll leave it at that. I’ll get you the knife tomorrow and you can go speak with him.”

“Okay,” said Albus. “Thank you, Professor.”

“You’re welcome, Albus. Stay safe.”

“Sure thing,” mumbled Albus as Wilcox exited.

Albus needed to have access to Swait’s knife before they left. If he could cut his hand again with the knife, he was pretty sure the knife had some effect to increase his magical ability. That would really assist their escape attempts. It would be excellent if he could take the knife back with him so he could give a little cut to everyone else as well, but Wilcox wouldn’t want him and James to have access to something that could unlock the door of the hospital wing.

He walked over to James.

“I have a request for you, and it’s going to be weird,” said Albus.

“I would say that ‘weird’ is my middle name, but I like my middle name too much to change it,” said James. “You may ask.”

“When I’m talking to Swait, I need you to come up behind me in the Invisibility Cloak and sneak in with me.”

James nodded. “That wasn’t so weird.”
“And then I need to stab you with Swait’s knife.”

James didn’t react. “Any particular reason?”

“For stabbing you?”

“Hello?” asked James, waving a hand in front of Albus’s face.

“You’ll find out once we’re there,” said Albus.

“I’ll take your word for it,” said James. “When will that be?”

“Tomorrow,” said Albus. “Just slip under the Cloak whenever a knock comes at the door, and follow me out when Wilcox brings me out.”

“Can do. Now, this trip to visit Swait – is it necessary?”

Albus nodded.

“Okay,” said James. “Because, to abbreviate the point I was getting to in our discussion earlier… Barry, Gavin, Marco and I agreed on one thing: the longer we wait, the stronger Dismiusa seems to get. So we need to get going as soon as possible. We were thinking within the week. We don’t think we’re getting any further with our plans than they’ve already gotten. So don’t waste too much time. But if you really do need to take this visit, by all means, do it.”

“It’s necessary,” confirmed Albus. “I might be able to help our plans along, with a little unwilling help from Swait.”

James began talking over Albus; apparently he’d only heard the first two words. “All right,” he said. “Then let’s get cracking on our final plan of attack.”

There was a knock on the door. Madam Birchbaum strolled over, made sure no one was near the door, and then opened it. There was just enough time to spare for James to throw the Invisibility Cloak over himself.

“Albus?” called Professor Wilcox, stepping in. “Time to visit our friend.”

Albus nodded and walked towards the door a little slower than normal; he had to give James time to catch up without making any noise.

“Hold up there,” said Wilcox, swinging the door almost shut. “Before we leave, go get your brother for a moment… I’d like to talk to him.”

Albus stopped. “Why?”

“Partly because I always see him scurrying away from a conversation with his friends whenever I enter,” said Wilcox, “and partly because I have a sneaking suspicion that you planned this meeting with Swait just so that James could sneak out alongside you under the Invisibility Cloak.”

“I’ll go get him,” said Albus, his mouth drying out as he knew Wilcox had outsmarted them.

Albus went around a corner, where James took off the Cloak.

“Damn,” he muttered. “He’s got us. All right, let’s go have a chat.”
They walked back out around the corner; James waved to Wilcox with fake cheer as they approached him.

“Well, hello there, James,” said Wilcox. “Just checking up. I want to make sure you’re not planning anything stupid.”

“Everything I’m planning is of the utmost intelligence,” responded James.

Wilcox laughed. “I’m sure it is,” he said. “But the utmost or your intelligence has not always proven to be up to the standards of the rest of us. Recall the Fokii incident which got you suspended from Quidditch. A judgment like that makes me worry that you thought the school was better off in your hands.”

“It’s the hands of fate, sir,” said James. “Not mine.”

Wilcox locked his gaze with James’s for just a moment, and then broke it off to place a strong arm on Albus’s back and escort him further towards the door.

“I’m going to leave the door unlocked, because Albus and I will only be gone for a moment,” said Wilcox quietly to Madam Birchbaum as they left. “Just don’t let anyone else know that it’s unlocked.”

Madam Birchbaum yawned instead of replying.

“Hang in there, Cynthia,” said Wilcox, sighing as they left.

They had no conversation until they reached the room where Swait was being kept.

“Okay,” said Wilcox. “Here you are. Don’t expect him to talk to you – he’s already gotten what he wanted, which is a reduced sentence.”

*I might be able to get him something else that he wants,* thought Albus inwardly. *And you’re handing it to me now.*

He took the knife that Wilcox handed him.

“Good luck,” said Wilcox, smiling.

“Thanks,” said Albus. He opened the door and walked in.

Swait looked up, and rolled his eyes at Albus.

“Thought that was goin’ to be my lunch visit,” he said, sounding disappointed.

“I was hoping to talk more about this,” said Albus, turning the knife over in his hand.

Swait snorted. “You’ll be talkin’ to yourself, if you insist on talkin’ about it.”

“Well, I think that depends,” said Albus. “I mean, my dad’s Harry Potter.”

“Good for you.”

“I guess you didn’t hear me,” said Albus. “Are you having trouble understanding my accent? Okay, then: My dad’s ‘Arry Potter. Get it that time? My dad can pull some strings with the Ministry, and I happen to be able to pull some strings with my dad.”
“A promise from you means nothin’ to me,” said Swait. “You can leave now.”

“My promise is good,” said Albus. “But here’s something better. It’s not just that I need your help – you need to help me. Have you noticed the current situation of the castle? You may not care about a reduced prison sentence, but I figure a reduced life might have some effect on your decision. Want to live? Then tell me how to work this.” He brandished the knife.

“Work the knife?” laughed Swait. “It’s easy.”

“This easy?” asked Albus, administering a small cut onto his palm with a wince.

Swait convulsed in his chair for a moment.

“So,” he grumbled. “You figured out ‘ow to stab yourself?”

“And then I can use better magic,” said Albus. “Right?”

“What do you want? You want to know ‘ow it works? Sorry – trade secret. Only one person knew and ‘e’s dead now. I’d ‘ave to kill you too.”

“Are you confessing to murder in front of me?”

“I didn’t confess. I ‘ighly implied. That’s different.”

“What else does it do?” asked Albus.

“It cooks spaghetti and does a little dance for you when you’re sad,” answered Swait.

Albus shook his head. “You can summon it to your hand from anywhere, can’t you? That’s something else it does.”

Swait laughed. “If that’s so, I would ‘ave done that instead of bargin’ into the castle, wouldn’t I ‘ave?”

Albus shrugged. “I know that ‘Blood’ is the keyword for reopening the scar,” he said, twitching as he felt his cut open wider. “So I assume there’s a keyword for summoning the knife as well. I must have said the word without realizing what the word was. I’m not sure what the keyword is, but it must have come up in my normal conversation somewhere, so it’s not a really obscure word. But then that makes me doubt that I only said it once. So there must have been some other condition – I’m assuming having the wound open is one of those conditions, and you must not have had your wound open. That’s why you didn’t summon the knife back.”

Swait clapped unenthusiastically.

“Come ‘ere,” he said. “I’m not lettin’ anyone out there ‘ear the keyword and I know they’re listenin’ at the door.”

Albus smiled. “You’re going to tell me?”

“I don’t care for dyin’ all that much,” said Swait. “And you’ll do what you can to get me out of prison early as possible?”

“I will,” said Albus.

“Well, I don’t believe you, but I don’t ‘ave too many options, considering ‘ow frequent and lengthy the damn alarms are gettin’, so yes, I’ll tell you.”
Albus stepped right up next to Swait.

“Closer, damn it,” said Swait. “I’m not goin’ to shout this to the ‘eavens. Get over ‘ere.”

Albus stepped right next to Swait, keeping himself wary of any tricks. He placed the knife into his back pocket.

“First, you ought to know what it’s called,” whispered Swait. “I’m sick of ‘earin’ you say ‘the knife.’ It’s got a name, too. And that name is the Bloodblade.”

He was talking so quietly Albus could barely hear him.

“The Bloodblade?” asked Albus to confirm.

A spurt of blood from his palm was shortly followed by his cut hand reflexively curling until he was clutching the cold handle of Swait’s knife. Before he could even register what had happened, Swait swung his leg above the table and swiped it down right on top of the knife, slicing the underside of his leg.

Albus was stricken for a moment, unable to move; he didn’t know Swait’s feet hadn’t been restrained. In the moment that he paused, Swait swung his leg above the table again with remarkable flexibility and crashed his leg directly through the table; employing a flash of wandless magic through his leg, he shattered the stone table as effectively as if he’d used a Reductor Curse.

Swait delivered a kick into Albus’s stomach fueled with wandless energy, which sent Albus careening backwards, striking his head against the wall. Flashing lights danced in front of Albus’s eyes, but he had the presence of mind to whip out his wand, and he Dissipated Swait’s next attack.

“Blade!” shouted Swait, and the Bloodblade suddenly left Albus’s other hand, appearing by Swait’s feet.

That’s the trigger, thought Albus as the door opened and Wilcox rushed in.

The cuffs around Swait’s arms were still around his wrists and had shards of stone sticking out from them; Swait picked up the knife and unlocked the cuffs quickly. Albus shouted “Blade!” again, but Swait had already been freed by the time the knife was gone, and Swait kicked a wave of energy at Wilcox that sent the surprised Headmaster right back through the door.

Swait was slashing his leg through the air, attacking Albus with bursts of energy from his cut leg. “Blade!” he shouted again as Albus threw on a Shield Charm, and the blade appeared by his foot again; he picked it up and sliced both hands and his other leg before Albus shouted “Blade!” back.

Barrages of energy were battering Albus’s shield, starting to break it. Wilcox burst in again, but Swait was running from the scene; he countered Wilcox’s Stunner with a double punch and then knocked Wilcox backwards again with a swift kick.

“Your cuts will close eventually, Potter, but mine will last a few minutes longer!” cackled Swait as he charged out. “And then I will summon the knife back to me before mine closes! More cuts won’t prolong the effect of your first. I win, Potter! I – MOTHER OF MERLIN!”

A piercing avian shriek followed his exclamation, and then Swait screamed but stopped swiftly. Albus ran out of the room just in time to see Professor Desulgon morph back from his Animagus form and send a Full Body-Bind right into Swait’s chest.

Professor Desulgon shook his head. “Albus, what the hell happened?” he asked. “How did he get
out? Why is he bleeding, and what was he talking about?”

Albus gasped as Swait leapt up from the floor; the Body-Bind placed on him had broken.

“Blade!” shouted Swait, leaping towards Professor Desulgon, knife glinting in his hand.

“Blade!” retaliated Albus, and Swait did nothing more than punch Professor Desulgon’s back. Professor Desulgon leapt to the side and whipped out his own wand as Albus frantically yelled, “Stupefy!”

The rocket-like jet from Albus’s spell barreled towards Swait and struck him directly in the face. Fueled by the magical property of the cut from Swait’s knife, Albus’s Stunner sent Swait spiraling backwards through the air so violently that he cleared the entire gap of the stairwell and smashed right through the railing on the other side, skidding to a stop at the wall when he knocked his head against it.

There was no time for the teachers to be impressed, or ask Albus how he’d done it; the siege alarm suddenly went off again. Albus stowed the knife in his back pocket again as Professor Desulgon and Wilcox jumped over the railing again to go try and fight off the oncoming hoard.

But something was different. Albus listened closely – there was another alarm going off, not just the siege alarm. Two separate alarms were blaring at the same time – what was the second?

Albus took out the Marauder’s Map. “I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.”

He scanned the map, looking to where most of the teachers seemed to be heading, and tried to find where they might have been headed.

And then he saw a dot on the map labeled Ivan Siobor.

No matter how many times in his life Albus had felt the highest possible levels of fear and horror, he still couldn’t handle it. He felt like he wanted to vomit and pass out, but he knew that if he did, nobody would know that Ivan Siobor, the Werewolf Hunter, was in this very castle. He gathered his balance as best as he could and sprinted towards the hospital wing where Exo would be with the Gryffindors – and the door was unlocked.


Frantically turning the pages of the map, he saw that no teacher was even close to him. He had to get back to the Gryffindors. His magic was increased by the power of the knife, so maybe he could fight off Siobor… maybe. He realized that based on their current locations, there was no way he could beat Siobor to their destination… but he had to try. And if he couldn’t save Exo, he would be sure to get his revenge.

He ran down the stairs and turned the corner to the hospital wing, running for not his life but for his friend’s. He skidded to a stop in front of the door to the hospital wing and checked the Marauder’s Map; Siobor was nowhere in sight, and he wasn’t inside with the Gryffindors.

Where was he? Where was he going? How did he get into the castle in the first place, with the barrier surrounding the edges of the forest – had he been waiting in the forest, biding his time since the beginning of the assault? Albus turned back to where he’d seen Siobor on the map, and followed where Siobor’s path had been heading – and then, amidst the cluster of dots that were the Slytherins living in the Great Hall, he saw Siobor run to the doors of the Hall and burst in.
Albus shook his head – what was going on? Why was Siobor headed to the Slytherins – were there any–

Albus’s hand flew to his mouth: *Corey Brown.*

The Slytherin crowd was suddenly blasted backwards through the Great Hall, but Albus could see that one person was yanked towards Siobor: it was Corey. Siobor fled the room, dragging Corey behind him like the first year child was on a leash, and then they were just outside the Great Hall. Siobor stationed Corey outside, and then a few seconds later, Corey’s dot disappeared from the map. And Albus knew exactly why.

The reality of the situation was like a series of punches to his gut. Siobor had just murdered an eleven-year-old child. He had no regrets and now he was headed directly for the hospital wing – there was no mistaking it. The teachers were following him now, but Siobor was moving much too fast to be only on his feet.

Albus stowed the Marauder’s Map in his pocket, but didn’t wipe it in case he needed to know where Siobor was. He took out Swait’s knife, and gave a cut to his other palm, just as Swait had done.

It only took a few seconds for Siobor to round the last corner, looking for his next victim, and he blasted forward with his arms oriented behind his back, flying through the air without ever touching the ground. He landed with his hands in front of him, twenty feet in front of Albus, whose wands were both directed at Siobor.

“Step back from the door,” growled Siobor in a thick Russian accent. “Only werewolves die by my wands.”

Siobor wore a hooded robe; the hood was up, casting a shadow over his features. His face was grotesque and distorted, so badly that it looked intentional; his grey eyes were in a normal position, but his nose was at a slight angle to the eyes and the mouth was at a slight angle the other way. His ears were large and looked mangled. His black hair was thick and sticking in every direction. He didn’t seem to be holding a wand, so how on Earth–

Albus took a closer look at the hands pointing towards him, and a wave of nausea swept over him.

Siobor didn’t have any fingers.

He had *wands.*

His fingers had each been severed at the very first knuckle, and in their place were ten short wands, all directed at Albus. Was this how Siobor had become so powerful? What had been the price? What had he *done* to himself?

Siobor didn’t waste any more time talking. One by one, in rapid succession, his wands fired jets of white light without him uttering a word, and Albus Dissipated the first two but was struck by the third, toppling to the ground as seven more jets shattered the stone wall above him. He was motionless, and Siobor was moving towards the door.

No – he wasn’t motionless. Swait had broken free, and so could he–

As if a rope tethering him to the ground had suddenly snapped, he jumped up and sent a Stunner right between Siobor’s eyes. The man held up all ten of his wand-fingers in front of his face, and Dissipated with all ten wands at once; even so, part of Albus’s super-powered spell still worked its way through. It didn’t Stun him, but it knocked him backwards enough to break his stance, and
then Professor Desulgon, Professor Longbottom, Professor Westerling, Professor Valon, Professor Plinky, and Wilcox all rounded the corner and spotted Siobor.

“ALBUS, MOVE!” bellowed Professor Wilcox as the teachers all began firing spells down the hall.

Siobor leapt away and suddenly, he was flying; all ten of his wands were emitting some sort of fire-like gas that was propelling him into the air. He slashed the air in front of him with one hand, and five waves of spell energy hit Albus one after another, knocking him into the wall. The waves of energy continued down the hall towards the teachers. While they were distracted, Siobor blasted off as fast as the jet of any spell Albus had ever seen, and he disappeared.

Wilcox arrived at the door and ran inside to check on his son; most of the teachers ran past Albus one way, and Valon doubled back to cover the rest of the school—

“Wait!” said Albus, pulling out the Marauder’s Map. “Wait!”

“No time to wait, Albus!” yelled Wilcox, running back out of the room.

“No – Professor, I know where he is! I know where Siobor is going!”

Wilcox didn’t respond; he obviously wasn’t taking that claim seriously. How would Albus know Siobor’s location at all times, anyway?

Albus checked the map just in time to see Siobor burst through the main doors and exit the castle. Finally, the alarms shut off. He disappeared into the forest, out of the boundary of the map within a second, moving faster than Albus had ever seen anything move.

“He’s gone,” said Albus to himself. His heart leapt as he knew Exo was safe, but it sank as he realized Siobor wouldn’t be caught.

Then he remembered what had just happened, and he raced off to the Great Hall.

Many Slytherins were clustered by the door to the Great Hall, looking down at the little body that lay in front of the Hall. Eftan was sitting in the very front, shaking his head with his eyes closed, looking like he never wanted to open them again; he was Corey’s mentor after all, the boy was dead now. Albus stopped and stared down at the lifeless form of Corey Brown.

The small boy’s eyes were wide open, terrified, staring at the ceiling while he lay on his back with one arm across his chest. And all because he had been bitten by a werewolf. No one deserved this fate – not even the murderous Fenrir Greyback, whose head had burst all over Oddolweld Pasture during the Lunar Eclipse festival. Corey had the same look in his eyes right now as when Greyback had been shot…

And then Albus realized that he had seen Corey before.

Not just in this year. He had seen Corey over two years ago, during the Lunar Eclipse. The boy, whose age Albus had correctly estimated at about nine, had barely made it out alive – his mother Disapparated while holding him, but had died right as they disappeared. And his father… had been Fenrir Greyback.

Corey was Fenrir Greyback’s son. Albus had seen Corey and Greyback holding hands at the Lunar Eclipse festival, but he didn’t make the connection until he saw Corey sharing his father’s face in death.
But the deaths were only the beginning. He knew there would be more.
It was still hard to believe that there had been a casualty amongst the students. Hogwarts was an impenetrable fortress, yet Ivan Siobor had broken in. Asher Pierce had been confirmed dead beforehand due to his appearance as a Fokii, but that was his own stupid fault. Corey Brown, on the other hand, was an innocent young boy who had been brutally, senselessly murdered right in the school’s hallway. It couldn’t be comprehended.

Albus and James knew the time was coming for their venture. It was time for this nightmare to be over. As long as the forest was still growing around the school, no one had the protection they needed. Aurors outside the barrier, communicating via Patronus with Professor Longbottom, said that they witnessed Siobor jetting away from the scene, blasting his way right through the barrier, but they couldn’t figure out how he did it. Wilcox had gone out to chase him in the forest, but had returned empty-handed (but thankfully alive).

Professor Desulgon walked into the room as Albus and James were making their final preparations; Albus turned his ear to listen to the conversation that Professor Desulgon was having with Professor Longbottom.

“What is Swait’s situation?” asked Professor Longbottom. “Helio said he was giving everyone a bit of trouble…?”

“He’s still Confunded,” answered Professor Desulgon. “But we have to keep Confunding him consistently. He’s completely forgotten, as of now, that he owns a knife. But he knows he’s forgotten something important and keeps racking his brain to remember it. We have to Confund him every hour on the hour unless we knock him out with a Sleeping Draught.”

“He’s a serious liability. Those charms had better be secure.”

“Yes… but we’ve also placed a Silencing Charm on him, so he can’t say the magic words even if he remembers. That’s our Plan B.”

“Do we have a Plan B for this bloody forest invasion?”

“Of course,” said Professor Desulgon. “Helio always says: Always have a Plan B, but don’t tell everyone else that you have it, because that will make them suspect that you don’t have confidence in Plan A.”

“Do we have confidence in Plan A?”

“Plan A is just waiting it out and hoping they figure out how to break through the barrier out there. If Siobor could do it with just a few wands, it’s really shocking that the Auror Office hasn’t figured it out yet.”

“You said you were working on a theory?” inquired Professor Longbottom.

“Yes, but it’s a tad risky.”

“Riskier than continuing to sit idly in this hellhole?”

“Riskier than that,” said Professor Desulgon. “Just forget it.”

“Well you can’t not say it now…”
“Did we already seal poor Corey’s body to prevent the Fokii from taking it over?”

“Stop trying to change the subject.”

With that, the two professors walked out of the room.

“Okay,” said Albus. “Now all we have to do is wait?”

“Right,” said James. “We’re leaving tonight; all the preparations are made.”

“Yeah.”

“The legends say that if she is defeated, she’ll go back to sleep, right?” said James. “Even if we don’t destroy her for good, putting her back to sleep will give everyone a chance to prepare for what happens next time she wakes up. Which would probably be more than seven hundred years from now, if we’re going off our current understanding… So that should be more than enough time.”

“Yeah.”

“You nervous?”

“Of course,” said Albus. “But this knife is going to give us an enormous advantage. It’s what makes me think we can do this.”

“I trust your judgment,” said James.

Ever since Swait had broken out of his confinement, and had shown his prowess in wandless magic when he’d cut himself with the knife, it appeared that he had broken his own Fidelity Charm. He had shown off his ability to gain magic from the knife, as well as the fact that when he shouted, “Blade,” he could summon the knife to him. And of course, Swait had already told the teachers that the knife could be used to unlock doors. With revelation after revelation of the knife’s abilities, the Fidelius Charm had deteriorated. Perhaps it hadn’t been adequately cast, and the continuing leakage of secrets had finished it off. Whatever the case, Albus discovered that he was now able to converse freely about the topic of the knife, with anyone he wanted.

“And Wilcox thinks that, now that your wounds have closed, you can’t summon the knife back?”

“But he doesn’t know that I can reopen the wounds by saying b-l-o-o-d,” spelled Albus. “And then I can summon the knife by saying b-l-a-d-e.”

“And you don’t want to summon it until the moment we’re leaving the hospital wing, because you don’t want Wilcox to notice it’s missing until we’re already gone?”

“Yes. I’ll give cuts to all of you, too, when we’re outside.”

“And how long does it take for the wounds to disappear completely, forever, until the next time you get another slice?”

“It was at least three weeks,” said Albus. “It took a long time for them to close. But according to what Swait shouted at me as he was leaving, I don’t think you can prolong the effects with more cuts. For example, if I gave myself another wound two weeks in, all of the wounds still disappear at the same time as the first one.”

“But you only got your cut yesterday – so there’s no chance that you’ll randomly run out of power
in the middle of the woods, is there?”

“No.”

“Good,” said James. “We’re going to need all the firepower we can get, with what’s out there.”

“Agreed.”

James shivered. “Is this what you felt like... right before you brought Exo to the Lunar Eclipse Festival?”

“This is worse,” laughed Albus darkly. “For the Lunar Eclipse Festival, I didn’t think we’d have to do any fighting. I didn’t think it was that dangerous.”

“And now Solomon looks like he might have been right all along,” said James, ruffling his hair as he shook his head in disbelief.

Another reason we’ve got to get through this, thought Albus. For Exo. If we don’t take down that barrier around the school, we won’t get Exo to Solomon in Moutohora for the lunar eclipse.

“You sure you’re okay?” asked James. “You’ve been quieter since we decided our departure date.”

“I’m okay.”

“Ready to get to sleep?”

“Yes.”

“Night, little brother. See you in a few hours.”

James tossed Albus the Invisibility Cloak and then went to his own bed. Albus slipped under the covers.

Aidan would be waking up using his silent watch at four in the morning, and he was going to use the Toupeepops to wake Albus and Alec. Their old method of waking each other up at the same time was still the best: the feeling caused by the Toupeepop’s effect, switching one’s head of hair with the person who licked the other Toupeepop in the pair, was enough to reliably wake up a sleeping individual. Aidan and Alec would head to the main entrance of the castle while Albus slipped around under the Invisibility Cloak to wake James, Barry, Gavin, and Marco. They would ensure, using the Marauder’s Map, that no teachers or students were patrolling the halls in their way, and then Albus would summon the knife to unlock the door of the hospital wing – with Swait’s knife available to them now, they didn’t need Aidan to come all the way down here, which helped logistics a lot. Then they would unlock the main door of the castle, and leave. Hopefully the door wouldn’t stay unlocked – Wilcox had enchanted it to reseal once it shut, but they didn’t know what effect the knife would have on the door. But the door was constantly being broken down by the forest anyway; if it remained unlocked, all that would happen would be another siege alarm, and the teachers would drive the forest back out again and seal the door themselves. The Fokii break-ins hadn’t caused any permanent damage yet... apart from the freeing of Dismiusa.

Thinking about the Fokii reminded Albus of their little problem in the walls. They hadn’t heard the clicking in a long time – but when Albus had notified Wilcox of the possibility of an undead basilisk in their plumbing, he’d sealed all the pipes off of the main lines and ensured that the basilisk wouldn’t be able to get through into the school itself. Hopefully this was more reliable a job of sealing than that of the front door.
Even with all these thoughts buzzing around in his head like a mad swarm of flies, Albus surprised himself by being able to fall asleep almost immediately.

A familiar sensation roused Albus from his rest. It felt like worms were sliding underneath the skin on his head; the roots of his hair were tingling, and he felt the hairs of his head stick straight up for a moment as they swapped with that of Aidan’s. Albus forced himself to wake up quickly; he needed to wake everyone else up in Gryffindor. He threw the Invisibility Cloak over himself and stood up.

He ran his fingers through his new hair. It was longer than Aidan’s – it was probably Alec’s hair. Aidan had swapped his hair with Alec’s to wake Alec up first, and then he’d swapped with Albus, so that Albus got Alec’s hair. Albus didn’t know how Alec dealt with this hair – Albus kept his hair usually short because it always went all over the place, but Alec’s hair was even messier.

He rustled James’s shoulder. James mumbled something, but then he snapped to his senses and shut himself up. He nodded, and after looking around to make sure that no one was in the room to intercept them, he stood up, holding his wand. Barry stood up when he saw James standing; apparently he hadn’t been able to sleep. James woke Gavin and Barry woke Marco.

“Ready to go?” whispered James, almost inaudibly.

James’s friends all nodded. The Potters and the Marauders crept to the door.

They passed Exo and Rose, who were both fast asleep. Albus felt bad, but Exo was not as strong with magic, and was extra vulnerable considering that Siobor had gotten into the forest somehow. Rose, on the other hand, was a supremely talented witch but had a much harder time handling stress than handling a wand. She probably wouldn’t have been able to deal with being out in the woods if she was terrified just from being in the castle.

As they approached the door, James peeked back at the sleeping bags. They had assumed that, inevitably, someone would have noticed them leaving – they couldn’t be completely silent, and there was probably at least one person in the entire Gryffindor House who wasn’t sleeping. But their exit was quiet so far.

“Blade,” said Albus, as softly as possible while still articulating.

Nothing happened.

“Oh – right,” he breathed as James gave him a concerned look. “Bloodblade.”

The knife appeared in his hand.

“Forgot that I have to be bleeding in order to summon the knife.”

Albus slid the knife into the lock of the door to the hospital wing, and with a click like a gunshot, it broke open. The door slid open.

Quickly, Albus and the others rushed out, as several sleeping bags rustled. As the door was closing, James shot a silent spell at the hinge, and there was no sound as it shut. Was it possible that they’d gotten out without being noticed? They had to play as if someone was going to notify a teacher, though, so they made a break for the main door as fast as possible.

“No one coming,” said Barry, checking the Marauder’s Map. “No one even near.”
“I like your beautiful blond mane,” said James to Albus as they ran.

“Thanks?” said Albus, ruffling Alec’s hair.

“You rock in blond, actually,” said Gavin. “James is right.”

“That’s creepy, Gavin,” said Marco timidly.

Gavin rolled his eyes. “You wouldn’t have said anything about that comment three months ago! Are you still on that? Just drop it!”

James looked down and saw that Albus was confused. “Marco’s uncomfortable around Gavin now,” he explained, “because Gavin snogged Topher Davis on Valentine’s Day.”

“We were drunk!” protested Gavin.

“Absurdly drunk,” laughed James.

“Yes, but even as straight men, we all must admit that Christopher Davis is an Adonis,” said Barry. “I’d snog him if I was drunk and forgot he had a penis.”

“Can you please stop reminding me that I snogged Topher Davis?” sighed Gavin.

“We’re not reminding, we’re congratulating,” said James. “He’s damn hot.”

Gavin shook his head and grumbled.

“Who’s the most attractive guy in your year, Albus?” asked Barry.

Albus laughed. That wasn’t a question he’d been asked by anyone, and he certainly hadn’t asked it to himself.

“Me,” he answered on impulse.

The four older boys guffawed and stumbled as they ran.

“James, your little brother is like a better version of you,” chuckled Barry.

“Hey!” said James.

“I don’t want to be any version of him,” said Albus, jabbing a thumb, and Barry, Gavin, and Marco laughed harder.

“Okay, time to be quieter now,” said Barry, his nose in the map again. “Valon is a floor above us, about to walk out of a classroom.”

They ran as silently as possible. The blood trickling down Albus’s arm was still an unpleasant sensation, but he’d gotten used to it at this point.

They got to the main door; Aidan and Alec were waiting for them there, and stepped out from behind suits of armor.

“Time to go?” asked Aidan, rubbing his hands together nervously. He had Albus’s hair, which looked very awkward because Aidan always kept his super-short; that super-short stubble was now on Alec’s head, and he looked absurd.
“Time to go,” repeated Albus, taking the knife to the main door.

It felt like there was some sort of force, like pushing two magnets together with the same pole, acting against his pressure on the knife. He couldn’t push it all the way to the door. James noticed him straining, and put a hand on the back of the knife, pushing with Albus. The knife started moving slowly with the both of them applying force, and as soon as the knife hit the door, there was a shattering sound. They knew that Wilcox’s spell was broken and the door had been unlocked.

“Ready?” asked James, a hand on the door.

“Wait,” said Albus. “Here.”

He gave the knife to his brother, who administered a brief cut onto his hand, and then Barry, Gavin, and Marco each cut their right hands as well. Aidan and Alec cut both hands, since both of them used two hands for two wands. If Swait had cut both of his hands, it must mean that there was some sort of effect specific to the limbs.

“If I cut my head will I be able to headbutt walls down?” asked Alec.

“Probably?” said Albus, stowing the knife in his back pocket. “All right. Now we’re ready.”

James nodded, and pushed the door open. “Expecto Patronum!” he called, summoning his Patronus to allow them to see.

For the first time, Albus was able to see what it was like outside.

The light of James’s tuatara illuminated nothing but trees. The grounds of the castle now extended exactly zero feet from the door. There were so many trees that it was hard to see a path on which they could walk. The boys all stepped outside and closed the door quickly so that nothing would get in and set off an alarm.


“Elevita!” repeated the other three sixth years, casting the Supersensory Charms upon themselves in order to make sure they noticed Fokii coming, or other unwanted guests.

Actually, though, the humans were the guests in this forest. What they might or might not encounter would be unwanted hosts.

“Then we’re off,” said James, unfolding another map. This wasn’t the Marauder’s Map – it was a map of the Forbidden Forest that James and his friends had drawn themselves. James was using it to find a specific spot. He and Albus both agreed that it was going to be hard to find Dismiusa, but there was one spot they would be sure to check first.

Back in Albus’s second year, something very strange had occurred in the last Quidditch match of the season. An earthquake of sorts had occurred, and a plume of dust had been ejected high into the sky above the Forbidden Forest. Then, James had dragged Albus into the forest to investigate. What they discovered was a clearing in the middle of the forest which was surrounded by trees covered in blood. The grass in the clearing was very high and razor sharp; it had cut James’s legs when he’d tried to wade in. If there was something strange happening in the forest, that was their current most likely candidate for the source. It would be the first place they checked. After that… they would just have to follow wherever seemed the correct direction. It wasn’t going to be easy, but according to the prophecy, they were the only ones who could do it. Perhaps this was because they were the only ones who had explored the strange forest clearing. Were they the only ones who...
could find Dismiusa, wherever she lay? And if so… would the second part of the prophecy really come true?

Albus shook his head. He couldn’t think like that. If the Potter brothers kept assuming that one of them really was going to die, they would self-fulfill the prophecy. There was no reason it had to come true if they took charge of their own destiny. His father could have chosen not to defeat Voldemort if he’d wanted – and Albus and James were both choosing to survive.

“Which direction is the Forbidden Forest?” asked Aidan, looking around.

“Every direction,” said Alec.

“We’re heading this way,” said James, pointing. “I don’t know if any of our old landmarks are still going to be recognizable, but Barry’s got a compass.”

“I do,” said Barry, holding up a small Muggle device.

“I’ll keep track of where we are, roughly, and see if we can pass by any of our old landmarks,” said James. “Okay. Watch your step. Duro.”

He solidified the dirt in front of them; the Dugroot’s roots wouldn’t be able to suck them under the ground if they were stepping on solid rock.

“We should go over all of our emergency drills,” said James.

“We should get a little farther into the forest before we do that,” said Aidan, “in case someone’s notified Professor Wilcox or another teacher that we’ve left. It would be very easy for them to find us if we were standing directly in front of the school having a chat.”

“Let’s walk and talk,” said Barry.

“For Dugroot, we use Duro,” said Gavin. “If it fails, we use Defodio to gouge out the dirt so that no one goes under.”

“For Stingwood, we use Lumidesca to make the roots retract,” said Marco. “If it fails, we use Levicorpus on whoever’s too dangerously close to the roots.”

“Right, and we just stay away from Verdusthorn and Magmarbor,” said James. “So right here and now it looks like it’s mostly Dugroot around us, which is fine. Even if we get out of Dugroot territory, we should still solidify the ground, so that we don’t get Hellhunters on our trail or Suts up our arses.”

“Oh, right,” said Alec. “The Dirt Piranhas. Er… it’s been fun, guys, but I think I’ll head back now…”

Albus paused. “You can if you want to.”

“What? No, I was joking,” said Alec. “You think I’m going to leave you out here with Dirt Piranhas everywhere? No way, I’m sticking around. You’re going to have to deal with me.”

“There are few people I’d rather deal with right now than you guys,” said Albus, smiling.

“Something’s coming,” said James, pausing.

“It’s probably the knife that helped me,” said James. “Let’s see – there it is, it’s just a thestral.”

“A thestral?” choked Gavin. “Aren’t they supposed to be bad omens…?”

“No, not really,” said James. “They’re actually quite nice. Just misunderstood. I wouldn’t aggravate them, of course, but I wouldn’t aggravate most things. Especially in this forest.”

“True,” said Albus, noticing that they were almost off of the rock that James had created for them to walk on. “Duro,” he said, his wand aimed down.

As opposed to when James had cast the spell, a force like a bomb burst from Albus’s wand and smashed into the ground; they all staggered for a moment as the ground in every direction as far as they could see turned to stone.

“Holy shit, Albus,” said Gavin, clutching his chest. “What the hell did you just do?”

“I… I think that’s just what happens when you cast a spell with a cut from Swait’s knife,” said Albus.

“That didn’t happen with James,” said Marco, frowning.

“That’s odd,” said Albus. “Wait… James, cast Diffindo at a tree. Dugroot doesn’t freak out when that happens, does it?”

“No, it’s the only one of the four that wouldn’t react violently to a severed limb,” said James. “Okay: Diffindo!”

A large branch of a tree at which his wand was directed was severed; it clattered to the rock below and snapped in half on contact.

“Now me,” said Albus. “Diffindo!”

The branch’s base exploded, chips flying out in a circular blast radius; the branch was blasted backwards and struck another tree, shattering when it hit the tree. The spell continued on and severed two more tree branches before breaking through the canopy.

“What the hell?” said James. “I thought the cut was supposed to…”

“Maybe it can’t do more than one person at a time,” said Alec.

“But Swait had it going at the same time as me,” said Albus. “I don’t understand.”

“We can’t waste any more time,” said Aidan. “Come on, guys, let’s go.”

“But this is really not good,” said Albus. “Did the knife run out of power or something?”

“We don’t have time to run back and ask Swait, and I don’t think he’d tell us anyway,” said James. “Aidan is right. Let’s keep moving.”

The forest was quiet apart from the sound of their feet hitting the solid rock below.

“Keep your eyes open, everyone,” said James. “We could see anything at any time.”

They passed a tree that could only be a Magmarbor; its bark was so red that it was glowing in the darkness.
“It’s glowing because it’s hot,” said Barry, pointing. “Don’t touch it, whatever you do.”

“I’m surprised we haven’t seen anything yet,” said Gavin.

“I’m really happy we haven’t seen anything yet,” said Marco, his grip tight on his wand.

“Quiet,” said Aidan.

They walked in silence.

Not long passed before they encountered the first obstacle, though it wasn’t nearly as much of a first obstacle as they had expected. A trickling sound proceeded their arrival in front of a small stream that was flowing past. It was small enough that they could all leap over it easily.

“That stream wasn’t here before,” said James, checking his map.

“Stranger things have been appearing,” said Marco. “Let’s just hope there are no roaring rivers.”

“It sounds like the stream might feed into a river over there, far in that direction,” said Albus, pointing downstream. “I can hear the rushing water from here.”

“I don’t hear anything,” said Gavin.

Albus cocked an ear to listen, but the sound disappeared. In fact, everything went quiet almost all at once.

“I just heard it,” said Albus, and he jumped slightly when he realized he couldn’t hear his own voice. Was he unable to talk, or had he temporarily lost hearing? Or – both.

He looked over to James, who quickly raised his wand and wrote, in burning letters in midair so that everyone could see, “Vulupus.”

The Vulupus had struck them all deaf and dumb. It was watching them from somewhere. If they wanted to break the spell, they had to find where it was and look at it; otherwise, they would all remain this way until it attacked.

“Spread out and look,” wrote James; the others nodded and they all turned in different directions, scanning the trees.

A soft glow from behind told Albus that James was writing something else; he turned to see James write, “Stay close – it will pick us off one by one if we’re separated, and we won’t know because we won’t hear you scream.”

Albus felt his heart thumping wildly in his chest; he felt the pressure in his ears that should have come with the sound of his heartbeat, but the absence of that audible sensory perception was turning his brain into a blind panic. Never had he experienced this level of silence. Everyone behind him could have already been killed, and he wouldn’t know the difference unless he looked; but if he turned around, he was exposing himself to a possible assault from that direction, and no one would know that he needed help.

“Gotcha!”

The sudden noise was much louder after the prolonged silence; Albus calmed his nearly violent reaction and turned around. Apparently the Vulupus’s spell could be broken for everyone if even a single member of the affected party found it. James was firing explosive spells into the forest
beyond; they were causing the trees to blast apart, but thankfully these were still Dugroots, and the
trees weren’t fighting back.

With the trees cleared, Albus caught sight of a fox scampering away; the Vulupus. At least it
wasn’t taking the form of a wolf, which would have signified that it was on the attack.

“If we run into a pack of those, would we have to spot every single one?” asked Albus as the others
all attempted to clean out their ears.

“They’re solitary,” said Aidan. “But I’m not sure they’d behave the same as they usually would. I
don’t know the answer to that question – no one has ever seen them in groups of more than one.”

“How did you spot it?” asked Alec, rubbing his head.

“Supersensory Charm again,” said James. “It’s really invaluable. You should all teach it to
yourselves as soon as possible.”

“I’ll remember that if we live long enough,” muttered Aidan.

“Hey, you need to stop acting like the grass is half-empty,” quipped Alec. “Get it? Like the glass is
half-empty, but we’re in the Forbidden Forest so it’s grass—”

“I get it!” shot Aidan. “I wasn’t laughing because it was stupid!”

“Leaf my jokes alone!”

“Alec, I’m going to wring your neck…”

“Vine by me.”

James was laughing way harder than he should have been. “How do you come up with these?”

“It’s as easy as one, two, tree.”

Aidan groaned as Barry, Gavin, and Marco grinned appreciatively, all clapping Alec on the back in
turn.

“Let’s keep going,” said James. “If we hit another Vulupus stare, the three of us without
Supersensory Charms should stay ready to cast spells for defense, and the four of us with the
Supersensory Charms will do the looking. Sound reasonable?”

“Yes,” said Albus with five other voices, surprised at how much of a leader his brother could
become in a situation like this.

They walked onward through the forest, cringing at every stick that creaked under their footsteps.
Aidan and Barry were keeping close eyes on the trees, watching to make sure there weren’t any
Verdusthorn or Stingwood trees appearing in the vicinity, and Albus was in front casting Duro
every so often. As long as those trees weren’t around, Albus could seal the ground with Duro as
harshly as possible and they wouldn’t be attacked by the trees in return.

Eventually, though, they encountered what they had been anticipating since the start: a change in
the forest composition. In front of them now, they could see a fair few Magmarbor trees glowing in
the distance. The trees were more gnarled in front of them, and the ground had little holes
everywhere like a sponge.

“Stingwood,” said Aidan and Barry at the same time.
“Any Verdusthorn?” asked James.

“No, but Verdusthorn has less of a ‘don’t touch’ level than Stingwood, so I’d use the same amount of caution even if there were,” said Barry.

“It’s not going to be morning for a while, so the roots won’t come up,” said Aidan. “Still, though, I wouldn’t take the chance.”

“Let’s check,” said James, pulling a rat-shaped Decoy Detonator out of his pocket. “Back up, everyone – you won’t want to be anywhere near the Stingwoods if they end up not being asleep.”

He wound up the Detonator; the little rat scurried across the forest floor, and as soon as it stepped over the pockmarked ground, a thin root shot upwards and speared it straight through the middle.

There was an explosion of the sort that Albus usually associated with his uncle’s shop; lots of loud noise and black smoke. But then there was a shrill shriek that was never manufactured into the device; the tree was screaming. Suddenly, all of its roots burst out of the ground in lengths of four to eight feet and began thrashing wildly like some sort of enraged thousand-armed octopus; in response, a good five dozen trees beyond the first suddenly started screeching and swinging their roots around as well. It was like a forest made of small Whomping Willows. There were probably more trees than the ones they could see, as well; all of them were making hellish noises and whipping roots violently. There was no way they could penetrate the wall of trees that was beyond.

“Okay,” said James, sighing. “I don’t think we’re going this way. The Decoy Detonators don’t even injure anything, but the tree is still reacting like that. I don’t think we should go anywhere near them. Let’s try to get around.”

“Which way?” asked Gavin.

James scratched his head. “Er… let me check the map to see if there’s any way I’m more familiar with…”

“We should go this way,” said Aidan, pointing to their left.

“Why?” asked Marco.

“Because the river that Albus noticed is this way,” said Aidan. “If we can’t find a way around the roots, then we can freeze the surface of the river and walk over the river. The roots wouldn’t be growing under the river.”

James nodded. “That’s pretty smart,” he said. “All right – let’s go that way.”

“Good thinking, Aidan,” said Alec.

“Yes, well, when you apply your intellect to navigating and not to making puns, sometimes the results will surprise you,” said Aidan coolly.

Alec rolled his eyes.

“Aidan, don’t take out your stress on everyone else,” said Albus.

Aidan looked like he was about to snap back at Albus, but then realized that he would have just proven Albus right. Instead he just turned his head forward and kept moving, observing the trees and the ground wherever they walked.
“Why couldn’t they just set a fire again?” asked Gavin. “Why couldn’t we just burn down the
trees?”

“Why can’t we just cut the trees down as we’re walking so that we don’t have to worry about
remembering Duro and everything else?” added Marco.

“Magmarbor grows best during a fire,” answered Barry. “First of all, we would have caused a lot of
explosions and fire and a lot of angry creatures seeking refuge in the only part of the area that isn’t
a forest – Hogwarts. Secondly, the forest would have grown back – probably just as quickly – and
it would probably have grown back entirely comprised of Magmarbor. And thirdly, we don’t really
know what we would have been angering. Or, we didn’t, at the time. Now we’ve got a pretty good
idea.”

“What are we going to do once we find her?” asked Alec. “Kill her? How?”

“We’ll have to come up with something,” said Albus. “The knife will probably help. I might have
to be the one… if the knife isn’t affecting anyone else…”

“Ridiculous,” said James. “You’re not fighting her alone.”

“But if the knife isn’t affecting you, you can’t fight something that powerful – the prophecy might
come true–”

“And it might come true for you, if I let my fourteen-year-old little brother fight an incredible
power like this all by himself,” said James. “Face it, we’re both fighting, and we’ll both come out
alive.”

Albus nodded.

“Hey, and we’re going to help, too,” said Alec.

“Yes, of course,” said Aidan.

“Count me in,” said Barry.

“Sure, why not,” said Marco.

“No backing down,” said Gavin.

Albus and James smiled at their friends, but they turned back to keep a close eye on the forest in
front of them. There wasn’t much time for sentiment.

Soon, they came upon the river in question. It was running quite rapidly, but with a few Ice
Charms from the seven students, it was starting to freeze over.

“Kalazkos,” said Albus, with the others.

The spell from his wand dropped the area of the entire forest by about twenty degrees in the blink
of an eye; the entire river froze solid so quickly and completely that the ice wasn’t even slipperly
when they stepped on it – there was no water on the surface to make it slick, because it was all
frozen.

“Merlin’s manhood, that knife works wonders,” said James, shaking his head in disbelief. “It
would have really helped if we hadn’t sliced up our hands for nothing…”

“Sorry,” said Albus.
“Hey, you don’t know how the knife works, no need to apologize. We’ll have to beat the secrets out of Swait when we get back.”

That was the mindset he had to keep up.

*When* they got back.

Not *if* they got back. It wasn’t a question.

James threw a hand across Albus’s chest at the same time that Gavin threw a hand across Marco’s; apparently their Supersensory Charms had picked up on something.

“*Protego!*” yelled James suddenly.

At that moment, a Dirt Piranha – a horrible, fat little worm-snake the exact color of the dirt – leapt at them from the other side of the river. It crashed into James’s swift Shield Charm and landed on the ice below, hopping around in agony until it reached the soil again; it dug straight down and disappeared.

“Oh, crap,” said Alec, his legs starting to shake. “Dirt Piranhas…”

“The hell was that?” yelped Marco.

“A Suttirfiujit,” said James. “Dirt Pi–”

“No, Gavin, what the hell was that?!”

“I was putting a hand across your chest to stop you from moving forward into the path of the Sut,” said Gavin. “What did you think I was doing?”

“You didn’t have to cop that much of a feel!”

“Oh, Lord, not this again…”

“Marco, he is not trying to seduce you,” sighed James. “Get over yourself. You’re way too ugly for a beau like Gavin.”

“I’m not trying to seduce anyone!” complained Gavin.

“Then stop sliding your hand over my nipples at every given chance!” retorted Marco.

“Fine, I’ll let the Suts eat you alive next time!”

“Marco, the homophobes are always the closeted gays,” said James. “You sure you’re not just upset because you don’t want to admit you liked it?”

As Marco fumed, Barry bumped his elbow into Aidan’s side. “What’s the matter with him?” he asked quietly, jabbing a thumb at Alec, who was looking ready to lie down and curl up in a fetal position.

“Dirt Piranhas were his boggart,” replied Aidan.

“Oh, that sucks,” said Barry. “Hey, Marco, what’s your boggart? Gavin in his underwear?”

“If you two don’t stop your little lovers’ quarrel, I’m going to slip you both Amortentia when you least expect it,” said James. “We get it! You’re both straight! Are we ready to keep walking?”
Right after James finished, he, Barry, Gavin, and Marco all looked simultaneously behind the group. Albus shivered; this couldn’t be good. What had their Supersensory Charms picked up on now?

“Oh, shit,” whispered James. “I knew I should have checked the map before we took any detours. We’re… we’ve come a little too close to the nest…”

Albus looked down to see a little spider scurrying across his shoe.

“Run,” said James, nodding and turning; he sprinted down the frozen river, and the six others followed close behind him.

Albus’s footing wasn’t strong on the ice; he made sure to keep freezing it with the Ice Charm more as they ran, to keep it cold enough that it wouldn’t become slick.

“You got this, little brother?” asked James, looking over his shoulder.

“I got this,” said Albus, running in front, taking the lead so he could cast *Kalazkos* easier.

“Oh, good,” said James, sounding like he was straining to keep his voice steady. “Don’t look back.”

“Don’t look back? Why–”

As he asked, Albus made the atrocious decision to look back, and what he saw in the distance was the rotting, eight-legged nightmare of a Fokii Acromantula, chasing them down with its pincers gnashing together in hungry anticipation.

It appeared to be gaining on them.
The Confrontation

Albus turned his head back to the frozen path ahead of him. As soon as he wasn’t looking directly at the Fokii, it disappeared from his vision.

“Expecto Patronum!” shouted James, his silver tuatara making a reappearance with them.

Albus raised his wand to join his brother; he and James were the only members of their group who could cast Patronuses. “Expecto Patronum!” he shouted.

With the power of the knife’s cut flooding his body, three separate Patronuses sailed out of his wand; the coyotes ran back to join the tuatara. The Fokii was squealing in agony, but still pursuing them doggedly.

“Kalazkos!” yelled Albus, freezing more of the river. “Is it slowing down?”

“No – if anything, it sped up!” yelled Barry.

He looked to either side; the sky was beginning to brighten in anticipation of sunrise, and little Stingwood roots were poking out of the ground on either side.

“Oh, God,” said Aidan. “If we’re still on this river when the sun rises – the Stingwood roots are going to notice our shadows and start following us!”

“Stingwood!” said James, looking like he had an idea. “If I shoot a spell that injures the Stingwood back there, then it’ll throw its roots really far out of the ground and start flailing around! It’ll sting the Fokii!”

“We can’t do that!” yelled Aidan quickly. “Stingwood sends a signal to all other trees in the area that cause them to do the same – the ones next to us would start attacking us too!”

Albus looked back; the Fokii was only about a hundred feet, and gaining with alarming speed.

They ran into a small valley; the river ran between steep hills on either side. The ground was still covered in little Stingwood roots. There was no escape in sight.

“What is that in the distance?” yelled Marco.

Up ahead, there was something gray sitting in the middle of the river. It looked like a stone wall out of nowhere. The river was damming up at the site and spilling to either side, but the roots were still visible over the river’s changed direction. There was nowhere to run now.

“It’s a Warkabull,” said Barry. “Shit! It’s just sitting there at our only escape!”

“Jump over it!” shouted Alec. “With Salimotor?”

“No!” yelled Albus. “The Warkabull will hunt you down endlessly if you cross the barrier made by its body – it won’t stop until either it’s dead or we’re dead!”

“The latter would happen anyway!” yelled Aidan. “It’s our only shot!”

“What is that noise?” shouted Gavin.

Their heads simultaneously turned to the left; down the hill, crushing every tree in its path like a
steamroller, was one super-large rolling tree. It was traveling at a phenomenal rate, knocking down and decimating the forest; it was headed for the river.

“Verdusthorn – they roll towards water!” yelled James. “Speed up, everyone!”

“Don’t use Salimotor!” yelled Albus, looking around. “There’s Verdusthorn roots on the other side of the Warkabull that are already flailing and we wouldn’t survive!”

“We’ll just have to hunker down next to the Warkabull with Protego!” said James.

The group picked up the pace as much as possible, sprinting towards the Warkabull. The Verdusthorn was causing damage to the Stingwood roots, and the ones nearest were starting to flail. The Verdusthorn was almost to the river, and it was about to roll right in between them and the Warkabull – and Albus could hear that the Fokii was almost upon them – if they ran into the Verdusthorn, the thorns would slice them open like confetti, and if they stopped, they’d be eaten alive, and if neither happened, the Stingwood roots would slice them thinner than parchment–

Putting on a last burst of speed, they outran the Verdusthorn by inches. Alec gave a cry of fright and tripped on the ice; he stumbled and fell but slid the rest of the way until he knocked into the Warkabull. The Verdusthorn hit a strong tree and turned vertically, pausing for long enough to allow them to pass before it crashed down on the other side, and then all of them were secure between the Verdusthorn trunk and the Warkabull’s stone-wall-like head. The Fokii Acromantula ran headlong into the Verdusthorn; as it was about to climb over the gigantic tree, and just as James was about to cast a feeble Protego to shield them, the Stingwood roots began lashing out and striking the Fokii. Two of its eight legs snapped at the contact; the Patronuses were still following the Fokii, but once the Stingwood roots hit the creature, it crumpled to the ground and remained still. The combined whipping of the roots with the searing light of the Patronus was destroying the Fokii quickly; meanwhile, Albus and James and their friends were sheltered in between a large tree trunk and a giant stone wall, both of which were providing impenetrable defense against the Stingwood roots. They were safe, for now.

“The improbability of what just happened is ridiculous,” said Aidan, shaking his head as the Fokii dropped unconscious to the ground. The roots from trees on both sides of the river were wrapped around it, dragging it in both directions until the carcass split in half and was engulfed into the trunks of two Stingwood trees.

“Or, someone’s watching us,” said Barry, “and doesn’t want us to die.”

The treetops bent in the wind, swaying as they let the silence ring.

“That’s ridiculous,” said Alec. “You think Dismiusa is protecting us on this trip? She’s been trying to invade the castle this whole time. Why would she want us to survive out here?”

“Maybe she wants to find out why we’re out here,” said Albus.

“The prophecy said a great evil was rising at Hogwarts,” said James. “If Dismiusa was evil, she’d want us dead.”

“Or interrogated,” said Aidan.

“It doesn’t matter why it happened,” said James. “The Stingwood roots have stopped flipping out. Let’s see if there’s a way around the Warkabull.”

“Of course there is,” said Barry. “We jump over it. Salimotor.”
“We can’t jump over it – it’ll be furious and it’ll charge us down,” said James.

“No, it won’t,” said Barry. “Not after the Stingwood roots have just been poisoning it. The stone wall on its head is impenetrable, but the roots have been stinging it from the back, too, which isn’t as impenetrable. It’s full of neurotoxins that render it immobile, so there’s no way it’s chasing us. I’d even say it’s probably dead already.”

“Oh, right,” said Alec. “Remember how bad Mia got when one of Professor Longbottom’s baby Stingwood plants stung her? And that was just a baby that wasn’t supposed to start hunting at its age anyway. I know Mia’s not the size of a Warkabull, but that was a lot of stinging roots swinging around just now.”

“Okay,” said James. “Are you sure?”

“Only one way to find out,” said Barry. “I’ll jump first.”

“No, I will!” shouted Gavin and Marco at the same time.

“No, I’m going to,” said Barry. “My suggestion – my plan – I go first. Besides, you two should never be separated… you’re so deeply in love with each other. Salimotor!”

Before Gavin or Marco could protest Barry’s actions or their sexualities, Barry was bounding over the Warkabull. He landed on the other side, and there wasn’t a noise from the creature.

“All right, I’d say it’s safe,” said Barry.

One by one, they leapt over the towering Warkabull. The stone wall was at least fifteen feet high, and each of them was just barely making it over. When it was Albus’s turn, however, he again neglected to remember the power he was dealing with, and he rocketed so far into the sky that he entangled himself in the branches of the canopy.

“Holy Merlin, Albus!” yelled Alec. “Are you all right?”

“Y-Yeah,” said Albus, securing his footing. “I’ll just…”

He had been about to say “I’ll just drop down,” but then he looked down and realized that he was two hundred feet in the air, or more.

“I’ll just stay up here,” he said, his arms and legs feeling very limp all of a sudden.

“That’s okay,” yelled Aidan. “Stingwood is harmless above the ground. It’s only when you’re near the roots that you have to worry. You’re safe up there if you want to stay.”

“I don’t know if I can move between the trees very easily,” said Albus. “I’m – I’m going to have to come down.”

“How?” yelled Alec.

“Cushioning Charm,” said Albus. “With the cuts from Swait’s knife, it should work just as well as the Jumping Charm I just did…”

“I have a better idea,” said James. “Elonglua!”

One of the branches near Albus was struck by James’s spell; it slowly grew in length until it was about a hundred feet long. James used the spell again, and it elongated further, until it was so heavy that it sagged almost vertically, touching the icy river below.
“Can you slide down?” asked James.

“I bet Marco wants to cast *Elonglua* on Gavin’s—”

“ENOUGH,” yelled Marco, cutting Barry off before he finished.

“All right,” said Albus. “I’m… ready.”

He was most certainly not ready. He was so far off the ground he could barely distinguish his friends from one another. It was one of the most terrifying feelings of his life. Nevertheless, he had to do what needed to be done.

He grabbed the part of the branch that was closest to him and slid down until his feet hit another smaller branch sticking out below. He shifted his stance and then slid down another five feet until he hit another branch. He kept doing this sliding down a few feet at a time, until thirty feet from the ground, his feet slid off the branch he was trying to land on, and feet flying, he slid down a few more feet before losing his grip and falling so hard on his rear end that there were cracks spreading in the ice all directions from where he landed.

“Ow,” he said simply, rubbing his backside.

“Is your arse okay, Al?” asked James worriedly.

“Marco’s arse won’t be,” said Barry, “after Gavin—”

“FOR SHIT’S SAKE, BARRY!” interjected Gavin.

“I’m fine,” said Albus, getting up. “I’ll walk it off.”

“You sure?”

“Positive.”

“Are you able to run?”

“If a creature starts chasing us again,” said Albus. “I can just rocket up into the treetops…”

“Good point,” said James. “Just make sure you don’t miss the branches and fall.”

“Good point,” repeated Albus. “Anyway, let’s keep going. The people back in the castle might be waking up soon, and if they haven’t already noticed we’re gone, they’re going to notice soon… we have to make sure they don’t find us and take us back.”

“Look,” said Alec, pointing ahead. “The Stingwoods are thinning out.”

They had been walking along the river for almost a half hour, and the sun (though they couldn’t directly see it) had started to rise. The Stingwood roots were poking about a foot out of the ground. Ahead, though, the concentration of Stingwoods looked thinner. The concentration of trees overall looked thinner, and some light was coming through.

“That’s a relief,” said Gavin. “What are they? Verdusthorns or Dugroots?”

“They’re Verdusthorns,” said Aidan, peering closer. “As far as I can tell.”

“How do you tell, anyway?”
“Verdusthorn has no branches, just a main trunk,” said Barry. “There’s only a little cluster of leaves at the top. Dugroot and Stingwood look pretty similar, but obviously Stingwood has the roots.”

“And Magmarbor is bright red, so that shouldn’t be difficult to spot,” said James. “It also won’t be difficult to avoid, which is good.”

“So, can we get off of the river once we get to the Verdusthorn clusters?” asked Marco. “Or should we stay on the river just to be safe?”

“To be safe, I’d say we should stay on the river a little longer,” said Barry, looking at the group’s map of the forest. “We deviated a lot from our intended route in order to follow the river through the Stingwoods, but the river is curving the other way now and we’re starting to correct our own path. I wouldn’t take the risk yet of stepping off the river… not until we have to.”

“We would still have to cast Duro, right?” asked Alec. “Even though they aren’t Dugroots?”

“Right,” said Aidan, “because there might be Hellhunters or Dirt Piranhas, so we still wouldn’t want to be walking on soft soil.”

“Dirt Piranhas,” said Alec, shivering again at the mention.

Five more minutes went by, and then, when they started to get deeper into Verdusthorn territory, the river took a sharp turn to the left.

“Okay, here’s where we should leave the river,” said Barry. “Otherwise we’d be going pretty far off the path. Albus, just cast us another super-powered Duro, and nobody touch a tree or cast a spell anywhere near one… or you’ll literally kill us all…”

“Duro,” said Albus, directing his wand at the ground near the river bend.

As the ground solidified, it made a sound that was very reminiscent of the cracking sound of ice, and everyone looked down to make sure the ice on the river wasn’t giving in. They all stepped off one by one onto the solid ground.

“Any Stingwoods at all over here?” said James, looking around.

“We’ll keep eyes out for them,” said Barry. “If there were, we’d see them flailing around, because they wouldn’t take kindly to the ground solidifying.”

“It won’t affect the Verdusthorns, will it?” asked Albus.

“No, just the Stingwood, because its roots are so sensitive,” said Barry. “And maybe the Magmarbor, since it just goes off whenever anything stresses it out. But we don’t have to worry about Dugroots, since they’re powerless when we–”

“Something coming,” said James, suddenly alert.

“Yeah,” said Barry. “Whoa – it’s moving fast–”

“Almost on top of us,” said James, raising his wand. “Get ready for Shield Charms if–”

A dreadful noise ripped across their ears; all seven of them dropped to the ground in sudden pain. It was like every awful, annoying sound he’d ever heard combined into a rattle. There was a Clattarang nearby, screaming its head off – the sound was piercing straight through the hands that
Albus had pressed to his ears; he squirmed on the ground in agony, and stars danced across his eyes as a wave of delirium started in.

How long could someone listen without losing their mind? About a minute, unfiltered... they were covering their ears, but the Clattarang was so close that it had drastically affected them almost immediately. He had to cool the air – Clattarangs slept at night, which was why they hadn’t seen one until sunrise, and the creatures calmed down if the air was cooler because they would think it was turning to night. But how many more would they encounter? And what spell could he cast to cool the air? It was getting extremely hard to think with the sound... the worst it would do was nibble his hair and fingernails, but there was no telling what else might find them if they were unconscious.

And then, suddenly, it completely stopped. The following silence was intense. Who had pulled off the spell?

“Who cooled the air for us?” asked Albus, standing up, and then he suddenly realized that he couldn’t hear his own voice, either.

He glanced around. Not twenty feet away, there was a Clattarang rattling its lampshade-shaped head back and forth. It looked like it was still making sounds, though it had stopped advancing on them... but they couldn’t hear it.

It had to be a Vulupus spotting them.

A burning light behind him told him that James was writing words in the air again; he turned to see that James had written, “Don’t look for the Vulupus.”

That made sense – if they saw it and the Clattarang saw it, then they would start hearing the Clattarang again.

“Let’s just keep moving,” wrote James, “and run out of the Vulupus’s sight. If it follows, we’ll still be immune to the rattle; if it stays here, the Clattarang stays mute.”

Albus nodded. James signed out three, two, one with his fingers and then they sprinted through the trees, trying not to hit any, lest they activate the Verdusthorns. Concentrating with all his might, James was casting Duro nonverbally as they ran, to make sure the Dirt Piranhas didn’t follow.

Barry was in front of him, giving him a thumbs-up before James ever cast Duro, which Albus suspected was to ensure that they didn’t aggravate any nearby Stingwood trees.

Albus still wasn’t used to the total lack of sound that came from the Vulupus’s gaze; it was an experience unlike any other. No matter where he was or what he was doing, there was always some background noise. Even when he was locked in the chamber under the school, there was still the sound of his breathing and heartbeat. It caused him panic worse than the sound of the Clattarang, though not as painful, and he was glad when he finally heard the slapping of their footsteps against the rock.

“Hope the Vulupus was hunting the Clattarang,” said Alec.

“It probably was,” said Aidan, clutching his chest as he tried to catch his breath. “Clattarangs have got to be... the easiest prey ever for Vulupi. Even if the Vulupus is spotted... it’s still deaf itself... so the Clattarang’s only defense doesn’t affect it... Clattarangs would be much easier prey than wizards... especially wizards who can cast nonverbal magic.”

“Who says school doesn’t teach you anything useful?” said James, grinning. He didn’t look as
winded, but then again, he was an athlete. “Professor Desulgon has been really grilling me on wandless magic. I can see why.”

Albus looked around. “I can see a few red trees now…”

“Yes, those would be Magmarbor,” said Barry. “Again, don’t touch.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Albus.

James cringed. “Shit!” he exclaimed. “Don’t relax yet. Something else – we must be getting near the center of the forest if we’re running into this many creatures.”

Then James suddenly disappeared.

“James?” blurted Albus, panicking slightly.

“What?” came James’s voice.

“What the–”

Albus felt inside his robes; he was still carrying the Cloak. What had James done, a Disillusionment Charm?

“I can’t see anybody!” yelled Alec.

Albus looked around and realized that he could only see Alec, out of their entire group. That meant…

“Oh, shoot, run,” said Aidan. “Run again. It’s an Ivvixen. Run, NOW!”

As they started running, Aidan continued. “If you see a creature looking like a tiger shaped like a table, attack it; it’s not very immune to magic and you may scare it away and return us to normal. If you see a Cravant, a red six-legged pointy-headed ox, run faster. Those are immune to magic, and we’ll probably be seeing them soon, since they usually travel with the Ivvixens.”

“Tacit,” said Albus.

“What’s a Tacit?” asked Alec.

“Auror terminology. It means–”

“WATCH OUT!” yelled James.

Albus ducked and glanced around quickly. Nothing was around.

“Supersensory Charm tells me something else is coming – more than one–”

“You made it sound like it was right freaking here!” yelled Albus.

“Well, sorry!”

There was a thumping in the distant forest, separate from their footsteps. It was growing louder.

“Crap,” said Barry. “We really can’t fight these things off. Everyone come together. James and Gavin and Marco and I can sense where you are in general because of our Supersensory Charms, but we can’t readily figure out your exact location. Don’t anybody go missing, now. If the
Cravants surround us... I’m not entirely sure what we can do. They’re resistant to magic, and the Ivvixens will be up in the trees if we try to climb, though I wouldn’t suggest climbing a Verdusthorn.”

“Set off a Verdusthorn near the Cravants?” suggested Alec.

“No,” said Aidan. “It won’t affect the Cravants through their thick hide, but the explosion would hit all the other Verdusthorn trees around it, and all those would go off – it would be a really horrible chain reaction.”

“Get ready for some Shield Charms if you hear Verdusthorns going off in the distance,” said James. “One might not do the trick, but all of us combined – especially Al with that knife’s power – might be able to stop it.”

“Here they are!” yelled Barry, and suddenly a group of red six-legged mammals were visible through the trees. They ran in an intercepting path, and when the boys changed running directions, so did the Cravants.

“They’re much faster than us!” yelled James. “Everyone – come together around Alec! Everyone use Shield Charms!”

The Cravants seemed to be headed directly for Alec. Albus recalled that they only attacked when the victim was solitary, which was why the Ivvixens followed the Cravants and turned all but one party member invisible. Once that one was dead, they’d single out someone else.

“Protego!” yelled Albus as the Cravants finally closed in.

The other six added their forces to the Shield Charm. The Cravants circled around the small group and started bashing their triangular heads against the Shield Charms, grunting and snorting as they pummeled the defenses. Keeping it up was a strain; there were eight separate Cravants relentlessly attacking, and even Albus’s extra strong Shield Charm had him buckling under the strain.

Then, suddenly, there was a series of awful howls. It was exactly what had happened right after the initial siege of the castle. The sound was from hell; it didn’t cause pain like the Clattarang rattle, but instead caused intense fear to boil up on the inside. Their legs buckled and their arms gave out from holding their Shield Charms. The group of seven hit the ground once more as the Shield Charms faded.

But rather than seize this opportunity, the Cravants instead turned tail and fled. Soon after, the Ivvixens must have fled also, because everyone returned to visibility.

“What was that howl?” asked Marco.

“It has to be Hellhunters,” whispered James.

“Oh, no,” said Aidan, clutching his head. “That would really not be good if we were found by Hellhunters... I really don’t know how we would deal with those... all of our plans just revolved around not getting found.”

“But how could they have tracked us?” asked Gavin, biting his fingernails. “We’ve been solidifying the ground behind us since the start!”

“They could have been following the trail of solid ground,” said Alec, slapping a hand against his forehead. “We didn’t think of that...”
Albus took a few steps back, but realized that he was stepping out of the range of the solid ground; he left a footprint. He stepped back onto the solid ground, but the footprint remained.

Staring at the footprint gave him an idea, though. His brain lit up, and the cogs started turning.

“Guys!” he said. “Follow me – run backwards!”


He watched Albus run backwards for a bit, and then his eyes widened.

“Because it looks like we’re leaving footprints going the opposite way,” he said. “The Hellhunters are smart enough to follow the solid ground, but they don’t know which way we were going. If they see footprints leading towards the solid ground, they’ll think we came from the other direction and they’ll think they should be following the other way!”

“Brilliant,” said James. “Absolutely brilliant! Walk backwards quickly, but make sure you don’t run into a tree. Everyone get moving, and quiet down from here on!”

They started off in the other direction. Albus led the way, but facing backwards, he was looking at the backs of everyone’s heads. He looked over his shoulder constantly to allow himself to navigate through the trees. Knowing that he and his friends were dead if he made a misstep made all of his senses incredibly sharp, and a few looks over his shoulder every once in a while were enough to let him know where to step.

“Protego!” shouted James.

A pair of Dirt Piranhas burst through the ground shortly after James’s Shield Charm, and they crashed into the shield and burrowed back into the ground.

“We’ve gone far enough and now there are Dirt Piranhas to worry about – use Duro, Al!”

“Duro!”

There was a crunch from below as the Dirt Piranhas tried to rocket out from under them but instead slammed into the rock that spread from Albus’s wand.

“Excellent work,” said James. “All right, everyone – we can walk forwards now. The Hellhunters will see enough of our footsteps that they’ll assume we were going in the other direction… hopefully.”

“There’s still something coming,” whined Barry, his legs shaking. “When is this menagerie going to end?”

“Good vocabulary,” said James. “But see the glow? This one isn’t dangerous.”

There was a soft glow coming from behind a tree in the distance.

“What is that?” whispered Aidan.

At remarkable speed, a dazzling silver unicorn darted past them at a distance of only fifty feet or so, and it disappeared in the other direction.

“That was beautiful and all,” said Alec, “but let’s get our arses in gear before the Hellhunters get our arses in their stomachs.”
“Well put,” said Aidan, and they started off at a swift pace again, solidifying the ground as they walked.

“More Magmarbors glow because their sap is so hot,” said Aidan, peering closely.

“No, that’s not it,” said Marco. “There’s a whiter glow.”

“I see what you mean,” said James. “What…”

They sped up slightly, and they came to what looked like a glass wall. Upon closing the distance, Albus realized that it was the same translucent crystal as had been blocking Dismiusa from her escape, and he gasped.

“It’s some sort of barrier,” said James. “Albus, get the knife… see if it can break through.”

“I’ve seen this before,” said Albus. “It was the wall in front of Dismiusa.”

He felt six pairs of eyes turn to him.

“The Fokii didn’t use the knife to break through,” he continued. “Dismiusa traced her finger along the wall, and it used my wand to trace the same barrier.”

“Maybe it didn’t know that the knife can unlock any barrier,” said James.

“But it knew the knife could unlock the door…”

“Can you remember the pattern she traced?” asked Alec.

“Definitely not all of it,” sighed Albus.

“Try it – maybe you’ll remember.”

“Try the knife first,” said James. “It’s a quick test and worth the try.”

Albus shrugged and took the knife from his pocket. He gripped it tightly and placed his thumb on the back of the handle, and pressed it slowly against the wall; he didn’t want to harm the blade if it didn’t work out, so he didn’t want to plunge it in like a killing strike.

And then, with a hiss like boiling steam, something began to melt.

Albus pulled the knife back with a yelp, and something hot was dripping off the end of the knife. He shook it off into the grass.

“Whoa,” said Aidan.

The knife wasn’t melting – it had been melting the crystal wall.

“It’s working,” said James. “Look – you made a hole. The wall isn’t as thick as it looks! Cut us a hole we can walk through. I… I can sense something on the other side now. With the Supersensory Charm.”

“I think Dismiusa is behind this,” said Albus.

“Well, duh,” said Alec. “Who else would be responsible?”

No one said anything for a moment.
“I think he means ‘behind this’ as in ‘standing behind it,’” said Barry. “Not as in ‘is the cause of.’ Though that’s almost certainly true too, as you said.”

“Oh,” said Alec.

“Go on, then, Albus,” said Aidan. “We didn’t come all this way just to stand awkwardly in front of the finish line.”

“Okay,” said Albus.

He pressed the knife back into the wall and started slicing it slowly.

The wall was melting, creaking sticky molten blobs that were aggregating and falling to the ground as he sliced. It was an effort, and the cut on his hand was burning as he moved the knife, but eventually he cut all the way to the ground. He started on the other side, and when he was finished, he cut along the ground; when he finished, the section of the wall he’d cut out fell flat onto the grass as he pulled his hand out from under the affected area, and there was a hole just large enough for them to climb through without touching the melted sides.

James leapt through first without saying a word; Albus followed close behind him, and the other five followed suit soon.

They were about to keep walking forward when a sound stopped them dead in their tracks.

“Interesting,” said a rough female voice. “So I didn’t have to use a wizard and his wand to breach the barrier.”

It took the collective group fifteen seconds for anyone to speak; it was James who spoke up first.

“Are… are you Dismiusa?”

Something shifted above their heads; Albus looked up and realized that there was a hammock of vines hanging above their heads. Someone was inside of it.

“Why are you using that name?” responded the ragged voice, sounding irked.

Albus tried to take a deep, calming breath. This wasn’t at all the voice he would have expected from a spirit of the forest. He expected a smooth, silky voice, if she talked at all and wasn’t just hell-bent on murdering them. This sounded like a voice that hadn’t been used in seven hundred years – but that made sense.

“It’s the name we were told was yours,” said James.

“It is the name used by the one who imprisoned me,” said the voice. “Do not call me by that name.”

“We are sorry,” said Albus carefully. “By what name shall we refer to you?”

“There will be no need for you to refer to me at all.”

Albus and James glanced at each other.

“Because you will be leaving shortly,” she said. “Most likely with your lives, but the chance diminishes the longer you stay.”

“Why are you attacking the castle?” asked James bluntly.
Albus tightened his grip on his wand.

“They imprisoned me.”

“No one in the castle now could have imprisoned you,” said James. “You’ve been there for seven hundred years. Please… don’t do this.”

Looking around, Albus realized that they were indeed in the same forest clearing to which James had led him in his second year. The serrated grass was still there, a few feet from where they stood. The blood stains on the surrounding trees were still noticeable.

The hammock was descending. It slowly turned vertically, and when it had almost reached the ground, a gathering of vines slithered from all directions and fashioned itself into a throne, with its back to the audience of seven. The woman sat on the throne of vines and continued not to look at them.

“You are brave,” said the woman. “But foolish. I have watched over your journey here for one purpose only: to tell you to leave.”

“Our journey here was for one purpose,” said James resolutely. “To tell you to leave Hogwarts. People are dying.”

“The boy who is now a Fokii,” said the woman, “was killed of his own accord. He wandered alone into the forest. This would have been his demise with or without me. And the boy murdered in the castle was killed by a man, not by the forest. This man carved his way into the barrier using a method I did not witness and cannot determine. Much like yourselves. Had I not witnessed your entry for myself, I would not have been able to understand how you entered. Had I known the knife had such power, I would not have allowed it to be taken. But my point is that I aim only for the deaths of the men and women who have imprisoned me. The faculty of Hogwarts.”

“You can’t kill them,” said James. “They’ve done nothing to you. They aren’t the ones who imprisoned you! Those people are probably long since dead!”

“Do not attempt to insert yourself into matters which you cannot possibly hope to understand. Once they are dead, I shall remove myself forever, I promise you that.”

“You can’t kill them,” said James. “None of them had any part in imprisoning you.”

“Not only did they imprison me, they are injuring me daily,” said the woman. “You could not possibly understand the connection I have with the natural forces. Every time they slay a tree, I feel pain. Imagine that you had fingers enumerable in the hundreds of thousands, but that ten of them were severed every day. The pain does not decrease with time.”

“They’re doing it because you’re trying to kill them,” said James. “Stop what you’re doing and we will stop.”

“Revenge is a necessary component in order to instruct.”

“You’re taking revenge on the wrong people!”

“The only reason you remain alive,” said the woman, a hand suddenly appearing to grip the side of the throne, “is because I sensed that you attempted to do as little damage to the forest as possible on your route here. But I cannot guarantee that your reprieve will linger.”

The hand gripping the side of the throne was green; it was not truly composed of fingers, but of
vines twisting around themselves, serving as a substitute for a hand. It was definitely the woman that Albus had inadvertently freed. But why didn’t she want herself to be called Dismiusa?

Perhaps it was the legend that had named her – and she had gone by a different name all her life.

“I do not have to explain myself to children,” she added. “I do not have to dictate to you why I must do what I must do.”

“You won’t get away with what you’re doing,” said James stoutly. “If you keep doing this, you won’t succeed, but you will regret it.”

The woman chuckled.

“Do you think you can overpower me?” she whispered. “Do you think you would win if we were to enter combat? I, who have dabbled in the Devoctrices?”

Albus’s stomach turned upside-down and inside-out.

“There is nothing that can best my power,” said the woman, and she slowly began to stand. “Nothing can overcome my abilities and the powers I have subjugated. I am past the reaches of death. My control is complete and my abilities are beyond calculation.”

James glanced at Albus, and down to the knife that Albus was holding.

Slowly, the woman stepped out from behind the throne.

She was wearing a tattered brown outfit and her skin was entirely green. Her hair was darker green, curling at the tips like the tendrils of vines, covering half of her face; her entire body seemed to have entered a plant state, if it ever was human at all.

She stared at them with one vividly violet eye. “I have seen the material of your least attainable dreams,” she said, “and I have mastered it. And finally I am free again. No one will control me, and everyone who attempts will swiftly die.”

She brushed the hair out of her face and her lips curled up in a smile.

“So you’d best not have any ideas of trying,” she said. “If I were you, I would leave before I break my code that I will only murder those of age inside the castle.”

Albus was hardly paying attention at this point. He was more possessed by her appearance. Petrified, he stared into Dismiusa’s eyes.

One purple.

And one blue.
Her face was round, her features were sharp. Her ears were ridged like leaves around the edges, and her veins were slightly green under her skin like vines. Her teeth were yellow and the inside of her mouth was storm-cloud gray rather than red. Small tendrils of plant were growing out of where some of her hair should have been, forming a crown around her head, and the rest of her dark green hair clashed with her pale green skin. And then there were the eyes: one blue, and one purple. Just like Mia Moon’s eyes, and just like the eyes of Litinia Darstary, the portrait of the Hogwarts Herbology teacher hanging in the History of Magic classroom, whom Rose had thought might be connected to the legend of Dismiusa. Alec was staring into the eyes as well, but the others weren’t seeming to notice.

“Those of age?” repeated James. “You’ll only be murdering ‘those of age?’ What happened to just murdering the faculty, and how do we know you won’t keep changing your mind after we leave and decide to kill everyone?”

“I won’t be changing my mind,” said Dismiusa. “Those of age have been helping destroy my beautiful forest, and my final decision is to execute all of them. After that, I will take down the barrier around the castle. The rest of the students will remain unharmed, excepting you if you refuse to leave… and even if I did change my mind, I’d like to see you try to do anything to stop me.”

“Well, I am of age,” said James, raising his wand. “So you’ll have to kill me, too.”

“I suppose I will,” said Dismiusa, tilting her head. “Perhaps the rest of you will finally leave once I take your life, and I can hang your body from the top of my wall as a warning to the others.”

Her throne of vines suddenly unraveled as the vines shot up into the air; Dismiusa grasped one of the vines with one hand and was pulled so far up into the trees they couldn’t see her anymore.

“Incendio!” shouted James.

A hoop of orange flames burst from his wand as he twirled it like a lasso; he slashed it up into the air and it sailed into the trees, igniting the tops of all of them.

“JAMES, WHAT THE BLOODY HELL?!?” yelled Barry, raising his own wand.

“Albus, help me!” shouted James, casting *Incendio* again. “The knife’s made your spells stronger!”

“You’re making her kind of mad!” yelled Aidan.

“*Expecto Patronum!*” yelled James, casting his Patronus into the air so that they could see better.

Just as he did so, a tendril of some sort of vine whipped out of the sharp grass in front of them and wrapped around James’s leg, pulling him into the grass.

“*Relashio!*”

Albus’s quick spell caused the vine, which he could now see was Devil’s Snare, to reject James, tossing him back towards the group as the vine snapped backwards. But his strengthened spell also caused the rest of the Devil’s Snare, which had been snaking through the grass about to strike, to rocket backwards through the air.
“Lot’s of Devil’s Snare – we have to run!” shouted Marco.

The group sprinted from the clearing, jumping back through the hole Albus cut in the wall. James was last to jump through; his legs were cut from being halfway pulled into the grass, and he looked like he was reluctant to leave. They continued their sprint away from the castle, and Albus cast *Duro* on the ground just to be sure.

“Did you see her eyes?” blurted Aidan; he apparently had noticed.

“Yes!” yelled Albus. “She has the same eyes as Litinia!”

“And Mia!” added Alec, looking utterly scarred by the revelation.

“Do you realize what this means?” shouted Aidan.

“My girlfriend is Dismiusa?!” bawled Alec, biting his nails.

“What do we do now?” roared James angrily.

“I don’t think we can fight her,” said Albus. “Not in the forest – she has every advantage! We should go back and see if Litinia knows anything!”

“Litinia ran away, though!” noted Aidan.

“Yes, but maybe we can convince her to come back if we shout at her portrait that there are lives at stake,” said Albus. “Litinia has a good heart. I don’t know what happened to her – or maybe Dismiusa isn’t even her, but an ancestor of hers – but if she knows something that might save the students and teachers of Hogwarts, we could probably get it out of her.”

“The Devil’s Snare is following us!” yelped Gavin.

The vines were coming at them, slithering along the ground, moving slightly faster than they were running.

A low growling could be heard in the distance.

“What is that other sound?” yelled Aidan, looking around.

“That’s… It sounds like…” Albus knew the sound, but he couldn’t put his finger on it…

And then two lights appeared between the trees to their right: something else was coming towards them.

“It sounds like… a car,” said Albus, finally realizing.

A rogue Ford Anglia, of a model that looked at least a quarter of a century old, covered in dents, mud streaks, and leaves in the doors and fender, was rumbling towards them. As it got closer, they could see that beneath all the dirt, it seemed to have once been turquoise.

“What in the name of Merlin’s most foul restroom trip is a car doing in the middle of the forest?!” blurted James.

“Why would Merlin name his most foul restroom trip?” commented Alec.

The car pulled up behind them and came right through the middle of their group; Aidan, Alec, and Albus were on the left and James, Barry, Gavin, and Marco were on the right of the car. All four
doors flew open.

“Shotgun!” yelled Alec, jumping in the passenger seat.

Albus looked back; the Devil’s Snare tendrils were almost upon them.

“I think it’s trying to help,” said Barry, jumping in the back. “We don’t have much choice!”

“I’ll drive,” said James, leaping in the driver’s seat.

Gavin and Marco jumped in the back with Barry. Aidan jumped in next, and Albus squeezed in next to him – but was surprised to find that the inside was rather roomy. Whatever nut-job had created this car had cast spells to make it more spacious on the inside.

As soon as they were all in, the doors closed and the car surged forward faster. They sped away from the Devil’s Snare, gaining ground; everyone inside the car began cheering.

Then the road became rocky; they were slamming forward into the ground, being lifted up in the air, and slowing down altogether. It felt like something under the ground was heaving upwards.

Albus looked out the smashed window; the trees around them were making their roots spin. The ground was carving out from under them as they traveled. They were traversing across Dugroots; they were going fast enough that the car wasn’t being trapped under the ground, but it was making the trip very bumpy and they were slowing down fast. There was a loud sound from inside the car that made Albus jump, but he focused on the road ahead and pulled out his wand.

“Duro!”

Albus’s spell solidified the ground in all directions, and they raced off on even ground again.

“Al, keep casting it every once in a while!” said James.

“Are you steering us back to the castle?” responded Albus.

“I’m not steering,” said James. “I tried to take the wheel just now and the car air-bagged me; I don’t think it wants me driving.”

“Hope it’ll drive us back to Hogwarts,” said Aidan tentatively.

“Oh, no, no, no,” said Barry, looking out his window.

“What now?” groaned Gavin, looking past Barry.

Albus looked behind the car, and immediately regretted it. Hellhunters were pursuing them now. The canines were black with red eyes and underbellies. They were shaped like dogs, but came in every size. Some were the size of Chihuahuas, some were the size of horses, and one of them was the size of a small house. The smaller ones were falling back, but the larger ones were keeping pace with the car, neither gaining nor losing ground. They looked determined to kill.

“Duro!” shouted Albus, solidifying the ground again.

“Not good!” roared James. “Okay, car, faster!”

He hit the gas pedal, but the car seemed to already be going at full speed.

“How freaking old is this thing? Faster, dammit!”
Through the window and all around the car, an ungodly wind erupted, sending the car flying right into the trunk of a tree. It landed sideways, and the five in the back all fell over each other, creating a pile on top of Albus; he let out a grunt as all the wind was knocked out of him. A Whirlwort, which had sucked them into the tree, bounded towards the car, but then lifted itself into the air and hovered away when it saw the Hellhunters bearing down quickly.

“No!” said James, casting a spell out of the top of the car; it hit a Hellhunter square in the face but did nothing.

“Gavin, if we die, I’m sorry!” wailed Marco. “I don’t hate you for being gay!”

Albus glanced up at the two, piled above him; they both looked panicked.

“Well, good, I suppose, because I’m not freaking gay!” retorted Gavin.

“Neither am I!” replied Marco.

At the same time, Gavin and Marco reached for each others’ faces and pulled themselves into a hard kiss. Then, simultaneously, they pulled away from each other, looking revolted, and together they gagged slightly.

“Oh, God, that was awful,” said Gavin.

“Never doing that again,” choked Marco.

The gigantic Hellhunter was the first to reach the car; it sank its teeth into the side and whipped its head around; the top of the car was torn off with a horrible metallic screech, and all seven boys tumbled out onto the rock below. In a heartbeat, they were surrounded by angry dogs.

“Al, jump into the trees,” said James. “You need to get back to Hogwarts.”

“I’m not leaving you,” said Albus, his heart racing as the circle of various-sized dogs closed around them, all of the creatures snarling in anticipation.

And then, there was a snarling from outside the circle, and suddenly a very different dog leapt into the scene.

An utterly enormous three-headed dog lunged at the largest Hellhunter; sinking all of its teeth into both of the shoulders and the neck. The Hellhunter howled in pain and tried to turn around to bite back, but the middle head turned its head with the jaw still locked around the Hellhunter’s neck, and there was a snapping sound as the neck broke. The two other heads reached down and ripped at the neck, tearing it open.

“Holy crap,” whispered Marco.

Abruptly, as if a switch had been flipped in their brains, the Hellhunters all turned on each other. They were fighting, tearing each other apart. In just seconds, the pack had decimated itself; only one dog remained, which limped into the woods alone. The three-headed dog was still feasting on its kill; it was even larger than the largest Hellhunter.

“We should move,” said James, glancing around at the carnage around him.

“Agreed,” said Albus.

“Not just because of what we see right now,” said James, gathering his footing and starting off at a
run again. “My Supersensory Charm is going off again.”

“Oh, Merlin, really?” moaned Alec.

“Going off like a bloody siren!” yelled Barry, hitting his head. “How many of them are there out there?!”

“Fokii, I think,” said James. “She’s sent an army.”

“What’s leading the army?!” yelped Alec, glancing over his shoulder.

Albus looked back; scanning the distance, he could see a hoard of creatures, but he could only see a portion of them at a time – whatever part he was looking at. It was definitely a swarm of Fokii, made up of all manners of creatures – Acromantulas, trolls, Cravants, Ivvixens, and even the Hellhunters that had just been killed. But something was at the front which could be seen no matter where he was looking. It wasn’t a Fokii, but it wasn’t a human, either. At first glance, it looked like Dismiusa, but it was mostly brown rather than green, and it didn’t have her flowing hair… What was he looking at?

“What are we even up against?!?” said Aidan. “Albus, not to pressure you or anything, but if it’s violent, you’re our best shot at fending it off!”

“Supra Stricata!” yelled Albus, pointing his wand backwards.

The Sealing Charm tore its way through the trees behind them. The effect of the spell was to bind the target against a flat object, like if the Body-Bind Curse also caused a person to stick to the nearest surface, but it was much harder to pull off; fewer wizards could adequately perform this charm than could cast a Patronus. With his magical upgrade from the knife, though, Albus decided to go for it. At the last moment, the strange figure ducked beneath the spell, disappearing into the earth. Albus’s spell kept traveling backwards and struck three Fokii, which smashed into the ground and were trampled by the rest of the hoard.

“What are we even up against?!” yelled Barry. “This thing wasn’t in any Dismiusa lore and we never saw anything like it when we patrolled the halls–”

Before he even finished his sentence, the figure burst from under the solid rock right in front of them.

This was definitely not Dismiusa – this was something else. The only resemblance it bore to Dismiusa was the fact that it seemed to be in the same not-quite-human state. The creature in front of them was wearing only an extremely ragged kilt-like garment. Almost its entire body was brown like soil, and its arms and legs were plated with rocks; its hands and feet and head were that of a human’s, but it looked like it had crystal fingernails and toenails, and crystal eyes. It didn’t have hair, but rather what looked like a sheet of metal.

With a swipe of its hand, the earth under Alec and Aidan heaved upwards, sending the two flying into the air; they crashed into trees and hit the ground. They were still in Dugroot territory, and the ground was still rock – what kind of power did this servant of Dismiusa possess?

“Stupefy!” yelled Albus, but a wall of rock rose up in front of Dismiusa’s servant; it blasted a large dent in the cliff, but didn’t break through.

The cliff shattered, and shards of rock were flying in their direction. One hit Albus full-force in the head, and he felt himself bleeding; stars were dancing around his eyes and there was a strange ringing in his ears. James shouted something, and the rocks stopped coming; Albus’s eyes focused
back together just in time to see the servant of Dismiusa leap onto the top of the cliff and stare down at James; suddenly, the rock underneath James opened up like the maw of a giant animal, and he was swallowed whole into the earth.

“NO!” shouted Albus as the gap closed over his brother. “NO – LET HIM GO!”

The Fokii were retreating. They apparently believed that their job had been completed. The servant of Dismiusa turned and ducked, diving back under the ground again, and it disappeared.

“NO! JAMES!” shouted Albus, running to where his brother had disappeared.

“Defodio!” shouted Barry, and a large scoop of the ground was carved out; he was trying to dig to James.

“DEFODIO!” shouted Albus.

A chunk of a thousand rocks totaling the size of a large house blasted out of the ground and smashed over several trees.

“James?” asked Barry, shaking as he looked into the gap; there was nothing there.

“JAMES!” screamed Albus.

“Whaaat?”

Albus whipped around; his brother had been scooped out with the rocks and was lying on the ground, twitching, under a large boulder.

“Oh – James! Sorry about that. Wingardium Leviosa!”

Albus’s charm caused the boulder to rocket into the sky. He still wasn’t used to his spells being so powerful.

James lifted himself up, brushing dirt off his arms, and coughed violently for a few seconds. “’M all right,” he choked.

“It knows you’re back out,” said Alec, pointing as he ran back over.

The servant of Dismiusa had stopped, its head turned back towards them.

At that same time, the boulder that Albus had shot into the air finally crashed back onto the ground several hundred feet away. When it did, there was an explosion that rocked the forest floor, and a wave of intense heat washed over them. A fire began burning less than fifty feet in the direction of the explosion, and it was already spreading towards them.

“Damn, that boulder must have hit a Magmarbor,” said Marco, staring at the fire.

The Fokii skidded to a halt after the explosion and changed direction, charging them down. Slowly the servant of Dismiusa turned around and started walking in their direction; it dove and disappeared under the rocks again.

“It could be anywhere now,” said James, sweating. “If we were only back by the river… we wouldn’t be on the ground and vulnerable…”

“Just use your Supersensory Charm,” said Albus, readying his wands, aiming them at the ground. “Tell me, as best as you can, when to fire a spell.”
“Okay,” said James. “But we’d better start running, too – we don’t want to be caught in the middle of all these Fokii, either!”

They started to run, but Aidan called out to them from the ground.

“Guys – I – I think my leg’s broken.”

Without another word, James ran over to Aidan and scooped him up in a swift motion. He ran with Aidan in his arms, surprisingly keeping pace with the rest of them.

“Oh, MERLIN, that hurts,” moaned Aidan.

“Pain is temporary, death is forever, suck it up,” grunted James through his teeth as he ran carrying Aidan. “At least you’re a scrawny little guy. Al, keep an eye on me as we run – I’ll give you a direction where that rock thing is coming from before I tell you when to strike.”

“Okay,” said Albus. “You got him?”

“I got him.”

The fire was spreading at almost the speed they were running; it was burning so hot that even outside of the fire’s reach, Albus’s skin was hurting. They were being chased by the fire and by the Fokii, and the servant of Dismiusa was somewhere under their feet.

“Al!” yelled James. “Everyone, stop running – that rock thing is in front of us and I think he’s digging a pit trap in our path.”

They stopped, looking back; the fire was closing in, and so were the Fokii.

“He’s coming up!” said James, dropping Aidan and pointing.

Albus raised both of his wands. “Supra Stricata Itero!”

The servant of Dismiusa burst forth almost directly under Albus, three feet from his face, with a metallic sword swinging at his neck.

Albus’s spells both hit it full force before the sword had a chance to strike; with a very solid slam, the servant was slammed into the ground and invisibly tethered there.

“Petrificus Totalus!” yelled Albus, just to be safe.

When his final spell struck the servant of Dismiusa, it disappeared. Rather, it dusted – it vanished, and a cloud of dust spread from where it had hit the ground.

“Where did it go?” yelped Gavin.

“No idea, stay alert,” said Barry. “But it vanished in my Supersensory senses.”

“Mine too,” said James, scooping Aidan back up again. “Sorry for dropping you.”

“They’re too close – leave me!” said Aidan.

“Oh, don’t even try that,” said James, heaving himself into a standing position and then starting to run again.

Albus looked back; the fire had slowed, but the Fokii were coming in strong.
His footsteps were suddenly softened, and he realized they were still in Dugroot territory, but he hadn’t solidified the ground in a while; they were on dirt again. The roots below them started to turn, trying to suck them under.

“Duro!” shouted Albus.

The crackling sound signified that the ground had been turned to rock. Albus whipped around upon hearing a pained squeal, and he saw a Dirt Piranha halfway out of the rock, struggling to free itself. It had been about to jump out at them, but was caught in the surface when it solidified. The Fokii ran past it just seconds after they did, trampling the poor little creature.

“They’re gonna catch up to us in seconds,” said Aidan. “James, drop me!”

“You can shut it now, Aidan, you should know I’m not going to drop you!” retorted James. “Just hang on, we’ll make it through this!”

“How?” cried Aidan, sending the first shivers of total despair down Albus’s spine.

Then they heard the sound of galloping.

The twanging of bows sounded from all directions. Centaurs appeared between the trees, holding bows and small white flowers with black stems – Moly.

The Moly-tipped arrows were being shot directly into the heart of each Fokii. Five centaurs raced in front of the group and formed a barrier, firing arrow after arrow so blindingly fast that their arms were barely visible as they worked. The entire swarm of Fokii were either downed or racing in the other direction in five seconds.

“So,” said the centaur Albus recognized as Firenze, trotting towards them sternly. “We meet again.”

“You saved our sorry arses yet again,” said Albus humbly. “Thank you.”

“ALBUS! JAMES!”

Albus turned at the familiar shout; Professor Longbottom and Professor Desulgon were closing in on them, too.

“Take these younglings out of the forest!” demanded Firenze. “This instant! How could you allow them into so dangerous a place?”

“We’re taking them out now,” said Professor Longbottom. “Dalton?”

“I’ll inform the rest,” said Professor Desulgon, waving his wands and silently producing two Patronuses, which flew in different directions. “Zayn is with Helio and Wes is with Paragost – right?”

“Yes,” said Professor Longbottom. “Boys, let’s get moving! James, why are you carrying Aidan – what happened to him?”

“Potentially broken leg,” said James.

Professor Longbottom conjured a stretcher and levitated Aidan onto it.

“Ow,” said Aidan simply.
“You’re lucky this is all that happened!” blurted Professor Longbottom. “And that,” he added, pointing to Albus’s copiously bleeding head. “I simply cannot believe we found you all alive.”

“And we’re making sure you’re staying that way,” continued Professor Desulgon. “You’re coming back with us, now!”

“Yes, please,” said Alec, stepping closer to their professors.

“Hurry up!” growled Firenze.

They followed Professor Longbottom and Professor Desulgon back towards the castle. When they reached the Stingwoods, Professor Desulgon cast some strange enchantment that left them without shadows, and Professor Longbottom cast a boardwalk made of light; they ran two feet above the roots without being noticed. They continued on this way until they got back among the Dugroots, which spoke to Albus that they were close to the castle again – the first steps they took outside the castle were in Dugroot territory. Professor Longbottom and Professor Desulgon cast Duro, and they kept running until, with a sigh of immense relief, Albus’s eyes fell upon a stone structure within the forest: Hogwarts. They were back.

“Nothing’s after us,” said James. “I think maybe the fire distracted her.”

“Her, who?” asked Professor Desulgon, turning his head to look at James.

“Er, well… Dismiusa.”

“You didn’t – run into her – did you?!”

“We kind of did.”

“WHAT?!”

“Get inside and then explain!” roared Professor Longbottom, casting a spell that opened the door for them.

They all skidded indoors breathlessly; Aidan’s stretcher stopped in the middle of the hallway and Albus almost ran into it. His legs finally gave out from under him, now that he was safe, and he willingly collapsed onto the floor.

“Why couldn’t we have gotten stretchers, too?” complained Alec, wiping his sweaty palms on his robes. “I’m exhausted…”

“You could have, if you’d just pretended your leg was broken,” said Barry.

“We are NOT joking around right now!” bellowed Professor Desulgon. “Do you realize the seriousness of what you’ve done?!”

“ALBUS!”

Rose had been hiding around the corner, waiting for their return. She ran at Albus and hugged him tightly; then she hugged James, Alec, and Aidan on his stretcher. She pulled away from Aidan and wiped her wet eyes. “I thought you weren’t going to come back,” she sobbed as Exo popped around the corner next.

“Why don’t I get a hug?” protested Barry, his arms on his hips.

“Stop kidding around, Barry,” warned Professor Longbottom.
“Why?” said Barry. “I’m thrilled to be alive right now, so I’m having fun.”

Uncle Charlie followed Exo, embracing his nephews after Exo did.

“Where in the bloody hell did you think you were going?” said Uncle Charlie quietly. “Did you think you were going to find Dismiusa?”

“They did,” said Professor Desulgon. “And they’re going to tell us all about it in a private classroom once the other four get back.”

“We need to talk to Litinia,” said Albus, getting to business as quickly as he could.

“Litinia?” said Uncle Charlie, taken aback. “What – why do you need to talk to her? And she’s gone.”

“Maybe I can get her back,” said Albus. “Please, let me try to call to her. We really need to talk to her.”

“Why?”

“I’ll let her tell you that,” said Albus. “I’m going to her portrait.”

He set off at a fast walk.

“Albus–”

“Let’s just follow him,” said Professor Longbottom, tugging at Professor Desulgon’s sleeve. “Albus, tell us what happened in the forest.”

“We saw Dismiusa,” he said. “She has Litinia’s eyes.”

“What?” gasped Professor Longbottom.

“Mia Moon’s eyes, too,” added Alec, tugging Aidan along on the stretcher. “We think Litinia might be Dismiusa.”

“Or one of her relatives,” said James. “Seeing as the eyes were passed all the way down to Mia, it could have been one of Litinia’s ancestors. Either way, Litinia might know something, and that might be why she ran away.”

They turned into the History of Magic classroom, and Albus walked straight to Litinia’s portrait.

“Litinia!” he barked. “Please, you have to come back. We need to talk to you.”

“Albus, we’ve been shouting at that portrait for weeks, in case Litinia knew something,” said Professor Longbottom. “It’s not going to work.”

“Litinia, it’s Albus Potter,” said Albus, ignoring his professor. “I know you probably don’t want to talk to us, but… please. I’ve been in the forest and I saw Dismiusa. Up close. I looked into her eyes.”

“You’re probably frightening her away worse,” sighed Professor Desulgon.

“We need to talk to you if you know anything at all. It’s a life-or-death situation. People have died, and more will die. If you can help us, if you can save some of these lives that would otherwise be lost, you need to come back, now.”
A spider monkey Patronus emerged through the wall and whizzed by his face. It settled in front of Professor Desulgon and Professor Longbottom.

“Paragost is injured,” said Professor Westerling’s voice. “A Clattarang momentarily disoriented us and we had a Verdusthorn explosion. Helio and Zayn are on their way over here, but in case we’re not back for a while, don’t worry; things are under control. We’ll be back soon, but you should seal the door again until we’re back, just in case it takes a little longer than expected for us to get him out of the forest.”

“Shit,” said Professor Desulgon. “No, I’m going out there too.”

“Wes didn’t ask you to go back out there, Dalton,” said Professor Longbottom. “The short version of that message was that they have it handled.”

“Short version, I don’t agree,” said Professor Desulgon. “I’ll see you back here.”

“You’re not going out alone!” said Professor Longbottom. “I understand your concern, but I think they have everything under control–”

“I’m not assuming that so quickly–”

“–so I’m coming with you. All of you, stay in this room until we’re back,” said Professor Longbottom.

The two professors charged back out the door.

“You hear that?” asked Albus, turning back to the portrait. “One of the professors almost just got killed by the forest. How can you just stay out of sight? How can you pretend not to be bothered by any of this?”

“Al, it’s not working,” said James.

“Can we talk about how these two snogged in the car ride back?” said Barry, jabbing a thumb at Marco and Gavin.

“Can we not?” said Marco, blushing.

“What would your husband say about this?” demanded Albus at the empty frame. “Did he kill you because you were killing people? Or was he just a horrible person who killed you for no reason – in that case, shouldn’t you pity the people who are being senselessly killed like your husband murdered you?”

“Don’t you dare,” said a soft voice from just outside the frame, “say a single word against Sidland Darstary.”

Albus fought back a smile as he realized he’d garnered a response from Litinia.

“So your husband was a virtuous man,” said Albus. “Then he must have had a really good reason for killing you. Litinia, please. There are lives on the line. Your descendant Mia. Everyone in this castle.”

“I know.”

Albus frowned. “Please. Come talk to us.”

“I can’t.”
“Why not?”

“I’ve done… Litinia did horrible things, didn’t she?”

“You can undo them now,” said Albus.

“No, I can’t,” said Litinia. “I’m just a painting of Litinia Darstary. I don’t know all the details of what happened, and I don’t know how to fix it. My husband – Litinia’s husband – painted me not to know the whole story.”

“What do you mean, ‘Litinia’s husband?’” asked Albus. “He’s your husband. You’re Litinia!”

“NO!” shrieked Litinia. “I’m – I’m just a portrait. I’m not real. I don’t exist.”

Albus grimaced. He hadn’t been expecting to deal with a semi-sentient object’s self-esteem. It was true; she wasn’t really Litinia. But if she could help them, even in some small measure… they had to access whatever information she held.

“Tell us what you know,” said Albus. “Anything will help.”

There was no response.

“Litinia!”

“I’M NOT LITINIA! WHATEVER LITINIA DID, I DIDN’T DO IT – I WAS PAINTED AFTER THE FACT! AND I HAVE NO RESPONSIBILITY FOR HER ACTIONS!”

“ANYONE WITH EVEN THE SMALLEST CHANCE OF HELPING US HAS TOTAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR HER ACTIONS!”

Litinia took another long silence before speaking.

“I’m… I’m just a painting.”

“Why do you think your husband painted you?” said Albus, slowly realizing it himself. “If you did such horrible things… why would he have immortalized you? Maybe he knew this day would come. Maybe he knew you could help everyone.”

He let Litinia think for a moment. Then, slowly, there was a creaking sound, like an opening door.

A tree in the background of the painting shifted; a door-shaped piece of the trunk swung open. It had been invisible – completely camouflaged against the rest of the tree. She had been hiding inside her own portrait the entire time.

“If you – if you really think I can help you,” she whispered, “and if you think you can accept my help… then I will try to help you.”


“I’m not Litinia.”

“You’re the closest thing.”

Litinia looked away.

“Tell us everything you know,” said Albus. “Start from wherever is relevant.”
Litinia nodded.

“My family owned a wandmaking shop,” she said. “I was immersed in wandlore and the study of magic from a young age. I watched the world develop. I watched as the practice became commonplace of burning entire forests to find suitable wand-wood trees. It made me upset. So I tried to find a way to replenish the forests of the world.”

*Does this have anything to do with the Devoctrices?* thought Albus inwardly.

“There was a spell known as the Superstorm,” said Litinia. “It allowed one control of all the natural forces. The trees, plants, many animals, and even the earth itself.”

*That would explain the earthen servant of Dismiusa, thought Albus. A manifestation of the same spell.*

“I don’t know everything that happened – I am sorry,” said Litinia. “But… delving into that kind of magic… seeking out that kind of power… It does things to a person. Even the best of us. I do not claim to be the best of us – perhaps that’s why it was so easy for me to – I’m sorry, I can’t do this.”

She turned and walked back towards her tree.

“Litinia, stop!” snapped James. “Whatever you did can be corrected–”

“I didn’t do it, and I wish to be a part of it no longer.”

“James, I can calm her down, just let me talk to her,” said Albus.

“Don’t you know what happened with Dumbledore?” said James.

Litinia paused.

“What?” she said softly.

“Litinia, Professor Dumbledore underwent the same sort of madness for power,” said James. “He only snapped out of it when his sister was killed. And he was the greatest wizard to ever live. Of course any other person wouldn’t be able to resist whatever madness you’re talking about!”

“The chaos in my head,” said Litinia, rubbing her forehead. “Even as a painting, it grows every time I think about what happened.”

“You can chase it away by confessing to us now,” said James.

“Is that true?” whispered Albus to James. “About Dumbledore?”

James nodded slowly.

“I was only painted based on my husband Sidland’s view of me,” said Litinia. “He took my best qualities and skipped the worst parts. But… I think I’ve picked up on what happened. My mind is similar to Litinia’s, so… I think I know exactly what she did. But I’m not sure.”

“It’d be a start,” said Albus. “And it would be our best guess.”

“I went mad,” said Litinia. “Bonkers. I think… I think I killed my family.”

Albus was relieved she was starting to use “I” again instead of denying that it was her.
“I think I killed anyone who was threatening the forests,” said Litinia. “And I housed the mulunctapoli in the Forbidden Forest, knowing they were being exterminated elsewhere. My husband knew what I had done, so he volunteered to exterminate the last of the mulunctapoli – inside the Forbidden Forest. But he really went in to kill me.”

“But you thought he succeeded,” said Albus.

“I did,” said Litinia. “Until you said that the Fokii had returned. I knew they couldn’t have come back on their own. It would have taken someone who knew how to recreate them. I had experimented with the Fokii previously… trying to make them more resilient, so that they would be better servants. I was accused of this crime, but the charges were dropped when I died.”

“But you didn’t die,” said Albus. “In the forest… you said you couldn’t die. You said, ‘I am past the reaches of death.’ What else did you do?”

Litinia shook her head.

“They charged me with experimenting with Dark Magic,” she said. “But they didn’t release all the details. I was experimenting with Fokii, so that’s what they told the people who asked. But I did more than that. I experimented with…”

“With what?” said James.

“I cannot describe this in front of children,” said Litinia. “I must tell Professor Wilcox in case they can stop me…”

“With Horcruxes?” asked James.

Litinia let out a little involuntary gasp.

“Yes,” she whispered.

“Oh my God,” breathed James.

“I think I know why I did it,” said Litinia. “My power was massive, but I knew that eventually I would die. I likely justified it to myself with the fact that living forever to protect nature was worth the price of one human life and the dive into Dark Magic which I thought was temporary… but as I said, I lost my mind. Sidland did not know about the Horcrux, but he knew about me. He slew my body, probably by pretending to still be in love with me and getting close. Thank goodness he did. But he probably committed suicide because he felt so awful about doing it. Even if I was evil by that point, absorbed into the chaos, we were still deeply in love… I don’t know if I would have been able to kill him if the same thing had happened to him.”

Albus’s head was swimming. He had heard about Horcruxes from his father, but he never thought anyone else but Voldemort could have gone so far as to create them.

“The mulunctapoli were supposed to bring me back to life,” said Litinia, “but Sidland slaughtered all of them. I should never have come back, but… someone was breeding the mulunctapoli since seven hundred years ago. I did not think it was possible, but I have to face facts. The only other possibility is that someone found me and purposefully channeled their magic into my body so that I would have enough power to manifest the mulunctapoli again. But no one would know to do that, unless they were convinced by the ridiculous stories of Dismiusa… even then, I can’t imagine it’s possible.”

“Professor Wilcox thinks the Sandbloods might have believed in Dismiusa,” said Albus. “They
might have had a wizard find you."

“We must inform Professor Wilcox that there is a Horcrux,” said Litinia. “I know where I would have hidden it… likely in the same place that I experimented with my Fokii. A chamber under the castle, accessible only by people who knew the correct patterns to trace on the wall guarding the entrance in the dungeons, and on the crystal shield surrounding the catacombs.”

“Oh, my God,” said Albus. “That’s where you were imprisoned. I’ve been there!”

Litinia looked startled. “I was imprisoned there?”

“You were behind the crystal wall,” said Albus. “You were trapped behind it, trying to escape. You said you were furious at the faculty of Hogwarts for having imprisoned you.”

Litinia smiled a little bit for the first time.

“Bolorant,” she whispered. “Surosch Bolorant… Headmaster at the time. He must have secured my body away, knowing that I might return. He always knew things about me that I didn’t want him to know. And do you know… he might have kept some mulunctapoli as well. He always said he wanted to study them. He could have been the one keeping them alive this whole time… and that could be why I’ve returned.”

“And Professor Bolorant sealing you away would explain why you were so angry at the staff of Hogwarts,” added Albus. “But if you were sealed away this whole time… how could anyone, including the mulunctapoli, find you to give their power to you?”

“The mulunctapoli do not need to be by my side to transfer their power into my body,” explained Litinia. “So as soon as they were released and started biting people – because the Sandbloods were using them as weapons to turn people into Squibs – I regained my power.”

“The final secrets,” said James, running a hand through his hair, marveling at the information they’d just received. “Or is there anything else? Anything else we should know about the Horcrux?”

“It is very likely that there is a barrier at the end of the castle catacombs,” said Litinia. “And only I could pass through it.”

“Only you?” said Albus, his heart sinking.

“I cast a spell of extraordinary power to guard the chambers, especially the last chamber at the end,” said Litinia. “But the effects of doing such magic – the power I developed, the barriers I enacted, and the Horcruxes I created – are physical as well as mental. That is what caused the change in my eyes – they were never like that until I started attempting the magic of myth.” She pointed at her left eye, which was purple.

“Really?” said Albus, surprised. “And that was passed down…?”

“My left eye changed color after so much of the legendary magic I was performing,” said Litinia. “I’ve heard it suggested that this happens because I was left-handed, and I performed all of the magic with my wand in my left hand. The violet tinge isn’t genetic, as science would have it explained long after I died… it’s a result of my dive into the powers of lore.”

“The Devoctrices?” said Albus.

Litinia didn’t hear him; with a groan, Albus recalled that the Fidelius Charm was still on him in
regards to the Devoctrices.

“But, only you can pass through the barrier?”

“Yes,” said Litinia. “Unfortunately, only I can traverse it.”

“The knife, Albus,” said James, snapping his fingers. “You could break through with the knife, couldn’t you?”

“No spell or object is anywhere near the strength of the Devoctrices,” said Litinia.

Albus’s eyes shot open.

“The spells whose abilities I entertained were beyond any magic attempted thus far, as much as I knew,” said Litinia. “I tried to loosely base my theories on legends of the Natural Sprites. Pyron, the deity of fire, was formed by the three Natural Sprites, named Terra, Mara, and Aether, controlling earth, water, and air, respectively. The story is bogus, but the ideas come from something very real: the elements can be controlled. I was unable to successfully complete the spell in its intended entirety… but I gained control over the earth, and its bounties. In essence, I became a spirit.”

“A forest spirit,” said Albus. “A deity. With Deimancy – the magic presumed to be of the gods.”

“Yes. Though Deimancy suggests that a higher power is directly involved… this spell actually had a name. It was the Superstorm Devoctrix.”

“Let’s get back to the serious problem of the Horcruxes,” said James, dismissing the tangent of the conversation just when it was getting interesting, and Albus knew he couldn’t bring it back because of the Fidelius Charm. “How are we going to get to it?”

“You will have to find a way to trick me into bringing the Horcrux outside of the barrier,” said Litinia, grimacing. “That won’t be easy. I don’t know if that will even be possible. The only other way to break the barrier would be to kill me, but of course, that can’t be done until the Horcrux is destroyed, which is behind the barrier.”

“You would never willingly take the Horcrux out from behind the barrier,” agreed Albus. “But… what about Mia Moon?”

“Who – the girl with my eyes?” asked Litinia, startled again.

“Yes,” said Albus. “If she really is your descendant – would she be able to cross the barrier and bring back the Horcrux?”

Alec gawked as Litinia gave it some thought.

“If she has my eyes,” said Litinia carefully, “she might… She might just carry the ability to pass through.”

“If it’s the only shot we’ve got, we have to take it,” said James. “Alec, that’s your girlfriend, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” whimpered Alec.

“Do you think you could convince her to come with us under the school?”

Alec shrugged.
“You’re going to have to try,” said James. “This is the only shot we’ve got. We’ll try the knife first, but if that doesn’t work, Mia is going to have to get the Horcrux for us. We’ll have to bring her along.”

“But surely you’re not going down there alone?” said Litinia. “We must inform Professor Wilcox—”

“There was a prophecy,” said James. “Only we can stop you.”

“A prophecy?” said Litinia, her eyes widening.

“Yes. Only Albus or I can do it,” he continued. “Or both of us. The point is, if Wilcox finds out about this, he’ll try to stop us from going. We can’t tell him. Do you understand?”

“I understand better than you think,” said Litinia, eyes glinting mysteriously, and Albus wondered if they really had been told the final secrets.
“And that,” finished James dramatically, “is what a Horcrux is.”

Barry, Gavin, Marco, Exo, Aidan, and Alec all stared at James, mouths open, eyes gaping. Albus and Rose, of course, had been told by their parents, but hearing it retold still gave them chills.

“So that’s why Voldemort couldn’t die,” said Barry.

“Exactly,” said James. “And it’s why Dismiusa won’t be able to die until we get rid of the Horcrux. Mia is our only chance.”

“Wait,” said Aidan. “Kalina – Mia’s sister – does she have the same eyes?”

“No,” said Alec. “Kalina and Mavis are only Mia’s half-sisters. Their father remarried Mia’s mother and Mia’s mother gave her the eyes.”

“Shoot,” said Aidan. “Not that I want to put anyone in that dangerous of a position, but Kalina’s got two more years of experience than Mia…”

“Mia will be fine,” said James. “We just need to convince her to come with us… and if she says no, we’re going to have to… er… kidnap her.”

“We’re going to kidnap my girlfriend?” whined Alec, biting a fingernail.

“And we need to find a way to destroy the Horcrux,” said James. “Fast.”

“We need to get Professor Longbottom’s sword,” said Albus, recalling how his father and uncle destroyed Horcruxes. “The sword of Gryffindor!”

“Oh?” said James, arching an eyebrow high. “And what exactly are we going to tell Neville – that we need to borrow it to cut firewood?”

“A basilisk fang, then,” said Aidan. “Didn’t you say those could destroy Horcruxes?”

“Well, yes,” said James, “but there’s a few problems… One, the basilisk venom is dried out by now – it doesn’t last more than twenty-five years after the creature’s death – and two, the fangs are attached to a living skeleton sliding around the Hogwarts pipes.”

“Those pipes aren’t connected to Litinia’s chambers under the castle, are they?” gulped Alec.

“We might have to prepare for that possibility,” said James.

“We haven’t learned how to kill undead basilisks in Defense Against the Dark Arts yet,” said Alec timidly.

“You’ll have to learn on the fly,” said James, shrugging.

“Professor Longbottom’s sword is sitting on the wall in his office, isn’t it?” asked Alec hopefully. “Maybe we could just steal it.”

“He’s told me it’s a fake,” said James. “The location of the real one is a secret.”

“Why do we need to keep it a secret?” asked Rose.
“There’s only so many ways to destroy a Horcrux,” said James. “The Sword of Gryffindor is the easiest method… the most accessible and the most controllable. So naturally, if there was anyone around who made a Horcrux and didn’t want anyone to destroy it, they would try to steal the sword so that no one else could use it. That’s why Wilcox wouldn’t let Neville keep it out in the open in his office. They hid it away and put some protections on it – only Dad and a few others know where it is.”

“Remember your father’s story about the basilisk, Albus?” said Rose. “My dad used to tell that story, too. Remember how he beat it?”

“Yeah, Fawkes came in, but we don’t have a phoenix,” said Albus. “And Fawkes delivered…”

“The Sorting Hat!” finished James excitedly, just as Albus reached the same conclusion. “We can pull the sword out of the Sorting Hat!”

“And turn it into a ‘Sword-ing’ Hat!” exclaimed Alec.

Aidan punched him in the arm.

“Let’s go,” said James. “We really can’t waste any time.”

He turned to the door just as it opened.

Wilcox hurried in. Professor Desulgon and Professor Longbottom followed. Albus glanced back at Litinia’s portrait, but she had concealed herself within the tree again, respecting their wishes to handle it on their own. He hoped she wouldn’t burst out and tell Wilcox the truth.

“Neville and Dalton tell me you’ve spoken with her,” said Wilcox, nervously drumming his wand against his leg. “With Dismiusa. What did she say? What does she want?”

“She still blames Hogwarts for imprisoning her, even though it was seven hundred years ago,” said James, shaking his head. “She wants to kill everyone of age in the castle.”

“What?”

“Everyone of age,” said James. “She wants to kill all of us–”

“No, before that – about being imprisoned?”

“She said that she was intent on killing everyone because she was mad at the faculty of Hogwarts for imprisoning her,” said James. “She didn’t elaborate, but it didn’t make much sense anyway – no one who imprisoned her would be alive today.”

“I see,” said Wilcox. “What else?”

“She attacked us and we left,” said James impatiently. “That’s all and there’s nothing else to say.”

“No, you’re going to give us the entire story!” said Wilcox. “Everything, from the beginning – from when you left the castle. If there’s anything in your story that might assist us in our fight–”

“–then I would have already said it,” interrupted James. “I’m not stupid! If something important had happened I would have told you, but all we did was fight forest creatures and run in every direction! There’s nothing more to the story!”

“Why are you so impatient to get out of here?” demanded Wilcox. “What’s keeping you from staying here and giving us every detail? Did you make some pressing appointment while you were
in the forest? A tea date with a mulunctapol? You’re staying here until you give me the whole—”

“I WANT TO SEE MY SISTER!” blurted James.

Wilcox hesitated.

Professor Longbottom put a hand on Wilcox’s shoulder. “Easy, Helio,” he said. “They can explain to us later. Right now we’re far more at risk for an invasion, I would think… based on the number of people who just disturbed the forest who are now within our walls… so we should go set up our defenses as high as possible. Just in case the forest comes looking for the people it failed to kill.”

“Very well,” said Wilcox stiffly. “Get them back to the hospital wing and make sure they stay there this time.”

“Will do,” said Professor Longbottom. “Everyone, come on. Lily is still there, James, so don’t worry. You’ll see her soon.”

He escorted them out of the classroom, guiding them towards the hospital wing.

Albus looked back at Professor Desulgon, leaving with Wilcox. Later, he needed to remember to ask Professor Desulgon about the Superstorm Devoctrix. He had only heard of one Devoctrix before – the Darkriver Devoctrix, mentioned by Exo, which was the spell theoretically capable of killing all Muggles. He hadn’t known there were more, which had been why he was concerned that Professor Desulgon was interested in such a spell. Now that Litinia had mentioned the Superstorm Devoctrix, he was getting a feeling there were many more. Maybe, if he mentioned the Superstorm Devoctrix to Professor Desulgon, he could get more information to slip, even if Professor Desulgon refused to hold an actual conversation about it.

No matter the situation, Albus consistently found himself curious – insatiable for information that he didn’t know. Maybe he should have been in Ravenclaw.

But he was trying to be sneaky about worming the information out of one of his professors. Perhaps he should have been in Slytherin.

But no, he was now in the middle of trying to slay an extremely powerful forest spirit in order to save his friends and everyone in the school, accepting the fact that he might die in the process. He was definitely a Gryffindor.

Professor Longbottom looked back at Aidan and Alec.

“Shouldn’t you two get back to your own Houses?” he said.

“Alone?” scoffed Aidan. “I’m not going back without a teacher.”

Professor Longbottom sighed. “Okay. I’ll take you two back after I…” He sighed.

“What?” asked Alec.

“I can’t leave them alone in there,” said Professor Longbottom.

“You’re going to keep a supervisor in there at all times?” asked Aidan. “What if there’s a siege drill? Are you going to have someone babysitting the Potters instead of helping fight?”

Professor Longbottom shook his head. “You two are going to stay with me in the hospital wing with the Gryffindors until we figure out what to do with you. You two are liabilities, too – you left
“Yeah, and we’re sure as hell not going to leave again,” said Alec. “Why do you think we’d be trying to escape? The forest was trying to kill us when we left! We’re not going back out there!”

Professor Longbottom nodded. “Well, that would make sense,” he said. “But you left the castle in the first place, which makes no sense, so I’m not judging you by how much sense your actions might make. I still think there’s something you aren’t telling us, but I just can’t fathom why you wouldn’t be telling us.”

Professor Longbottom opened the door to the hospital wing, and the whole of Gryffindor gasped when Albus and James walked back in.

Lily squealed and ran to her brothers. She nearly bowled James over with her hug, and then she tackled Albus into the wall with her next hug. He laughed a little bit and hugged her back, but when she pulled away, her eyes were wet and her lips were pouty.

“Why did you go out there?” she cried. “Why? That was stupid!”

James pulled a piece of parchment and a quill out of his pocket; he started writing on it while Professor Longbottom was looking towards Albus and Lily, and all before Professor Longbottom turned back around, he folded it into a paper airplane and waved his wand. The paper airplane sailed around the room until it bumped into Augustus Longbottom’s leg; Augustus unfolded it, read it quickly, and nodded at James; James nodded back.

Augustus reached into a pocket in his robes and pulled out a small plant made of twisting tan vines. Albus twitched – what was he doing with a plant in the castle? What if it got controlled by Dismiusa and choked everyone to death in their sleep?

Apparently, it hadn’t been affected yet, though – Augustus was still alive. He took his wand out and gave the plant a quick jab near the top; it shuddered, and the top of the plant leaned over to aim at the ground. The tip of the plant opened up, and a little seed fell out onto the floor.

Immediately the siege alarm began screeching throughout the castle.

“Not now!” groaned Professor Longbottom. “All right – all of you – stay here!” He pointed threateningly at James and Albus, and then he opened the door again and ran out, locking it behind him.

“Bloodblade,” whispered Albus.

His wounds reopened further, and the knife appeared in his hand. James took out the Marauder’s Map; once he confirmed that there was no one near the door, he nodded to Albus, and Albus unlocked the door with the knife again.

“Where are you going?!?” shrieked Lily as they all ran out and closed the door again.

“To the Headmaster’s office?” asked Barry.

“Right,” said James. “That’s where the Sorting Hat is. Barry, take us wherever there aren’t teachers or students patrolling.” He handed Barry the map. “And stay mostly quiet. If the alarm goes off and we’re talking loudly, we’re going to be found.”

“That was amazing,” said Aidan. “What did Augustus do?”
“He’s got a Fertfig,” said James. “It’s resistant to any outside influence, even sunshine, water, or soil nutrition, so it just grows. That’s also probably why it wasn’t affected by the weird plant magic that’s been going on with Dismiusa. It summons seeds from other nearby plants into its mouth and then spits them out, because it likes being closely surrounded by other plants for protection. Augustus and I previously discussed the possible need for a distraction, and so I sent him that parchment airplane that said, ‘We need a distraction.’ He stimulated the fig in its sweet spot, which causes it to spit out a seed. That seed was actually magically summoned from a tree outside the castle walls. Hence, some living thing has entered the castle, which wasn’t inside the castle when Wilcox set the alarm – so now the alarm has been set off, and it won’t be turned off again until Augustus Vanishes the seed.” They began the climb up to the seventh floor.

“But Augustus is such a goody two-shoes,” laughed Albus. “How did you get him to do that for you?”

“There’s something I know about him, which he would prefer me not to tell the whole school,” said James with a smile.

Albus racked his brains, wondering what Augustus could possibly have done wrong. He was finding nothing regarding the subject, but in his mental search, he noticed a strange tickling in his head.

This was a sensation he hadn’t experienced in a while. Someone was trying to enter his head. They were probing around, trying to get through the barrier he’d constructed with the help of Dr. Varnisse.

Dismiusa was trying to find out what they were up to.

“James,” said Albus, running faster to pull up next to his brother.

“What’s up?” asked James. “Sorry, but I promised Augustus I wouldn’t tell anyone as long as he promised to do me at least one favor per term.”

“No, that’s not what I need to tell you,” said Albus. “I think Dismiusa is trying to break into my mind again.”

“What?!” said James, almost tripping over his own feet. “And what do you mean, again? Is this – is this what was happening to you earlier in the year?”

“Yes,” said Albus. “My mind apparently was under the equivalent of an open wound, and Dr. Varnisse thought that the ambient energy in the castle – which I guess she didn’t realize was Dismiusa – was able to enter my head because of the damage from last year. Dr. Varnisse helped me shut it, but I’m not sure if Dismiusa is going to break in again. She’ll know our plans if she does.”

“Tell us if you think she’s going to break in,” said James. “We’ll knock you out so that you can’t think anymore, and then she won’t be able to learn anything.”

Albus grimaced. “You think that’ll work?”

“It would be like turning out the lights when someone’s trying to see where they’re going,” said James. “I assume so, anyway. We just can’t let her know that we’re aware of her Horcrux, or else she’s going to put everything she’s got into killing us and defending the castle catacombs.”

“I’ll tell you if I think she’s about to get in,” said Albus. “I promise.”
“We’ll wake you up when the Horcrux is gone,” said James. “If it happens. If she breaks in after we destroy the Horcrux, that’s okay, because the job will already have been done. Just do me a favor and try to fight. You’ve got the cuts from the knife, so your magic is powerful – even if you’re not the best Occlumens yet, you’re still powered up in all of your magic. You can fight her off.”

“All clear to the Headmaster’s office,” said Barry as they reached the top of the last flight of stairs. Huffing and puffing from the exertion, but knowing they couldn’t slow down now, they all ran to the gargoyle guarding Wilcox’s office.

“We need to go up,” stated James as they neared the gargoyle.

“The Headmaster is not present.”

“We know,” said James. “We need to talk to the Sorting Hat.”

“Well, fine,” said the gargoyle. “There’s no password until the siege is over, anyway. Feel free to go up, but if the Headmaster comes back and asks me why you’re up there, I’m going to have to tell him.”

“And if we leave before Wilcox comes back,” said James as the gargoyle jumped to the side, “you won’t say anything?”

“Not unless I’m asked.”

The nine students ran up the spiral stairs, which were slowly rising.

“Could you make these rise a little faster?” barked James back at the gargoyle.

“Could you ask a little nicer?” it retorted.

James groaned. “Please, can you speed us up?”

“I don’t control the speed!”

James’s eye twitched as he continued climbing.

The ascent was easier because they were also being lifted upwards by the rising and spinning staircase, and they were in the hallway to Wilcox’s office before long. James threw open the oak door and they all stumbled into the room, nearly falling after going from the moving staircase to the flat and stationary floor.

“Hello there,” said Dumbledore cheerily inside his portrait. “What brings you all here today?”

“Hoping to borrow something,” said James, running over to the shelf with the Sorting Hat. “Sir.”

“Do you have permission to borrow this thing?” asked Dumbledore.

“Permission?” snorted Snape. “He’s a Potter. He thinks he owns the world.”

James jumped up and snatched the hat off of its shelf.

“The Sorting Hat?” asked Dumbledore. “Dear boy, have you become dissatisfied with your house after six years?”
“I do have permission to borrow it, actually,” said James, stuffing the hat on his head. “Any Gryffindor in need can access it.”

“Oh,” said Dumbledore. “In that case, you might want to watch your head.”

There was a dull thunk as something hit James hard on the top of his head. He groaned and toppled over; the Sword of Gryffindor spilled out of the bottom of the hat.

“Normally I would thoroughly discuss a proposition as acquiring the Sword of Gryffindor,” mused the hat, “but I can sense you’re in a bit of a hurry.”

“Thank you,” said James, picking up the sword.

Albus took the hat, dusted it off, and jumped, tossing it back on its shelf.

“How’s your House identity crisis going, Albus Potter?” asked the hat before they left.

Albus grinned. “I’m a Gryffindor, through and through.”

“I would have given you the sword, too,” said the Sorting Hat. “Watch your brother, now. He’s a bit too Gryffindor for his own good.”

“Will do,” laughed Albus, closing the oak door behind him.

“We should have told the Sorting Hat and the Headmasters not to tell Wilcox we were there,” said James, biting his lower lip apprehensively.

“We’ll just move quickly and hope Wilcox doesn’t come back,” said Albus. “Besides, it we’d said that to the portraits, one of them probably would have left and found Wilcox to tell him, thinking we were up to no good.”

“To the Hufflepuff common room next,” said Aidan. “I can get in, but you guys can’t. I’ll find Mia and get her to come with us.”

“Don’t explain anything to her,” said Alec. “She might flip out a little bit if you tell her exactly what we’re planning, and she won’t come with you. And you can’t drag her out with all the other Hufflepuffs in there. Just tell her that I’m outside and I’m back safe, and that I wanted to say hi, but I can’t come into the common room so she has to come out to see me.”

“You’d have me lie to your girlfriend like that?” said Aidan.

“If it keeps her alive in the long run, yes,” said Alec. “If we don’t stop Dismiusa, what happens if she finds Mia? She might kill Mia to stop her from getting the Horcrux.”

“I didn’t think of that,” said Aidan.

Albus gasped.

“What?” said Alec, looking at Albus. “What’s wrong?”

“If Dismiusa breaks into my mind,” said Albus, “she’ll know about Mia, too. I didn’t realize how much danger that would put her in…”

“Shoot,” said James. “Just keep an eye on what’s going on in your head, Albus. Like I said, we’ll knock you out if we have to.”
“Quiet – we’re going to be passing near some teachers,” said Barry.

They descended past some shouting voices.

“Where’s the breach?!” yelled Professor Desulgon. “Where is the noise coming from?”

“Helio’s working on triangulating the source!” shouted Professor Longbottom. “It’ll only be a few minutes before we know where to look. Keep on your guard until then!”

“Shoot,” said James, raising his wand. “Expecto Patronum!”

His silver tuatara sailed through the floor and headed towards the hospital wing.

“How can you do a talking Patronus to warn Augustus?” asked Albus.

“I told Augustus to destroy the seed if I sent a Patronus into the hospital wing,” said James. “I can’t talk with it, so I just told him to destroy it if he saw my Patronus. We’ll have to move faster once the siege alarm shuts off, because they’ll undoubtedly notice we’re gone before long.”

The siege alarm shut off.

The trip down the stairs was much faster than the trip up. Barry took them the long way around to the Hufflepuff common room, because there were seventh year students patrolling the corridors in that direction. They pulled up in front of a stack of barrels near the kitchen.

Aidan ran up to the barrels and tapped five times on the barrel in the middle of the second row, accenting the first and third taps. The lid of the barrel swung open.

“Don’t anybody else try that, unless you want to smell like vinegar for the rest of the day,” said Aidan, crawling into the hole through to the Hufflepuff common room. “Only Hufflepuffs are allowed.”

Alec walked up to the barrel to look inside, but as soon as he came within five feet, the lid of the barrel snapped shut.

“Hufflepuffs have the best common room, I’ve heard,” said James.

It didn’t take long for Mia to be convinced to come see Alec. The lid of the barrel swung open again, and Mia leapt out, kissing Alec before her arms were even fully locked around him. James whistled.

Barry looked over at Gavin and Marco and grinned; he didn’t even need to say anything and the two boys reddened and looked away.

“Alec, I can’t believe you went out there,” said Mia. “How could you just leave me like that?! What were you trying to do?!”

“Well, you’re about to find out, because we need your help,” said Alec as Aidan crawled out next. “You see… we think that you’re a descendant of Litinia, right?”

“Yes?” said Mia, confused as to why Alec wasn’t solely focused on apologizing.

“Well, Litinia made a barrier under the castle long ago that only she could pass through,” said Alec. “Or, only people who carried her bloodline. We think you’re the only one who can get through it, and there’s something important behind the barrier that you need to get for us—”
“Under the castle?” stated Mia skeptically.

“Yeah,” said Alec. “Behind that door I was telling you about.”

“Are you MAD?!”

Barry glanced back down at the Marauder’s Map. “Quieter, please,” he said nervously.

“You almost got yourselves killed out there,” she said. “Look at Albus! Look at that cut on his forehead! Now you want us to go into the place where all the forest creatures are trying to break in?!?”

“Mia, we think it’ll stop Dismiusa,” pleaded Alec. “I’m so sorry we have to involve you, but please, I’m asking you to help us because you’re the only one who can!”

Mia charged back to the open barrel tunnel, but Alec sprinted in front of her and the barrel slammed shut at his approach. She started trying to tap on the barrel, but Alec’s presence next to her kept the barrels from opening, since he was not a Hufflepuff.

“Alec McKinnon, you will let me back into my warm common room right now!” she declared shrilly.

“No, you need to come with us,” said Alec. “I love you, and I won’t let you get hurt. That’s also why I need you to help me and my friends end this crazy ordeal.”

Mia eyed the rest of them suspiciously.

“You’re sure there’s actually a real reason I need to come with you?” she said.

Alec nodded.

“Fine, then,” said Mia. “For you, you arse. I’ll do it for you.”

She kissed him on the cheek and folded her arms.

“But if I so much as break a nail, you are my eternal butler and you will pamper me for the rest of my life,” she said.

“I already do,” said Alec, shrugging, “so let’s go.”

They turned towards the dungeons, but Albus stood in place, clutching his head.

James looked back after they had already sprinted a fair distance. “Albus?” he called back.

Albus grimaced as a pain streaked through his skull again. She was trying as hard as she could – she was trying to break in. He was having a hard time resisting.

“Albus, use your training,” said James calmly, coming up beside him. “Come on. Do what you need to do.”

Albus shook his head, gasping for breath and falling to his knees.

“If you need me to intervene,” said James, holding up his wand, “squeeze my hand.”

He slipped his other hand into Albus’s, and Albus gripped it, wondering if he should do it now.
“What’s wrong with him?” asked Mia with concern. “Is it the cut on his head that’s bothering him?”

The cut on my head...

Albus took the Bloodblade from his pocket, and quickly sliced a small wound open in his head.

Mia squeaked with horror, but the cut started working instantly. He could feel his mind gaining strength, pushing out the intruder, and the pain began to quickly subside.

He stood up slowly and nodded. “I’m okay,” he said. “It worked.”

“What the bloody ball sac is even happening?!” cried Mia, clutching her hair.

Aidan laughed out loud. “Wow, Alec, she really is the girl for you.”

“Quiet again,” said Barry. “Let’s go.”

“Are you sure you’ve got this?” said James quietly to Albus as they started running again.

“Yes,” said Albus.

“Why did the knife still work for you?” asked James. “Cutting your forehead – how did that help, even though it didn’t work when we tried to cut ourselves and it did nothing?”

“Maybe because I’ve already got some cuts,” said Albus. “I don’t know, though. We really need to ask Swait what’s going on with the knife. There are so many things we’re working around that I just don’t understand.”

They quickly arrived in the dungeons. Albus navigated himself to the wall, and dragged his finger along the streaks in the dust as usual, and the wall melted away. Mia looked stunned but had stopped asking questions by this point, and she simply followed them down, with a grip so tight on her wand Albus was afraid it would snap in half. James entered the chamber last and closed the door after he was through.

“Why did you close it?” asked Barry.

“We don’t want to let anything into the castle,” said James. “Not only would we be unleashing something as potentially bad as a basilisk into the castle, but no one would know, because the siege alarm wouldn’t go off. I’m pretty sure this is still a part of the castle, so nothing in here would set off the alarm. *Expecto Patronum.*”

With James’s Patronus illuminating the path, they went down another spiral staircase; this stone staircase, however, led down instead of up like the one to Wilcox’s office. Once at the bottom, the sealed door was in view. It was shut again.

Albus ran up to the door and took the knife to the lock. He opened the door and waved everyone inside, and they walked down another staircase.

This staircase led to another hall. At the end of the hall, there were still shards of glass everywhere from where the crystal wall had shattered. Behind the shards, there was an empty hallway expanding only into darkness.

“This is where Dismiusa was?” asked James in awe.

“Yes,” said Albus. “And I never did see what was down the other end of this hall. I don’t know if
the teachers ever investigated, either.”

“Well, we’re about to investigate,” said James. “Everyone ready?”

“I hope there’s nothing in there that we need to be ready for,” said Albus.

“We should be ready for it anyway,” said James.

“We are,” said Mia determinedly.

James’s Patronus led the way as they attempted to penetrate the darkness.
“Let’s just keep chugging along,” said Mia spiritedly, leading the way.

“Mia,” laughed James, “I’m so glad you’re on board with this. I was assuming we’d have to knock you out or Imperius you or something to get you to come.”

“I’d like to see you try,” said Mia, flexing her wand arm.

“How long do you think this tunnel goes?” asked Exo.

“I don’t know,” said James.

“Do you think any animals could have gotten down here?” asked Rose, looking in all directions so quickly that it was hard to believe she could actually see anything.

“I don’t know,” said James. “Probably not, though. The alarms would have gone off inside the castle.”

“If they went off right now, would we hear them, all the way in these catacombs?” asked Barry.

“I don’t know,” said James, an eye twitching. “Stop asking me questions I don’t know, it’s making me nervous.”

“Is something glowing up there?” asked Albus, peering into the darkness.

James squinted. “Okay, that one I can answer,” he said. “Yes, something is glowing up there.”

“An animal?” squealed Rose.

“I DON’T KNOW,” said James.

“Not an animal,” said Barry. “We’ve still got our Supersensory Charms on. We’d notice it. That’s… Looks like a mushroom.”

“A mushroom?” repeated Alec. “Is it the Fokii Fungus?”

“No, that one’s huge and the Fokii Fungus is tiny,” said Aidan. “It’s not even a mushroom, really. More like microscopic mold. Mold of the soul.”

“We need to break the mold,” quipped Alec.

Aidan punched Alec in the arm again.

“Aidan,” scolded Albus, “Alec doesn’t need a bruised arm for this.”

“Why do all of your names start with A?” asked Barry, looking down.

“Why do all of your names start with stupid?” retorted Alec.

James looked down at Albus. “Why did we bring them?” he chuckled.

“Stop asking me questions I don’t know,” replied Albus.

They passed the mushroom. It was taller than they were. A cloud of hot air hit Albus in the face,
causing him to stagger backwards blinking, bumping into Rose.

“Albus!” she breathed. “You scared the life out of me.”

“Who did you think bumped into you?” coughed Albus. “Oh, that gas is disgusting.”

“You’re covered in yellow dust,” said James, brushing Albus’s shirt.

“So are you,” said Albus, looking at a coating of fine yellow powder all over his brother. He looked back and noticed that there were a bunch of yellow specks in the air by the glowing mushroom.

“Spores,” said James. “Shoot, I hope they’re not poisonous.”

“Poisonous?!” yelped Rose.

“They’re not poisonous,” said Mia.

“How do you know?” asked Exo, looking over.

“The size of the spores,” said Mia, “and the reticulated bioluminescent—”

“You might as well stop there,” said Alec. “We’ve understood all we’re going to understand of what’s about to come out of your mouth. But thank you very much for being a Herbology genius.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Good thing we brought her,” laughed Albus.

“Why didn’t you guys bring a teacher?” asked Mia. “Professor Longbottom would know how to deal with any plants we encounter… and Professor Weasley would deal with the animals. Isn’t he your uncle – Albus, James, Rose?”

“We’ll explain later,” said James tensely.

Albus knew why he wasn’t eager to discuss the topic – it meant reminding everyone, including themselves, that there was a prophecy predicting that either Albus or James would die.

“All right, I trust you,” said Mia. “As long as you trust me. Especially when I point out, for example, that these mushrooms are poisonous.”

“Which ones?” asked James, looking around. “Not the ones we just walked into?”

The mushrooms around them now weren’t glowing; in fact, they were very hard to see. They perfectly blended into the dark brown walls of the catacombs.

“Yes, the ones we just walked into,” confirmed Mia. “Peruvian Slowdeath.”

“Charming,” said Rose, backing away. “Are we… are we going to die slowly?”

“Yes, unless we do something about it,” said Mia, yawning. “The spores of this plant make you lethargic… wanting to lie down and nap… that’s partially because your heart rate is slowly going down, and if you stay too long, eventually your heart rate will drop down to zero. Permanently.”

“What do we do?” asked James, looking back and echoing the yawn. “Should we leave until we have a plan?”
“There’s an easy way to deal with it,” said Mia, pulling out her wand. She blew hard on the tip, blowing a bubble that wrapped itself around her wand and encased her head.

“The Bubble-Head Charm. As long as you’re not continuously breathing the stuff, you’ll be fine.”

The other nine friends all cast Bubble-Head Charms on themselves; those in sixth year had known it for a while, and those in fourth year had learned it this year. Thankfully, everyone present had passed the test of casting it, and everyone was breathing easy again.

“What do we do if we come to a fork in the road?” asked Albus, suddenly realizing the possibility.

His voice sounded muffled inside his bubble; no one reacted or answered him. For a moment, Albus worried that there was some Fidelius Charm again, but he then remembered that the Bubble-Head Charm absorbed almost all sound.

They passed the problematic mushrooms; James popped the bubble on his head, and the rest of the group followed suit.

“I was just thinking,” said James, “but I couldn’t say it out loud because no one would hear me through the Bubble-Head Charm. What if we come to a fork in the road?”

Albus shrugged. “I was thinking the same thing.”

“Do we split up?” asked James. “That seems like an awful idea, though. But as another question: what happens if we get separated? We should probably have a plan.”

“If we get separated, I think we could probably find each other just by yelling,” said Barry. “We’re in a confined space with hallways to channel our voices. If we’re separated and we really can’t find each other, then we could all just go back to the beginning and start again.”

“What about a fork in the road?” asked Marco. “We should probably figure out a plan fast for that one.”

“Why?” asked Exo.

“Because we’re about to come to one,” said Marco, pointing ahead.

There was indeed a fork in the road. But it wasn’t just a split into two paths. Before them was a choice between three hallways in three different directions. And each of those hallways led to another split into three different paths.

“Well, this isn’t a fork in the road,” said Alec. “It’s a bloody octopus in the road.”

“What the hell do we do now?” asked Mia. “How can we possibly determine which way is right?”

“We flip a coin,” said James, shaking his head. “A nine-sided coin.”

There was a soft series of rattles in the distance.

“What was that?” asked Rose, her wand up and at the ready.

“It sounded like… something we don’t want to meet,” said Exo.

“Look!” cried Mia suddenly, pointing at the walls.

“Exactly,” said Mia. “Now look at the wall just inside that tunnel.”

She walked to the left and pointed to the wall of the left series of tunnels. There were patches of something slimy and brown, almost indistinguishable from the wall.

“Moss?” said Alec.

“Mold,” said Mia. “And if we go into the left tunnel… the next tunnel we should take is the one that bears to the right, because that’s the only one with mold on its walls.”

“Bloody brilliant,” said James. “All right, everyone, left and then right. Let’s go.”

As they entered the tunnel, the rattling sound grew louder.

“What is that?” asked Gavin. “It sounds like… like…”

“Like chattering teeth,” said Marco.

“Oh, no,” said Gavin.

“What?” asked Rose, tensing even more than before, which Albus had thought was impossible.

“It sounds like bones slithering over rock,” finished Gavin. “That’s what the sound inside the castle walls was when this whole thing first started – bones clicking around the pipes.”

“Albus, get ready,” said James. “You and I can cast Patronuses. We need to cast them at a moment’s notice. We might be able to ward it off by casting now. How many do you think you can do with that power boost from the knife?”

“Let’s find out,” said Albus. “Expecto Patronum!”

He concentrated with all of his ability. There was a spurt of blood from his palm that he wasn’t expecting, and suddenly a staggering number of Patronuses sailed forth from his wand, one after another.

“Holy… How many is that?” said Barry, gawking.

“Wait, keep them in one place,” said James, counting.

“Twenty-three,” said Aidan.

“Yeah, I got twenty-three,” said Rose.

“How the bloody hell?” said Mia.


Twenty-three, thought Albus inwardly, his Arithmancer’s mind buzzing on its own. Prime number. Distance to next prime number is six, which is larger than any previous gap. Three sevens and a two. Two sevens and a nine. One seven and a sixteen. A thirteen and a ten. A thirteen, a seven, and a three...

“That basilisk, if it’s in here, is probably guarding the right tunnel,” said James, shielding his eyes from the blinding light of two dozen Patronuses. “I mean – the correct tunnel, not the tunnel on the right. So we’ll probably be seeing it.”
“Maybe not, if we’ve got this many guards,” said Alec, smiling at all the Patronuses.

“But it’s a huge creature,” said Rose. “Even as a skeleton, it’ll take a lot of Patronuses to bring it down.”

“What about Moly to the heart?” asked Aidan. “But what do we do about that if it doesn’t have a heart anymore?”

“Good question,” said James. “But we don’t have any Moly anyway, so—”

“I’ve got Moly,” said Mia, pulling a little white flower with a black stem out of an inside pocket of her robes.

Mia looked around amusedly at the other nine staring at her.

“Why didn’t we bring you along in the first place?” asked James.

“Because you’re all morons,” said Mia. “Anyway, let’s keep going to wherever we’re going.”

“Sounds like a plan,” said James.

The group walked tensely down the tunnel. The light of all the Patronuses, illuminating the mold on the walls more visibly than before, also calmed them down slightly.

“Patronuses are amazing,” said Mia.

“I wonder if anyone’s ever studied them really intensively,” said Rose.

“How much can they do, anyway?” asked Mia.

“They ward off Dementors and Lethifolds,” said Albus. “They can let you communicate with other people across large distances, and they fill you with inner strength—”

“Stop,” ordered Mia.

Albus frowned at her. “Sorry,” he said, “but you asked!”

“No, sorry, not you,” said Mia. “All of us. Stop walking.”

They slowed to a stop, and Mia pointed at the walls.

“No mold,” she said. “No slime mold… we must have passed the correct turn.”

“We didn’t pass any turns,” said James.

“Not that we could see,” said Mia. “Go back.”

They backtracked a while, until there was mold on one of the walls again.

“Here,” said Mia. “There’s mold on this side, but not on the other side, and it ends here, so…”

She walked to right where the mold ended, and she placed her hand on the wall right next to the tail end of the mold.

Her hand went straight through the wall.

“Hey, that was easy!” said Mia, stepping through the wall with a smile.
A second later, as the others were about to follow her, she charged back through screaming.

A clicking, rattling sound was getting very loud from the other side of the wall.

“RUN!” yelled Albus, and they dashed back towards the beginning of the tunnels as a giant serpentine skeletal head burst through the wall and gnashed its jaws together.

Its jaws opened as if screaming, but no sound came out; the light from the Patronuses was causing white smoke to rise from the bones. It backed through the wall again.

“Follow it!” yelled Albus to his Patronuses, and the coyotes sailed through the wall in a hoard, followed shortly by James’s.

There was no screaming – only hissing. At first Albus thought that it was a snake hiss, but as the basilisk tore through the fake wall again, hounded by the Patronuses, Albus could see that the hissing was from the steam rising off its bones. The Patronuses were decaying it, and it was furious.

The basilisk whipped its head around and started pursuing them, gnashing its jaws together. It had a lot of fangs missing, and it couldn’t even eat them – it had no stomach – but going into those jaws still wouldn’t end well. Its body, just a mass of ribs, followed it out of the wall; inside the skeleton, at a point close to the head, there was a small sac dangling from the arch of a rib, which was beating.

“It’s still got a heart!” shouted James.

Mia took out the Moly flower from the inside pocket of her robes. “How do I get this into the heart?!” she cried.

“Give it here!” said Barry, running forward. “I know a spell!”

Mia held out the Moly flower; Barry took it and turned his torso around, holding the flower in front of his wand as he aimed it towards the basilisk.

“Sagittar!” shouted Barry.

The Moly flower’s stem shot forward like an arrow, aimed directly at the heart through the gaping maw of the basilisk. Right as it was about to go through the mouth, the snake rolled to one side, and the heart lurched away; the flower fell through the skeleton and landed on the other side.

“SHIIIIIT!” thundered Barry.

“Accio Moly!” shouted Albus.

The flower picked itself up off the ground and zoomed towards Albus; he snatched it from the air and thrust it back into Barry’s hands.

“Try again!” said Albus. “You can try as many times as you need to!”

“Not if it eats us first!” said Mia. “Wait – Densaugeo!”

Her spell hit the basilisk right in the face. The two fangs closest to the front suddenly began growing rapidly.

“WHY WOULD YOU MAKE IT WORSE?!” roared Alec.
“Albus, help me out!” said Mia. “You’ve got some sort of weird magic boost, don’t you? That’s how you got all those Patronuses?”

“Why would I make its fangs bigger?!” demanded Albus.

“Just do what I say! Trust me!”

“Densaugeo!” said Albus, despite thinking he’d lost his mind.

His spell also made contact, and the fangs suddenly experienced an enormous growth spurt. The fangs grew so much that the snake’s head suddenly smashed against the ceiling, and it skidded to a stop. It was pinned in place by the fangs, which were now as long as the ceiling was high. The mouth was stuck open; the fangs were digging into the floor and pressing the top of the jaw against the ceiling of the tunnel.

“Brilliant,” said James. “Absolutely BRILLIANT!”

“Fangs are still growing,” said Albus. “Barry, shoot it before the fangs snap off or something!”

“Sagittar!” shouted Barry again.

The Moly flower fired forward. It whizzed through the open mouth of the basilisk and punctured a hole directly in the dangling heart.

The steam rising off the basilisk turned into billowing smoke; the Patronuses illuminated the rising clouds until finally it cleared away and the bones crumbled into white dust before their eyes; the heart had vanished.

“Holy hell, Mia, how are you a ‘Puff with that kind of skill?” asked Barry, laughing with relief.

“Ex-cuse me!” snapped Mia, turning to him. “I happen to be VERY proud of the accomplishments of my house, thank you very much!”

“Sorry,” said Barry, holding up his hands. “I just thought – that was really clever, and you–”

“So there’s no clever people in Hufflepuff?” crowed Mia, gesturing towards Aidan. “And there’s no brainless gits in Ravenclaw?” she added, gesturing to Alec.

“Yeah!” said Alec, crossing his arms. Then his brow furrowed. “Hey, wait!”

“Oh, that’s just so typical,” said Mia, shaking her head. “You know, Hufflepuffs have always been–”

“Litinia was a Hufflepuff,” said Aidan, interrupting her, “and this is what she’s managed to do, so I think that pretty much settles the argument… Can we get back on track now?”

“Litinia was a Hufflepuff?” said Albus. “How do you know that?”

“I asked her once,” said Aidan.

“But… a Hufflepuff turning to Dark Magic?” said Exo.

“The allure of power is a terrible thing,” said James, “but Aidan’s right – we really need to get back on track. Let’s get back to the wall illusion.”

They walked past the remains of the skeleton; Mia bent down and plucked the Moly flower back
out of the white dust on the floor, tucking it into her robes again.

“Just in case,” she said.

They approached the hidden wall; James poked his head through to make sure it was safe, and then waved them all through.

“Bubble-Head Charm,” he said before ducking back through.

Upon phasing through the wall with his Bubble-Head Charm in operation, Albus found that they were surrounded by the mushrooms that exhaled the poisonous spores.

The strain of keeping up twenty-three Patronuses was making him tired. He allowed the coyotes to fade away; most of their light disappeared. James looked around quickly to make sure that nothing had happened to Albus to cause the Patronuses to disappear; Albus gave his brother a thumbs-up, signaling that he was okay, because with the Bubble-Head Charms, James wouldn’t have been able to hear him speak.

Mia directed them towards more of the mold; they kept walking. Mia took them directly through two more walls, and there were still mushrooms everywhere. But eventually, when she took them through yet another hidden entrance, the mushrooms had gone. In their place was a mass of tangled Devil’s Snare and Venomous Tentacula filling the correct hallway.

“Both of them?” whispered Mia. “That’s not good.”

“How do we get past?” asked Alec.

The Devil’s Snare abruptly turned itself around and oriented itself to face them.

“Oh, I think it noticed us,” breathed Mia, backing away.

Albus lifted his hand. Inhaling deeply, he remembered his skills in wandless elemental magic, and he waved his hand through the air.

A fireball the height and width of the corridor burst from his bloody palm, so hot that he screamed in pain and ripped his arm away as his wound was cauterized. The fireball burst in the middle of the plants, and there was a screech as the plants burned to a crisp in seconds, all the way down the hallway as the fire spread.

“Damn, are we lucky to have that knife on our side,” said James. “And of course, to have you, little brother. Incendio wouldn’t have been nearly as powerful as that pure energy from your wandless magic.”

Albus nodded and looked at his right hand; it wasn’t bleeding anymore because of the burn.

“Blood,” he said, and the wound reopened.

“I want credit for not freaking out over all the weird crap that’s been going on around me,” said Mia, raising her finger. “I don’t know if any of you noticed, but this is getting weird.”

“There’s a glow coming from around the corner,” said James pointing.

“Don’t you feel it?” asked Barry. “With the Supersensory Charm?”

“I feel it,” said James. “It feels like… just unadulterated power, doesn’t it?”
“It does,” said Gavin.

“That must be the barrier,” said James. “I felt that way around Dismiusa.”

Barry threw a hand on James’s shoulder as he was about to walk forward.

“It isn’t Dismiusa, is it?” he whispered.

“I don’t think so,” said James. “Because I can sense something behind it, too. Like a heartbeat. I think we’re in the right place.”

“I feel the heartbeat too,” said Marco.

“We’re here,” said Gavin.

They walked slowly forward, stepping over the ashes of the incinerated plants; turning the left corner, they came into view of a crystal wall.

This wasn’t like the wall in front of Litinia that the Fokii had needed Albus to shatter. This was something more. Little lights danced around the surface of the wall – blue and purple. As the group approached the wall, a number of the little lights swarmed to either side, causing the sides to be a mix of blue and purple.

“Your eyes,” said Alec, pointing to the wall and back. “They’re showing us your eyes.”

“I guess so,” said Mia, staring into the wall.

“We’re right here,” said James, stepping as close to the wall as possible.

“I know,” said Mia. “I’m going in.”

Fearlessly, she stepped right up to the wall, and wasting no time, she placed her hand against it. Just as before, her hand passed right through the wall, and she stepped fully beyond the dancing lights. James pressed a hand to the wall, but was repelled by some sort of magnetic force, and he got a small electric shock when he tried to press against it; he pulled his hand away, shaking it. He reached the hand into his robes and grasped the ruby-studded handle of the Sword of Gryffindor.

Mia passed back through the wall seconds later, cupping something in her hands as if it had been no big deal at all.

“I think this is it,” she said calmly.

She opened her hands. Inside her palm of her hand was a small rock; inside the rock was a fossil of some sort of fern.

“It’s gotta be,” said James, stepping over to Mia. “Put it on the ground.”

Mia complied, and she backed away as far as possible.

“I don’t like the way that rock made me feel,” she said softly, placing herself next to Alec. “Even just in the few seconds I was holding it.”

James lifted up the sword, and grasped the handle tightly. Determinedly, he plunged the sword down onto the rock.
The fossil of the fern cracked in half directly along the stem. A green smoke escaped the stone through the crack, and there was a tiny shriek followed by total and utter silence.

“That’s it,” said Albus. “That was the Horcrux, wasn’t it?”

“It was,” said James. “I don’t sense the heartbeat anymore.”

“But she’s not dead yet,” said Aidan. “We still have to kill her.”

“But we’ve made her vulnerable,” said Rose. “She can die now.”

“She’s still ultra-powerful,” said Exo.

“So is Albus,” said Alec, knocking Albus’s shoulder.

“This knife isn’t as powerful as Dismiusa,” said Albus. “And it doesn’t last forever. If you want my help, we’re going to have to do it before the knife’s power goes away – maybe it ran out of juice, and that’s why it’s not helping anyone but me, since I used it before the power-granting abilities expired.”

“How long does it last?” asked James.

“A little over three weeks, I think,” said Albus. “If I’m remembering right from the previous cut I got.”

“A little over three weeks – twenty-three days?” asked Rose. “Twenty-three days and twenty-three Patronusus?”

Albus scratched his head. “A little over three weeks might be twenty-three days,” he said. “That would make sense… How’d you think of that?”

“I guessed,” said Rose.

“Wait a second,” said Mia, and she ran back through the crystal wall of lights.

“Mia!” said Alec nervously, reaching for her and pulling his hand back when he was zapped.

Mia emerged again almost a full minute later, pointing through the wall.

“It’s interesting – I wish I could show you,” she said. “There’s a little desk in there, like it was Litinia’s second office or something. The rock was on the desk, sitting in plain sight, but it was acting as a paperweight. I took another look at the parchment – it’s got a list with only four out of the twenty-three slots filled in; three of those are checked off.”

“Could you bring it through?” asked James.

“I tried,” said Mia, “but I couldn’t get anywhere near the wall when I was carrying the parchment.”

“Twenty-three slots?” asked Rose.

“The list only had four names filled in,” said Mia. “The rest were empty slots where names should go. The four that were filled in were, ‘Barricant,’ ‘Vivertain,’ ‘Superstorm,’ and ‘Darkriver.’”

“Darkriver?” echoed Exo.

“Superstorm?” repeated Albus.
“Can we leave?” asked Alec.

“There will be time to figure this stuff out later,” said Rose, “but we’ll have to be breathing in order to do that. For now, we have to get out there and take down Dismiusa once and for all in order to keep on going. This is the final stand.”

James sidled up to Albus and placed both hands on his little brother’s shoulders.

“Albus,” he said. “I just want you to know that I am so proud of you.”

“Stop it, James,” said Albus, shaking his head. He knew what James was doing. The final confrontation was looming, and so was the prophecy. “Don’t say goodbye – neither of us is going anywhere.”

“I’d be saying this even if I’d never heard about the prophecy,” said James. “I’m pretending the prophecy doesn’t exist – I’m going to fight to survive, but if it’s a choice between both me and Dismiusa or neither of us, you know which choice I have to take.”

Albus didn’t say anything; his eyes filled with tears.

“Promise me one thing, if I don’t make it out of this,” said James.

“...What?”

“Just kick the Slytherins’ arses every year for me.”

Albus shoved him away and smiled through his streaming tears. “I will, you dumb jock,” he said, trying not to let his voice crack.

“All right, pipsqueak, let’s go.”

Every time James spoke, Albus imagined the worst immediately occurring. Every sentence that came out of James’s mouth might be his last words. He tried to imagine the coming school year without his brother, and he couldn’t.

“Goddamn, Barry,” said James, “did you just rip one off – it smells rancid!”

Albus shook his head. Those better not be his brother’s final words... that sentence wouldn’t be ideal for carving on a tombstone.
“Oh, that’s not good.”

All eighteen other eyes fell upon Mia, who was biting her lip. That wasn’t what they were hoping to hear from the person who was supposed to be guiding them back.

“What’s wrong?” asked James calmly.

Mia turned back to them, looking apprehensive. “It’s all dead.”

“What is?”

“The slime mold,” said Mia. “It died, or retracted, or something. It’s not on the walls anymore. We’re going to have to find our own way back.”

“Can we remember which way we took?” asked James, looking around.

“Probably not,” said Aidan. “We were walking through a bunch of walls. How are we going to figure out which walls we walked through?”

“Walk with our hands brushing the wall,” said Gavin. “Then we’ll feel when the wall isn’t real.”

“But how do we know that there weren’t any other fake walls leading the wrong way?” said Marco.

“We don’t,” said Rose. “We’ll just have to try to remember.”

“Oh, we should have brought food with us,” said Alec.

“We’re not going to starve to death in here,” said Gavin. “It wasn’t too far a trip.”

“Yeah,” said Barry. “We’ll find our way back eventually if we just keep walking and keep track of where we’ve been.”

“Before we go,” said Albus, “Mia, do you want to check in there again – see if there’s anything important?”

“I checked all over the little room,” said Mia. “It’s not big. There wasn’t much in there… just the desk and the parchment with the little list.”

“‘Barricant,’ ‘Vivertain,’ ‘Superstorm,’ and ‘Darkriver,’” repeated Albus, as they started walking back the way they’d come.

“Hey,” said Exo. “Do you think those are spells that Litinia was talking about? The Dark spells?”

“‘Barricant’ sounds like ‘Barricade,’” said Aidan. “Is that what the spell right there is?” He pointed at the wall with the glistening lights.

“The ‘Superstorm Devocrix’ is the one Litinia said gave her so much power,” said Rose. “So maybe the ‘Barricant Devocrix’ is the one that makes the barriers.”

“And the Darkriver Devocrix is the theorized spell that kills Muggles,” said Exo. “But why would Litinia use that?”
“Well, that was the only one of the four listed that wasn’t checked off,” said Mia. “‘Barricant,’ ‘Vivertain,’ and ‘Superstorm’ were checked off. ‘Darkriver’ was listed but wasn’t checked off. And the other nineteen were blank.”

“Maybe she was making a list of Devoctrices,” said Albus, “and the ones that are checked off are the ones she’s used.”

“Maybe she’s making a list,” said James. “Of Devoctrices. And the ones she checked off… those are the ones she’s used?”

Albus rolled his eyes; they still couldn’t hear him talk about it, even when they were having a full-blown conversation on the topic.

“What’s up with you?” asked Alec, looking over to Albus. “Usually when we’re having these sorts of discussions, you’re totally into it.”

Albus shrugged.

“Then Litinia has used the Barricant Devoctrix and the Superstorm Devoctrix,” said Marco. “So what’s the Vivertain Devoctrix?”

Nobody spoke as they all considered the question.

“Horcrux,” grunted Barry.

James nodded. “That’s gotta be it,” he said. “Is the Horcrux a different kind of spell than we know? I mean, that would only make sense.”

“Maybe the other people using it didn’t even know that it was a Devoctrix at the time they were using it,” said Exo.

“So what’s with the knife and the twenty-three Patronuses?” asked James, looking over at Albus. “Was that just a coincidence, or what?”

“Twenty-three is three plus seven plus thirteen,” said Albus. “Not sure if that’s important.”

“Do you think the knife is a Devoctrix?” said James.

Albus took out the knife and looked at it again. “I don’t know,” he said honestly. “Both ways seem like too much of a coincidence…”

“This conversation has been absolutely fascinating,” said Aidan, “but has anyone paid the slightest attention to where we’re going?”

They all stopped walking at the same time.

“Er, no,” said Mia. “I kind of forgot that we weren’t just walking down a straight hallway…”

“Have we passed the right wall already?” said James, feeling the wall beside him.

“Not sure,” said Rose, turning around and looking the other direction. “It’s all just underground tunnels and it all looks the same.”

“Could we just carve out the walls?” asked Barry, rubbing the wall. “Or would that cause the tunnels to collapse?”
“I wouldn’t risk it,” said Aidan. “Let’s split up – half of us walk backwards, half of us forwards, and whoever finds the illusion wall first calls to the others.”

“No need,” said Alec, who had walked farther ahead, feeling the wall. His hand was going through the wall.

“Okay,” said Rose, “but is that the right way?”

“Let’s find out,” said Alec, sticking his head past the illusion. The rest of him walked through, and they followed him.

“Still no mold,” said Mia with a frown. “Darn… I was hoping it was just that hallway.”

“Did it go away because we destroyed the Horcrux?” asked Exo as James waved them in the direction they had come from, assuming this was the right set of tunnels. “If so, what else is going to happen as a result of the Horcrux being destroyed?”

“There aren’t any mushrooms,” said Gavin. “Unless this is the wrong path, the mushrooms that were belching spores are gone.”

“But what if something appeared?” asked Exo nervously. “What if these plants disappeared but something worse appeared?”

“Why would it?” asked Albus. “Litinia would have focused all of her endeavors on defending the Horcrux. If we already destroyed it… what’s the point? Hasn’t she already lost? Why would she set booby traps to occur after we destroyed it?”

“Revenge?” suggested Alec.

“Why not put the effort into stopping us from destroying it in the first place?”

“I’m really surprised we didn’t encounter more defenses,” said James. “I mean… it’s a part of her soul. It’s a really precious thing to put with such poor defense.”

“Not to mention a path leading right there,” said Mia.

“I mean… there was the Fokii basilisk, but that wasn’t even originally there,” said James. “It was lucky for Dismiusa that there was something that powerful dead in the castle for the Fokii to take over.”

“Maybe her real defenses didn’t last seven hundred years,” suggested Marco.

“What, and her body did?” said Albus. “She was here for seven hundred years.”

“You said she was in pain,” said James. “Right?”

“I don’t know,” said Albus. “I can’t be sure it wasn’t just a trick to make me release her. But she was down here for seven hundred years! Nothing was down here with her except her plants and her Horcrux!”

“I don’t know if we have all of the information yet,” said James. “I don’t know how we could possibly get all of that information, either.”

“Oh,” said Barry, his hand falling through the wall. “I don’t think it was that soon last time – was it?”
“No,” said James, sighing. “I think we’re headed the wrong way.”

Barry stuck his head through the wall. He pulled it back quickly. “Whoa,” he said. “That wasn’t what I was expecting.”

“What?” asked James, poking his head through next. “Whoa.”

“Let me see,” said Alec, walking forward; he leaned into the wall and smacked his head right on the stone. “Ow!”

“You didn’t walk far enough this way, sweetie,” said Mia, taking Alec’s shoulders and shoving him to the side.

Alec stuck his head through the wall successfully as Albus got to the wall and took a look for himself.

“Whoa,” said Alec as Albus’s head emerged on the other side. “It’s… solid crystal or something. Isn’t this the wall we saw in the forest, right before Dismiusa?”

“Yes,” said Albus, looking over at Alec’s floating head, neck feeding into the wall. “This is the kind of wall I saw before when Dismiusa got loose – the one she was trapped behind.”

There was a translucent wall about twenty feet behind the wall, made of crystal, giving off a slight glow. Albus stepped all the way through, and the rest of the crew followed him and Alec.

“Is this the one that you cut through with the knife in the forest?” asked James, looking towards Albus.

“Yeah,” said Albus. “I–”

“AAUGH!”

Albus and James jumped and whipped their wands into position as they looked towards the source of the sound – Exo had tried to place his hand on the crystal wall, but had fallen directly through it and landed on the ground halfway through. He stood back up and jumped away from the wall.

“I… wasn’t expecting to go through it,” said Exo, shaking slightly.

“How exactly did you do that?” asked James, pressing a hand against the wall. It seemed to resist him, and when Albus pressed a hand against the wall as well, he found that it was solid just like any other wall.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” said Rose, knocking on the crystal. “Why Exo? Why not Mia?”

Mia was pushing against the wall as well, but she couldn’t pass through it.

“What on Earth?” muttered Albus, shoving against the wall.

“Al, you said Dismiusa broke through the first time by tracing a path?” said James. “Can you remember the path?”

“No,” said Albus.

“Why am I the only one?” asked Exo, watching Barry, Gavin, and Marco press hands against the crystal glass, shaking their heads.
Albus suddenly had a flashback to his second year: he and Exo were standing in Oddolweld Pasture on Lottocrough Island during the Lunar Eclipse Festival. A strange energy had billowed from John Solomon’s wand. Everyone around Albus had gasped and collapsed, and Albus had been thinking almost the same thing. *What am I the only one not affected?* The answer back then was that he wasn’t a werewolf.

The answer now was right in front of him, and it was also one of the security methods Solomon had placed upon his invitations to the festival. The invitations had stated that only werewolves could unlock the letter, but that hadn’t been true…

“I bet it’s because he has a Transfection,” said Albus, staring at the wall.

“What?” said Exo, looking over. “You think Dismiusa made this barrier passable by *anyone* with a Transfection?”

“Does she even have one?” asked Rose.

“Wait,” said Alec. “Like, Animagi and werewolves?”

“And Metamorphmagi and Botanimagi,” said Aidan. “But… why would she do that? Does Dismiusa have a Transfection?”

“Maybe she was a Botanimagus,” said Rose.

“I’ve only ever heard of a few Botanimagi in history,” said James.

“Well, who wants to turn into a *plant*?” scoffed Alec.

“But if anyone were to do it, it would be a deity of the forest, wouldn’t it?” continued James.

“I bet making barriers like the one around her Horcrux took a lot of strength,” said Albus. “It would be a lot more difficult. So she wouldn’t want to make all of her barriers like that. And really, how many people have Transfections? The numbers aren’t high at all. So it’s still pretty secure. And all she needed to really defend was the Horcrux.”

“So what’s behind here?” said James. “Exo, did you see anything?”

“I didn’t really look,” said Exo, “but it looked like a classroom.”

“A classroom?” said Rose, perking up. “Not in the castle?”

“No, it was too dark and cold to be a classroom from the castle,” said Exo. “Do you want me to look again?”

“Really quickly, to check if it’s safe for Al to carve it open for us,” said James.

Exo nodded and pushed his face through. He stepped through entirely, and they waited.

It was nerve-wracking enough when he didn’t return immediately, but then they became increasingly aware that the hall was shaking. The tunnels were rumbling, and pebbles on the floor were bouncing.

“EXO?” yelled Albus, pressing a hand to the crystal wall. He put his eyes up against the glass, but the room and the wall were both too foggy to see anything on the other side. He fumbled around for the knife in his robe pocket, but then remembered he could summon it. “*Blade!*” he said, and the knife appeared in his hand. He slid it into the wall and started to cut a hole; the tremors faded
“We don’t know what’s in there,” said Mia, clutching Alec’s arm.

“And Exo’s in there with whatever’s in there!” said Albus. “I’ll handle it – I’m strong enough–”

“But there’s nothing on the other side of the wall!” said Barry. “I was sensing Exo there with my Supersensory Charm, and then he suddenly vanished. But nothing was ever in there with him! That means it’s either booby-trapped, or filled with really nasty plants!”

“Exo didn’t say he saw any plants,” said James.

The cut on Albus’s hand was burning again, as it had done when he’d carved a hole in the wall leading to Dismiusa’s forest clearing. He ignored it and sliced open a hole large enough for everyone to crawl through, and he jumped into the strange room.

It had long tables and chairs just like a classroom in Hogwarts, but it was very dimly lit. They seemed to be alone in the room.

“There’s nothing in here,” said Aidan, taking in the sights. “It’s all just desks and chairs. No parchment, no quills… and no plants, which is good…”

“And no Exo,” said Albus, panic growing.

“It’s creepily empty,” said Mia. “Where could he have gone? It’s no bigger than a classroom back at the castle.”

Albus ran up to the teacher’s desk in front. There were locked drawers all around; he inserted the knife into the locks and began turning. All of the drawers were empty, except for two. In one of them, he found a piece of parchment with several unlabeled scribbles on it, and he stowed it in his pocket. In the other, he found an empty syringe.

“What is this room?” wondered Albus aloud.

“A syringe?” asked James. “For what?”


“Maybe this was where Litinia was keeping the muls,” said Rose. “And I don’t know how they would have escaped, but if they were just sitting under Hogwarts since the thirteenth or fourteenth century, then it’s a wonder they didn’t get out sooner.”

“Er… room is shaking again,” said Mia, clutching Alec’s hand.

“Maybe we’re about to find where Exo went,” said James. “Brace yourselves!”

The room started shaking more and more furiously. They started spinning, and there was a rumble that grew to a roar, and then suddenly they were belched onto the floor of a more luminous room.

“Hey!”

Albus leapt up at Exo’s voice. Exo was on the other side of the room, feeling the wall. He ran over to the others, who were picking themselves off of the floor.

“Where are we?” asked Marco.
“Check the map to make sure,” said James, looking to Barry, “but I think we’re back in the castle. This is a classroom on the first floor.”

“I didn’t look out the door yet,” said Exo. “I was kind of afraid to open it. I wasn’t sure what was out there.”

“Well, it would only make sense,” said James. “Maybe Litinia built in a shortcut out of her chambers, just in case someone tried to trap her there…”

“Wait,” said Aidan, picking up the same confusion that Albus was getting. “Then why didn’t she escape this way when she was trapped down there for seven hundred years? If that really was a barrier passable only by people with Transfections, then we’ve already established that she could pass it!”

“People with Transfections,” said Rose. “Is Dismiusa even a person anymore?”

“No!” exclaimed Albus. “When I was talking to Professor Ramanu, she said that whatever was under the castle had ceased to be human seven hundred years ago! Maybe… maybe she unintentionally sealed herself in!”

“Her husband killed her,” noted Exo.

“And she came back because she had a Horcrux,” said Albus. “Maybe she accidentally sealed herself inside her chambers when she did that – and she’s been marinating in her own hate for that long, thinking somebody else sealed her away! But she didn’t realize that by losing her humanity, she lost her ability to pass through her own barriers!”

“Too many maybes,” said Aidan. “How about we focus on the real things we know for sure – like the fact that Dismiusa can be killed now?”

“We are indeed in the castle,” said Barry, pointing to the Marauder’s Map. “Should we tell the teachers that Dismiusa is mortal again?”

“I hope she’s mortal now,” said James. “Hopefully she didn’t have more than one Horcrux.”

“I don’t think anyone until Voldemort attempted more than one Horcrux,” said Albus. “And Litinia’s was a full seven hundred years ago.”

“So, Albus,” said James. “I saw you put something in your pocket right before we teleported out of the room – before you found the syringe. What was that?”

Albus took out the bit of parchment. He smoothed it out on his leg, and then held it out; it was a continuous, unmarked line, overlapping itself in places, looping around like slanted, curving handwriting.

“I feel like I’ve seen this before,” said Albus quietly.

“How did we get back, anyway?” asked Gavin. “Does anyone know? Exo, what happened before you got sent back here?”

“Out loud, I said, ‘This looks like a Hogwarts classroom,’” said Exo. “Just talking to myself. And then I got sent back.”

“I think Rose said the word ‘Hogwarts’ right before we got sent back here, too,” said Aidan. “That must be the trigger word.”
“We should really go let people know that we’re not dead,” said Mia, jabbing a thumb at the door.

“Right,” said James. “But they’re going to want to know things… and they’ll be asking us more questions. Everybody, it would be no use pretending we weren’t up to anything… so just tell them the truth, all right?”

“The whole truth?” said Albus.

“I doubt we’d get in trouble for doing ninety percent of the work to kill this bitch Dismiusa,” said James. “Probably special awards for services to the school, actually.”

“I’d like to see my name up on one of those trophies I’m always cleaning,” said Barry, nodding.

“We’ll just tell them everything,” said James. “Then we wait and see what the teachers are going to do. I doubt we could take on Dismiusa without them, but according to the prophecy… Al and I are supposed to finish the job.”

“I doubt they’d let us help or get in on the action at all,” said Albus.

“I doubt they can stop us, with you able to summon that knife,” said James. “They should know that by now. There’s nowhere they can contain us.”

“They could knock you unconscious,” observed Alec.

“Let’s not give them any ideas,” said James.

The siege alarm suddenly blared through the castle; Barry flipped to the front of the Marauder’s Map to view the main entrance of the castle.

“Do you think she knows we got her Horcrux?” asked Exo.

“GUYS – WE HAVE A SITUATION,” shouted Barry.

“What?” said James, leaping over to Barry and the Marauder’s Map; Barry pointed at the page.

Albus ran over to look, and gasped when he saw the name to which Barry was pointing: Litinia Darstary.

“Holy – she’s in the castle,” whispered James. “That’s exactly where we want her. We couldn’t get to her if she was in the forest, but she’s come here!”

“This still isn’t going to be easy!” said Aidan as they ran for the door.

“No, but we never expected it to be,” said James, throwing open the door; he ran outside and was promptly bowled over by Wilcox.

“WHAT IN THE–”

“Oh – hello, Professor, glad I ran into you!”

“JAMES? WHERE THE LIVING HELL HAVE YOU BEEN?”

“Short version, long version?”

“Short version, obviously – the essentials?”
“We’ve been down under the castle, getting rid of Litinia’s Horcrux for you.”

“What?!”

Albus and company went outside to join James; James showed Wilcox the shattered fossil rock, as well as the Sword of Gryffindor.

“WHERE THE HELL DID YOU GET THAT?”

“Sorting Hat,” said James. “But that’s part of the long version.”

“Horcruxes,” said Wilcox, his eye twitching, “have nasty defenses, or it defeats the purpose of having a safe container. How did you – what, ten of you? – get past the defenses that quickly? Without a single injury?!”

“Well, Albus cut his hand and forehead up pretty badly, but that’s also part of the long version,” said James. “Dismiusa’s defenses were set up by an incredibly powerful category of spell called the Devoctrices: only Dismiusa could–”

“The what?”

“The Devoctrices,” said James, raising his eyebrow as Wilcox paled. “Why, does that sound familiar?”

“Short version, please!” said Wilcox.

“Only Dismiusa’s blood could pass through the barrier,” said James. “Fortunately, Litinia Darstary is Dismiusa, and Mia is Litinia’s descendant–”

“What–”

“So Mia could pass through the barrier, and she brought back the Horcrux and I destroyed it, and then we found a secret chamber that teleported us back here,” said James. “So that was the super defense, but she didn’t foresee that her descendant would return to help destroy her. Otherwise the defenses were impenetrable, so she shouldn’t have needed anything else. As it is, we’ve destroyed the Horcrux. And then we happened to discover that Dismiusa is actually in the castle right now, so we should probably focus on that at this point in time.”

“How the bloody hell do you know that Dismiusa is–”

“Long version! Professor, she can be killed now. We have to take her down before she kills everyone of age in the castle like she’s sworn to do!”

“Then I’ll hear the full version some other time,” said Wilcox. “Do you know where she is?”

“She’s just come in the front entrance, sir,” said Barry. “I think she has some sort of mental connection to the Fokii, so the basilisk Fokii we killed in the catacombs probably alerted her that we were after her Horcrux.”

“You killed the basilisk?!” blurted Wilcox. “...Again?!”

“Let’s head to the main entrance!”

“No, not you!” said Wilcox. “You get back to the other Gryffindors. I will alert the other teachers. Stay out of this, for your own good!”
“With all due respect, Professor, if I were focused only on my own good, I would of course return to the hospital wing and stay put,” said James. “But for everyone else’s good, I think I’ll stay out here, and I think you know why.”

Wilcox shook his head, turned the direction he had been running, and restarted his charge towards the main entrance.

“Right behind you, sir,” said James, following Wilcox.

Albus ran after James, and the other eight followed the brothers. Albus drew his wands, and James drew his wand and the Sword of Gryffindor.

“Bet Gryffindor never thought his sword was going to go into combat against a Puff!” said James, brandishing the sword and grinning.

“So are Claws what you call Ravenclaws?” asked Albus. “And Dors are Gryffindors?”

“Gryffs are Gryffindors, but yes to the Claws,” said James.

“And what are Slytherins, then?”

“Dicks.”

Albus snorted.

James grinned and picked up the pace; they were almost to the main entrance of the castle.

Without warning, and though Albus wasn’t thinking about anything except reaching Dismiusa and taking her down, tears began streaming down his eyes. He wiped them off on the sleeve of his robe before James could see.

“Dismiusa isn’t here!” yelled Professor Longbottom as they approached; he was having a frantic conversation with Wilcox as they were fighting off tendrils of plants. “This is Vinesce! It’s a plant found all over the world; if there’s enough rain and sunshine and soil nutrition for an extended period of time, it can grow enough to cover a small island in days. If we don’t stop it now, it’ll fill the entire school!”

“This is Dismiusa!” hissed Barry to James. “The vines are labeled as Litinia! The map doesn’t know how to deal with it; there’s scattered letters of her name all over the place down here, but it’s definitely the letters of her name.”

“Professors, the vines are Dismiusa!” bellowed James. “She’s a Botanimagus!”

“Merlin’s trousers, a Botanimagus?” yelped Professor Longbottom. “Well, that would explain its sentience! Usually it isn’t this aggressive. It just expands into whatever is around.”

A vine whipped its way at James, apparently recognizing him; he swung the sword and sliced the end right off of the vine; it flew into the wall and there was a high-pitched noise like a banshee scream.

“That sword’s infused with basilisk venom!” said Professor Longbottom. “That’s going to poison her, isn’t it?”

“Not if she’s a goddamn plant!” roared Wilcox, sending a blast of Frostflame into a patch of vines closer to the door.
“Right,” said Professor Longbottom, sending a wave of energy that shredded the vines in front of him into confetti.

All of the teachers and many of the seventh and sixth year students were around this patch of vines, sending out every effort they had, yet the vines were growing faster than they were being destroyed. James joined in with the spellwork, and had to stow the sword because he didn’t want to get up close enough to use it.

The vines lashed back all of a sudden, and wrapped around a single point. The hundreds of yards of vines melded down into a single human form. As everyone stopped and stared, Dismiusa appeared in front of them with a burst of green light, snarling with yellow teeth.

Without waiting a second, Wilcox began throwing spell after spell at Dismiusa. She ducked and dodged most of them, and absorbed some of them into her palm. She leaped backwards and aimed her hand at the top of the doorway, and a blast of green energy shattered the stone there; the pieces spread all over the floor, some of them striking students and faculty so hard that wands were dropped.

Now that the doorway was larger, bigger creatures could fit through; three Warkabulls burst in, roaring. They stampeded towards the castle defenders.

“JUMP!” roared Professor Desulgon.

Dozens of voices cast Salimotor and they all leapt onto the second floor; Albus did the same, but mistakenly bounded all the way over the open stairwell area to the seventh floor. He aimed his spellwork down from above, but had to run back down the stairs when he realized it was too difficult to aim.

The Warkabulls were running rampant; the stone walls on their heads were almost all Albus could see as they bashed their way into walls and chased the people who hadn’t been in prime position to use Salimotor. Meanwhile, Dismiusa was throwing wandless magic at everyone she could see, and it was incredibly powerful; students and faculty alike were getting thrown hundreds of feet backwards into walls.

“Time to use it!” yelled Professor Longbottom, and Wilcox nodded. “PIERTOTUM LOCOMOTOR!”

All around them, the statues on the sides of Hogwarts leapt out of their stations. As Albus ran down the stairs, the statues suddenly joined him, cascading like a stone waterfall to the first and second floors.

“HOGWARTS IS THREATENED!” Professor Longbottom was shouting to the statues. “MAN THE BOUNDARIES! PROTECT US! DO YOUR DUTY TO OUR SCHOOL!”

Albus hit the second floor with most of the fighters. He started firing spells next to Louis, who tousled his hair and grinned.

“Where’ve you been?” said Louis. “You aren’t one to miss the action!”

“I was smack in the middle of the action,” replied Albus.

The statues began swarming the Warkabulls below them; Professor Longbottom was laughing exuberantly. “I’ve always wanted to use that spell!” he exclaimed.

Suddenly, five yelling statues bounded over their heads, onto the back of the nearest Warkabull.
They sank their axes into its back, and their swords into its neck; the Warkabull threw them off and turned around in a rage, stomping down onto the statues with powerful legs, shattering them on impact. It threw its head down in a headbutt, smashing the stone wall on its head directly into the ground, and two more statues were crushed.

While the Warkabull had flipped the stone wall onto the ground, a slightly pinker part of its neck was exposed. Sensing weakness, Albus and several others fired Stunners, Full Body-Binds, and several hard-hitting curses into its fleshy spot. Quite unexpectedly, the Warkabull exploded violently; and pieces of gray elephant meat went flying into their ranks.

“Albus!” shouted James, running over. “Albus – I have an idea – this is a nonverbal spell, the one I used on you back in the hospital wing when we had that argument: **Levicorpus! Use it on a Warkabull!”**

“**Levi –”**

“Nonverbal! And flick the wand upwards!”

**Levicorpus!** thought Albus, following his brother’s instruction.

The spell hit the Warkabull high in the hind leg; it lifted slightly off of the ground, but the magic-resistant hide took out the brunt of the spell, and it fell back down with a crash.

“Again, Albus, and focus all of your energy into it!” said James. “You were getting it.”

Albus fired another spell, but the Warkabull turned itself around, and the stone wall on its head took the spell, which completely resisted the effects.

“I’ll run to the other side and distract it, and try to get it to turn around,” said James, heading along the railing to the other side of the stairwells.

Albus cast his gaze below once more. With a snarl, Dismiusa had twisted and morphed back into her Vinesce vines Botanimagus form. Like a frog’s tongue, a cluster of vines lashed out from the center, and smashed into the railing of the second floor, dragging someone back down–

Dismiusa had noticed James.

Albus gasped as he recognized his brother amidst the tangle of tendrils. James was struggling, trying to swing the Sword of Gryffindor at the vines, but one vine swiped it right out of his hand and redirected it, plunging it towards James–

The first thing Albus thought when pointing his wand at James was, **Levicorpus!**

James flew up into the air, torn free of all of the vines holding him, and he dangled just above the seventh floor.

“How do I undo that?” yelled Albus up six floors.

“The counter-jinx is **Liberacorpus**, but I don’t fancy the fall!”

Suddenly, there was a vacuum like the force of a hurricane. Whirlworts had entered, and were sucking everybody down. James was slowly descending from above.

“Whirlworts!” shouted Uncle Charlie. “Throw something unpleasant in its mouth! Like, fire or something!”
But Albus had only just aimed his wand at the Whirlwort when a crystal cylinder appeared out of nowhere, wrapping around the entire stairwell, closing them off from helping the people who had been sucked in.

“No!” yelled someone from the other side. “How do we get through?!”

Albus reached into his pocket for the knife, but accidentally grabbed the parchment he’d found in Dismiusa’s shortcut back to the castle. With a jolt, he remembered what the markings meant.

He took out the parchment and pressed the tip of his wand to the crystal wall. He looked at the markings on the parchment, and traced the strange markings, like curved handwriting. He remembered when the Fokii took his wand and forced him to carve the same path in the wall in front of Dismiusa – and then he finished the pattern and the crystal cylinder shattered.

“How in the – never mind!” shouted Louis, who had been watching Albus. “Where’s James?!”

The Whirlworts were still inhaling strongly, and James had been sucked almost all the way to the ground. A vine whipped out and wrapped itself around James’s neck, not dragging him, but choking the life out of him. Another cluster of vines was pummeling Wilcox underneath a shield the Headmaster had put up; the two remaining Warkabulls were also stomping the shield with brutal force.

“Diffindo!”

Tabby Floren was hacking at the vines around James, trying to free her boyfriend. Albus joined in, and one swift Severing Charm cut all of the vines under James. Dismiusa, clearly agitated by this, morphed back into her humanoid form, and a blast of energy knocked Albus over backwards. Professor Longbottom and Professor Desulgon managed to injure the Whirlworts enough for them to leave, but then, through the open door, a dozen small, furry creatures rushed in – muls. Albus watched in horror as one of them leapt into the air and just missed his brother’s hair, and then one of the Warkabulls left Wilcox’s shield and ran in that direction. It charged towards James and swung its head hard; James was hit full-force by the swinging stone wall and careened into the larger stone wall of Hogwarts, sliding unconscious to the ground.

Clayton Slater darted past Albus in a blur, and propelled himself to the ground. He grabbed James, and placed James on a broken piece of a Hogwarts wall; he propelled the piece of wall into the air, landing the rock and its passenger safe on the second floor.

Clay had diverted his attention from his surroundings for too long; two muls jumped towards him, and their jaws opened wide to sink into his arm and leg. Clay toppled down onto the floor, face-down. The muls detached themselves and left him lying there.

The two mulunctapoli which had absorbed Clay’s magic then began using it; Albus had forgotten they were capable of this. With just their stares, they lifted James’s body back off of the first floor, and James was magically thrown right back at Dismiusa. She caught James, still unconscious, by the neck.

“NO!” screamed Albus, propelling himself over the railing and aiming both of his wands. “Frisorba Vitigida!”

The Frostflame flashed through the air like a lightning bolt. Dismiusa looked over and held out her hand to absorb the energy, but she failed in totality. The spell fueled by the power of Swait’s Bloodblade, which was already an abnormally powerful spell, swept over her body and James’s, and encased them both in ice before Albus even landed on the floor below. James and Dismiusa
were sealed together, floating above the ground as the war continued to rage below.

No, thought Albus. No. This can’t be happening. To destroy her – do I have to – what will happen to James?

Albus tried to remember the prophecy. How could they break it? It had to be possible – just because someone said it didn’t mean it had to come true, did it?

The ice was starting to shake and crack. He had to make the decision now. Only he and James could destroy Dismiusa – or was that true?

“PROFESSOR WILCOX!” screamed Albus, running over to the Warkabulls, which were both attacking him again. “PROFESSOR–”

“Little busy!” barked Wilcox.

“Oh, get out of here!” Albus shouted at the Warkabulls, waving his hand.

Something in his hand snapped, like a popping joint. Both of the Warkabulls suddenly stopped their assault. They slammed back onto the ground, and looked at Albus. And then they turned and walked out of the castle.

“Albus,” said Wilcox, “is this part of the long version too??”

“No,” responded Albus. “I have no idea – but Professor, you have to deal the last blow! You’ve got to – the prophecy says James or I has to defeat Dismiusa, and that one of us would die doing it – but I haven’t defeated her yet – she’s about to break free–”

He pointed back at the ice, which was fracturing all over; it would shatter any moment.

“But if it’s you who defeats her, then the prophecy doesn’t come true!” continued Albus. “Neither James nor I defeats her, and so neither James nor I would have to die – please, Professor, you’ve got to–”

“Avada Kedavra!”

So close to the wind of death, Albus’s senses heightened, as they had the first time he’d seen the spell in action. He turned around to watch. Like a gunshot, the cold green jet of the Killing Curse pierced the ice in a single hole and emerged only in a single hole; a second later, the ice exploded. James’s limp body dropped to the floor, but Professor Westerling cast a rapid Cushioning Charm. Where Dismiusa had been encased in the ice, an explosion of flower petals littered the room. They fluttered to the ground gently as the muls tucked their tails between their legs and fled out the still open door. The plants inside the castle all withered and expired before their eyes, turning brown in an instant, and there were groans and slams from all around as trees toppled over in the forest around them.

“She’s gone,” said Barry, appearing suddenly by Albus’s side with the Marauder’s Map opened; he tucked it away before any of the teachers looked.

“Homenum Revelio,” said Professor Desulgon.

A small red-orange halo appeared over James’s head; it was tiny, but it was staying steady in the air. Professor Longbottom scooped James up and carried him in the direction of the hospital wing.

Albus stared at his headmaster, waiting for the reaction. The battle had been won – Dismiusa had
been obliterated – but he had cast the most evil of Dark curses to end it. It wasn’t clear what else he could have done, but it couldn’t have been easy on him. He took a deep breath as Wilcox stood up tall to speak.

“Close the door,” said Wilcox simply, rotating around and beginning to clear the debris.

Albus looked around at the decaying petals scattered all over the floor, and then back to Wilcox.

“Professor…”

“I’m sorry you had to see me do that,” said Wilcox, his shoulders sagging; now it was beginning to come out. “I’m sorry I had to do it at all.”

“It was the only way to truly end it,” said Albus. “There was no way to contain her.”

Wilcox nodded. “I know.”

“Thank you.”

Wilcox nodded again. “Albus, when you’ve seen enough death… you realize it’s everywhere. Omnipresent in life. And sometimes it just has to happen, and there’s no way around that. When you realize this fact… you embrace the power of knowing that death is sometimes for the greater good. Death in and of itself is not evil.”

“I know,” said Albus, smiling. “I was raised by the Master of Death, of course.”

“Right,” said Wilcox. “Still, I feel as though I must… explain something.”

“I understand,” said Albus.

“I… would never advocate the use of the Killing Curse on anyone except for the most extreme of circumstances,” said Wilcox. “But, of course…”

“This was the most extreme of circumstances,” finished Albus.

“Yes,” said Wilcox. “I would have been a murderer if she had broken free and strangled your brother… but that time, I would have been responsible for the death of an innocent.”

“I’m going to go visit my brother,” said Albus. “But Professor… remember… she wasn’t human anymore. We have proof of that fact – Professor Ramanu proved that she wasn’t human. With Arithmancy. You’re not a murderer.”

Wilcox smiled weakly. “Well… thank you, Albus,” he said softly. “That… that does clear my conscience…”

“You’re welcome, sir,” said Albus. “Thank you… Thank you again.”

“You’re welcome, too, Albus. Go relax. It’s over.”

Albus grinned and raced off down the hall to the hospital wing. He burst through the door and quickly espied Lily and Professor Longbottom at James’s bedside. Lily’s eyes were glistening, but she was smiling widely.

James looked over at Albus and smiled as well. “Hey, little brother,” he said. “So… it’s over, is it?”
“It’s over,” said Albus.

“And… I’m not dead?”

“Doesn’t look like it from where I’m standing,” said Albus.

James sniggered. “Suck it, Fate,” he said softly, throwing two middle fingers at the ceiling. “Suck. It.”
“And that’s the whole story,” finished James.

Wilcox nodded, but Albus felt slightly guilty; it hadn’t been quite the entire story. He had left out the Marauder’s Map and was hoping Wilcox wouldn’t ask how they found out that Dismiusa was in the castle.

“Er, but how did you find out that Dismiusa was in the castle, again?” asked Wilcox, raising an eyebrow.

“That piece of parchment in my pocket,” said Albus, substituting one piece of parchment for another. “The one I found in the hidden chamber that showed the way to shatter the walls — it also… it… had a little — green writing. The writing appeared when we were leaving. It said, ‘Dismiusa is coming.’”

James gave Albus an appreciative nod for bailing him out on that one. Wilcox nodded, but Albus could tell that Wilcox was quite aware of his lie. However, he didn’t ask any further questions.

“I have to say, boys,” said Wilcox. He didn’t shake his head, or give a little laugh, or heave a sigh; every amazed gesture seemed to have been used in regards to Albus and James already. “I just don’t understand how you accomplish these things. I would say the both of you are going to be killed someday, but seeing as how you seem to stumble away unscathed from everything, I’d say you should be pretty comfortable walking across molten lava at this point. Honestly, Fate herself can lay claim to one of your lives and you can still squirm through her grasp!”

Albus blushed slightly. “Well… I don’t think we could have possibly done it without Swait’s knife.”

“Yes, who knew?” said Wilcox, examining the knife on his desk. “I wonder how Swait managed something like this. You’ll have to speak with him again. Maybe you can get more information.”

“Maybe,” said Albus. “But it would have to be after… the day after my cuts close. I got my cuts on the same day as Swait.”

“Oh, that’s right,” said Wilcox. “He’s Confunded, isn’t he? He’s forgotten he owns a knife… and we can’t let him remember until those cuts close up for good. How long does that take?”

“We think twenty-three days, sir,” said James.

Wilcox blinked. “Just how do you know that, again?”

“The number twenty-three,” said James. “Like the list we found in Litinia’s chamber with the Horcrux.”

“Twenty-three?” asked Wilcox.

“Oh,” said James. “Forgot to tell you this part.”

“Sounds like an important part to have forgotten….”

Albus let James take the reins on explaining this one, too, because with the Fidelius Charm still on him, he wasn’t going to be able to tell the whole story.
“It was only important in terms of information,” said James. “It wasn’t so immediately important at the time. We found a little piece of parchment inside the room with the Horcrux. It was a list which had twenty-three possible slots, but only four of them were filled in. They were… The names were… ‘Barricant,’ ‘Superstorm,’ er… ‘Darkriver,’ and… er… help me out, Albus?”

“‘Vivertain,’” said Albus.

James scratched his head. “Er…”

“I said, ‘Vivertain,’” said Albus.

“Er… I think it started with a ‘V…’ er… oh, right – ‘Vivertain’ was the last one! Thanks ever so much for the help, Albus.”

Albus grumbled and leaned back in his chair.

“Three of those were crossed off,” said James as Wilcox’s eyes grew wider and wider in fascination. “‘Barricant,’ ‘Superstorm,’ and ‘Vivertain’ were crossed off. We think those are individual spells of a category called the Devoctrices. Litinia told us she’d used a spell called the Superstorm Devoctrix, and that was what—”

The door opened rather quickly, and Professor Desulgon marched in.

“Hello, Dalton,” said Wilcox, his eyes narrowing. “Have you heard of this new fad called ‘knocking?’ I’ll give you a hint – knocking doesn’t consist of standing outside with your ear to the door. How long were you there?”

“Pardon me,” said Professor Desulgon, backing up to the door and knocking upon it; he then walked back up to Wilcox. “But I thought you should know that the castle is under siege again.”

“What?!” yelped Wilcox, standing up. “From what?!”

“From hundreds of anxious parents and guardians,” said Professor Desulgon, and Wilcox slumped back into his chair. “They’re flooding the castle to make sure their precious offspring are intact. And I think you’ll be getting a personal visit from one of them sometime soon.”

“Hah? Why’s that?”

As Wilcox asked, he got his answer. A manic woman with black hair streaked with white burst into Wilcox’s office; Albus didn’t immediately recognize her, but eventually realized that it was Mrs. Pierce.

“You ALLOWED MY CHILD TO DIE!” she shrieked. “YOU DECIDED TO BYPASS HIS FAIR TRIAL, DID YOU? NO ONE WOULD CARE IF YOU THREW HIM OUT INTO THE FOREST TO DIE?”

“Greta,” said Wilcox, standing up. “This isn’t the time for such—”

“You’VE CROSSED THE LINE, HELIO. YOU FIRST CROSSED IT WHEN YOU TURNED TO THE MUGGLE-LOVERS AND THE FILTHY-BLOODED PIGS, AND NOW YOU’VE REALLY DONE IT, AND YOU’D BETTER WATCH YOUR BACK – YOU THINK YOU CAN KILL MY CHILD AND GET AWAY WITH—”

“Your son was a murderer, Greta, and he as good as took his own life,” said Wilcox, surprisingly calm. “I didn’t need to organize an execution. But may I ask – what is your logic in regards to the
death of family? You didn’t turn against Gallen Ingot when Ingot murdered your husband’s brother. And your brother-in-law didn’t even betray Ingot. May I ask why you didn’t storm up to Ingot and declare that he watch his back?”

Greta had stopped listening; her eyes had fallen upon Albus and James, and her wand had emerged from her sleeve.

Professor Desulgon aimed his wand at Greta from behind. “Lower your wand, Mrs. Pierce,” he growled, “or I will lower your body onto the floor.”

“Go on,” said Wilcox, his wand also directed at Greta. “Try and attack them, and see what happens to you. I assure you that you would undergo a fair trial if you were to murder them.”

Albus kept his hand steady on his own wand, ready to rip it out if needed.

Greta shook her head. “No,” she said, stowing her wand again, and they relaxed but tried not to show it. “No – in time, you too will die. In time.”

“I’d highly recommend against death threats, if you want to keep the little respect you’ve retained,” said Wilcox. “Just a suggestion.”

Greta stormed out of the office.

“I wonder if she’ll still send Red here,” said Wilcox after she had left. “Or if he’ll transfer to Durmstrang or another school… perhaps Hextus Horra.”

“Oh, I really hope he goes across the Atlantic,” said James. “Hextus Horra is in America, isn’t it? That would be wonderful.”

Professor Desulgon, visibly relieved at Greta’s departure, also turned to leave the office. “There’s going to be a lot of parents in the castle,” he said as he exited. “Many of them probably taking their kids and leaving.”

“I know,” called Wilcox after him. “But what would we do about N.E.W.T. and O.W.L. tests if we closed the school? I think we’re going to have to try and get things back into routine, as preposterous as that sounds. Those in their exam years will simply have to work harder.”

“That’s asking a lot.”

“It’s more to ask them to stay another year.”

“True.”

Professor Desulgon closed the door.

Wilcox waited about ten seconds, and then he waved his wand and opened the door again; Professor Desulgon was not there.

“Well, I’ll ask you boys more about this later,” said Wilcox, “but right now I’ve got to deal with some probably crazed parents. If I’m lucky, I won’t need rabies shots afterwards. Get back to your dormitories, okay? There are too many people in the castle and I’m still worried about your safety. Besides, that’s probably where your parents will be headed.”

Albus smiled at the thought of seeing his parents again. He agreed with Wilcox – to Gryffindor Tower was better than wherever Greta Pierce might be.
“Wait, one more question,” he said at the same time as James said the exact same words. They looked at each other and laughed.

“You two really are brothers,” said Wilcox, smiling. “All right, one more quick question each.”

“Are we still going to play for the Quidditch Cup?” asked James. “And seeing as I helped kill the green bitch, could you revoke my ban on Quidditch?”

Albus burst out laughing. “You would be worried about that!”

Wilcox put a hand on his forehead and chuckled as he smoothed back his hair. “James, don’t worry; you and Albus and all eight of the rest of you are getting special awards for services to the school.”

Albus’s face lit up; so did James’s. They flashed grins at each other.

“So yes, I will allow you to play in the Quidditch final,” said Wilcox. “If we’re doing any more Quidditch, that is. We’ll see about that. But I do want to return things to as normal a state as possible, so slowly reincorporating all aspects of school is my goal… I don’t see why not.”

James pumped his fist in victory.

“Er… my question… what day is it?” asked Albus, laughing.

Wilcox laughed even harder. “Oh, yes, no one really knew for most of that ordeal, did they? Well, Albus, it is currently Monday, April the twenty-sixth. I’m thinking we start classes again a week from today, which would be May the third. And by my count, since you gave yourself that cut three days ago, you’d lose the knife’s power on May the sixteenth. I’ll set you up with an appointment with Swait then.”

“Excellent, thank you,” said Albus.

He was mostly interested in that appointment so he could get his hands on the knife again. He was starting to get used to this surge of power.

“Unfortunately, the dates of the Pre-O.W.L.s and the Pre-N.E.W.T.s have already passed,” said Wilcox.

“What do you mean, unfortunately we can’t take another test?” said James. “Well, thank you, Professor… I’m going to go say hi to my dad. Didn’t think I’d get to do that again.”

Albus waved goodbye to Wilcox and followed his brother; Wilcox followed them down the stairs but broke off to go to the first floor and greet the families while Albus and James went up to Gryffindor Tower.

“What’s the password?” asked Albus as they came upon the Fat Lady; James shrugged.

“The password is ‘please,’” said the Fat Lady.

“Please, may we go in?” asked Albus, flashing a grin.

The Fat Lady nodded and swung her portrait open.

The Gryffindor common room was packed with parents hugging their children. Albus saw Uncle Bill and Aunt Fleur with Louis, Uncle George and Aunt Angelina with Freddie and Roxanne, Uncle Percy and Aunt Audrey with Lucy, and Uncle Ron and Aunt Hermione with Hugo and Rose.
Albus and James wandered over to Hugo and Rose.

“Hey, there’s my favorite spitting images!” roared Uncle Ron, standing up and collecting them both in a hug. “You two are unbelievable. Better than we were, aren’t they, dear?”

“I’d be a hypocrite for admonishing them,” said Aunt Hermione, “so I won’t… But I will point out that you really could have gotten yourselves killed—”

“Or worse, expelled,” said Uncle Ron, clapping his wife on the back. “Don’t worry about admonishing, it’s why we love you.”

“Where’s Mum and Dad?” asked Albus.

“Ah, I see,” said Uncle Ron. “We’re not good enough for you. I get it, that’s fine. Your mum and dad wanted to go collect Lily from Ravenclaw and then find you. They should be here very soon.”

“And they wanted to stop by to see Clayton in the hospital wing,” said Aunt Hermione. “That’s just so awful, what happened to him… so incredibly awful.”

“I think he’ll get a comfortable life courtesy of the Auror Office’s disability insurance,” said Ron. “But I really can’t imagine going the rest of my life without being able to use magic.”

Albus wandered over to Exo, who was sitting alone in front of the fire while almost everyone else was with family.

“Hey, Exo,” said Albus. “Today is the twenty-sixth of April… we have a full month to plan for our trip.”

“I almost forgot about that,” said Exo, “with all that’s been going on. Where are your parents?”

As he said it, Albus’s parents walked into the Gryffindor common room with Lily. Wilcox followed them in.

“Albus! James!” said Harry as James charged their father. Albus waited for Exo to get up, and then hugged his father with intensity.

“Exo,” said Wilcox, waving him over. “Come with me, please.”

“Right,” grumbled Exo. “Full moon tonight. Well, at least we got some good Wolfsbane delivered, finally.”

Wilcox and Exo left. Albus and James hugged their mother for a long time before James finally broke away and asked, “So what happened to the barrier around the castle?”

“It just disappeared,” said Harry, shrugging. “We were worried it disappeared for a bad reason, like Dismiusa finishing her work or something… luckily, that was not the case. I never would have thought you two would be the ones to stop her.”

“Hey, give credit to our friends,” said James. “But most of the credit goes to Albus… and Swait.”

“Elbad Swait?” asked Harry. “The man who broke into Hogwarts right before this all happened? We were searching his place frantically after the barrier first went up – we thought he must have had something to do with it. What did he do?”

James dove back into an explanation of the whole story. They chatted for some time between events of the story, and then when James finally finished spinning the tale, they simply sat in
“I think you guys are stupid but awesome,” said Lily to James and Albus, breaking the silence, and they all laughed.

“How can I visit Janelle?” asked Albus.

Harry smiled. “We’ll try to arrange something very soon for you two.”

“So what’s going on outside?” asked James.

“We’ve been focused on the school for a while,” said Harry, “but we’ve got some developments on the Sandbloods. We’re not allowed to talk about these things with anyone else yet, but you may hear some good news on that front soon.”

“Especially with Clayton’s offer, the outlook is good,” said Ginny.

“Clay?” asked Albus, surprised. “What about him?”

“He said he’d be willing to infiltrate the Sandbloods,” said Harry. “To get information on them from the inside.”

“Really?” asked James.

“Yes,” said Harry. “He said he wants to make the best of a bad situation. Now that he’s become a Squib, and he was already in our trusted employ before this occurred… he can infiltrate them. If he’d only been pretending to be a Squib, he wouldn’t be able to do this, because they would be able to sense his magic. But now that he really is… he can join them, incognito, and tell us what’s going on. We can’t disguise him magically without setting off some alarm that they have, but Clay was telling us about how Muggles can change their appearance without magic. And since Clay was born to Muggles, he’s familiar with all their ways like a Squib would be, and he can blend in with the Squibs, who have lived their whole lives without using magic. But don’t tell anyone this – I really shouldn’t be telling you, but given that you’ve done more for the Auror Office than most Aurors, I feel that I can trust you. We can’t let this information about Clay spread, or his safety could be in danger when the Sandbloods start looking for who the imposter is.”

“We won’t tell,” said Lily.

“Hey, Dad,” said James. “Al and I are getting special awards for services to the school!”

Harry smiled even wider. “I’m not surprised,” he said. “You did quite the favor for the school. I may have saved your mother and saved the school from closing, but you saved everyone. I’m so proud.”

“Rose is getting the award, too,” said Albus. “So is Exo, and Aidan and Alec, and Mia Moon, and Barry, Gavin, and Marco.”

“Wow,” said Harry. “I know all of them except Mia Moon. Are you friends with her? Who is she?”

“Mia is Alec’s girlfriend,” said Albus, “and Litinia’s descendant. We only figured it out because of her eyes.”

“Why, what do her eyes look like?” asked Ginny.

“One is blue,” said Albus, “and one is purple.”
“Two different-colored eyes?” said Harry. “I only knew of a few people with two differently colored eyes.”

“Who’s that?” asked Lily.

“Gallen Ingot, for one,” said Harry.

Albus gasped so loudly that most conversations in the room stopped and looked over to him.

“Dad,” said James quietly. “Is Gallen Ingot’s power… still unexplained?”

“Well, yes,” said Harry. “But now we think maybe the legends of Ingot finding Dismiusa may have been true.”

“I don’t think so,” said James. “Dismiusa was locked under the school for seven hundred years. But I think we might have found out what made Gallen Ingot so powerful… and it might have been the same thing that made Dismiusa powerful.”

“What?” said Harry, suddenly alert. “How did you figure this out?!”

“It’s a long story,” said James. “Have you ever heard of a kind of spell called a Devocrix?”

Harry frowned. “A kind of spell… like Charms and Transfigurations? What do you mean?”

“I guess that’s what I mean,” said James. “I’m still unclear on it, too. The Devoctrices are a category of spell that’s super-powerful. There’s one that Litinia said she attempted… the Superstorm Devocrix. It’s a spell she said would allow her to control and command the natural forces.”

“Tell me more,” said Harry, leaning forward.

“There’s still one part I don’t understand,” said Aidan, popping over to the Gryffindor table at breakfast the next morning. “The Warkabulls. When you said you just waved your arm and they went away. What do you think could have happened there?”

“I don’t know,” said Albus. “But I felt something odd inside my hand. There was a flash of something weird inside my head. It felt a little bit like when I read minds.”

“You don’t think…”

“Maybe I mind-controlled the Warkabulls.”

“They do have the smallest brain-to-body ratio of any known magical animal that ever lived,” said Rose. “A brain that tiny would probably be easy to control.”

“I don’t know if it works like that, but that seems to be the only plausible explanation I would be able to fathom,” said Aidan. “Oh, and there’s something else interesting you should probably know that happened after Dismiusa went down…”

“What’s that?” asked Rose.

“Mia’s eyes,” said Aidan, “are no longer blue and purple. Just blue.”

Wilcox had quite a job for the next several weeks, calming everyone down and assuring parents
that their students could stay in school safely for the rest of the year. They brought in a dozen more
Aurors to give a feeling of better security. Harry knew a few of them, and told Albus that if he
needed something, he should ask the stern-looking Auror woman named Adelaide, who he called
“Brickface” for some reason. That was just as well; he felt awkward around Alana now, and Rohan
was always snogging Lucy.

True to his word, Wilcox got classes up and running, and they had very awkward classes for two
weeks. True to his word again, they played the Quidditch finals. Slytherin’s and Hufflepuff’s
match was inconsequential, as Gryffindor and Ravenclaw were too far in the forefront, but
Hufflepuff sealed their third-place ranking and Slytherin’s fourth-place ranking. Alana looked put
out, which Albus couldn’t help but smile about. He looked for Scorpius and Eftan in the crowd, but
found only Scorpius. Eftan hadn’t attended the game. He wondered how their friendship had held
up since it began before the descent of Dismiusa.

“You’re speaking with Swait tomorrow?” asked Exo as they left the game.

“Yes,” said Albus. “After that, he’ll be moved to a secure prison. Wilcox had only him kept here so
that I could talk with him… and because he might flip out if he was moved, with how many times
he’s been Confunded.”

“Yeah, I hear sensory overstimulation is detrimental to someone who’s been Confunded recently,”
said Aidan.

“You’re Confunding me just by talking,” said Alec.

“Well, I hope you learn a little more about what the knife is all about,” said Aidan. “Are you
planning to cut yourself again?”

“If Wilcox gives me the knife, yes,” said Albus.

“Do you think he will?”

“I have no idea,” said Albus. “He would probably suspect that I’ll give myself another cut. But
maybe he won’t care if I do.”

“And you really need to get another cut, and you really need to hope the knife still works,” said
Aidan. “Right? Seeing as your cut power runs out tomorrow.”

“Yeah,” said Albus. “The lunar eclipse is in eleven days.”

“And they still haven’t found Solomon,” said Exo.

“They haven’t found Siobor, either,” said Aidan.

“Well, he found us,” said Alec.

“You’re going to have to be really careful, with Siobor out there,” said Aidan. “Especially knowing
that he’s after Exo. If he managed to get into the castle, he may very well manage to find you.”

“I’ll try as hard as I can to get the knife,” said Albus.

“Didn’t Solomon say on the note for Exo not to bring anyone except himself?” said Aidan.

“Yes,” said Exo. “But Albus has an Invisibility Cloak.”

“Do you think it would fit all of us?” asked Alec.
“Are you following him again?” laughed Exo.

“Well not?” said Alec. “We haven’t died yet.”

“You really don’t have to,” said Exo. “Especially seeing as it’s going to be really hard to hide three people…”

“I don’t think you guys should come,” said Albus quietly.

Aidan and Alec stared Albus down to determine whether he was serious.

“I’m sorry, guys,” said Albus. “But all three of us would have to stay under the Cloak to not scare Solomon away. Even two people would make it impossible to move. Not to mention that we’re going to have to take the Loch Stock Liner, and it’s already going to be suspicious with Harry Potter’s son there – I don’t want you two getting in serious trouble.”

“How are you going to convince them nothing’s amiss?” asked Aidan.

“I know Milo Melaenk pretty well by now,” said Albus. “I could get him to keep quiet for the day.”

“And you don’t want us to come.”

“Sorry,” said Albus. “But it would just be really hard to sneak four of us out and to New Zealand, and especially by Solomon. He’s a master of Defense Against the Dark Arts. He might even know I’m there under the Cloak – what would he think if there were three of us?”

“The same thing he’d think about you,” argued Aidan, looking offended.

“But I’m Harry Potter’s son,” said Albus.

“You would pull that card,” growled Aidan.

“It’s true,” said Albus. “I probably won’t even be under the Cloak when we go to find him. He’d have a way to find me because he’s terrified of being caught. If we’re honest – and he’ll probably test to make sure it’s me – then he might show up. But we can’t take the risk that he doesn’t show up. We can’t take that risk with Exo’s fate.”

Aidan shook his head. “Fine,” he said. “Fine. We won’t go.”

“I’m sorry,” said Albus. “You know I want you guys to go with us…”

“I understand,” said Aidan. “I can still be disappointed that I can’t help my friend, though.”

“Have you been talking about this?” asked Alec, looking to Exo.

“No,” said Exo, his eyes watering as he looked at Albus.

“I’m really, really sorry,” said Albus, “but I’ve been thinking about this for a while. You know, that if there was a way—”

“Albus, we understand,” said Aidan. “Alec and I will be there for you next time.”

Albus nodded. “Thank you.”

“Unless you die and we aren’t there to save you,” said Alec. “Just saying…”
Albus sighed.

“No, we’ll be okay, Albus,” said Aidan. “Don’t feel bad about what you have to do.”

No matter how many times Aidan said it, his words felt hollow, and they were carving out Albus’s already hollow stomach more every time.

“We’ve just revived him from his Confunded state,” said Wilcox, a hand on the doorknob. “So don’t make him think… too hard. Okay?”

“Okay,” said Albus, his heart beating extremely fast. “Can… Can I… have the knife, Professor?”

“Oh, yes, of course,” said Wilcox, handing the Bloodblade to Albus with a smile. “I almost forgot. Though I’ll have to ask you not to cut yourself with it… I hear you’ve been more than a little destructive in your classes.”

“Yeah,” said Albus, laughing, remembering his attempts at a defensive spell in Defense Against the Dark Arts that week – he’d blown half the classroom apart while just trying to make the ground pulse.

He realized that, if he were to cut himself again, and if the knife were to work again, he would still be overpowered in the classroom, and Wilcox would realize quickly that he had cut himself again. But it wasn’t like Wilcox could then take the power away from him – he would just claim it was by accident, or another unexplained phenomenon.

Albus took the Bloodblade and Wilcox opened the door to Swait, who was again chained to a desk.

“Ah,” grumbled Swait. “Wonderful. I finally get to use my damn voice again and this is ‘oo they send to talk to me. Lovely.”

“Sorry about the poor treatment,” said Albus, “but given your escape attempt, we couldn’t really take any chances. Where were you planning to go, anyway? What were you planning to do once you got out? The castle was surrounded by a barrier.”

“Thank you for confirmin’,” said Swait. “I was well aware of that.”

“But you still tried to escape,” said Albus. “Would your knife have cut through the barrier around the castle, if we’d tried?”

Swait shrugged.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” said Albus. “Well, that would have been a good bit of hindsight. But I’ll also run that by Wilcox – this may give us a hint as to how Siobor got through the barrier as well. So, thank you for the help.”

Swait grunted.

“You’ve been Silenced for too long – have you forgotten how to talk?” asked Albus, holding the knife up. “Look, I’m impatient and I need some information from a friend, so if you can help me it would be much to your benefit. I want to know what this knife is.”

“A piece of metal used for cuttin’,” replied Swait.

“Cutting what?”
“People.”

“I don’t know about that,” said Albus. “Lumos.”

The tip of his wand lit dimly.

“Nox,” he said.

“What’re you doin’ now?” mumbled Swait.

Albus lifted the knife to his palm and reopened the previous cut.

“Lumos,” he said again.

The wand didn’t light any brighter than before.

“Nox,” said Albus, flicking out the wand. “But you don’t seem to be too worked up about the fact that your knife has run out of juice. I have a theory I’d like to run by you and I’m hoping you’ll be kind enough to tell me if I’m right.”

“Go ahead, if you want,” said Swait. “I can’t stop you.”

“That, and you want to know how many people know the truth of your knife,” said Albus. “Well, here are my thoughts. You’re not upset that your knife has run out of power. And you probably should be keeping the knife on you at all times, so that you can cut yourself when the power runs out. But when the Fokii stole your knife, you were unable to summon it. So you didn’t have a cut. But you also didn’t have the knife on your person at that time, or else you would have used it to cut yourself right after the cuts closed. You wouldn’t have let something this precious out of your sight, unless you needed to. Why would you need to let it out of your sight, and why would you not be upset that the knife’s immense power is gone? Well, I think you can recharge it – and I think it was being recharged when it was stolen. So, tell me: am I right?”

“You really expect me to tell you whether you're right?”

“I’m hoping, yes.”

“And why would I do that?”

“Because I think it might be connected to something bigger that really affects us all.”

“Like what?”

“I would say the Devoctrices, if you could hear me,” said Albus, rolling his eyes.

Swait choked a little bit and paled a lot.

Albus’s intense attention focused immediately. “Excuse me? Did you hear me just then?”

“’Ear what?” said Swait feebly.

“Devoctrices,” said Albus, narrowing his eyes as Swait slightly flinched again. “How exactly are you hearing me? The Fidelius Charm is on that information. You wouldn’t be able to talk to me, unless… unless…”

Unless Professor Desulgon talked to you, too.
“What did my Transfiguration teacher ask you?” demanded Albus, walking up and slamming his hands on Swait’s table; he jumped backwards slightly. “Albino, red eyes? Professor Dalton Desulgon? What did he say to you?”

“’E – ’e wanted to know whether the knife was a Devocrix,” gasped Swait. “’E was – persuasive. ’E said ’e’d free me if I ’elped ’im.”

“He’d free you?”

“From prison – eventually – but ’e stopped my escape,” said Swait, grinding his teeth. “’E ‘asn’t talked to me since.”

“When was this?!” screamed Albus; he needed to keep up the furious charade as long as it kept Swait talking.

“’E said ’e was rescuin’ you,” said Swait. “’E said ’e needed the knife to rescue you and ’e needed to know whether it could break through the wall under the school! Then the ’Eadmaster came in and ’e changed ’is tune pretty quickly, but ’e threatened me again after Wilcox left, askin’ whether the knife was a Devocrix.”

“And is it?!” roared Albus, swinging his wand directly in between Swait’s eyes.

“Get that out of my–”

“Who are they going to believe if there was an accident and you ‘accidentally’ put out your eye?” hissed Albus.

“Yes – yes, it is!” cried Swait. “Now will you–”


“’Ow do you know all of this?!”

“ANSWER THE GODDAMN QUESTION!” spat Albus, his wand sizzling the small hairs in between Swait’s eyebrows. “OR WE’RE GOING TO HAVE TO GET YOU TO TALK IN A MORE PAINFUL WAY!”

“AUGH – Magimorph, Juxtatic, and Dominict, are you ‘appy?!”

“What?!”

“The Magimorph Devocrix. The Juxtatic Devocrix. And the Dominict Devocrix. Doesn’t bloody matter anymore, fine!”

“How many Devoctrices are there?!!”

“It’s said there’s twenty-three,” said Swait. “’Ow can you know so much about this – but be clueless on the basics?”

Albus was startled to notice briefly that Swait suppressed a smile – was he being played again? Was any of this true?

“Tell me what they do.”

“The Magimorph Devocrix,” said Swait, strangely calm, “imitates another form of magic. You know wizard magic is much different than ’ouse-elf magic and merfolk magic and the rest. The
Magimorph Devoctrix allows imitation of another kind of magic – the Bloodblade acts like goblin magic. The Juxtatic Devoctrix – you’ve seen that one before, ‘aven’t you? I learned about it from that sword your dad and your ‘Erbology professor used to kill the snakes. Godric Gryffindor cast the Juxtatic Devoctrix on ‘is sword to let it be summoned from the ‘at. But ‘e never knew quite ‘ow much of a big deal it was for ‘im to cast that spell. And then the Dominct Devoctrix… you know that one, too. It’s the spell that Antioch Peverell cast to make the Elder Wand so powerful.”

“The… Elder Wand?”

“Sure, you didn’t think it was fashioned by Death ‘imself, did you? ‘Ow about that Resurrection Stone? Or should I say, the Deathbreacher Devoctrix? And that Invisibility Cloak you got probably stuffed up in your robes there? Ever think it might be the Illusiveil Devoctrix?”

Albus’s head was spinning. How many more things were Devoctrices that he hadn’t considered?

“Aren’t there so many things you want to know? So many mysteries you need explained? Time-Turners – ‘Orcruxes – the Philosopher’s Stone? Surely you want to know. I know – I can see it in your eyes. That’s the same ‘unger for knowledge that drove me to create the Bloodblade.”

“Why are you telling me this?” asked Albus, pressing his luck.

“Well, I think a smart kid like you may be able to ‘elp me,” said Swait. “And I can ‘elp you. You see, I don’t ‘ave the answers to all the questions you would like to ask me… not ‘ere, anyway. But I ‘ave collected those answers, and only I know where I’ve buried the secrets. And even if someone found it, only I can pass through the barrier that leads to that knowledge… can you guess why?”

“The Barricant Devoctrix,” answered Albus softly.

“Right you are. Well, I’m a decent guy and I’m willin’ to share. But you would need to do me a favor, and I think you know what it is. Get me out of prison time, and I’ll be willin’ to strike a deal. After I’m free, I will get you any answers you want about the Devoctrices in exchange for the knife back.”

Albus seized up. How could he decide this? Swait was a lunatic with more power than he knew how to control. He was dangerous and probably held a grudge. But he held the possible answers to Gallen Ingot’s power, as well as Dismiusa’s, and therein perhaps lay the key to preventing anyone else from achieving and abusing the power again. But was Swait necessary for this to occur? He said he had compiled the information; did that mean that he had taken artifacts and scrolls and hidden them away? Did that mean no one else could possibly get access from the information? The Barricant Devoctrix would fade if Swait died, but would they be able to find it without him?

He couldn’t make the decision now; he’d have to write to his father, or tell Wilcox. But one other thing was certain – he would be speaking about this with a certain Transfiguration teacher. Professor Desulgon had accused Wilcox of sneaking around, and this was what he was doing in his spare time?

“Wait,” said Albus, breathing hard. “If you’ve used so many Devoctrices to create that knife – if you’ve delved into this branch of magic – why aren’t your eyes differently colored?”

“Ah,” said Swait. “Figured that part out, ‘ave you?”

“Answer the question.”

Swait chuckled. “I know ‘ow to control it.”
“How to control what?”

“‘Ow to control whatever gave rise to the term ‘mad with power.’”

Albus had no idea how much of this to take seriously; it was infuriating. And the fact that Swait knew perfectly well how much it was infuriating him was infuriating him even more.

“Listen, kid,” said Swait. “You want answers. I want freedom, and my knife. And if you give me my freedom, then I will give you as many answers as your little ‘eart desires in exchange for my knife. And why don’t I throw in a little somethin’ to sweeten the pot for you even more?”

“Why don’t you?” agreed Albus, folding his arms.

“I’ll tell you exactly ‘ow Gallen Ingot got so powerful… and ‘ow to repeat that feat.”

Albus’s mouth dried out in a matter of fractions of a second. He stared in disbelief at the smugly smirking man handcuffed to the desk in front of him. Was Swait serious? How could he know that – could he be telling the truth? Could he take the risk that Swait really knew? How many other people knew how Gallen Ingot became powerful – and how many of them were, right now, attempting to follow in his footsteps?

“Good deal, right?” said Swait. “I’m goin’ to remind you of this part of the deal: if you don’t get me free, or if you free me and set me up to be recaptured later, I won’t be sayin’ anythin’ to anyone, and you’ll never find your answers… I’ve made sure of that.”

Albus stared him down, trying to detect even the slightest bluff.

“I don’t care ‘ow you get me out – just do it. If it’s illegal, that’s fine, too – I’m good at evadin’ the authorities.”

“Could have fooled me,” scoffed Albus.

“Give me your answer, Potter. Now.”

“I’ll… think about it,” said Albus. “I’ll consider your offer. Thank you, I suppose.”

“This stays between you and me,” warned Swait. “Anyone else gets wind of this and you can say goodbye to all that potential knowledge.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” said Albus. “Bye, Ellie.”

He left the room as Swait sputtered indignantly. Digging in his memory, Albus had remembered the nickname “Ellie” from Swait’s memory of him playing football with the Muggle girl. He closed the door and Wilcox stood up from his lean on the wall.

“Did he say anything?” said Wilcox.

“Not that I can tell you without you failing to hear me,” said Albus.

“Fidelius Charm… What a setback. But I thought Swait’s Fidelius Charm broke?”

“I’d explain, but you wouldn’t hear me,” said Albus. “But I had a thought. We should try and find someone. Someone that Swait knew as a child… A Muggle girl named Penny. That’s all I know about her, but she might be important. If we find her… maybe we’ll find what Swait is trying to hide.”
“Albus, good to have you back in class and not blowing up everything you touch,” said Professor Desulgon at the end of their Transfiguration lesson the next day. “All right, everyone; you’re dismissed a little early today, and don’t forget to practice those Cross-Species Switches. Luckily we were ahead of schedule when we had our small interruption, but we’ll still be able to finish this year’s curriculum this year, if we work hard. See you Wednesday.”

Albus gathered his belongings into his bag, but left it on his desk and went to talk to Professor Desulgon. Alec, however, beat him to the punch.

“Ah, Alec,” said Professor Desulgon. “You said you wanted to talk to me after class? Hello, Albus – just a moment.”

“Yes,” said Alec, looking very excited. “See, I had this idea. When we were fighting the forest when Dismiusa herself came into the castle, I had a thought about some really cool magic that I don’t think anyone’s ever tried before. Has anyone ever tried… casting spells from their wand without actually touching their wand?”

Professor Desulgon stroked his chin. “Hm,” he said. “What a fascinating thought. It’s possible that it’s been tried, but I don’t know if it’s ever been accomplished.”

“Because something happened to my wands,” said Alec, holding it up. “I got hit by an energy blast from Dismiusa, and I tried Dissipating it with both wands. It didn’t work. So I got up and tried to cast *Incendio*, but I accidentally set myself on fire.”

Professor Desulgon laughed. “That’s not so surprising…”

“Hey!” said Alec. “I wasn’t finished! What I was saying was, my second wand cast the same spell at the same time as the wand I was actually trying to cast the spell with. Even though I didn’t say *Itero* or whatever.”

Professor Desulgon cocked his head. “Now *that* is something. Are you sure you didn’t–”

“I wasn’t even *holding* the wand – I dropped it, and stepped on it to stop it from rolling away. Then it activated under my shoe.”

Professor Desulgon nodded. “Well, Alec, that’s quite the magical theory you’ve proposed. But it always takes so very long for this type of theory to become research, and for that research to become fact–”

“I did a ton of studying on it in the library,” said Alec, taking a book out of his bag and placing it on the table.

Albus choked back laughter – Alec, in the library? Had Dismiusa’s energy blast affected his head?

“No one really has what I was thinking,” said Alec. “But some people came close. See, I was really thinking about how I might do this, and then I thought, hey, there must be someone who’s tried something like it before. I researched and found some stuff by a guy named Draxler Cordot–”

Professor Desulgon’s eyes widened; the name was familiar to Albus, but he couldn’t remember where he’d read it before.

“–and this dude postulated it, calling it Psychomorph or something–”

Professor Desulgon’s eyes widened further; Albus couldn’t help but think this name was oddly close to Swait’s mention of the Magimorph Devoctrix.
“–but he was having a tough time with it, and I thought, hey, maybe it’s because Diwandology is something new. All of these guys were trying to cast a spell with one wand to make one wand do what they want with their minds, without actually casting a spell. But I was thinking, maybe you could use two wands at the same time. These early magical scientists wouldn’t have thought to use two wands, maybe, which was maybe why they couldn’t get it, and why no one’s done it right yet. You could use two wands, and cast a spell on one wand – and that spell makes that wand do whatever the first wand does, do you get what I mean?”

“It sounds,” said Professor Desulgon, “like you’re trying to make your wands essentially the same – so that whenever you cast a spell from your first, the second does exactly the same spell. Like cloning your wand?”

“Yeah, that’s exactly how I was trying to describe it!” said Alec, holding up a scratchily drawn diagram of his idea. “I even named it already. I saw the word ‘Quantum’ somewhere and I liked it, so I’m going to call it ‘Quantum Cloning!’”

He pointed at the diagram, which was labeled “Quantum Cloning” in barely legible handwriting.

“That’s… a really powerful idea you have there,” said Professor Desulgon. “Wow. I’m blown away, Alec. You have no idea how big of a discovery this could be if you figure it out – really! People have been trying to do this for centuries. Millennia.”

Alec beamed with pride. Albus nodded in appreciation at his friend’s conjecture.

“I’ll tell you what, Alec,” said Professor Desulgon. “You should find a reputable associate who will help you research this. Try and get something done quickly, and publish it in some newspaper, even a rinky-dink paper, as soon as possible – lest someone else figure it out before you, publish it before you, and take all the credit.”

“Why don’t you be my associate?” said Alec, beaming.

“Oh, gee, me?” said Professor Desulgon, flushing and grimacing. “Well… oh…”

Alec’s face fell.

“I’m sorry, Alec – I’m just going to be extremely busy next year,” said Professor Desulgon. “I’ll be getting my Mage’s Degree from the Katarina Pinzel School of Sorcery next year. I may even have to find a substitute who can fill in for me on my more strenuous days. I’m very sorry – I would if I could.”

“That’s okay,” said Alec glumly. “I’ll find someone.”

“Make sure you can trust them,” called Professor Desulgon as Alec left. “Albus! Hero of the school. Make it quick, but what can I do for you?”

“You can talk to me a little more about the Devoctrices,” said Albus, wasting no time; he was going to have to get to Arithmancy soon.

Professor Desulgon shook his head. “I’m afraid I can’t really talk with you about that,” he said. “See, it’s something that Professor Westerling and I need to keep very secret for a little while–”

“To keep power out of the wrong hands,” said Albus. “I get it. But I can’t tell anyone after you tell me, and you know I’m not the wrong hands. So why not?”

“Because if I die, I don’t want the secrets getting out,” said Professor Desulgon, shuffling his
books around his desk.

Albus hadn’t exactly been sure what answer he would be expecting, but that wasn’t it. He had to take a moment to recover.

“How much information did you manage to get out of Swait?”

Professor Desulgon slammed his books onto the desk with a loud bang that made Albus nearly jump out of his robes.

“How much information did you manage to get out of Swait?”

“Albus,” growled Professor Desulgon, “you need to stop snooping around.”

“It’s not my fault,” said Albus. “I said the word ‘Devoctrix’ when I was talking to Swait and he heard me, so I decided to ask him a little more—”

“Let’s get something straight, Albus,” spat Professor Desulgon, snapping more than Albus was accustomed to hearing from him. “I know you enjoy living dangerously. Even if you don’t actively pursue it, danger finds you. And you do enjoy it — you manage to worm your way out of every physical threat known to man. But you’ve been lucking out of the physical harm because of one thing: the threats are direct. What you’ve got to realize absolutely right this second is that not all danger is going to knock on your door and leave you a nice note requesting an encounter. If you continue to stick your nose in where it doesn’t belong, you are going to be up against forces that will destroy you in a heartbeat, without a trace, and without any prior warning. You will be attacked before you realize you’ve finally interfered too far — and you’ll be dead before you even realize you’ve been attacked. It’s time to stop, Albus. It’s time to let things be and it’s time to stop trying to put together the puzzle — it’s not meant to be solved. Quit being the hero. If you pry too far again, I swear I will modify the memories of you and all of your friends.”

Albus was struck completely dumb; he mouthed a few pathetic words before closing his mouth and turning around to leave as quickly as possible.

“You know I can’t force you to take my advice,” said Professor Desulgon as Albus left, “but if you do, then I’ll say this in advance: you’re welcome.”

“For what?” shot Albus.

“For saving your life,” said Professor Desulgon.

Several seventh years, including Louis and Gil, walked into the room and started giving Albus funny looks.

“You’re late to class,” said Professor Desulgon. “Goodbye.”

Albus hurried to Arithmancy, sweating a little bit from the verbal thrashing he’d just received from Professor Desulgon. What was going on? Was Professor Westerling in on this, too? What did Professor Desulgon mean by “forces that would destroy him in a heartbeat?” Was Professor Desulgon referring to someone else, or to himself? If Albus continued to sneak around for clues, was he in danger from some outside force or from Professor Desulgon? He said he was saving Albus’s life… but from whom?

The mystery was compounding further, despite all the answers he’d received from Swait.

Albus’s pulse quickened. Was Swait the person he had to worry about? Or, was it possible that Swait would know the identities of the people he needed to worry about? What did Swait know about Desulgon?
But Swait had already been moved out of the castle.

Albus looked down at his hand; the new cut he’d made with the knife was still there.

“Bloodblade,” he said quietly.

He had forgotten to try this part of the knife’s effect. The blade appeared right in his hand as the cut reopened. Even if the knife no longer granted incredible magical power, he could still summon it – and presumably, he could still open locks with it.

He walked into Arithmancy, wondering if he could possibly get some more answers from Professor Ramanu. After all, he had gotten the first clue from a book about Arithmancy. The book called *An Expert’s Guide to Modern Arithmancy*, though he had been required to return it to the library some time ago, had given him his first view of the word “Devoctrix…”

He suddenly remembered where he’d seen the name “Draxler Cordot” before – in that very book. He was an ancient magical theorist.

But if what Professor Desulgon said was true, then Albus wouldn’t be finding any other books on Devoctrices, because Dumbledore had removed all of them. So anything he found in the library about Cordot probably wouldn’t give him any relevant new information.

“Hello, Albus,” said Professor Ramanu, handing out their quiz. “Everyone, remember: when you’re done, as usual, turn it over and draw a large seven on the back, and the quiz will be graded in front of you. You have the whole class to complete the quiz, and whatever time you don’t use, you can use to look over the quiz and see what you missed, and ask me any questions if you have time.”

Oh, I have some questions, thought Albus.

He rushed through his quiz, finishing in ten minutes; the rest of the class apart from Rose, Lucas, and Aidan didn’t seem to be even near halfway done, by the look of how much they had written. Albus drew a seven on the back of his quiz, only briefly glancing at the 100% mark before walking up to Professor Ramanu.

“Hello, Professor,” he said quietly. “I have some questions that are kind of unrelated to the quiz… I hope that’s okay?”

“Of course,” said Professor Ramanu. “Just keep the volume down so that the other students can concentrate. What’s on your mind?”

“A lot,” said Albus. “I have a few questions. I guess I’ll start at the start, then… Have you ever heard of the Trinities?”

“Every Arithmancer has heard of them,” said Professor Ramanu. “I don’t know much, but I know they are whackos with a pension for subpar Arithmancy. They tend to bend the rules a little to prove what they want to prove. Where did you hear about them?”

“A library book.”

“All right,” said Professor Ramanu. “Just don’t mention it too much around poor Professor Wilcox – I think he’s quite ashamed of his father.”

“His father? Aezar Wilcox?”
“Yes, Aezar was a commissioned Minister of the Trinity Church. To his credit, I don’t think he was quite as crazy as the Darkrivers – he wasn’t into the whole Muggle-slaughtering thing. He didn’t join Voldemort when asked, and Voldemort killed him.”

“What else can you tell me about the Darkriver Trinities?”

“They supposedly proved, through Arithmancy, that there were twenty-three variants of a spell called the Darkriver Devoctrix, which all are apparently spectacular ways to mass murder Muggles. But they really screwed up the proof. There’s been arguments about whether it’s one or zero spells that can do what they say, but no one’s really conclusively proven anything yet. Super-powerful spells are a really fuzzy area… but even if they were possible, it seems at the moment that they might never be attainable.”

Wrong, thought Albus.

Professors Westerling and Desulgon were plotting something having to do with the Devoctrices, and were threatening to blast away the memories of anyone who learned too much. Wilcox’s father was a commissioned minister of a church which considered wizards superior to Muggles. Skepticisms were growing within him, and he didn’t know how to respond to them.

“Just don’t take anything proven by the Trinities at face value,” said Professor Ramanu. “They tend to be… not right. Not right in the head and not right on paper. ...Oh, look – a message.”

A paper airplane soared into the room at Professor Ramanu. She held out her hand to catch it, but it veered away and deposited itself into Albus’s hands. Albus unfolded the paper airplane and read the few words on it.

Albus,

Stop prying. I’m watching

~Prof. Desulgon
“So,” said Aidan as the fourteen Gryffindor and Ravenclaw Quidditch players took to the skies. “You’re leaving in four days.”

“Right, but say that a bit quieter, please,” whispered Albus. “Yes. Exo and I are going to head out after Herbology begins. We don’t want to do it sooner because we have to summon the Loch Stock Liner at the Black Lake and we don’t want everybody to see the ship coming, because they might investigate. So…”

“So you need me to make an excuse for why you two aren’t around.”

“Yeah.”

“All right, I’ll do that,” sighed Aidan. “I’ll just tell Professor Longbottom that Exo isn’t feeling well and you’ve stayed in Gryffindor Tower until Madam Birchbaum gets there.”

“Thank you,” said Albus with relief; that was actually the exact story he was going to tell Aidan to use.

“Potter and Moon staying close,” came Barry’s booming voice around the pitch. “The second Potter-Moon Seeker showdown of the year, the first being Albus and Mia.”

After a few minutes’ silence watching the game, Aidan asked, “And what are you going to tell Milo on the LSL so that he doesn’t flip out over you and Exo running away from school, on a weekday, unsupervised, to the other side of the planet?”

“Er, still working on that,” admitted Albus.

“It had better be a good explanation, or it’ll ruin everything before anything even starts,” observed Aidan. “But is there even any good reason why two school-age boys, one of them world-famous and the other looking like he’s about to fall over dead, would visit Moutohora?”

“The Weasleys are really harassing Ravenclaw Seeker Moon,” announced Barry, “and Ravenclaw Beater Brown has taken to following her around to protect her. If the Gryffindor Beaters are good, though, Ravenclaw is where they meet their match.”

“That’s where the Moutohora Macaws Quidditch team is,” said Albus, shrugging. “Maybe we’re visiting them?”

Aidan rolled his eyes. “Not during the school day, you’re not.”

“I’ll think of something.”

“Potter and Moon have simultaneously spotted the Snitch! But Potter is closer, and it looks like he’s got this all wrapped up! Moon angles herself downward in defeat!”

“I’m sure you’ll come up with a perfect explanation. My main concern is that you do that before the journey actually happens, and not in retrospect.”

“Ruiz smacks the Bludger right at her fellow Beater!” shouted Barry. “Was that a mistake? If it was, Brown rebounds spectacularly, smashing it – it’s headed right for the Seeker pair! What is she— DID SHE JUST DO THAT? DID SHE REALLY JUST DO THAT? WHAT IN THE– IS
Albus had been looking, but still couldn’t see exactly what had happened. Anya Brown and Esperanza Ruiz hit the ground and threw their bats to the side; they hugged Kalina Moon tightly and they all jumped up and down in excitement.

Did Gryffindor just lose?

“What the hell happened?” shouted Albus, looking around for someone who knew what was going on. “What the bloody hell just happened?”

“I think…” said Jonah, staring in disbelief, “…that Anya Brown hit the Bludger into the Snitch, and knocked it out of the air.”

“What?”

“It must have been planned,” said Jonah, impressed against his will. “Because Kalina reacted so quickly and I think she caught the Snitch as it was falling.”

“Ravenclaw wins, two hundred and ten to twenty! Looks like Ravenclaw’s been saving that trick up their sleeve for a while! Ravenclaw takes the match and therefore the Quidditch Cup! I really expect this Beater pair to make it to a national Quidditch team.”

Albus sighed. Well, there was always next year for James. This Quidditch Cup didn’t even seem as important – with all of the goings-on of the year, it seemed disconnected from everything else.

He looked aside, and had to do a double-take when he saw his father near the bottom of the stands, grimacing up at the celebrating Ravenclaw Quidditch players. Then he remembered that he had been informed that Janelle was finally able to visit today… looking next to his father, he saw her there, beautiful as ever.

He raced down the stands and made a beeline for them. As he approached, Alana caught up to him from behind; Alana was asked to sit near him at Quidditch matches as well, for protection. The danger outside the castle still existed even though the danger inside had disappeared.

“Wait, Albus!” she called. “Don’t get too complacent – remember, you still have to ask your security questions!”

“Right, I remembered that,” lied Albus. He got close and then allowed Alana to situate herself between them. Janelle’s face lit up when she saw Albus in such a way that Albus was certain it was her.

Albus cleared his throat. “What’s–”

“Well, a blue tree, right – now can I have your face?!” exclaimed Janelle, placing a finger on her chin and nodding as Albus had instructed her.

“Yes,” laughed Albus, and Janelle rushed him and kissed him passionately. Harry stood by awkwardly, scratching his sideburns, looking to either side and trying to politely avert his eyes.

“You are crazy, and reckless, and brilliant,” raved Janelle at the end of Albus’s story of what had happened during the times he was unable to contact her. She leaned against his shoulder and laid her legs in the other direction.
“Thanks, I guess,” responded Albus with a laugh, shifting on the couch to accommodate her better.

“The rest of the world was freaking out as well,” said Janelle. “Madam Maxime ushered in many guards to Beauxbatons, worrying that something similar may happen there. But I suppose, if it was one woman, we don’t have to worry about that anymore.”

“True,” said Albus.

“It has been such a pleasure seeing you again,” said Janelle. “I will be in touch. We will have to visit more often over the summer to make up for this. Overall, I am just glad you’re safe.”

“I’m glad I’m safe, too,” laughed Albus. He kissed Janelle again.

“Just, please, for crying out loud,” said Janelle, “don’t get into any more trouble… okay?”

“Er… okay,” said Albus sheepishly, remembering that he was leaving for Moutohora with Exo later this coming week.

“Good,” said Janelle. “I think I would handle the stress even worse if you ran off unguarded again, like you did into the forest to find Dismiusa. If you do anything like that again I am breaking up with you!”

Albus kept his mouth shut. Janelle was giggling, but she stopped when she noticed his expression.

“What?” she asked carefully.

“Well… I… nothing,” said Albus.

“You’re not really thinking you would do something like this again if you were given the chance… are you?”

“Depends on the situation,” said Albus quickly. “I mean… people had already died, and my brother and I were prophesied to stop it. So… of course I had to take the responsibility… if someone else’s life was at stake.”

“Then next time, don’t try to do it all on your own,” said Janelle. “Surely someone else can help.”

Albus looked away, remembering how he’d asked his friends not to come.

“Albus, I am serious,” said Janelle. “You cannot keep barely scraping through these situations and expect to live every time! Maybe you feel invincible and it doesn’t bother you, but have you thought about me? If I had known exactly what you were doing in here when you were doing it – I would have had a heart attack at the least!”

“So would you be fine with it if you only found out about these things after you already knew I was okay?” asked Albus, flashing a grin.

“No!” exclaimed Janelle. “No, I would not! Because it means you’re still endangering yourself constantly, more than you are already in danger, and one day you’re not going to come out of it okay and it’s going to kill more than just you!”

Albus gulped.

“Albus Potter, you are the person who least needs further risk to his life!” said Janelle. “I want you to promise me you won’t put yourself in harm’s way again!”
“What if it’s for someone else’s sake?” asked Albus.

“Why aren’t you promising?” asked Janelle, finally lifting herself off of his arm so that she could turn to face him. She stared into his eyes with hers narrowed. “You make it sound like you’re already planning another… expedition.”

“Well… I am,” said Albus, finally relenting. He couldn’t lie directly to her face.

Janelle puffed herself up like Grandma Weasley did when she got mad. “Albus, if this is a joke, I find it quite unfunny!”

“It’s not a joke,” said Albus under his breath. “Sorry… quieter, please, though, there are other people in the library and I don’t want them to hear this.”

“What are you talking about, Albus? Explain, now!”

“You know my friend Exo,” said Albus. “He’s the werewolf.”

“Yes, I know Exorian. What about him – is he in on this, too?”

“He’s the reason,” said Albus. “We need to get him to John Solomon, the anti-Dark Arts activist. Solomon can cure him on the lunar eclipse.”

“John Solomon – I have heard the name,” said Janelle. “What is this quest you’re taking with Exorian?”

“We need to take the Loch Stock Liner to Moutohora,” said Albus. “But we need to avoid notice when we leave, and we can’t let anyone know where Solomon is. He’s a wanted criminal, but he’s–”

“MON DIEU, ALBUS POTTER!”

“Shh!” said Albus, cringing. “Solomon is innocent; he’s been held accountable for a crime he didn’t commit.”

“How do you know this?” she demanded, looking more and more bothered.

“Because I saw him at the Lunar Eclipse Festival,” said Albus. “I saw him and then there was proof that he cured a werewolf. The Auror Office isn’t assuming anything, but their assumptions to the contrary are so ridiculous – just trust me, okay?”

“How can I trust you,” said Janelle, “when you were fully planning to let me leave without so much as a whisper of any of this? How can I trust you when you were ready to deceive me into thinking you wouldn’t do anything like this again?”

Albus turned away and sighed.

“Well, thought Albus, when you put it like that…

“Give me one good reason you’re willing to put your life in danger yet again!”

“Because Exo’s life is in danger!” said Albus. “Janelle, Exo’s life is in danger every month. Not
only is he the target of Siobor because of his condition, but his life is in danger, too. He’s talked about it with me. Every month, he feels like he’s dying, and he worries he might actually be dying. The transformation on his body, his body not yet being mature, are putting him through a lot of hell. He’s been undergoing growth therapy by health professionals ever since the attack, because his growth has been stunted. The stress and the stigma and the physical effects and the worry of Siobor are killing him. He says his dad thought, right after the attack, that there was a fifty-fifty chance he’d live long enough to go to Hogwarts. And he’s still at risk, because he’s still not fully grown. He could still die just from what occurs every month, and the Wolfsbane helps him keep his mind but it doesn’t help his body. The only way to make sure he survives is to cure him, and this could be our only chance for a cure. Janelle, here’s my one good reason I’m putting my life at risk: because Exo’s life is at risk. If he dies and I could have stopped it, I wouldn’t be able to live with myself, so why keep my life out of danger if I can’t live it? I’m going, Janelle, and I’m going to help my friend, so if you’re going to break up with me… better me single than my friend possibly dead.”

Janelle had been gawking at Albus since about halfway through his speech. Slowly she retracted her jaw until she was biting on her lower lip, and her eyes filled with tears.

“How could I justify breaking up with someone so selfless?” she said slowly, and then she threw her arms around him in a big hug.

Albus hugged her back, and smiled into the warmth of her shoulder.

“But I still don’t think you should go alone.”

Albus leaned away and sighed. “Janelle, no one else believes Solomon.”

“Then convince them,” she said. “You’ve convinced me. Give a performance like that to your father, or to your Headmaster, or someone you can trust.”

“I don’t think you understand,” said Albus. “They’d take him into custody first, and put him on trial, and they’d probably convict him, too, even without any real evidence. But if they do that first, then we’re going to miss the lunar eclipse.”

“You can always find a friend,” said Janelle. “Please, Albus. You have already denied me the promise that you won’t put yourself intentionally in harm’s way again. Please promise me you’ll find someone to go with you. Please.”

Albus shook his head. “I’ll try, Janelle,” he said, “but I can’t promise.”

Janelle squeezed her eyes shut and turned the other way.

“I will promise, though,” said Albus, “that Exo and I will both come back safely.”

“You had better make good on that one,” she replied quietly.

“I’ve given it a lot of thought,” said Albus quietly to Exo at breakfast on Wednesday morning – the morning of the journey. “Here’s what we’re going to do. We’re going to… Exo, are you listening?”

“Ugh, I’m sorry,” said Exo. “Sorry. Killer headache. Dad was really reluctant to even let me come to classes this morning. I had to insist… more than usual.”

“That’s saying something,” said Albus. He had forgotten one critical detail: Since the full moon was before midday on this side of the world, Exo had transformed last night, and he was feeling
really weak; he looked even more dreadful than usual, since the full moon’s peak was coming soon. And he’d probably look worse once they got to the other side of the world where the eclipse was happening. But hopefully that could play even more effectively into Albus’s plan.

“Sorry,” apologized Exo again. “Continue.”

“Well, the worse you look, the better,” said Albus. “We’re going to get you to the Loch Stock Liner and tell Milo that we need to get you to Moutohora immediately because you’ve received a terrible injury.”

“Why would I need to go to Moutohora for an injury?” said Exo skeptically.

“Because Moutohora is the only place we know where we could find *phoenix tears,*” said Albus quietly with a grin. “Sparky the phoenix is the mascot of the Moutohora Macaws Quidditch team. He’s a domesticated phoenix. We’ll tell Milo that we need to get you to the residence of the Moutohora Macaws immediately so that Sparky can administer tears to your wounds.”

Exo nodded. “Well… that’s smarter than anything I could have come up with… but…”

“I’ve considered as many things that could go wrong as I could think of,” said Albus. “Milo might want to contact your father, but I’ll tell him there’s no time and that we have to get you there as fast as possible. Then I’ll send a Patronus out and pretend I’m using it to tell your father and my father… and whomever else Milo wants to tell. Then when we get there… I’ll tell Milo I can get you there on my own, and we’ll slip under the Cloak once we’re out of sight of Milo. If Milo comes with us, I’ll Confund him. If we’re not alone with him, we’ll put on the Cloak and still try to slip away… if not, I have the element of surprise, so I may be able to Stun everyone. It’d be risky, but… we’ve got to try.”

“And if the Liner brings us directly to the front door of the Macaws?” asked Exo. “I think they’d notice…”

“We’ll just have to try and slip away under the Cloak,” said Albus. “We’d have to slip away from Milo, or Stun or Confund him, no matter what we told him… so that part has to be the way it is.”

“We are going to get in so much trouble when this is over,” muttered Exo.

“Yes,” said Albus, “but it’s worth it.”

Exo nodded and tried to smile, still clutching his head.

Dozens of owls soared into the Great Hall, swarming all about. Albus looked up, and reached up to grab a letter dropped by none other than Buteau, Janelle’s owl. He stared at it with a puzzled expression for a moment before opening the letter.

*Albus,*

*You’d better have gotten a chaperone.*

*Love, Janelle*

*P.S. Good luck.*

“Is that from Janelle?” asked Exo, trying to lean over to peek at the letter.

“Er, yes,” said Albus, hurriedly stowing it away before Exo found out he’d told someone else
about the trip. “But… I can answer it when we’re back. Are you ready?”

“Yes,” said Exo. “I’ve been ready for this since I was bitten.”

Albus nodded, and pushed his breakfast aside. He hadn’t eaten much, but he wasn’t very hungry. He’d felt this way many times in the past already… before the Lunar Eclipse Festival, before the infiltration of the Sandblood base… and before trekking into the woods to find Dismiusa. Janelle was right – why was he putting himself at risk more than was already occurring naturally?

Then, looking back at Exo’s sallow face, and the way he generally looked about to fall apart, he remembered exactly why he was putting himself at risk.

But the risk shouldn’t be too high. How could Siobor know where they were headed? And if Solomon was truly evil…

How could he be evil? He’d cured Xin Theuris, the man who tried to rescue him. How could anybody deny it now?

So why was he doubting everything now?

“I can’t believe it,” breathed Exo. “I can’t believe this is really about to happen.”

“We can marvel over everything later,” said Albus, pushing all similar thoughts out of his own head. “Right now we just need to focus on doing it.”

Slowly, students began rising and leaving to get to their first classes of the day. Albus grasped his bag. Though they weren’t planning on attending class, they couldn’t go to breakfast without bags, lest they draw attention. Albus and Exo walked out with the crowd, but turned a corridor that was rarely used and ducked behind a tapestry to slip on the Invisibility Cloak.

Under the Cloak, they slipped through the open front door behind their classmates headed to Herbology. They waited patiently for classes to begin, and then when no one else was outside, they walked swiftly and invisibly towards the Black Lake.

As they got closer, Albus looked back to the castle to see if anyone was nearby. When he scanned the landscape and deemed they were alone, he turned to Exo under the Cloak.

“Well,” he said, “are you ready?”

Exo nodded.

Albus checked his watch. “We should wait until at least 9:40 to leave. Milo will probably get us there as soon as possible when we give him our explanation, and Solomon said not to arrive before 9:44, or you would transform.”

Exo suddenly lurched over as if he were about to vomit.

Albus leaned to assist him, and the Cloak slid off of them. He stood by Exo and rubbed his back. “Are you okay?” he asked tentatively.

“Y-Yeah,” stammered Exo softly. “Just – this happens when – I think the lunar eclipse is starting. On the other side of the planet.”

“It’s not 9:44 yet.”

“It’s probably the penumbral eclipse,” said Exo. “Not the full eclipse.”
Albus glanced back at Hogwarts with worry; he leaned down to pick up the Cloak, and he thought he felt something hit his knee. He stood up and looked around, but there didn’t appear to be anything nearby…

Cautiously, he threw the robe over himself and Exo again, and together they waited until 9:40 to arrive.

It took forever; class had started at 9:00, but they couldn’t exactly leave in the middle of class. Finally, Albus pulled off the Cloak.

“Hemorrha,” he said, pointing at Exo’s neck.

A blue-purple blotch appeared under Exo’s skin; it could easily have been the result of some extreme magical injury. Exo rubbed his neck idly.

“I’m going to call the LSL,” said Albus, stowing the Cloak in the pocket of his robes.

He waded out knee-deep in the lake and held his wand out just above the surface of the water. He tapped it against the surface three times, and waited… a few seconds later, he tapped again, and then a third time shortly after that.

“Ohay,” said Albus as the ground rumbled; he turned back to Exo. “Look even sicker, if possible.”

Exo raised an eyebrow; he already looked like death.

Albus ran back onto the shore as the LSL burst from the waves, cringing and looking back to the castle. Hopefully, even if someone noticed, they could get going before anyone arrived.

He put Exo’s arm around his shoulder and pretended to help him hobble towards the lake. Salvo Ihmleste, the captain, looked down at Albus over the side of the ship and frowned. Then he called out to them.

“Ahoy, there, young Potter, we’ve been expecting you – is your friend all right?”

Albus froze, and he felt Exo’s breath hitch.

“They were expecting him?”

“Er – we’ve got to get going, sir–”

“Yes, yes, to be back in time for lunch, I assume? Don’t worry, we’ve got it covered. Is that Exorian Wilcox? Here, I’ll get the plank…”

He waved his wand, and a large board burst from the side of the ship. It angled itself downward and slammed into the ground in front of Albus and Exo.

“Climb aboard and we’ll get you there within an hour, as always.”

Albus looked at Exo and they shared a grimace. What was going on?

They decided to go with it, and they climbed aboard the LSL. Albus flashed Salvo a grin before they disappeared into the cabins; Salvo didn’t ask them any questions.

“Ah, Albus!” said Milo. “Good to see you again! Happy we could help with your little project. Head right into cabin eight. Is Exorian feeling okay?”
“Er, yes, I’m fine,” said Exo.

“All right, if you say so,” said Milo. “As per our code of conduct, we will always arrive at your stop within one hour or we’ll reimburse you; two hours and we’ll reimburse you double. Feel free to settle into any open cabin. Please don’t smash the windows. And welcome to the Loch Stock Liner, safest way to travel! Hazard-free since 1883.”

Albus decided not to ask any questions, lest he provoke suspicion about not knowing what everybody else was apparently assuming he knew. But why would Milo have already assigned him a cabin, unless… someone was already there?

Was it Solomon? Was it… Siobor? No – the Liner would have arrested him, and if he was in disguise they would have sensed it. Was it – no, it couldn’t be–

Albus threw open the door to cabin eight.

Janelle was sitting inside, one leg crossed over the other, arms folded.

“Hi there, Albus,” she said. “Where is your chaperone like I asked?”

Albus choked a little bit on his words before he could convey them. “How did you know we were–”

“You told me you were taking the Loch Stock Liner, you dummy,” said Janelle. “I could only assume you would be taking it just as the lunar eclipse was starting on the other side of the world, so I hopped on just before you did.”

“But – how did you know when the–”

“Because Beauxbatons has a superior Astronomy program,” said Janelle. “It wasn’t hard to look up the dates of future lunar eclipses.”

“You told her we were coming?” said Exo, looking severely let down.

“Er – it sort of slipped,” said Albus.

“Yes, he doesn’t trust me enough to have told me without significant prodding,” said Janelle, looking equally betrayed.

Albus looked from one to the other awkwardly. A purple light flashed from the candles in their cabin, and then the Loch Stock Liner was submerged.

“Er – but – what did you tell Milo?” asked Albus, looking to Janelle.

“I told him that Beauxbatons and Hogwarts were both sending a fourth year student to Moutohora to interview the Moutohora Macaws about Sparky,” said Janelle, “for our respective Care of Magical Creatures programs. But that doesn’t matter right now. You brought the Invisibility Cloak, yes?”

“Yeah,” said Albus, reaching into his pocket. “I–”

As he grasped a fold of the Invisibility Cloak, his hand went through a hole in the pocket of his robes.

“Oh, wow,” said Albus. “I mean – I would have noticed if something as big as the Cloak had fallen out of my pocket, but… that’s a pretty big hole in my pocket.. I hope nothing else–”
His eyes shot open. “Oh, bloody hell – the _knife! The Bloodblade!_”

As he said the name, the knife reappeared in his hand. He clapped his other hand to his mouth as he realized something else that was missing from that pocket, and _that_ wasn’t coming back just from saying the name.

“My other wand,” he said, filling with dread. “The knife must have sliced my pocket open – and my other wand fell out.”

Janelle and Exo both blanched.

“Oh, no,” said Janelle. “You’re going to need that if things turn sour…”

“It’s not on the Liner, is it?” asked Exo.

“No,” said Albus. “When I picked the Cloak up off of the ground, I thought I felt something solid hit my knee – that must have been the knife. So my wand must have fallen out at the same time… it’s probably by the shore.”

“Should we go back and get it?” asked Exo.

“No,” said Albus. “It should stay there… but I don’t want to give Milo and Salvo any more chances to ask us any more questions. And we can’t waste much time. I mean, even if we hit the high mark of the Liner’s traveling time – an hour – we’ll still have time to find Solomon, because Moutohora isn’t that big. But we can’t waste much time past that.”

Thankfully, though, the pity that Janelle and Exo were feeling for his lost wand seemed to dissipate their disappointment.

“You might want to bandage that hand,” said Janelle, pointing to Albus’s robe. He had placed his hand on his robe; blood was wetting it. “_Ordonatus._”

The blood on Albus’s robe disappeared and was replaced by a bit of soapy foam, which Janelle wiped off to reveal that it was completely stain-free.

Albus looked into Janelle’s eyes for a moment as she leaned back against the wall, and tried to decide whether he hoped she was coming with them, or staying behind. Janelle could definitely fit with him under the Cloak… but would their feet show? And would Janelle stay quiet like they needed? But Solomon would probably be able to even sense Albus under the Cloak. If he noticed two people hiding, would he even risk coming near Exo, for fear of being recaptured.

But even before all that… would Janelle rat them out to anyone in her attempts to make sure they were safe?

They sat awkwardly, not speaking. The full hour passed, as expected, and Exo looked sicker and sicker every time they went through the jerkiness of Digher Straits. Janelle kept watching Albus, as if he were going to escape if she took her eyes off of him.

The candle lights flashed blue at last, and Albus stood up immediately, grabbing a handle near the door to steady himself.

“We’re arriving,” said Albus. “We’re at Moutohora.”
The Cure

The Loch Stock Liner burst through the surface of the water once again.

Before Albus opened the door to the cabin, he peered out the window. By the red light of the eclipsed moon, he could see a tiny island composed of two small peaks. One was twice as high as the other, but even the higher couldn’t have been more than a quarter mile in elevation. The island was covered in vegetation, so they couldn’t see where Solomon or the Macaws might hide; however, Albus guessed Solomon would be in an open field, where the light of the moon could shine down upon the ritual.

He opened the door and gestured for Janelle and Exo to follow him.

Janelle hopped out of her seat and made a point to position herself between Exo and Albus. They walked past Milo.

“Thank you for choosing the LSL!” said Milo happily. “Though I’m not sure how else you would have crossed through the globe this fast, so it was probably an easy choice. Anyway, we’ve arrived at Sulphur Bay on the south side of the island. Boulder Bay is just to the west.” He opened the door and pointed down the left end of the shore to another bay with a small sand peninsula. “But I’d avoid that area if I were you… there are Muggles who do some environmental work over there. You probably wouldn’t fancy having to explain yourselves to the New Zealand government. Have fun watching the grass grow, or whatever you’re doing here! Give us a call whenever you’re finished.”

Albus smiled and gave him a cheerful wave that didn’t fit his mood. But he didn’t want Milo to know that. They exited the cabins, climbed down the ladder, and splashed into the shore below, and then stepped onto the sand of Moutohora’s beach. There were rockier shores to either side, dotted with trees, with shorter shrubbery on a sandy path towards the center of the island. It would probably be an amazing sight-seeing adventure in the daytime.


Albus glanced back at Exo; he looked even paler than a regular full moon.

“So, Exo, take out the letter,” said Albus. “We’ve got to find Solomon…”

“Let’s look in this direction, to start,” said Janelle, pointing towards the lower peak of the island.

Albus looked at her skeptically. “Why?”

“Because I thought I saw something from when we were standing on top of the ship,” said Janelle as the Liner submerged again just offshore.

“If you saw something, that’s probably the lodgings of the Moutohora Macaws,” said Albus. “I doubt Solomon would make his position visible. But we have a way to find him – Solomon said to fold his letter into a paper airplane and then throw it, and it would fly towards him.”

“What?” said Janelle, sounding very displeased. “You never told me this!”

“Why would I – where are you going?!”

“To find the Macaws!” yelled Janelle over her shoulder as she sprinted off towards the smaller
peak of the island. “You’re not going without a chaperone! Do you think I came out here just to add my life to the gamble?! I want this to happen for you and your friend, which is why I didn’t bring anyone along on the Liner, but I don’t want you to die in the process!”

“No!” shouted Albus. “Janelle, COME BACK!”

Janelle didn’t respond. Hurriedly, Albus shifted to face Exo, who was folding Solomon’s letter into an airplane as fast as possible. “Faster!” he cried.

“I’m going as fast as I can!” said Exo. “If I don’t fold it properly it might fly slower!”

Finally, Exo finished folding. He hurled the airplane into the air, and it zoomed off sharply to the right, leading into a small nook between the trees. They charged after it; Albus thought for a moment about throwing on the Invisibility Cloak, but he wouldn’t be able to run as well if he was holding it, and there might be thorns that could tear the precious fabric. But Solomon would trust the son of Harry Potter… right?

The dense trees were hampering their progress; they had to hop roots and dodge trunks constantly. But Janelle had started her race to the Macaws on a clear path of sand; if Solomon was on the far east edge of the island, and if the Macaws were closer to the center, she would arrive far before they arrived… that wouldn’t be a problem if the Macaws didn’t all own Soundsplitters, brooms which could probably reach Solomon even before Exo and Albus did, at this pace. For Exo’s cure, but also even just for Solomon’s safety, they really had to hurry; they couldn’t waste any time.

The paper airplane traveled at a pace such that it was always the same distance ahead of them; if they sped up, so did the plane. They took a long arc around the island, running around the higher mountain.

“Albus,” puffed Exo as they ran; he looked over his shoulder briefly, and Albus saw that Exo was looking like he might wither away in minutes.

“What? What is it?” asked Albus with high concern. “Are you okay? Do you need to rest for a moment?”

“No, no, I’m fine,” insisted Exo, turning his head back around just in time to avoid running into a tree. “I was just thinking… with all this stuff that’s coming to light, you know, about Dismiusa and Gallen Ingot and Swait using the Devoctrices… do you think it’s getting more common? Do you think there’s some sort of connection – are more people figuring out how to do these powerful spells than in any time in history?”


“Well – this ‘ritual’ that Solomon says will cure me… do you think it’s a Devoctrix?”

Albus almost tripped over his feet. “Oh, Merlin,” he said as he considered it. “That would explain so much – why people say that no spell can cure a werewolf… because a Devoctrix isn’t really the same type of spell as we usually consider!”

A small creature darted out from its hiding place when Exo passed nearby; Albus ran full-speed into it and tumbled to the ground. Exo skidded to a halt, and the paper airplane slowed to a stop near him.

“Are you okay?” he asked, putting his hands on his knees to rest.

“Yeah, I didn’t hurt myself,” said Albus, brushing himself off.
He turned to look at the creature scurrying away in a limp, and laughed in spite of everything. It was a small lizard covered in spines. “Oh, look – it’s a tuatara!”

“What?” said Exo, peering through the darkness to try and see.

“A tuatara – it’s James’s Patronus animal. I guess they live on Moutohora. ...Whatever, we have to keep going!”

Exo nodded, and turned to step back into his run. They continued their sprint around the mountain, and some of the trees started to clear.

“There’s a beach over there,” said Exo, pointing and changing course. “We can run faster without all these trees–”

“No, no, don’t do that!” yelped Albus. “You don’t want to go out in the open – if the Macaws are flying overhead, they’ll see us.”

“Good thinking,” said Exo, and he changed course back into the denser trees. They veered even further into the growth to avoid detection, and the paper airplane drifted over to stay in front of them, though now it was pointing slightly off of the course they were actually taking.

“I think we’re getting close,” wheezed Exo. “Look how much the airplane is changing direction while we’re running...”

It was true; the airplane was pointing further and further to their right, suggesting that they were approaching their target and would pass it on their right if they kept their course. If they were farther away, the angle wouldn’t be growing as fast as it was.

“They should change, too,” said Albus, taking out the Invisibility Cloak. His legs were burning from the sprint, but he ignored the pain. He threw the Cloak on, and followed Exo’s change in direction to follow the airplane more closely.

It had been at least a half-mile’s journey through the island. At their running pace, they had probably been left with plenty of time before the full eclipse began; Albus checked the watch that Aidan had lent him, and found that it was 10:51 – twenty minutes until the full eclipse, which would only last fourteen minutes. That wasn’t much of a window, but if they were almost there already… Solomon would hopefully be able to defend against the notice of any Macaws if they warned him beforehand.

They finally burst through the last of the trees into a clearing that bordered the sea. They were on the very southeast corner of the island. Several rock peninsulas jutted out into the bay before them. The trees were positioned so that the clearing was unnaturally square-shaped, and Albus knew this had to be the place. The paper airplane dipped down until it nosedived into the ground, and Exo stopped so harshly that he slipped and fell on his rear-end.

Albus stopped behind him and tried to mask the sound of his breathing as Exo stood up, looking around in the darkness.

Tremulously, he spoke. “...John Solomon?”

“I am here,” uttered a slow, deep voice in response.

Albus threw a hand to his mouth to prevent any noise from escaping as Exo staggered backwards and nearly fell over again.
“Oh, my God,” whispered Exo. “You’re really here.”

There was a strange ripple in the air, and then a door opened out of nowhere. A man of entirely average proportions walked out from behind the door and stood several yards in front of Exo. He wore black gloves and black robes with a hood; he took the hood off to reveal a head of short, matted gray hair. His presence was instantly commanding, though he stood no taller than most adults Albus had known and his features were no more severe; there was simply some force about him that he knew how to present. He was, after all, a world-renowned Defense master and a great speaker.

He was holding a wand and another instrument that Albus recognized from the Lunar Eclipse Festival in their second year: an undulating black funnel. The door behind Solomon slowly swung shut, and it vanished as soon as it latched; not a trace of the door could be seen.

“Hello, Exorian Wilcox,” said Solomon, and a slight smile appeared on his solemn face. “It’s good to see you.”

Exo could only mouth dumbly; he was star-struck.

“And you may tell young Master Potter that he need not hide his face from me,” said Solomon, looking around at the trees that bounded the clearing.

Albus pulled the Invisibility Cloak off of himself, and Solomon gazed over to him. Albus smiled and held up a hand meekly. “Hello,” he said.

“Before we say anything else,” said Exo, panting heavily after their run, “I should warn you – we picked up unwanted company, and we’re being tracked. Since we need to buy more time before the full eclipse… we might want to figure out a way to fend them off.”

“I am experienced with unwanted trackers,” said Solomon, teasing a smile again. “It is no matter. I’ve arranged that this area is impossible to reach or flee using Apparition – there will be no one appearing in our midst, so we will be able to see them coming. But if you really would like to ensure that no one can see us, we could disappear through the door. It leads to an area of the island protected against sight, sound, and all other magic, but it will still be exposed to the natural elements around it – thus we can still see the moon and I can still perform the ritual.”

“Yes!” exclaimed Exo, though he moderated his volume to avoid detection. “Yes – they’re probably on brooms, so we’d have a job fending them off. We should go in now.”

“Very well,” said Solomon. “Step inside – Albus, you may remain under the Cloak until we return… when we do, your friend will no longer suffer the condition.”

He reached into the air, and wrapped his fingers around an invisible doorknob; he pulled on the door to open it, and Albus froze in place.

His mind flashed back to the Lunar Eclipse Festival, and watching the atrocities that occurred there. This was the first time he had truly flashed back without reactivating the trauma of the night, as he had directly after the massacre. He watched his mind replay the memory of Solomon getting his fingers shot clean off.

Solomon took his hand off of the door. Albus stared. The fingers were curling unnaturally… either too much at once, or not at all. He slowly raised his wand; Exo glanced back at Albus and his eyes flew all the way open.

“What are you doing?!” hissed Exo through his teeth.
“Master Potter?” inquired Solomon, slowly and calmly.

Harry’s voice echoed back through Albus’s head – something he had said once, but which had not made enough of an impression in Albus’s mind at the time for Albus to think he would remember it:

*John Solomon dropped off the face of the earth a couple weeks ago, you remember him, the guy who gives those lectures… he always wears gloves?*

“T-take y-your g-g-gloves off,” ordered Albus.

Solomon peered at him curiously. “Excuse me?”

“Take them off,” repeated Albus. “NOW!”

“Albus, what the hell?” spat Exo.

“I want to see your hands,” said Albus. “You always wear gloves. What’s underneath them?”

Solomon held up his hands and wiggled his fingers, but his grip on his wand was awkward. Albus kept his own wand steady.

“Siobor had wands for fingers,” he said. “Exo’s not going with you until you take off your gloves and prove you have fingers. Why is this so difficult? If you just take your gloves off, I’ll believe you. Why won’t you just do it if you’re not Siobor?”

“You honestly think I’m Ivan Siobor, the werewolf hunter?” scoffed Solomon, shaking his head.

Albus tried to stop his wand from shaking as he kept it steadily directed towards the man in front of him. “Yes,” he said. “Yes. I do. You would have taken your gloves off by now if you weren’t.”

Exo backed slowly away, and raised his own wand.

“Don’t even think about attacking,” warned Albus, invoking a hollow threat. “You’ve already seen what I can do when my hand has been cut by Swait’s knife. I outdueled you once and I’ll do it again – I don’t care how many wands you have.”

Solomon chuckled. “I’d hesitate to call that ‘outdueling’ me,” he said.

Albus’s heart plummeted like a stone, splashing into his stomach: it was Siobor.

“How did Siobor know this?”

Albus’s throat dried out instantly and his wand began shaking so violently he could not stop it.

“More like not knowing your own strength,” said Siobor. “But it wasn’t your own strength, was it? You lucked your way out of it with Elbad Swait’s Bloodblade. But might I remind you… that luck ran out when the knife’s power ran dry.”

Albus’s eyes filled with tears as suddenly several dozen men and women with firearms walked out of invisible doors all around them, and every one of them had fingers on the triggers.
“Prepare yourself to receive the cure, filthy werewolf scum,” chortled Siobor. “I have not lied… you will transform no longer. It is a truth accepted long ago. The only cure for the werewolf is death. Goodbye, from the Man in the Shadows.”

Albus squeezed his eyes shut as the last trickle of hope left his body.

But then, something brought it back.

A song, beautiful and harmonious, drifted across the trees. It was a song that filled his soul with light and energy; a song that restored his hope. The face that Siobor next struck informed Albus that the song was having the opposite effect upon their evil adversary. Then, with a flash of brilliant red-orange light, a phoenix teleported in front of their eyes. It wrapped its tail around Albus and Exo so rapidly that the onlookers had no time to react, and it disappeared with them in tow – because of course, Phoenixes could Apparate where humans couldn’t…

Sparky the phoenix and his passengers reappeared in the trees; Albus and Exo spilled onto the ground at Janelle’s feet. Janelle scooped Albus up off the ground and hugged him tight as two men in red, yellow, and blue robes – the colors of the Moutohora Macaws – set up a strong magical barrier around the three youths.

When Janelle released Albus, he turned to look; the Macaws, touching down off their brooms, began dueling Siobor’s minions. These Muggle weapons were either extraordinarily powerful or primed with magic – they were cracking and shattering the magical barriers that the Macaws were employing. But the Macaws were winning, Stunning the army while remaining safely behind their shields. Tashra stood in the center of the clearing, dueling Siobor himself.

“DON’T ATTACK SIOBOR!” screamed Albus. “HE’S TOO STRONG!”

Sparky lifted into the air over their shield and thrust himself forward at Siobor. With another piercing cry of phoenix song, he flapped his wing in Siobor’s direction, and a wave of billowing phoenix flame rushed towards Siobor. The song filled Albus with hope – they would win the day, and Siobor would be defeated–

Siobor propelled himself out of the range of the plume of fire, and Albus could not hear his shout, but a green jet of the unforgivable spell shot towards Tashra only from the index finger of his right hand. The spell hit Tashra directly between the eyes, and he collapsed onto the ground.

“NO!” screamed Albus, Janelle, and Exo all at once.

The rest of the Macaws, who had just finished dueling with Siobor’s servants, turned and began to attack their Captain’s murderer all at once. Siobor blasted into the air on jets of wind from all ten of his wands, and he vanished into the red sky.

“No,” whispered Albus, and tears began streaming down his face as he looked at the still form of Tashra on the ground, and he knew it was entirely his fault that the man was dead. “No…”

Sparky lifted himself again and flew to Tashra’s side. He lowered his beak and nudged at Tashra’s side, and then hopped on his chest and dripped a single tear down onto Tashra’s face between the eyes, right in the spot where the Killing Curse had hit him. But Tashra did not rise.

Sparky craned his head up to the sky, and opened his beak, and suddenly, the world was filled – no, each person was filled – with the phoenix lament.

The beautiful, mournful song washed over Albus like waves smoothing out a beach. It was his very own grief, turned directly to song, yet somehow listening to the music calmed his soul. He stood,
stricken by the power of the lament, until the Loch Stock Liner burst from under the bay in front of them. Harry and Wilcox leapt from the side and gently touched down into the water. They ran to shore, and they both turned their gazes to their sons.

As Sparky’s song continued to flood Albus with emotions, he saw that it was having an even more powerful effect upon his father, who had already heard phoenix song once in his life: after Dumbledore’s death. He wondered what kind of emotions it was bringing back. The father and son stood in front of each other, gazing into each others’ eyes, wondering what the other was feeling. Albus had worried that his father would be furious, but he had no such worries now.

Harry ran to Albus and threw his arms around him. He wasn’t crying, but neither was he speaking. He just held Albus tightly and Albus hugged him back.

Sparky took to the skies once more, and Albus knew he wouldn’t be coming back. His lament continued to drift towards them, but it was fading as he flew, and eventually, the bird and the song disappeared forever. The feeling in his chest took longer to loosen.

“We should go,” said Wilcox. “My son… he’s going through more full moon than usual. He needs rest.”

“You go, Helio,” said Harry. “Take Exo. But Albus and I… we can’t just leave these people alone with the damage that’s just happened.”

“I could take Albus and Janelle back, too,” suggested Wilcox gently.

“No,” said Harry. “I want to be with my son for a while.”

Wilcox nodded in understanding. He escorted his son back to the Loch Stock Liner, which crept back under the waves once more.

Neither Harry nor Albus was letting go of their hug. They stood by the Macaws, letting the tears fall all the way until the shadow of the earth left the moon and the blood-red light over the world was lifted.

“So,” said Harry as they climbed aboard the LSL. “Siobor was Solomon all along… perhaps even from the beginning.”

“How is that even possible?” asked Albus. “I thought… I thought they both had histories.”

“Ivan Siobor never attended any school,” said Harry, opening the door to the cabins. “Nobody knew him personally. Solomon might truly have led a double life from the start, inventing the character of Ivan Siobor by distorting his facial features and appearing occasionally in Russian news.”

Harry waved to Milo without much enthusiasm; Milo didn’t ask for any payment.

“Don’t put us up at the top of the queue, please,” said Harry. “We need time to talk anyway.”

“Noted,” said Milo, his usual cheerful demeanor gone.

Harry, Albus, and Janelle wandered into an open cabin and sat down. Harry continued talking about Siobor.

“We have to be prepared for the possibility that Siobor is a powerful Metamorphmagus, just like
Teddy – in which case we wouldn’t be able to sense any disguise he takes as we would if he were Polyjuicing. This includes visages of people we know. You know that Teddy can make himself look like anyone in the family… Siobor might be able to mimic people just as well. In fact, given this information, the same man might even have been a third person we knew.”


“Hugh January,” replied Harry. “You remember him – the man who worked in Luna’s wand shop? He had three missing fingers?”

Albus’s jaw dropped. He did remember Hugh January. And now that he thought about it… he recalled that all three of them – Solomon, January, and Siobor – had supposedly lost family to Fenrir Greyback. And Albus had been told that Hugh January lost three fingers to a curse from Greyback… but what if it was his own doing? What if Solomon had already cut those three off by that point? What if that was why Solomon was known for why he always wore gloves… and at the Lunar Eclipse Festival, when Albus had sworn he’d seen three of Solomon’s fingers get shot off, what if Siobor had blasted his own fake fingers off to make it look like the gunners were targeting him, too?

“Hugh worked in Luna’s wand shop, possibly stealing secrets of her advanced wandlore for his own usage,” continued Harry. “His missing fingers make me think Siobor was experimenting long before he finally went all the way and replaced every one of his fingers. Perhaps that’s when he decided to disappear. After all, Solomon and Hugh went missing at about the same time. We just thought that was coincidence; why would we ever have suspected they were the same person? But maybe they weren’t initially the same person; Siobor could have killed January and taken his identity long ago. He’s crafty. He’s avoided capture for this long, and he managed to lure you boys in. He would have killed you two if Janelle hadn’t hopped on board the LSL and notified the Macaws as soon as she could.”

“Thank you,” said Albus quietly.

Janelle nodded, but there was no “I told you so” anywhere in her expression. She simply understood.

“And… whom did Siobor enlist to serve him like that?” said Janelle. “With those Muggle gun devices?”

“Sandbloods,” said Harry. “I recognized a few of them. Uncle Ron is heading over there now with another group of Aurors to take them into custody. A couple of them were prominent Sandblood leaders whose names we’ve heard thrown around their base… but I think most of them were Imperiused Muggles. Not that this is a bad thing – it means we’ve rescued a great deal of people. Thank goodness the Macaws had the sense not to use deadly force… and thank goodness they’re also fairly accomplished duelists.”

“I can’t believe Siobor is in league with the Sandbloods,” said Albus. “Why would they have teamed up – don’t the Sandbloods hate wizards?”

“Maybe they’re using him to get rid of certain wizards – the werewolves,” said Harry. “Perhaps Siobor wanted use of the Marionette’s Medicine, so he contacted the Sandbloods. Or maybe Siobor Imperiused some Sandbloods to help him along, and he’s not actually affiliated with them at all. There’s no way to know… I’m actually surprised that the Sandbloods didn’t all swallow poison pills and kill themselves. If they don’t kill themselves, we might be able to clarify the situation a little bit with the information they have to give. But whatever the case… Ivan Siobor, or John Solomon, or whoever he is, is now the number one priority of the Auror Office. Keep Exo safe at
school, Albus. We’re going to have to station people at Hogwarts all year round… probably Rohan and Alana at least.”

Albus twitched at Alana’s name, and Harry seemed to notice.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing,” said Albus, casting his gaze to his feet.

Harry eyed him curiously for a moment, but the conversation died down, and they were left staring out the window at the passing Bicks in Digher Straits, until the cabin lights flashed green and the Liner resurfaced in an area of the world where there was light. True to his promise, Milo had not moved them up the queue, as the Loch Stock Liner kept on its way.

“I just wish I knew how Siobor was able to break through the barrier around Hogwarts,” said Harry. “The only thing I could imagine is that he…”

Albus looked up. “What?”


“What is it? I tell you everything…”

“I’ve been sworn to secrecy on this one.”

“By whom?”

“That’s a secret.”

Albus huffed and put a hand under his chin.

“But as for the large part of it, I’m beginning to think you and James are finding out more about it than I ever did,” said Harry quietly, and that was all the hinting that Albus needed.

Janelle looked around at the two of them awkwardly, but seemed to decide that she would try and pry it out of Albus later. She didn’t know, however, that Albus wasn’t necessarily able to talk to anyone about it. Since his knowledge from Professor Desulgon had influenced how he analyzed the information from Litinia and Swait, he couldn’t discuss any of it.

They didn’t talk much the rest of the way back. They used the time mostly for silent reflection. To take his mind off of Tashra’s death, Albus thought about whether his father knew anything about the Devoctrices – he had, after all, been Head Auror when Gallen Ingot came to power, and if that was indeed how Ingot had become so powerful, then he probably would have heard any theories about it. But when James had begun to describe the Devoctrices, Harry didn’t seem to recognize the name…

How many people knew about the Devoctrices, and how many times had they been used in the world? What other things in the world had he taken for granted that might be Devoctrices? He’d have to make a list sometime.

After what seemed like much less than an hour, the candles in the cabin flashed blue, and Harry broke himself out of his thoughts as well. He gestured to Albus, and Janelle shifted in her seat, unsure if she should go with them.

“I’ll be right back to escort you back to Beauxbatons, Janelle,” said Harry. “Albus, I’m just going
to walk you out of the ship – I shouldn’t hold up the Liner much longer, so I can’t bring you all the way to the castle. Will you be comfortable walking back to the castle on your own?”

“Yeah,” said Albus. “I mean – it’s not that far of a walk…”

“I know, I’m just making sure,” said Harry. “After all, you’ve been through a lot, and I wouldn’t be surprised if you never wanted to be alone again. Come on, then.”

“You never will be alone,” said Janelle before the door closed; Albus turned back and smiled at her, waving before Harry nudged him out again.

“Albus,” said Harry as they waved goodbye to Milo, whose twiggy mustache still sagged in sorrow. “I’m so happy you’re safe… and it’s a really good thing that we’ve uncovered some of the truth about John Solomon… but please. Never, ever do anything like that, ever again.”

Albus had been wondering when the “never scare me like that again” part of the talk would come up. He nodded.

“I don’t need to say any more than that, do I?” he sighed as he walked with Albus to the ladder that was thrown down into the Black Lake. “You know as well as anyone… there are some things that phoenix tears can’t cure.” He looked over to the castle. “Like werewolves… and death.”

His gaze seemed to be fixed upon the Astronomy tower.

“I’m sorry,” said Albus quietly.

Harry looked over to him. “It’s really perfectly understandable, Albus,” he said. “You have… you have a saving people thing. It’s just that… history repeats itself. But my history is full of good people dying, I want you to promise me that, if at all possible, you will not save someone without proper guidance… okay?”

Albus was being asked to make a lot of promises lately. He nodded.

“All right,” said Harry, smiling weakly. “Off you go, Albus. I’ll… I’ll see you in a few weeks… when you’re home.”

He hugged his son tightly again, but didn’t let go.

“Albus, I’m…”

“You’re what?”

Harry turned to the Liner’s captain. “Salvo, I’m escorting my son back to the castle,” he said. “I’m afraid to let him walk back alone. Please wait here for me – I’ll pay you whatever losses you sustain because of my delay.”

“I understand,” said Salvo, and he turned to screech something back up to the mermaid in the crow’s nest.

Harry climbed down the ladder first, and froze the water under them so that they could walk the short distance to shore while remaining dry. They continued to the castle, and Harry was so tense that Albus worried his father would have a heart attack if a bird flew too close. But he understood why the tension was there.

“I’m going to have to head back to the Aurors now,” he said when they were finally approaching
the castle. “We’re following up on some important leads. I’d like to stay here with you and personally make sure you and James and Lily are safe, but I can’t do that forever—”

“I promise, Dad,” said Albus. “I won’t do anything like this again.”

Harry hugged his son again for a long time, and then nodded. “I’m definitely holding up the Liner,” he said. “I’m going to go bring Janelle back. Next time you two see each other, you owe her an enormous thanks.”

“I know,” said Albus, smiling.

Harry turned and jogged back to the Loch Stock Liner, but kept looking over his shoulder as Albus continued to wave goodbye.

He walked the few remaining steps to the castle, but every footstep made him cringe. With every step he took, he carved his path into the world. How many people would die in his wake?
Reflections

Albus stepped back into the main doors of the castle, and before he took more than a few steps, Professor Desulgon was upon him.

“Albus,” he said. “Professor Wilcox would like to see you in his office. He’s there with Exorian now.”

Albus nodded. “Thank you for the message,” he said, and turned to the direction of the nearest stairwell.

“Albus—”

Albus looked over his shoulder.

“Er. Nothing,” said Professor Desulgon, and he walked away.

Albus tried not to overthink this, and he continued up to Wilcox’s office. He stopped in front of the gargoyle, realizing that he didn’t know the password, but it jumped aside to admit him anyway; Wilcox still hadn’t set a password since Dismiusa. As he climbed to the top of the stairwell, and knocked on the big oak door.

It swung open to admit him, and Albus walked into Wilcox’s office, where Exo was lying down on a small bed that had apparently been conjured for him. His two wands were resting on a little table near his bed, and Albus mentally slapped himself in the head as he realized he had forgotten to recover his second wand at the shore of the Black Lake. Everything else that had happened had chased it from his mind.

“Firstly, before we talk about anything, Albus,” said Wilcox softly, “are you okay? Are you comfortable discussing what happened?”

“Yes, I am,” said Albus without a break in his voice. He was going to be able to talk about it – it would be painful, but that wouldn’t stop him if it was going to help bring Siobor down.

“Okay, that’s good,” said Wilcox. “Secondly, before we discuss it, I’m going to need as much information as I can about what happened, so that I can more reasonably draw conclusions from what you tell me…”

Albus’s brain did not accept that sentence as readily, and he puzzled over it for a few seconds before speaking up. “Wait, Professor,” he said, trying to put his thoughts together. “How can you get information about our discussion – before we discuss it?”

“By a handy little magical device that lets me see it for myself,” said Wilcox. “It’s called a Pensieve, and one is kept in the Headmaster’s office for his personal use, left by your namesake. Have you ever extracted a memory for a Pensieve, Albus?”

“No, sir,” he said curiously. “Am I going to?”

“To extract another’s memory is incredibly difficult without causing injury or damage to the memory in question, and potentially more. I cannot do it for you or for my son. I’m not sure Exo is in any condition to do so, anyway. So… will you try?”

Albus looked over to Exo, lying on the bed, looking like he was in agony.
“If it helps us catch Siobor, then yes,” said Albus. “Absolutely.”

“Good,” said Wilcox. “It’s best that we do it right away – while the memory is freshest. I’ll teach you the proper theory as quickly as I can, but there’s something you should know about when you use a Pensieve – the memory will never be as clearly in focus as before you extract it, unless you are at that moment observing it by the Pensieve. You’ll remember enough of it, but you’ll have to concentrate harder to bring it to mind. Are you still willing to try?”


“All right,” said Wilcox. “First, you need to place a wand against your temple… like this.” He displayed the motion, and Albus copied him. “Then, focus on the memory. Play it back in your head as you’re slowly moving your wand away from your head. You’ll get better at this with practice, but you’ll find that a surprising amount of detail is preserved in the strand, even if you didn’t think you were doing it right.”

“Maybe you should do this for me, Professor,” said Albus, moving his wand away. “What if I screw up, and I lose my memory?”

“We could have Exo do it when he’s feeling better, but I’d like to do it as soon as possible,” said Wilcox. “And what do you mean, have me do it for you? It’s so difficult to—”

“No, I mean, like…” Albus grinned sheepishly. “Er… Imperius Curse, maybe?”

Wilcox buried his face in his hands. “Albus, you’re not really asking me to use an Unforgivable Curse on you… are you?”

“Well, I wouldn’t tell anyone,” said Albus. “It would be easier for everyone—”

“And that’s capable of landing me a life sentence in Azkaban, Albus!”

“No, Albus, you can do this yourself,” said Wilcox. “Besides, there are certain… side effects to connecting minds like that. You can do this, Albus – you’re the most natural student I’ve ever encountered in regards to mental magic. It’s actually easier than you think, and if you think you’ve screwed up, you can get the memory back – all you have to do is feed the memory back into your head through your eyes and ears.”

“That’s disgusting,” stated Albus simply.

“Well, I suppose it is,” said Wilcox. “Now, lift your wand to your temple again, please. Pull out the memory by playing it back in your head as it occurred, but you don’t have to include all the details. In fact, just focusing on four or five important points of the memory in sequence will provide you with a perfect picture of what occurred.”

Albus did as he was told. He held the wand up to his temple, and then he closed his eyes and reminisced, pulling his wand away from his temple as he did so.

“I am here,” said Solomon, and a door opened out of thin air, revealing him.

Solomon reopened the door to try and admit Exo, but his fingers curled in a very strange way around the doorknob.
More doors opened out of thin air and Sandbloods popped up everywhere.

The phoenix song filled him with hope as the Moutohora Macaws appeared.

Damien Tashra was struck full-force with a Killing Curse.

Albus opened his eyes to find that they were shimmering with tears, and a silvery hair-like strand of light was curling down from the tip of his wand.

“Albus, you did it!” exclaimed Wilcox.

“Did what?” asked Albus, looking at his strand of memory. “What is this – what–”

He had to really strain his mind to recall what had just happened: he had taken this memory from his mind, and it was the memory about what had happened in Moutohora. The strand was mostly silver-white, but as he looked at it, he could see flashes of red and green, colors that reminded him of what occurred. There were five small bead-like structures within the strand, probably the points of memory he had used to draw it out. As he watched, they melted outwards and smoothed out the surface of the strand until it was a relatively even width throughout.

“Okay, now that memory can exist outside of your mind,” said Wilcox. “Just don’t press your wand into the strand at any point other than the very tip, or the memory will fracture and disintegrate before your eyes. That’s what you do if you want to mostly forget about something, but specialized Mentalists can bring it back if you regret it later. We’d rather not waste the time to get a Mentalist over here, so it would be much appreciated if you didn’t destroy that memory.”

“Don’t worry, Professor, I won’t,” said Albus. “As much as I’d like to. But that wouldn’t erase what happened. So what do I do with it now – where’s the Pensieve?”

Wilcox waved a wand in the air, and a black cabinet opened across the room; a shallow stone basin could be seen inside, with runes and symbols carved into its edges. It was full of material that could be called liquid light or solid wind; Albus had seen it before in his father’s Pensieve, but he’d never actually entered a memory… excepting the ones he’d entered while they were still in their owners’ heads.

“Now, simply lower it in,” said Wilcox. “Don’t worry about walking too fast; the memory won’t detach from your wand unless you tap your finger on your wand while flicking it, or until the strand touches the surface of the Pensieve’s contents.”

Albus walked over to the Pensieve and lowered the memory into the basin. The fresh memory caused the rest to swirl violently, and then when Albus next looked inside, it showed the clearing on Moutohora in the red light of the eclipse. As he watched, Exo ran into the clearing, out of breath. He was wondering where he was in this memory until he remembered that he was under the Cloak.

“I’m going to go back in to watch the memory,” said Wilcox. “I will extend the invitation to you, but it won’t be a pleasant experience if you do. You’ve already seen what happened, and you’ll have enough of a recollection to fill in any details if I ask questions, but given your reaction after the massacre in your second year, perhaps you shouldn’t relive this particular memory.”

“Well… I agree, sir,” said Albus. “Sorry.”

“Apology accepted but unnecessary. I’ll be back momentarily… in about however long it took for this to happen.”
He placed his hand on the surface of the Pensieve. He was lifted up almost vertically, and then zoomed down into the basin and vanished.

Albus looked over at Exo, who seemed to be asleep. He wanted to sleep, too, but then he remembered that it was only – what, one in the afternoon? He checked Aidan’s watch and confirmed his guess.

There was a sharp knock on the door to the office. Albus ran to the door, not sure whom Wilcox was expecting, but worrying that the knocking would awaken Exo. He threw open the door to find Louis standing there.

“Albus!” he said. “What are you doing in here during lunch? Where’s Professor Wilcox – I’d like to borrow–”

He looked over at Exo, still soundly sleeping, and then turned to see the Pensieve out of its cabinet.

“...the Pensieve,” finished Louis in a softer voice. “Shoot – are you using it right now? What’s going on?”

Albus grimaced; no one had been told yet about where he and Exo had journeyed.

“Er... Exo and I just got back,” he said simply and awkwardly.

“Got back?” said Louis, his mouth twisting quizzically. “From...?”

“From Moutohora.”

“Moutohora, New Zealand?!”

“Yes.”

“What were you doing there? Did you get to hang out with the Macaws’ Captain Tashra?!”

Albus’s legs gave out from under him, and he sank onto the floor. He couldn’t stop the tears from coming, and he began to cry himself out once again. Louis settled down next to him and hugged him tightly, not understanding but not asking any questions, for which Albus was extremely grateful.

Shortly after, Wilcox emerged from the Pensieve; he simply surfaced and lifted himself out of the basin gracefully. He had a strange look on his face, which grew more towards confusion when he saw Louis.

“Louis?” he asked, a little puzzled. “Is there something I can help you with?”

“Well, I was hoping to use the Pensieve for a little bit, sir,” said Louis. “But if you’re busy with it, I’ll come back...”

“No, no, go ahead,” said Wilcox, gesturing. “I’m finished with it. Is Albus okay?”

“I’m not sure, Professor,” said Louis, still rubbing Albus’s back. “I haven’t asked.”

“He and Exorian spirited away to Moutohora without notifying anyone,” said Wilcox. “Something happened down there. I’ll let him tell you about it if he wishes.”

“I assumed as much,” said Louis. “Er... should I come back later anyway, sir?”
“No, it’s okay,” said Albus, wiping his nose, feeling very much younger than he was. “You can stay… I’m okay.”

Louis looked back at Wilcox, then to Albus again, and then shrugged and walked over to the Pensieve. He lifted his wand to his temple and drew out a silvery strand of a memory. Albus peered into it, wondering if he could see colors corresponding to the events of the memory like he could see in his own strand, but it was only silver-white. He supposed the colors within the memory were only visible to the memory’s owner.

Louis disappeared into the Pensieve soon after, and Albus wondered what he was examining. Wilcox cleared his throat a little bit, and Albus looked back up at him.

“Albus, who is the ‘Man in the Shadows?” he asked with a grave tone.

“Who – what?” Had this been from his memory?

“The ‘Man in the Shadows.’ Right after the Sandbloods came out of their doors, he said, ‘Goodbye, from the Man in the Shadows.’ Was this the first you had heard of this man, whoever he is?”

“Well, yes,” said Albus, trying to recall Siobor saying this. “I just… assumed he was talking about himself.”

Wilcox gave a foreboding look to the wall. “Or it could be about his superior.”

“Oh,” said Albus, not enjoying the thought that someone was in charge of Siobor – that person would probably be infinitely worse.

“Either way, it’s something that I feel we should bring up to the Auror Office,” said Wilcox. “They’ll probably be seeing this memory, too, but it’s a good idea to get them started on the search sooner rather than later, I suppose. Er – let me revise that – the Auror Office will also be seeing this memory, with your permission?”

“Yes, of course,” said Albus as Louis tumbled back out of the Pensieve, much less smoothly than Wilcox.

Wilcox looked a little irritated at Louis’s presence. “Was that all you needed?” he asked, keeping his voice steady.

“Yes, that’s all I wanted to see again,” said Louis, brushing off his robes. “That helped me a lot. Apologies for the interruption, and thank you.”

“You’re quite welcome,” said Wilcox. “Have a good day, Louis.”

“You too, sir.”

Louis left looking determined.

Wilcox turned to Albus. “I think I’ve had most of my questions answered for me by watching the memory,” he said. “So, unless there’s anything else you feel is important I know right away… you may go. I don’t want to force you to stay here and wallow in what has happened.”

Albus nodded slowly. “I don’t think there was anything else, sir. Not that my father wouldn’t be able to explain to you better, anyway.”
“Then please head back to your dormitory,” he said. “And please stay there for the remainder of the day, at least until dinner. Only attend your following classes if it makes you feel better, but I would advise against it. Just get some rest; your mind will be needing it, even if you don’t think your body does.”

“Yes, sir.”

Albus cast a last glance towards Exorian before exiting the office. He walked very slowly back to Gryffindor Tower.

“Well, what are you doing back up here?” asked the Fat Lady pompously. “Should you not be in class at present?”

“Fidelius,” said Albus.

“Well, yes, that is the password, but why aren’t you–”

“Fidelius,” snapped Albus impatiently.

“Goodness, fine,” she said, swinging the door open. “But if someone comes around asking where you are, I’m going to have to rat you out!”

Albus didn’t respond to her; he simply crawled into his bed and huddled himself under the covers.

Ever since he had been old enough for James to pick on him, he had generally preferred his own company, but now, he wanted someone beside him. The tears had stopped coming, but the pain inside him had not stopped throbbing.

Late that night, Albus snuck outside again under the Invisibility Cloak. He very much did not want to go out alone again, so he asked James and Rose to come and help look for his wand. He didn’t want to go outside at all, but he knew he had to get to his wand before something else did, like a troll or the squid. They accepted, and they traveled to the Black Lake under the Cloak together in search of the missing ebony wand.

“This would be a lot easier if we had a general idea of where your wand was,” said James as they approached the edge of the lake. “Then we could Accio the wand. But without a general idea of where it is, that wouldn’t work. Let’s split up… but stay close. Siobor already came into the grounds of Hogwarts once. Albus, you stay under the Cloak, okay?”

“Sure thing,” said Albus, not eager to argue that. He wandered off towards the part of the shore he thought he and Exo had waited before summoning the Loch Stock Liner, and began walking with his head down, scanning the ground in front of him as he went.

His mind was drifting towards things he could have done instead of lead Exo into Moutohora by themselves, instead of focusing on where he was going; he ended up walking nearly a third of the way around the lake before realizing that he was supposed to be looking near where he thought he’d dropped it. He turned around and started to walk back, but froze when he heard soft voices approaching from that side.

Two older boys were walking towards the lake.

He grasped his wand tight, still tense from his experiences. He was under the Cloak, though, so he should be fine. It didn’t look like it was Red Pierce or any of his friends… Red was only a year older than Albus. These were two seventh year boys. One had blond hair so bright it was almost
illuminating the darkness around it with the light of the almost-full moon. As Albus peered closer, he saw that it was Louis. The person traveling along with him spoke, and Albus recognized Gil’s voice.

“...particular reason, on a moonlit eve? I’m not saying there’s necessarily anything suspicious about that... but come on.”

“Whatever you’re thinking is probably right.”

Gil looked at Louis, and Albus wasn’t sure whether to creep closer or back away and leave them alone. They were headed almost right towards him. Albus decided to just keep walking back towards James and Rose.

“Louis... why did you break up with Caspar?”

Albus perked his head up and slowed to a stop.

“Well... there were several reasons, but the biggest deciding factor of the moment was when he refused to come visit after the barrier finally went down.”

“He refused – like, he straight-up told you that he didn’t want to come?”

“He thought it was too dangerous. Thought Dismiusa might still be out there or something. Maybe my perception is skewed as a courageous Gryffindor, but...”

“No, I see your point.”

“Yeah. I mean, if your significant other is in a dangerous place, isn’t that the perfect time to head to their side? Wouldn’t you want to protect them if you thought they were in danger? Nope. Instead, he asked me to come to Durmstrang. I said I wanted to be with my family and friends, especially if Dismiusa came back with a vengeance, though we all knew that wasn’t going to happen.”

“And that’s why you broke up with him?”

“Not really. It was more of the little things.”

“Little things he did that annoyed you?”

“Little things he didn’t do.” Louis had reached the lake, and he took his shoes off to dangle his feet in the water. Gil sat beside him.

“I wish I was a Metamorphmagus like your sister’s boyfriend,” said Gil, checking his hair and preening in the reflection of the lake. “Then I could just switch my hair back and forth whenever I wanted.”

“Well, you already do,” said Louis, laughing. “You can never decide what looks best, can you?”

“Nah. I look beautiful in so many different colors...”

Louis laughed and slapped a hand on Gil’s shoulder. He moved his hand to the farther shoulder and rested his head on the nearer; Gil looked pleasantly surprised.

“So – ah – what did you mean by little things he didn’t do?”

“Well... like the way he didn’t look at me. The small things he didn’t say to me. The gestures he didn’t do for me. He knew how to make me happy when I was angry – he always cheered me up
with a hug and a kiss when I was upset – he just didn’t know how to stop me from being upset with him in the first place, and I decided it was better to move on. I moved on so that I could be here now, sitting by a pristine lake in the moonlight, with someone who has done all these things for me.”

Gil didn’t appear to know what to say.

“I sorted through a few memories in Wilcox’s office today,” said Louis, “because I never really took the time to appreciate how much you always cared about me. I’d like to take that time now, if you don’t mind.”

Gil put his arm around Louis and smiled. “Well. Can’t say I mind.”

“Good,” said Louis, taking his head off of Gil’s shoulder and bringing his head up; his face was very close to Gil’s.

“I… er… I thought you… said you were ‘women-and-Caspar-sexual,’ not…”

“Well… the situation has required a change,” said Louis quietly.

“Are you women-and-Gillian-sexual now?” whispered Gil.

Louis shook his head. “No. Right now I’m just Gil-sexual.”

He leaned in for the kiss, and Albus silently pumped an excited fist. Louis put his arm back around Gil’s shoulder, and then he pulled forward and they both pitched into the lake. They came up laughing and splashing each other before pulling each other close in the lake and continuing where they’d left off.

Feeling awkward for having sat in on that, but knowing he needed some love to break the hold of darkness on his heart, he continued back to James and Rose.

Albus pulled off the Cloak as he got near; James sighed exasperatedly at Albus when he reappeared.

“Bloody hell, Albus, where were you?” he said. “I was about to start shouting. Don’t disappear like that on me again.”

“Oh, and you’d better love me forever,” said Rose. She held out her two hands as if holding a dinner platter; Albus’s wand on the surface of her hands, undamaged.

He smiled as he took the wand from her grip, which emitted a soft glow upon reunion with its master.

James peered down the lake curiously. “What the hell – is that – is that two mermaids having a wrestling contest?!”

“Er… let’s give the mermaids some privacy,” said Albus, starting the jog back up to the castle.

The rest of the school year flew by without notice; after all, it was only two weeks, since exams were cancelled. Albus was restless the whole way through, and he could only cleanse his mind by wandering about the castle at night under the Invisibility Cloak. He was sleepless, but he didn’t mind that because his sleep was consistently tormented by what he’d seen.

On the last night of the term, he wandered for a particularly long amount of time. He battled
himself within his own mind, as he always did, so that when he was asleep, he was hopefully too exhausted to dream.

*Why did I have to think that Solomon was good? How could I have been so ignorant to all the signs?*

*But Xin Theuris was a werewolf who was cured. And we still haven’t explained it. It wasn’t my fault he tricked everyone so badly…*

*The Auror Office was still skeptical. Did I think myself smarter than the Aurors?*

*The Siren Song Charm made sure we would fall for it. We were doomed from the start.*

*But I was warned about the Siren Song Charm. Still I nearly led Exo to our deaths.*

Siobor wasn’t going to stop trying until it happened. But I tried to help my friend, and I did save his life – rather, if I hadn’t joined Exo, then Janelle wouldn’t have been there to save both of our hides.

As he finished his nightly internal argument, he encountered a locked corridor that he hadn’t yet explored. Not one to refuse a challenge, he took the Bloodblade from his pocket and picked the lock with ease; the door swung open, revealing a single short hallway with four unused classrooms, two on either side with a statue of a very old man standing alone at the end of the hallway. He checked the Marauder’s Map under the soft glow of his wand. The corridor was indeed on the map, and it wasn’t specially labeled. If this region of the school had always been locked, the makers of the map must have found some way to break into this corridor as well.

Albus scratched his head; why were these classrooms unused? There didn’t seem to be anything dangerous down here, and Wilcox had never warned them to stay away from this part of the castle, which he would have done had there been any reason to stay away. He pushed open the door to the first classroom on the right and strolled inside.

It was empty, but there were desks with heavy magical graffiti and names carved into the sides. The words “BERTHA JORKINS SUCKS” gleamed the brightest on one of the oldest desks; the scratches around it suggested that teachers had attempted to remove it but were unsuccessful. Some of the letters kept vanishing and reappearing so that the message kept switching between “BJ SUCKS” and the original. Drawings of large seventh years chased drawings of first years around the surfaces of the other desks and crudely illustrated hearts pulsed around sets of initials. He wondered idly why no one had bothered to clean them; or perhaps this was a classroom where they stored desks that had too much graffiti that couldn’t be removed.

He walked out of the classroom, thinking about Exo. Of course Exo didn’t blame Albus for what happened – that would be incredibly irrational – but he was even more closed off than usual; he walked with a heavier stance and he didn’t smile nearly as often. He didn’t talk to many people, and when he did, the conversation was short, to the point, and not very enjoyable. He had really put all of his stock in Solomon being able to cure him. Even after the massacre at the festival in their second year, he had still retained hope that he would be able to find Solomon and get the man to cure him personally and individually. But now that this had occurred, he had no hope whatsoever that he would ever be free of his condition. Perhaps it was better off that way, though Albus felt himself very pessimistic for imagining that Exo was better off without hope. But perhaps he’d learn to live with it now; maybe this would help him cope in the long run.

The other classroom on the right side of the corridor was larger and held all sorts of broken telescopes, abaci, Dark Detectors, and other magical and non-magical instruments used in the classrooms. There were no desks or chairs, but there was a chalkboard with a lot of rude messages
written on it, most of them regarding certain individuals who could stick certain objects in certain locations. He read a few of them over several times and rehearsed them to himself so that he could use them on other people, and then departed the classroom for the next.

The third classroom, the farther classroom on the left, was as large as the second and held a lot of old newspapers. Albus sat for a while and sifted through them curiously, but they were all at least a hundred years old and none of them really interested him. There was another chalkboard in this room, this one listing a whole bunch of incantations with crudely worded descriptions of their effects. He studied a few of these as well, and then moved on to the last classroom of the locked corridor.

This last classroom was small, like the first. There were countless boxes of books; some of them were so full that they were bulging and torn with the volume of the volumes inside. But that wasn’t what caught Albus’s eye.

In the center of the classroom, there was a large, magnificent mirror in an ornate gold frame, so high it nearly reached the ceiling. The surface was incredibly smooth and clear, like it had just been polished. Albus glanced up at the top of the mirror, and saw an inscription carved into the frame: *Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on woshi.*

“The Mirror of Erised,” he said breathlessly. What was it doing here? Was this where it had been moved after his father had obtained the Philosopher’s Stone from it?

Curious as to what he might see, he stepped directly in front of the mirror.

Knowing that it wasn’t real, he had to remind his heart not to stop when people began appearing next to him. First, his family surrounded him. Then he was holding hands with Janelle. Alec, Aidan, and Exo appeared, followed by Eftan and Scorpius Malfoy, and a couple of grown men and other members of his friends and family, until the mirror was full of smiling people.

Albus looked upwards; the mirror showed him standing outside at night, and the moon was full, shining down upon a human Exorian Wilcox. The more he looked at the mirror, the more he realized how complex was his desire. Exo was no longer a werewolf. Albus and Janelle looked happy together in the mirror. His family was happy, unburdened, and not tense about being out in the open at night. Eftan looked happy and was back amongst his friends, and Scorpius had found more than a single friend. And the other random people standing around him – there was Damien Tashra, and Sahil Vivekkamal, and Lyman Dane… people who had died because of him.

But Albus knew that this lengthy desire could be summed up with simplicity. He just wanted his and everyone else’s lives to be happy, whole, and normal.

He walked out of the room and exited the locked corridor.

Where else was there to go? His wandering mind still commanded his wandering body to go further. He had discovered the Mirror of Erised – he’d have to tell his father. What else did his father find during his time at Hogwarts? The basilisk’s chamber… the Room of Requirement…

His father had said the Room of Requirement was destroyed by a fire. Was that true? His father’s stories had included how he entered the Room of Requirement, so he knew how to get in. He wondered if it was still operational at all.

He exited the corridor, and closed the door behind him.

He hadn’t been thinking at all. Why hadn’t he checked the Marauder’s Map to see if anyone was
outside the door? Professors Desulgon and Westerling rounded the corner just as the door shut, and
they turned their heads sharply like predators noticing prey.

“Did you hear that door?” said Professor Desulgon.

“I did indeed,” said Professor Westerling. “Did someone just…”

Albus backed away quickly. Professor Westerling had already apprehended him once under the
Cloak this year. He ducked around another corner just as Professor Westerling whispered,
“Homenum Revelio.”

A red-orange halo burned above his head; he ducked further down the corridor so that the teachers
wouldn’t see the glow. He checked the Marauder’s Map briefly, and saw that no one was headed
down this way. Breathing a sigh of relief, he continued on his path up to the seventh floor after
waving at the ethereal halo above his head until it vanished.

He walked very quietly so as not to attract attention, especially as Peeves zoomed over his head
blowing raspberries. As a result, Professor Desulgon and Professor Westerling, who were
apparently also headed to the seventh floor, reached it before Albus did. He stood next to a suit of
armor to let them pass. They were speaking under their breath.

“...not sure how effective it is,” Professor Desulgon was saying. “I’d never really heard of the
charm being used that way before I talked with you.”

Professor Westerling whispered something back as they passed, and Albus only caught one word:
his name.

“...Albus…”

He frowned. Were they talking about him?

He didn’t dare make his presence known; Professor Desulgon would probably Obliviate him right
then and there. Instead he continued on his quest to the Room of Requirement.

He stopped in front of the patch of wall he’d heard contained the room: just opposite the tapestry
of Barnabas the Barmy. He walked past it three times, repeating the same sentence in his head: I
want to see what became of the Room of Requirement. I want to see what became of the Room of
Requirement. I want to see what became of the Room of Requirement.

On his third trip past, the door appeared.

It was a rather ordinary door, though brightly polished like the mirror, and it had a brass handle. If
he remembered the stories from his childhood correctly – including Aunt Hermione’s claim that
the door could no longer be opened, as she had tried it when she had returned to Hogwarts for her
seventh year – he tugged on the door, and he could move it no more than he could have moved a
wall with a brass handle on it.

But then again, he had an advantage over the people who had previously tried reopening the room.
He took the Bloodblade out of his robes once more. Carefully, he slid it in between the wall and
the door, as there was no lock to pick. But something seemed to happen despite the lack of a lock;
there was a clicking sound, like something tumbling into place, and a breath of air was released
from the door as it settled into place.

Slowly, he opened the door.
It happened so fast that he never saw it coming: a wisp of flame blasted from the opposite end of the room, striking like a coiled snake, and smashed painfully into his chest, exploding on contact into a million embers. He dropped his wand and the knife and crumpled to the floor, only conscious for a second but somehow having the presence of mind for just long enough to pull the Cloak slightly off of his body so that someone would see him lying there. The door to the Room of Requirement lay slightly ajar, its inside charred black and completely empty.

He heard voices as if from afar; he clutched at the empty space in front of him, trying to drag himself closer to the voices, trying to claw his way back into life.

“–such an injury–”

“–and I don’t know how much hope we can–”

An injury… something had happened to him.

With the greatest effort it had ever taken to perform so simple an action, he began to wrench his eyelids apart.

“Oh, my God,” said Madam Birchbaum, checking a little device attached to Albus’s heart. “Oh my God. H-He’s – he’s – d-“

“Dead?!” yelped Albus, sitting up straight, the word “death” ironically injecting him full of life. “Shit – am I dead?!“

Wilcox stared at him, and a single eye twitched. “Er,” he said. “Apparently not.”

“Holy hell, Albus,” said a voice from the other side of Albus’s bed. Albus turned to see his brother and sister standing there; James threw his arms around him, as did Lily. “Holy hell,” said Jamesa again. “Bloody hell. Holy blood. Helly hole.”

“Get your arms off of him!” shrieked Madam Birchbaum. “Get your arms off of him right this second! He could be incredibly fragile!” She checked the heart monitor. “Good God, he’s alive.”

“Albus,” sighed Wilcox, “you really need to break this habit of coming as close as humanly possible to dying.”

“What happened?” asked Albus, shaky on the details. In fact, as he tried to remember any detail, he found that he couldn’t. When had he gotten injured?

“You were struck by Fiendfyre,” said Madam Birchbaum. She grasped her hair and pulled. “You IDIOT! Why did you have to open the door to the Room of Requirement?! You knew what had destroyed it!”

“The Room of Requirement?” asked Albus. “When did I…?”

“Are you experiencing memory loss?” asked Alana, whom Albus suddenly noticed across the room. “Can you tell us what happened right before you went to the Room of Requirement?”

“I didn’t even know I went there,” said Albus.

“What is the last thing you remember?” asked Madam Birchbaum, still attacking his chest with what looked like knitting needles and toothbrushes.

Albus screwed up his face in concentration. “I… don’t remember.”
Madam Birchbaum’s arms went limp in exasperation for a moment, and she held her instruments away from Albus’s chest to avoid puncturing him. “Albus, by definition, the last thing you remember is not something that you don’t remember. Please think about it for a moment and tell me the last thing you remember.”

Albus reached back in his mind. A good starting point was his last class of the term – a double period of Modern Magical Instruments with Professor Norton. He could begin there, and move forward, tracing his path until he couldn’t remember.

After his last class, he had celebrated with his friends in Gryffindor by playing a few games of Exploding Snap. Exo had gone to bed, and Albus had tried to talk to him but was shunned. Instead, he’d decided to wander the castle… but where had he gone?

“Just before most of my friends went to bed,” said Albus.

“Is it a full lapse in memory, or are things just fuzzy?” asked Madam Birchbaum.

Albus recalled that he’d taken his Cloak with him. He looked to his side and saw the Invisibility Cloak in James’s arms and the Bloodblade on a table nearby. He recalled through a haze that he had used both.

“Fuzzy,” said Albus.

Madam Birchbaum nodded as she continued to work on his chest. “Good – then we can rule out possession. Were you being controlled or was it your own stupidity at work?”

“I don’t think I was being Imperiused or anything.”

“Albus, you need to stop getting yourself killed,” whispered Lily. “It’s going to get you killed one day.”

“By all means it should have,” laughed Madam Birchbaum. “Like father, like son, I suppose.”

“What do you mean?” asked Albus.

“You survived being hit by the Fiendfyre Curse,” she said. “No one has ever been directly struck by Fiendfyre and lived. Much like the Killing Curse. Like father, like son. But it’s going to leave a scar – a scar that you very well may carry for the rest of your life. Like father, like son.”

She Conjured a mirror and held it so that he could see the reflection of his chest, on which there was a nasty red scar that was shaped and colored like a wisp of flame.

A mirror, thought Albus dimly. That’s strange… I feel like I should be remembering something about a mirror.

“At least yours is easier to hide,” she said. “But probably more painful. We have no idea what the aftereffects of this curse will be. All we can do is hope it doesn’t slowly destroy you from the inside.”

“Yes, let’s hope that,” said James, shooting an angry look at Madam Birchbaum as Lily started to tremble.

“I don’t think it will,” said Madam Birchbaum. “It’s not a Spreader. Some curses spread from their point of origin, and forcing them back can be quite an ordeal. But this scar is sitting still. It’s just that – a scar. I think you’ll be fine, now that you’re awake. I’m using all my knowledge of curses to
try and reduce whatever effects may come about in the future, but I don’t think they’ll be lethal.”

“Thank you, Cynthia,” said Wilcox.

“Yes, thank you,” said Albus. “Sorry for all the trouble I’ve caused you…”

“It’s okay,” said Cynthia, sighing. “I took the job knowing full well that the Potter kids would be attending Hogwarts soon – I should have expected it.”

Albus chuckled a little bit; James smiled in appreciation and Lily shook with suppressed tears.

“Hey, Madam Birchbaum?” asked Albus. “I have one request…”

“What’s that?”

“Would you mind if I took a potion for dreamless sleep tonight?”

Madam Birchbaum nodded. “I’m surprised you didn’t ask me earlier, given what had happened,” she said. “It’s available to students for general purposes, you know, so any time you want it, you can come down and ask for it – no explanation necessary. Certainly you may have it tonight.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re quite welcome, Albus,” said Madam Birchbaum. “In fact, why don’t I get you that potion now, seeing as you haven’t really slept much tonight anyway? Rest up, Albus Potter. All of you, get out. He’ll see you on the train home tomorrow.”

Rohan and Alana rode the Hogwarts Express back with the students for protection. Alana was overly concerned about Albus and kept checking up on him, but Rohan sat crossly in the back of the train – Lucy had just broken up with him. Louis and Gil, on the other hand, seemed overly happy, having just graduated and just gotten together. They were both planning to enter training for admittance to the Auror Office, so they would see each other often. Albus overheard them talking again as he left the train.

“You know, they have a partner system at the office,” said Louis, tousling Gil’s new neon green hair. “After our first year of training, we get to select someone with the same amount of training to be our partner in the office.”

“Oh, boy,” said Gil, grinning. “I can’t wait. I know a really smart, handsome, sweet guy who everyone’s going to want to partner with… and whoever gets him is going to be super lucky.”

“I’d be honored,” said Louis, bowing.

“Well, I was referring to myself, but I guess you can be the lucky guy to get me,” said Gil, and he laughed and kissed Louis one more time before they approached their families to get congratulated on their graduations.

Sylvester walked by Albus’s other side, talking with the Greengrass triplets.

“…never says a word to me anymore,” he was saying, “and he still hasn’t returned my bloody mirror…”

*Mirror*, thought Albus again. *That’s something I had to remember… I know it is… I feel like it was important for Dad to know… what was I supposed to remember*?
He broke out of his thoughts when he saw his mother and father again; he could think about it later. After all, some little thing he should have remembered about a mirror couldn’t have been that important, could it?

“Oh, Albus,” said Ginny, hugging him tightly. “You just can’t get enough of living on the edge, can you?” She released him and put her hands to her hips. “Let’s see it, then, shall we? The scar?”

Albus blushed; he didn’t like it when people asked him to see the scar. But this was his mother, so he pulled up his shirt. On his left side, just above his heart, the flame-shaped scar sat there.

“Oh goodness,” said Ginny, laying a finger on it.

A sharp burning pain seared across his chest, and he jumped back. “Ouch,” he hissed through his teeth.

“Merlin’s beard, look at that,” said Ginny, pointing to Harry’s scar and back to Albus’s. “You match. As if the eyes weren’t enough. Sorry if I hurt you, dear.”

“I’m fine,” said Albus, lowering his shirt before other people started to stare.

“I certainly hope you are,” said Harry. “But Fiendfyre is so volatile that if any of it were still alive on your skin after the initial burn, it would have eaten you alive right then and there. We should really be thankful you survived.”

“I am.”

Albus glanced over at Alana, who was staring at the Malfoys in the distance. He narrowed his eyes and peered after them. Someone else was with them – was that Eftan? Was Eftan going home with the Malfoys? Where were his parents?

“Come on, everyone, to the car,” said Harry. “Adelaide and Kerrington are waiting for us so that we can actually take a car.”

“That’s stupid,” said James as they walked out of the station. “If they want us to be able to take a car so that we can feel normal, the presence of an armed guard kind of shatters that illusion. We’re not normal and we know it.”

“I’m sorry,” said Harry.

James grimaced. “Sorry, Dad – I didn’t mean it like, that I was upset with you or with my life or anything. I wouldn’t trade it for the world.”

“I know you wouldn’t,” said Harry, cracking a smile. “You’re too much of a glory hound. Now, let’s get home, shall we?”

They climbed into the car; Adelaide and Kerrington smiled at them, but it didn’t make things any less awkward.

“So,” said Adelaide. “Did you tell them the news, Scar?”

Harry turned around from the driver’s seat and smiled at Albus.

“What?” said Albus.

“That bug you planted in the Sandblood base all that time ago?” said Harry, winking at Albus before he turned back to the wheel and pulled out for the drive home. “It finally produced a lead on
“It did?” asked James excitedly; Lily clapped enthusiastically.

“It did,” confirmed Harry. “Just yesterday, we got the news from the guys we have listening in. We’re getting the Loch Stock Liner on hopefully tracking it, and we’re getting a search party going. It’s in Egypt, as we suspected. We can’t say where for sure… yet. But we’re getting there.”

“That’s great news,” said Albus, happy to hear something positive.

“I’ll let you know more about it as the situation develops,” said Harry.

Albus stared past Adelaide out the window, his mind still wandering as his body had wandered the Hogwarts corridors.

Dismiusa was gone, and Hogwarts was safe… hopefully. But Siobor had gotten in. And he was still out there, waiting for another chance to strike. He was patient, clever, and entirely evil. How long would it take for them to bring him down? And was there truly someone else commanding him from the shadows? They had discovered, after Malseth died, that the head of the Sandbloods was not the Mastermind of all the wizards under MM… could this new adversary be behind it all? How much else was he operating behind the scenes?

There would be enough time to reflect on Dismiusa, and Siobor, and the Sandbloods, over the long summer. Albus leaned back on the headrest and tried to let sleep come to him again, if only to take his mind off of the frantically swirling thoughts that plagued his every waking second, or perhaps also to distract him from the pulsing pain in his new scar.

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