**Raindrops on Roses**

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**Summary**

Beginning immediately after the Epilogue, this story follows Scorpius, Rose and Albus through their Hogwarts years and beyond. Childish fears and desires soon turn to more serious dilemmas as some members of the Ravenclaw trio are forced to grow up too soon. Albus wants to be remembered for being something other than Harry Potter's son. Scorpius knows his father expects him to follow in his footsteps, but how long can he keep his friends, his music and his OWL in Muggle Studies a secret? And Rose has yet to decide what she wants...
Chapter Summary

The next week, his and Rose's family went Christmas shopping. Half the day was spent in Diagon Alley, the other in Muggle London. Albus took Rose to a discount store where they spent some pocket money each to buy a last-generation iPod. Once they got it back to Albus' house, they took it out of the packaging and synched it up to the family computer. Then, as an afterthought, they went online and found some new music that they thought Scorpius might like, and downloaded until they had gone quite over-budget. They owled it to Hogwarts with a note attached saying, "Happy Christmas - don't eat it all at once!" Albus thought this was hilarious.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
Rose and Albus sat with James, Fred and Roxanne on the train. The older three were boisterous and insisted on dousing the lights and closing the curtains - with their wands - so they could play exploding snap in the dark. Albus suspected they wanted to do this just so they could use magic, having not been able to show off for the whole summer holidays. He pulled out one of his schoolbooks. He had already read most of them at least once, or at least skimmed through the most important or interesting bits. He knew Rose had read hers thoroughly, twice.
He was sick with nerves. His dad's secret about the Sorting Hat had made him feel a _little_ better, knowing he couldn't end up in Slytherin if he really didn't want to. He allowed himself to consider it, but tossed the idea aside quickly. James would never let him hear the end of it, and his uncle Ron, no matter what his dad said, would probably never forgive him. On the other hand, he wasn't sure he wanted to be in Gryffindor, either. From what James made out, he and the twins were on their way to being the most famous troublemakers in Hogwarts history - a high target, considering the competition even within their own family. He didn't quite fancy living with that over his head for a whole six years. Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff would be all right, he supposed, but then he'd be all on his own, and it wasn't as though he _hated_ his family, he just didn't want them around _all_ the time.

"Rosie?" he asked quietly as the other three laughed uproariously over a particularly spectacular explosion that momentarily lit up the dark carriage.

"Mm?" His cousin looked up at him from where she sat on the other side of the table, reading by the light of a little Muggle torch she had brought with her. Albus wondered vaguely how she'd known to bring it.

"You want to be in Gryffindor, right?"

Rose shrugged. "I guess. Never thought about it much."

"How can you _not_ think about it? It's all I've been thinking about for weeks."

She giggled and closed the book, leaving her finger between the pages to mark her place. It was _Standard Book of Spells, Grade 1_. She was probably memorising it, Albus thought enviously. "Well I don't really mind, I suppose. Mum said not to worry about Houses, and the Sorting Hat is always right anyway."

"My dad told me the Hat lets us choose Houses, if we want. It did for him, he says."

Rose's eyes widened. "What? But then what's the point of it? I thought the whole idea was..."

"I dunno, do I? It's news to me I know all about it. I'm just glad I don't have to be in Slytherin."

Rose bit her lip and looked worried. Albus was secretly pleased about this, as it meant he was no longer the only one fretting. "Well..." she thought out loud. "Our parents were in Gryffindor, weren't they? So were all our uncles, and our grandparents. So that's probably where we'll end up."

"Who says? Anyway I have to put up with James all summer already, I don't see why I should have to deal with it at school as well."

Rose looked surprised. "Oh Alby. He's not that bad."

At that point, the pile of Exploding Snap cards went off so dramatically that Fred was forced to put out a small fire in the upholstery with his wand.

"The three of them together are," Albus muttered. "I just want to do well in classes and not get expelled, and not have to come with excuses for them when they keep getting in trouble, and I _know_ that's what I'll have to do if I end up sharing a common room with them."

Rose sighed. "I suppose. But what can you do about it now? Just wait and see what the hat says."

Albus knew this was the only thing he _could_ do, but it didn't make him feel anymore comfortable. It was James who announced imperiously, hours later, that it was time to get changed into their
school robes. Albus rolled his eyes, but did what he was told, worried that he would be the only one still in his Muggle clothes when the train stopped. As it was, it was another half an hour before the train slowed into Hogsmeade station.

"Firs' years! Firs' years, over 'ere!"

Albus grinned. "Hi Hagrid!" he called, dragging his trunk over to where the huge man was gathering a group of children who all seemed to be about the same height, and the same level of terrified. Rose wasn't far behind him.

"'Ello, you two!" Hagrid beamed at them from behind his bushy beard, black but shot through with grey. "How's yeh mums and dads?"

"Fine," Albus replied, noticing that everyone else was looking worried, as if they also ought to be on a first name basis with the tall man. "Dad says hi, and Mum says to please not let me do a Dennis, whatever that means." Hagrid burst out laughing.

Albus felt a little better as he left his trunk behind and followed Hagrid to the boats, waving occasionally to a couple of people he knew. He was glad that he wasn't doing this totally unaware of what was going to happen, like his dad had done. The girl nearest him was wide-eyed and shaking slightly as she got into the boat with him and Rose and an Asian boy. "Don't worry," he told her as the boats set off by themselves from the shore, and she let out a little squeak of surprise. "Hagrid won't let us drown. What's your name?"

"Belinda," the girl whispered, doing all she could to keep herself in the middle of the boat as much as possible.

"I'm Jian," said the boy, without being asked. "We met on the train - she's Muggleborn."

Albus thought this was a rather rude way to introduce someone, and from the look on Rose's face, she agreed.

"I'm Albus," he said to Belinda. Jian's eyebrows instantly rose, but Albus ignored him. "And this is my cousin Rose. Promise we won't let you fall in."

Belinda smiled back, weakly. Jian was apparently too polite, too intimidated, or too distracted, to enquire further. By the time they reached the other side, Belinda was already somewhat calmer, and Albus had almost completely forgotten about the Sorting.

He remembered all too vividly however when they were led inside the Great Hall and met by Professor Longbottom. Albus could see Lizzie Longbottom, who occasionally joined her brother and parents at the Weasley house for Christmas, somewhere in front of him, whispering excitedly to a blonde companion he didn't recognise. Professor Longbottom smiled at them all and explained the process of the Sorting, though Albus was barely listening. The nerves had ridden up again and were making his heartbeat very distracting.

They entered the Great Hall to a chorus of cheers and applause. It took Albus a while to figure out the layout of the House tables and recognise his brother and cousins at the Gryffindor table. His older cousins, Victoire and Dominique, were sitting a bit further up, also at Gryffindor but surrounded by their friends, most of whom seemed to be boys, Albus noticed. The girls did tend to have that effect on people.

Professor Longbottom had produced the Sorting Hat, which was not nearly as impressive as Albus had imagined. It began singing, which he also had not been told about, and he found the sound rather
more annoying than interesting. He looked up at the staff table and saw a few familiar faces, including Headmistress McGonagall, Professor Flitwick and Firenze, who was standing, but looked nonetheless comfortable. He had met them all several times at the annual memorial service held at the school, and various family events. He liked Professor Flitwick, who he had outgrown at the age of eight, but still found McGonagall rather intimidating.

He jumped when Rose nudged him and he realised that the singing had stopped and Neville had already started reading out the names. He was instantly glad that the names were in alphabetical order by last name, not first. He watched, trying to calm his pounding heart, as Ascott, Belinda, was sorted into Hufflepuff. Lizzie, when her turn came, also ended up in Hufflepuff, which she seemed happy with. Albus thought her mother might have been a Hufflepuff. Professor Longbottom certainly looked pleased enough, but only allowed himself a wide smile at Lizzie as she sat down at the clapping Hufflepuff table.

Immediately after Lizzie was read out, came 'Malfoy, Scorpius'. Albus looked up, interested. He had been too worried about James' taunts at the train station to have paid proper attention to the blond boy. The room seemed to have gone rather quiet at his name. He looked very small and very pale as he stepped forward to have the hat put on his head. He sat there for a long time. Eventually the hat opened its brim and yelled "RAVENCLAW!"

Albus blinked in surprise. Weren't all the Malfoys supposed to be in Slytherin? Certainly there was some whispering as well as scattered applause from the Ravenclaw table as the boy, looking relieved rather than disappointed, went to sit down at the empty end. Al didn't have much time to worry about it though, because Professor Longbottom was saying, "Potter, Albus". There was a whoop from the Gryffindor table, accompanied by quite a lot of whispering from the whole room. Albus didn't dare look at James, who was almost certainly the culprit of the unexpected cheer. He clenched his teeth and sat on the chair as though it might be the last thing he would ever do. The hat, as it came down, slipped slightly over his eyes. He jumped as the hat's voice, apparently inside his head, began ruminating.

'Another Potter, eh? Well, let's see. Gryffindor would do, of course, plenty of bravery here, but I sense reservation. A little more ambition, perhaps?'

'No no no!' Albus thought quickly. 'I'm not ambitious at all. Opposite in fact. I just want to study and pass my exams and not get expelled.'

'Are you sure? I believe I sense a desire to live up to certain expectations, to be as well-loved as your father, perhaps?'

'I don't want to be famous,' Albus insisted, beginning to panic. What if what had happened with his dad had just been a fluke, and the hat was really just going to make up its own mind?

'Famous is not the same thing as being well-loved. But if you're sure, better be -

"RAVENCLAW!"

Albus let out a breath he hadn't realised he had been holding. He opened his eyes and immediately spotted James, staring at him open-mouthed. He took off the hat, handed it back meekly and hurried over to the Ravenclaw table, which had suddenly burst into enthusiastic applause.

"All right!" one of the older students exclaimed as he sat down. "About time we got a Potter!"

"Better hope he doesn't immediately lose us points," grumbled another. "Potters are famous for that."
Albus found himself sitting almost immediately across from the Malfoy boy, who seemed to be doing his best not to stare at him. He forced himself not to look at James, Fred or Roxie, and brought his attention back to the Sorting, feeling the pain in his chest subside. It was done now, anyway. At least he could make his own way, even if he wasn't sure how easy it would be to make friends with people he didn't even know...

He was to be proven wrong on this at least. Rose was the very last person to be Sorted, and barely two seconds after touching her head, the hat yelled "RAVENCLAW!"

Albus gaped at her as she skipped, beaming, up to the table and sat next to him. "But... you wanted Gryffindor!" he exclaimed at her over the applause.

"Changed my mind," she said, grinning at him. "You didn't think I'd leave you all alone here, did you?"

Albus felt a strong urge to hug her, but had to resort to grinning back as Professor McGonagall was standing up to begin her welcome speech.

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Rose woke up later than she had meant to, the next day. She had stayed up until past midnight, unable to sleep in an unfamiliar bed surrounded by strangers. In the girls' dormitory, she didn't even have Albus to talk to. She gave up eventually and pulled out her copy of A Standard Book of Spells, reading it until she eventually fell asleep.

By the time she got down to breakfast, Albus was already there with the other first years. There were four first year boys in Ravenclaw, and five girls.

"Timetables," Albus said cheerfully as she sat down, handing her one. "Professor Flitwick brought them, they're the same for all of us."

Excited, Rose skimmed the timetable as she ate. "Transfiguration first," she said eagerly, "with Hufflepuff."

"Oh yeah," Albus said, looking a bit guilty. "Um, I told Lizzie I'd sit with her. That ok?"

"Of course," she said, though she felt secretly a bit put out. They met Lizzie and began trying to find their way to the Transfiguration classroom, leaving the rest of the Ravenclaws to catch them up.

"So, Lizzie Longbottom," Albus teased as they climbed the giant staircase in the entrance hall. "How are the Hufflepuffs taking you having your Dad on staff?"

"Oh it's so embarrassing!" Lizzie sighed dramatically. "But not too bad. I mean, so far, they've all said they like Dad, and at least he's not my Head of House, as well. I don't think I'll have it as bad as Tony."

Rose remembered there had been some trouble some years ago when Lizzie's brother Anthony, now a fourth year Gryffindor, had started school as the first student in over a century to have a parent in the staffroom. He certainly wouldn't be the last, as the new Hogwarts teachers were nearly all recent graduates themselves. Experienced educators, Rose remembered her mother remarking, were sadly thin on the ground.
"I'm sure I'll do well in Herbology," Lizzie was saying. "I mean, I've been helping Daddy with the garden at home since I was two, and when he's at home he doesn't shut up about his classes... but when Tony did well they all thought it was favouritism... until he got in a fight about it and Dad was furious and gave him detention. I think they mostly shut up after that."

With some directions from other students and a rather irritated ghost, they eventually made it to their classroom. Albus and Lizzie went to sit together near the front, while Rose, sighing slightly, sat at the empty desk opposite them. She pulled out her textbook, her wand and some parchment, and began flicking through the pages, wondering what they would be learning.

As the other students started filing in, someone eventually came and sat next to her. She looked up and was surprised to find it was the Malfoy boy. She wasn't totally sure what to think of him. Based on her parents' stories about his father, she had been sure that he would be cold, mean, even vicious towards her and Albus. But as far as she knew he hadn't said more than two words to his housemates, or anyone, since they had first arrived.

"Hi," she said nervously, thinking it might be rude to just ignore him.

He looked up at her, his expression unreadable. "Good morning," he replied. She was surprised to find that his voice was slightly accented – French, she was sure. She might not have noticed it except that she was used to hearing her cousins Vic, Dom and Louis speak in the same way.

"Comment ça va?" she tried.

The pale face lit up and he began speaking eagerly in very fast, fluid French that was totally unintelligible to Rose. She shook her head. "Um, sorry. I only know a bit, from my cousins."

The eagerness subsided, but he continued to smile at her. "Oh well," he said, suddenly shy again.

"I'm Rose Weasley," she introduced herself, holding out a hand.

He must have known who she was before, from the Sorting, but he seemed to hesitate and his manner flattened slightly when she spoke her name. He shook her hand, a bit reluctantly. "Scorpius Malfoy," he replied, then, after a moment, "you have French cousins?"

"Three of them," she explained. "Their dad is my dad's brother, he's all Weasley, but their Mum's French. Is yours?"

"No," Scorpius replied. "I just live there. All my friends are French. We speak English at home, though."

"Right," Rose chided herself. It was difficult to remember actual facts about the Malfoys, such as where they lived, when her father's numerous rants about the 'bloodsucking little ferret' kept ringing in her ears. "Did you want to be in Ravenclaw?" she asked, unable to stop herself.

He managed a little half smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "Father wanted me in Slytherin, but mother was a Ravenclaw, so he can't complain."

"Oh."

"He'd be furious if I'd ended up in Hufflepuff, though."

"Or Gryffindor?"

Scorpius laughed softly. "He'd kill me."
Rose was trying to decide whether or not he meant 'he'll kill me' in the traditional figurative sense, or the literal, when the teacher walked in.

Transfiguration was very interesting. Professor Ashborne covered most of the first chapter of the textbook, and set a short essay that Rose was sure she could at least start, if not finish, over lunch. The time seemed to fly. Scorpius didn't say anything else, but took notes in a neat, elegant script that would have put all her cousins to shame. The second half of the class was spent trying to turn matchsticks into needles, which Rose did on the third try, and Albus on the fourth. She grinned at him from across the desk. Scorpius, she noticed, had done it on the first try. She wondered if her dad had meant what he had said about her beating Scorpius in every test. It didn't look likely so far. Professor Ashborne seemed to be doing her best not to look impressed.

"That was fun," Rose remarked off-handedly when the class was over, and they were packing up their bags.

"I suppose," Scorpius replied, shrugging.

"You're very good at it," she tried. Albus was already waiting by the door, staring at her impatiently.

"Not really," he replied, in a manner that seemed annoyingly over-modest. "I've already covered most of the Transfiguration work for this term."

"Oh, so have I," Rose said quickly, not wanting him to think she was a complete dunce. "I've read the textbook three times, and some of my mother's old books from second year --"

"I mean the practical work," Scorpius interrupted. He didn't sound as though he was boasting at all, in fact, he was barely meeting her eyes, as though he was a bit ashamed.

Rose stared at him. "But, the Statute for the Restriction of Underage Wizardry…"

"Oh that." Scorpius smiled at her. "Don't think my father cares too much about that. Anyway the laws are different in France. You can practice magic at home as long as you're supervised."

Rose was immediately jealous and fascinated all at once, but Scorpius was already heading to the door, and she had to hurry to keep up. "You've met my cousin Albus, right?" she asked, by way of introduction.

"Mm." Scorpius nodded awkwardly to Albus, who nodded back. Rose didn't think that was a very good start. She was sure her mother would insist that they at least try to get along, especially as they were going to be sleeping in the same room for the next seven years. They continued to the Great Hall in awkward silence, until Rose spotted two familiar, tall, blonde girls up ahead. "Vic, Dom!" she called. The girls turned back, and Rose grinned triumphantly at Albus, who gave her a confused look.

"Guys, this is Scorpius," she said eagerly when the girls had reached them. "Scorp, my cousins Victoire and Dominique."

Scorpius seemed a bit taken aback, but he recovered quickly "Je suis très heureux de faire votre connaissance," he said to Victoire, who let out a little sigh of delight and began chattering to him in French. Rose grinned triumphantly at Albus, who gave her a confused look.

"Let's go eat lunch," she said to him, and led him into the Great Hall.

"Why are you talking to Malfoy?" he asked her before they had even sat down.

She rolled her eyes. "Why shouldn't I talk to him?"
Albus made a face. "Well, it's not that I mind, but won't your dad go spare?"

Rose thought about this. "Quite possibly," she decided. "But Mum would shut him up. Anyway we can't just ignore him completely, he's in our house. In your dormitory," she added.

"Yeah," Albus agreed, but he sounded worried. "His family are Death Eaters, though."

"Were Death Eaters," Rose corrected. "And he seems nice, so far. I think he's a bit lost. I mean, it's all right for us having our whole family, and the Longbottoms, and the Lovegoods, and everyone. Imagine coming here from another country and leaving all your friends behind, and not knowing anyone."

At this point, Scorpius entered the Great Hall, and Rose waved him over. Scorpius sat down as though expecting a whoopee cushion to go off.

"Your cousins are nice," he said, in response to her questioning look.

"I knew you'd like them," Rose said proudly.

"Their mother's family lives quite close to mine, actually," Scorpius said thoughtfully. "But I've never met them. Probably they're not what my father considers the 'right sort of people'."

Albus turned to stare at him indignantly. "And what are the 'right kind of people, then?'" he snapped.

"Search me," Scorpius sighed. "Hardly anyone as far as I can tell." He looked up at Rose. "You... you called me Scorp, before."

"Did I?" Rose felt a bit silly. "Sorry. Do you mind?"

Scorpius, to her surprise, looked pleased. "Not really," he said. "Just no one's ever given me a nickname before."

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By the time Charms came around, Albus had almost resigned himself to the fact that Rose wasn't going to give up on Scorpius Malfoy. She had chatted with him, amiably, all through lunch, mostly about lessons. The boy was alternately shy, then sarcastic, mostly just answering her questions rather than venturing those of his own, always in his slightly accented, highly educated voice. Albus thought he was a bit weird.

He was distracted, however, by James, Roxie and Fred, who cornered him just as they were finishing lunch. "So," James said, a bit awkwardly. "Ravenclaw, eh?"

"Yup," Albus said, watching the twins warily. He thought Roxie looked a bit sad, but Fred had his interminable cheeky smile on, as usual.

"Shame. Would have been cool to be in the same house."

Albus stared at him. "You never thought that. You kept saying I'd be in Slytherin."

James shrugged. "Was only teasing."

"I know, but still."
James was looking over at where Rose and Scorpius were waiting for Albus. "Isn't that the Malfoy kid?" he asked, from the advanced age of twelve.

"Yeah."

"That sucks."

Albus shrugged. "Not so far. He's all right." In a weird, shifty way, he added to himself.

"Now now Alby," Fred chuckled. "Don't go sullying the Potter name by befriending a Malfoy."

Roxie rolled her eyes. "Let him alone, Fred. He can be friends with who he wants. Anyway he can hardly be bitter enemies when they have to share a dormitory."

"Oh yeah, I can just see his dad dropping him off at our house for dinner," James laughed.

Albus went red. "Shut up," he mumbled. "We're not even friends, just talking about school stuff. And he won't come to our house anyway, he lives in France."

He escaped the Gryffindor trio and joined Rose and Scorpius on the way to Charms.

"Who was that?" Scorpius asked, surprising them both by asking a question.

"My brother and our cousins, Fred and Roxanne," Albus explained.

Scorpius raised an imperious eyebrow. "They don't look like your cousins."

"So? Their mum has dark skin. Fred turned his hair red once, but it didn't suit him at all."

Rose giggled. To Albus' surprise, so did Scorpius. "How many cousins do you have?" he asked.

Albus grimaced. "Er... nine. First cousins, anyway. Ten if you count Teddy, he's sort of our adopted cousin. And five uncles and four aunts."

Scorpius' eyes widened. "How do you all fit?"

"We don't, usually. We only see each other all together at Christmas, and even then not everyone all at the same time. It gets a bit crowded."

Charms was much like Transfiguration had been, except that there was a desk with three seats in it which Rose pounced on immediately, so they all sat together. They had Charms with the Gryffindors, none of whom Albus or Rose were particularly familiar with. A few of them muttered ominously while glancing in their direction. Albus distinctly heard one of them say "Potter", before he was shushed by the others. He was used to people staring at him, and talking about him. It was one of the disadvantages of having a famous father. He didn't mind too much, it was just part of his life he had to put up with. Albus was proud of his father, who was seen as a hero by a lot of people.

A lot of people were also staring at Malfoy, and that a bit more openly. The boy was noticeably uncomfortable, and kept twitching every time he caught someone at it, while Professor Flitwick chattered excitedly about Charms.

To Albus' disappointment, there was no practical portion to their first Charms lesson. He had quite enjoyed Transfiguration, mainly since it hadn't been nearly as difficult as he had expected. Perhaps he wouldn't be quite as much of a failure in Ravenclaw as he thought, after all. He listened carefully to the lecture and even took some notes, until he forgot to notice the people staring or muttering.
After class, he started talking excitedly to Rose as they left the classroom, chatting about how long it would be before they got to make things fly. They went quite a long way before they realised Scorpius was no longer with them. "Should we go back for him?" Rose wondered aloud. "Maybe he got lost."

Albus snorted. "Maybe he just wanted some time alone," he suggested, mentally adding away from you. His cousin could be overwhelming when she wanted to be. Then he thought he heard a noise, like something glass smashing against stone. "Did you hear that?" he asked. Everyone else had by now gone past them, heading for their common rooms.

"Mm hm."

"Oh, come on then," Albus sighed. He and Rose walked back down the corridor the way they had come. A couple of turnings later they found Scorpius. He was standing against a wall, faced by three much taller boys. They were all Gryffindors. "-back to your Death Eater dad," one of them was saying. "Surprised you've got the nerve to come here."

"That was my only inkwell," Scorpius said in a small voice.

"Aw, pity." The tallest boy, who seemed to be the ringleader, was holding Scorpius' schoolbag. It was leather; a good make but quite old, Albus thought. He pulled out the Charms textbook and looked at it. "How old's this book, Malfoy? First edition, or something?"

Scorpius mumbled something that sounded like ". . . was my mum's." The boys laughed and the tallest one chucked the book into the pool of ink and glass beside him.

Albus had had enough. He took a step forward, and had to hurry to keep up with his cousin, whose face was already Weasley-red. "Give that back!" Rose demanded. The boys all looked surprised.

"Sorry Malfoy," tittered one of them. "Didn't realise you had backup."

"Give it back to him," Albus echoed. He glared up at the tallest boy, who was about twice his own height. The tallest boy looked like he might like to argue, but then one of the other Gryffindors leaned over to mutter something urgently in his ear. The leader's eyes widened in surprise. "You a Potter?"

"Yeah, so?"

"James' kid brother?"

Albus felt like heading the boy in the nadgers, but restrained himself. He knew that was his Gryffindor heritage thinking, and there was enough of that sort of stupidity happening already. "I'm his brother, yeah."

"Well..." the boy looked worried, and puzzled. "What are you doing sticking up for him?" he jerked a thumb at Scorpius, who couldn't seem to decide whether to glare at his shoes or stare at Albus and Rose. "He's a Malfoy."

"So?"

"His dad was a Death Eater!"

"So? I bet lots of people's parents were Death Eaters."

"But his dad like... tried to kill your dad!"
Albus decided not to argue the technical inaccuracies of this suggestion. "That's their business. It's certainly not any of yours. So you can just leave off and go pick on someone your own size. And actually, I'm glad I'm not in Gryffindor now, if they're all great big bullies like you." This was perhaps not the most impressive speech ever, but it was about the best an eleven-year-old could manage. He was quite proud of it.

The boy shrugged, as though he had planned this all along, and handed the bag back to Scorpius. "Grown up for a first year, aren't you? Better think about where your priorities lie, Potter," he said, and let the others usher him away.

Rose was staring at him with her mouth open. "That was aces!" she announced with astonishment.

"Gits. We should tell Neville on them."

Scorpius was still standing pressed up against the wall, clutching his ancient bag to his chest as though it were a life support. "What did you do that for?" he asked sharply.

Albus rolled his eyes. "Geez, sorry Malfoy. Next time we'll let them mess up all your stuff."

"Are you okay?" Rose asked. Malfoy turned on her as though to deliver a scathing retort, but Albus saw it die in his mouth. No one could resist her mothering voice. She got it from Gran. It made you want to give her a cuddle and tell her all your worries.

"They broke my inkwell," Scorpius said instead, swiping quickly at his eyes.

"Well, you can borrow mine," said Rose kindly.

Scorpius blinked at her. "Really?"

"Course you can. Or you can sit with Albus and borrow his, because one of us will probably take turns sitting with Lizzie. Right Albus?"

Albus nodded vaguely, though this seemed like a lot of organisation. It was probably best to head it off before she decided who they were going to sit next to during meals.

"But... but..." Scorpius looked at her helplessly. "He was right. My dad did try to kill your dads... both of yours. I'm not an idiot. He hates your family. And you want to be... to be..."

"Friends?" Rose suggested.

Scorpius gaped at her. "I can't be friends with a Potter!" he squeaked. "And especially not a Weasley! My dad will... he'll..." he grimaced. "I don't even know what he'd do."

"Well," Albus said sensibly. "He doesn't have to know about it. Anyway it'd be dumb to be enemies, wouldn't it? What'd that solve? Nothing, it seems to me."

Scorpius turned to stare at him, instead. "You are grown up for a first year," he said out loud. Then, without waiting for an answer, he continued. "It might work. My parents hardly ever talk to anyone from England, except my Grandparents, and I don't see how they could find out about it." He smiled faintly. "I sort of like the idea of doing something they don't know about."

"Right then," said Rose, as if the matter was settled. "Lets go back to the Common room and change for dinner. These new robes are really itchy."

-*S-*
And the matter did seemed to be settled. Looking back on it a few weeks later, Scorpius wondered how everything had happened so quickly. He hadn't expected to make any friends at Hogwarts at all, let alone the offspring of arguably his father's two - possibly four - least favourite people. But he liked Rose and Albus. They were nice. They reminded him of some of his friends back in France, except that they weren't scared of him, or playing with him because their parents wanted them to. They didn't ask uncomfortable questions. No one seemed to mind that all his books and equipment were second hand (family heirlooms, was his father's argument, and no one, unsurprisingly had taken him up on it).

He supposed they must know about his grandfather going to prison all those years ago, and the fees and the inquiry, and all the raids and damages paid, and how that had left them with nothing except the old manor house which his grandfather refused to sell. His own parents mainly lived off his mother's dowry, which had long since run out, and his mother had to convince his father to sell another 'family heirloom' every time things got desperate. Neither of them ever seemed to consider getting a proper job. He supposed it was one of those things that his father would say was Not Done'. It seemed to Scorpius that there were a lot of things that were Not Done, and yet somehow they still got done, by someone.

But no one asked about any of that, which saved him having to explain. And they didn't mind having to share their ink or books either. Albus would occasionally make a dark and disapproving face whenever Scorpius unpacked his bag at the end of the day to reveal yet another ruined book or quill, because even little Albus Potter, son of the famous hero, couldn't stop everyone from hating him. Scorpius started to make more of an effort to hide the damage, but he couldn't help having to read off other people's books, or borrow quills, just to get his homework done.

Scorpius hadn't wanted to go to Hogwarts. His father hadn't wanted him to go either, one of the few times father and son had actually agreed on something, albeit for different reasons. And it was one of the few times his mother had got his way in an argument.

"Absolutely NOT!" he remembered his father yelling the night his letter had come. He had hid behind the bannister at the top of the stairs and listened. "I am not sending my son to that - that place! Did you know LONGBOTTOM is a teacher there now? Well I say teacher -"

"What is the alternative, darling?" his mother answered. She said 'darling' in a hard sort of voice she rarely used. "Durmstrang? You know I couldn't bear to send him so far away. And you know Beauxbatons is out of the question."

His father growled. Scorpius wondered why it was out of the question. All his friends were going to Beauxbatons. He didn't have many friends, perhaps two or three who he really liked. They were sons and daughters of old wizarding families, though not nearly as crazy as his own, he thought. They lived in normal houses like Muggles lived in, and used electricity and computers and the postal service. Not that his parents knew anything about that of course. Whenever the Malfoys visited the electricity was all turned off, and the computers hidden away in cupboards. His parents arranged the meetings mainly to keep their son well-educated in the wider wizarding community. Sometimes they went into Wizarding Paris, though of course they hardly ever bought anything. Scorpius Malfoy had always known he was a wizard. He had been about five or six when he had found out that he was the sort of wizard that most other wizards despised.

It had been a long argument, but his mother had eventually won out. Durmstrang, no matter how extensive their Dark Arts program was, was simply too far away. Half the classes weren't even in English. It was Hogwarts or a minor wizarding school, and even Scorpius knew that his father would
rather die than admit that he couldn't afford to send his son to a real wizarding school. He couldn't, but they had made him study for two years in Charms, Transfiguration and Potions in order to get a scholarship. He didn't tell Rose or Albus any of this. He liked them, but he wasn't totally sure he could trust them yet. He didn't want his Gryffindor tormentors finding out.

It wasn't just Gryffindor, either, he was realising. Slytherins didn't think much of him either, though their reasons were a bit more complex, perhaps. The Ravenclaws, by merit of his being one of them but also perhaps because they were too intelligent or too busy to concern themselves with hand-me-down grudges, mostly ignored him. He wasn't really sure what the Hufflepuffs thought, though through Albus and Rose he was becoming friends with their friend Lizzie Longbottom and her housemate Belinda Ascott. Belinda was the first real Muggleborn he had ever properly met. He didn't think there was any difference between her and anyone else. He kept his father's rants about Muggleborns to himself, just in case, however.

Being friends with Lizzie was a good thing, because his least favourite and definitely worst subject was quickly becoming Herbology. "This is stupid," he sighed one afternoon in October, poking his flutterby bush with his wand. "It's not doing anything."

"That's because you're just jabbing it, silly," said Lizzie patiently, putting her hand over his and showing him the wand movement. "Now ask it nicely."

He blinked at her. "But it's just a plant."

"Plants are people too, I always say," said Professor Longbottom as he was passing. Scorpius was a bit wary of Professor Longbottom. He was one of those people his dad really didn't like, even if he seemed perfectly nice most of the time. But he was Lizzie's dad, and Albus' Godfather, so he couldn't be that bad.

"But they aren't, though," he said quietly, shrinking back in his seat.

"Pretend then," said Professor Longbottom. "You've got an imagination, don't you, Mister Malfoy?"

Scorpius was quite good at pretending. When he was little he had played pretend games with his friends. Robin Hood, Peter Pan, King Arthur all featured prominently, once his friends had told him the stories or secretly leant him books. He liked being the hero. He tried pretending the bush was a person. Please bloom? he thought at it. For a minute nothing happened, then, reluctantly, the bush put forth one tiny bloom, fluttering weakly. He sighed.

"You can't be good at everything," said Rose. She and Lizzie's bushes were covered in delicately fluttering blossoms.

"We're Ravenclaws," Albus pointed out. To Scorpius' solace, his bush was also mostly devoid of blossom. "Aren't we meant to be good at everything?"

Albus and Rose got letters from their parents quite often. Scorpius did not. Everyone was too polite ever to mention this, however. He wondered if they ever wrote home about him. He doubted it. From what he understood, Rose's dad especially felt about the same way about his dad than his dad felt about him.

"Mum says Teddy's got a job," Albus announced from where he was reading on the sofa in the Common Room.

"What is it?" Rose asked.

"Something in the Ministry, she says. Spywork, probably."
"Al!"

"Well, it probably is. Andromeda talked him out of being an Auror, I guess, but he's always wanted to be a spy. He's suited to it. Metamorphmagus," he added to Scorpius by way of explanation.

Scorpius thought about this for a moment. "That rings a bell, for some reason," he said thoughtfully. "That's people who can change themselves to look like other people, right?"

"Yup," Albus nodded. "He inherited it from his mum."

"Is his mum someone called Nymphadora?"

Rose laughed. "Yeah, but everyone calls her Tonks. Anyway she died a long time ago, before we were even born. Why?"

Scorpius shrugged. "Dunno. Heard my father talking - well, yelling - about her, I think. Guess we're related, in some way."

Albus frowned. "I guess you are, if it comes to that," he thought. "Tonks was a Black before she got married - oh right," he said, snapping his fingers. "That's it, Teddy's gran is your grandmother's sister, Andromeda Black."

"Oh, her I know about," Scorpius said. Forget his father, try getting his grandmother to shut up about her estranged sister once she got started. And now he thought about it, he seemed to recall her mentioned some sort of halfbreed mutant boy who was bringing shame on the family lineage, or something. He changed the subject before he could accidentally say anything like that.

He hated the way his father's speeches seemed to bleed into his mind. But he did them so often that Scorpius knew some of them by heart. Pureblood wizards were tops. Mudbloods and Halfbloods weren't worth a second thought. The Ministry was a foolish establishment with no decent government, which was why there was no one properly qualified running the country. But what Scorpius saw was that being a Pureblood of the kind his father thought he was really meant going around forcing people to believe what you believed in, and killing them if they didn't like it. This seemed stupid to Scorpius, and thinking this made him feel guilty. He didn't much like his father, but he was still his father, after all. On the other hand, he had to be careful that the poisonous words he had heard so often did not ever come to his lips, even as a joke. At Hogwarts, among these strange new people, that was the sort of thing that was Not Done.

-~A~-

-~A~-

One afternoon in late November, Albus came into the boys dormitory to find Scorpius sitting on his bed, holding something that belonged to Albus. Scorpius quickly pulled the white cords out of his ears, looking guilty. "Sorry," he said quickly.

"It's okay," Albus shrugged, "you can listen to it if you want." Then, unable to stop himself, he added, "I'm surprised you know how to work it." Scorpius, like uncle Ron and Grandpa Arthur, often seemed to consider Muggle things about as alien as if they really had come from another planet.

"Oh, Raoul had one," Scorpius explained. Albus vaguely remembered him mentioning Raoul as one of his friends from France. "Yours is different, though. Very different. I like this music." He showed Albus the iPod screen. Albus grinned.

"Johnny Cash? He's ancient."
"It's your music."

"Yeah well, James set it up. He's weird like that about some music."

"I like it."

"Suit yourself."

"How'd you get this thing to work, anyway? I thought Muggle stuff went all weird around magic."

"Er." Albus looked guilty. "Its modified... a bit. Don't tell anyone though, that sort of thing's still a bit murky, legally. Mum fixed it so it won't run out of battery and put a solidifying charm on it. The rest of it's all Apple magic, though."

"Apple magic?" Scorpius was looking at him as if he'd gone totally mad.

"Take too long to explain."

Scorpius was turning the device over in his hands. It was an old one, at least four new models had come out since he'd got it, but while it still worked Albus didn't see much point in getting another. He didn't even use it that often. "You want it?" he asked. He wasn't sure why he said it. Perhaps it was the look of wonder and longing on Scorpius' face.

"What? No!" Scorpius exclaimed, putting the thing down quickly on the bedside table. He was flushing red in embarrassment.

"You can if you -"

"No!"

Albus stared. He'd never seen Scorpius so emphatic about anything before. "Because your dad might find it?" he asked, insightfully.

"No, because... you can't just give me things!" the boy replied, looking as if he might cry. "I don't need your pity."

Albus blinked. "I just thought you might like it. But it's okay. You can still listen to it if you want."

He told Rose about this confusing incident later, and she nodded sagely. "Well of course he wouldn't just take it from you," she said in an infuriatingly knowing tone of voice. "He's proud. It's like how Dad gets sometimes when people try to give him free stuff. You must have noticed."

"Well I know his family lost their fortune in the war," Albus said. "But its not like they're destitute, or anything, is it? I mean he had magic tutors, and things."

"Has he ever told you that straight out? No, I think his parents home-schooled him. He hates having to borrow our books and things, too, you know, but he doesn't have much choice when all he's got is his mum's old school stuff. And have you seen him eat? Like there's a famine on the way."

"Oh come on," said Albus, disbelieving. "Are you telling me his family don't even have money for food?"

"I'm not telling you anything," Rose shrugged, picking up her quill to start her Potions essay. "Just what I've seen."

Scorpius had to stay at Hogwarts that Christmas, and he didn't seem surprised. "We don't really do
Christmas at my house anyway,” he said. "I'd probably just be in the way." Guiltily, Albus wondered if it was because he would be one less mouth to feed.

Their first night at home, everyone went to the Burrow to catch up over dinner. Albus' mum kept hugging him randomly, and Lily, Louis and Hugo wouldn't stop asking questions about Hogwarts. He and Rose did their best to answer them. James, Fred and Roxanne spent a lot of time chuckling and muttering to each other. Albus hoped they hadn't done anything to the dinner. He hadn't realized how much he'd missed his Gran's cooking.

The topic of Scorpius had to come up eventually, of course. "Neville tells me you've been spending a bit of time with the Malfoy boy," Ginny said, about halfway through the main course.

"What?" Rose's dad became instantly alert. "He never said anything to me."

"Of course he didn't, Ron," said Aunt Hermione, giving him that look that suggested she was resisting the urge to roll her eyes at him. "He knows what you're like."

"Neville says he's a bit shy," Ginny continued. "I'm glad they're all trying to get along."

James snorted into his dinner. "Get along?" he snickered. "The three of them are together all the time. They follow each other around, like little ducklings."

Albus felt his face heat. "Well someone has to," he snapped at his brother. "To protect him from stupid Gryffindors who think its fun to tear up his books and call him names."

"What?" James looked taken-aback. "I never-"

"Oh I know you never. Just leave off Scorp. He's all right."

"I like him," said Dominique, to everyone's surprise. "He speaks fluent French, Mama, and he's always really polite, unlike some people I could mention."

Albus glanced up at his Dad. The expression on his face was one of those unreadable ones that could go either way.

"You kids just watch yourselves around the Malfoys," Ron said, carefully avoiding his wife's gaze. "Shy or not, you never know what they're going to do, but its usually something horrible."

"Oh Dad," Rose sighed. "Scorp doesn't have a horrible bone in his body." She turned to Albus. "What are you getting him for Christmas?" she asked.

Albus grinned. "Actually I do have a sort of an idea," he said.

The next week, his and Rose's family went Christmas shopping. Half the day was spent in Diagon Alley, the other in Muggle London. Albus took Rose to a discount store where they spent some pocket money each to buy a last-generation iPod. Once they got it back to Albus' house, they took it out of the packaging and synched it up to the family computer. Then, as an afterthought, they went online and found some new music that they thought Scorpius might like, and downloaded until they had gone quite over-budget. They owled it to Hogwarts with a note attached saying, "Happy Christmas - don't eat it all at once!" Albus thought this was hilarious.

-~R~-

-~R~-
Rose supposed Scorpius must have liked the gift, because the hug he gave her on their return to Hogwarts could have rivaled one of her Gran's best. She hardly had enough time to be surprised. She hadn't thought Scorpius was the hugging sort. Perhaps he wasn't, but was just now making an exception. "No one's ever given me a present like that before!" he said, banging Albus on the shoulder. Rose supposed this was the boy version of a hug. "Did you get the sweets I sent? I got them off the House Elves." Albus, who had inherited the knowledge from his father, had passed on the secret of the location of the kitchens before they had left.

"We got them," Rose said, grinning. Scorpius, who had met them where they disembarked from the horseless carriages at the school gates, walked with them through the grounds. "Did you have a nice holiday?"

"It was great!" said Scorpius with real enthusiasm. "Christmas dinner was amazing, and there were decorations and the suits of armor sang Christmas carols and I did all my homework and Madam Hooch let me practice flying with some of the third years. Bit lonely though," he added, smiling at them. "Glad you're back."

Rose smiled. She remembered how the boy had been the first day she had met him: quiet, a bit sarcastic, and wary of anything anyone said or did in case they were secretly making fun of him. Now he was almost normal, she congratulated herself inwardly. "How were yours?" he was asking now.

"Oh, the usual," Albus said. "Christmas dinner at Gran's, Quidditch in the garden, lots of kissing and so on." He made a face, and Scorpius laughed. His cheeks were flushed red against his pale skin as they walked through the snow up to the castle.

"You need some sun," Rose told him, nudging him in the ribs with her elbow. "You're as pale as the grey lady."

"Thanks," he said, rolling his eyes at her.

"Like Jack Frost," Albus joined in. "There's icicles in your hair."

Scorpius scooped up a handful of snow and lobbed it at him, and things descended quite rapidly from there.

~*-~S~*-~

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The first time Scorpius ever saw Harry Potter was at the memorial service that year. The service was held annually at dawn on the second of May, and consisted of a slow walk through the grounds towards the stone memorial that stood at the edge of the Forbidden Forest. Scorpius had seen it plenty of times, but never looked really closely, or thought about what it meant. All the students attended, even those who were studying for NEWTs or OWLs. And lots of people came from all over the country, including the Minister for Magic, and - Scorpius felt he should have expected this - Albus and Rose's parents. Their adopted cousin Teddy also came, and walked at the head of the parade with Rose's father and Albus' mother. Albus explained that walking at the head of the parade was anyone who had lost immediate family in the big battle. "My Uncle Fred," he explained at Scorpius' question. "And both Teddy's parents died."

Scorpius didn't ask anything else.

He felt sick, standing there in the darkness as they watched the candles being carried by the families
of the dead being placed all around the memorial. Perhaps it was only that he hadn't had anything to eat yet.

"Today," said Headmistress McGonagall, her ancient reedy voice carrying over the crowd in the still morning air. "We celebrate not only the lives of those who died here, nineteen years ago, but remember those who perished all over England during the year of terror. We remember those who fought bravely to free us from tyranny. Who gave their lives in order that we might live. Who stood for light against the darkness. We will remember them."

"We will remember them," the crowd intoned softly. The sun began to appear on the horizon as people came forward to leave flowers, or little letters or packages around the memorial. He saw Albus' mother put a handful of what appeared to be brightly-coloured stones on the sandy-grey surface. Albus cousin Teddy - his own cousin, he reminded himself - left an envelope and a small rock to weigh it down. Mr Potter put a hand on his shoulder. Scorpius thought - they were only Victoire's age, some of the kids that died. And some of them had kids of their own. And they were fighting for Hogwarts to be what it is now - a safe place, where even someone like him could find friendship and happiness. And his own father had been on the other side.

Where are you, Father? he asked silently, watching the sunrise. You should be here, saying sorry for helping hurt these people. Because they ARE people. You think of them as less than human, because of who their ancestors are. Why should that matter? Why should any of your stupid rules matter? No wonder some of these people look at me the way they do. They think I think like you. Well, just wait. I'll show them. I'm going to be the worst Malfoy ever in the history of Malfoys.

"Scorp?" it was Rose.

"Yeah?"

"Er… you okay?"

Scorpius forced a smile onto his face. "Yeah. Breakfast?"

"Um… well. My parents and Hugo and the others are sort of coming inside to eat with us, sort of thing."

"Oh." He felt something squirm in the bottom of his stomach. Hunger, he told himself.

"You can eat with us, if you like." She seemed to think this a perfectly sensible suggestion, but over her shoulder he could see her Dad - the tall, scary redheaded man - give him a look that suggested that if Scorpius didn't run along, he might just get eaten himself.

"No thanks," he said. "I think I'll sit with Lizzie and her mum." Mrs Longbottom had introduced herself quite politely to him earlier, and he quite liked the plump blonde lady. "Is that okay?"

"Course it's okay," she said, smiling back at him. The smile was a bit sad, and so was the one he gave her in return. One day, he thought determinedly. One day we'll be able to sit together and no one will care. No one will say a word. Because I'll prove to them that I'm not going to be like every other Malfoy.

-~R~-

-~R~-

Rose studied hard for her exams. Despite her father's objection that first-year tests put far too much pressure on the students, and were never actually as difficult as the teachers made out they were
going to be, she was determined not to disappoint her mother by not coming top in everything. Her mother would never say she was disappointed, of course, but she would be, all the same.

Rose needn't have worried. She passed everything with flying colours, and so did the two boys. They were after all, Ravenclaws, despite some occasional behavior which would have made most people think otherwise. They both liked to read almost as much as she did, and the three of them spent many enjoyable evenings just reading together in the common room. Scorpius worked hard to stay on top of things, and Albus seemed to have inherited his paternal grandfather's knack for just picking things up as he went along. No one was more surprised at this than Albus himself when he came equal first with Rose in Charms, Defense Against the Dark Arts and Transfiguration. Scorpius aced Astronomy and Potions, and, with Lizzie's gentle tutelage, passed Herbology.

By the time summer came around, Rose was looking forward to going home, but her mood was dampened slightly by Scorpius' obvious reluctance. He fretted about how he was going to do his homework with only half his books, until Rose offered to lend him hers. "I can borrow Albus'," she pointed out. "Or I bet my mum's got some old copies lying around somewhere. She never gets rid of books." He looked like he might argue, but she changed the subject before he could say anything.

Then, on the morning of their departure, he handed her his beloved iPod. "You better take this," he told her with a sigh. "I'm dead if Father catches me with it."

"Oh." She looked at him sadly. "Okay." Scorpius loved his iPod. He never went anywhere without it. He listened to it in bed, while studying, while eating and - Rose was shocked to learn - he had even learned the trick of hiding the earphone cord up his sleeve so he could listen to it in class while appearing as if he was merely leaning on his hand. She had done her best to put a stop to this but she suspected he still did it when she wasn't looking.

"We'll put some new music on it," Albus said, attempting to lighten the mood as they boarded the train back to King's Cross.

Scorpius' face lit up. "Oh yeah! Please. You know what stuff I like."

"I know what stuff you sing in the shower," said Albus.

Scorpius flushed. "I do not!"

"Do too. And in your sleep, sometimes."

Scorpius looked mortified, and Rose burst out laughing.

Their parents were waiting for them when they got off the train at King's Cross. "Bye," Scorpius said quickly.

"See you next year," said Albus, and Rose nodded, not knowing what else to say. It seemed unfair that she and Albus were going home to a summer of fun, playing Quidditch, spending time with their family, visiting Uncle George's shop, and Scorpius had to spend his summer cooped up alone in a house with his parents. Rose had decided that her father had been partially right, at least. Draco Malfoy was not a nice person. Quite possibly he was a horrible person, maybe even an evil person. She couldn't help thinking that Scorpius didn't deserve to put up with that sort of thing.

Scorpius hurried off, and Rose caught a glimpse of his parents through the crowd. Mrs Malfoy quickly hugged her son. Mr Malfoy said nothing but put a hand on Scorpius' shoulder and led him away. Rose felt the iPod in her pocket like a lead weight, and closed her hand around it. He would be okay, she told herself. It was only a few months, after all
Chapter End Notes

My fanfic blog: http://misssaisonfic.tumblr.com/
Second Year Part 1: Dungbomb Disaster

Chapter Summary

*Scorpius thought about this. He had to admit that there weren't many holes in this logic. "But he's my father," he pointed out after a moment. "Isn't that my world too?"

"Thankfully that world doesn't exist anymore, unless we let it. You always have a choice, Scorpius."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

2018-2019

-*~S~*-  
-*~S~*-  

Scorpius wondered how so much could change in a year. He had never felt any particularly strong attachment to his family's house, but it had always been home, before. Now, as he sat in his bedroom staring gloomily out of the window, he realized he was feeling homesick for another home altogether. Hogwarts. He liked school. He missed his friends. There were things he didn't miss, like Herbology, and people stopping him in the corridors to mess with him, but these things seemed less important than ever. He flicked the pages of the book in his lap. It was Rose's Transfiguration textbook. It was noticeably much newer than his own books. He had an excuse lined up, however, in case either of his parents noticed. His own book had got damaged in a Potions accident, and he had borrowed this one from a friend for the holidays. Should they ask which friend, he would call on one of the other Ravenclaw boys, Gaius or Peter, or perhaps one of the Slytherins. As long as they didn't check the nameplate in the front, which bore Rose's name in her neat, curly handwriting, it'd be okay.

He put the book away and felt absent-mindedly for the bundle in his pocket. It was a letter he had written to Rose, Albus and Lizzie. It had been sitting folded up in his pocket for days. He was starting to think he was never going to get the chance to post it. Using the family's owl was out of the question, of course. He was waiting to be invited to a friend's house so that he could use their owls, but it seemed that his former friends were not that interested. They had all made new friends at Beauxbatons.

The only other option was Muggle post. There were multiple problems with this, however. Getting out of the house, for one. Finding a post office, for another. And perhaps the most serious problem, passing for a Muggle. He had no idea how any of it worked. He understood that a person would take his letter and somehow get it to Albus' house, but how they were going to cross the ocean without Floo or a broomstick was beyond him. And how could one man carry all the post that was going to England? Was there a team of them? And he would have to pay, which meant using Muggle money,
which he didn't have. If it came to it, he didn't have any Wizarding money, either. He'd have to wait until September first, he supposed.

The next day, however, he got a surprise. He woke up to a snowy owl tapping softly on his bedroom window. He tore off his covers and hurried over, lifting the window and letting the owl inside. It held out a leg for him, and tied to it was a thick envelope. He untied it quickly and tore it open. The owl pecked at his hand. "Oh, okay," he said, reluctantly putting the letter down. "Hang on a second." He went to the door and opened it very quietly. It was early and his parents were, luckily, still asleep. He padded down the hall and down the stairs to the corner in the kitchen where Gergoire the owl lived. Scorpius put a hand into the box by his cage and drew out some owl treats. Gergoire hooted at him, and Scorpius shushed him before going back up the stairs as silently as he could. He gave the treats to the owl and opened his letter.

_Hi Scorp_, it read.

_Hope you're having a good summer. We're having an okay time here. Yesterday we went to the Burrow and played Quidditch. Teddy was there and he told us a bit about his top-secret work with the Ministry (not so secret now, harhar). Also Hagrid came over last week and told us stories while he ate a whole week's worth of food! You'd think they didn't feed him up at the castle.

Lily is being annoying as usual, she keeps moaning that she still has to wait another year before she can start school. I offered to let her do my Potions essay. May need your help on that, by the way. I'd ask Rose but she would gloat.

Anyway see you on September 1st.

-A.

_Ps. this is Womy, our owl. James named him when he was about five. You can use him to write back if you want._

Scorpius grinned and put the letter down. There was another sheet inside the envelope, and this one had Rose's handwriting.

_Dear Scorpius_

_We thought it might be easier for you if we just sent one owl with both our letters. I hope you're okay and not spending all your time inside. Have you done all your homework? I got through mine pretty quickly. I've been reading some of mum's old second year books, and we're going to Diagon Alley soon to get all our school stuff._

_Dad is trying to convince me to try out for Quidditch. I don't know. I like playing, but I think the pressure to win might be too high! Though since we're only second years we would probably only be reserves. Albus is thinking of trying out too. Will you? It might be fun to go together even if we don't get in._

_Albus and I found some music we think you'll like, some showtunes and some more of that guitarist you like, Greigson. We promise to give you your iPod back as long as you don't spend the first week ignoring us while you listen to it._

_See you on the train, hope you're well._

_Rose._

Next to her name she had drawn a little sketch of a rose. Scorpius smiled. He folded both letters and
put them in his pocket, swapping them for his own letter. They would be safe there, he thought. His mother sometimes searched his room for contraband like sweets and Muggle toys, ever since she had caught him playing with a light-up car leant to him by his friend Raoul. "You're lucky I found this," she had said to him, waving it in front of his face. "Your father would thrash you properly." As it was, she had slapped the back of his hand and taken the toy away. He didn't dare say where he had got it unless his mother forbid him from seeing Raoul anymore. But he didn't think she would search his clothes while he was wearing them.

He scribbled a quick PS on the letter before he tied it to the white owl's neck and stroked it gently. "You can stay for a bit," he told it, thinking it had probably been a long flight across the channel. "Just don't let my mum or dad catch you." Womy hooted at him, rubbed his beak against his fingers, and fluttered off out of the window. Scorpius sighed. It might have been nice to have some company for a bit.

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Womy arrived in the kitchen the same morning as everyone's Hogwarts letters, which meant that Albus could open the letter and read it in relative peace while James moaned about all the extra books for his elective subjects, and Lily tried to read the booklist over his shoulder, and his parents Floo'd Aunt Hermione to confirm their trip to Diagon Alley that afternoon.

Dear Al, Rose and Lizzie

Hi guys, hope you're having fun summers. I am mostly bored! Done all my homework, read every book in the house, too! Considering sneaking out to a bookshop!

Not much else to tell except that Mother has got a 'job' keeping accounts for the Apothecary in the village. Papa was Not Pleased but even he has to admit that we could use the money. Mother is out a lot so I do not even have anyone to talk to. I tried to suggest that I could get a summer job too but Papa was in one of his Moods so I gave up. Maybe next year.

Papa was quite pleased with my exam results at least. (Luckily he doesn't care about Herbology! If he did care he would probably blame it on Professor Longbottom anyway - Lizzie I will not repeat some of the stuff he says about your Father teaching!) He is pleased that I am doing well in Potions because that was always his favourite subject but he wants me to do better in Charms, also Defence Against the Dark Arts. He asked if we had done any duelling yet and I said no but I told him what Professor Tufty said about first years handling fire power and he just gave me a Look.

Anyway enough about exams and about my father. Really looking forward to next year!

from Scorpius.

PS. thanks for your letters and letting me use your family's owl, Al please thank your mum and dad for me. Glad you're all having fun playing Quidditch! Rose I will think about the team but I only really started flying properly at Christmas! I will probably be terrible. -S.

"Is that from Scorpius?" Albus mother asked, leaning over to put some more bacon onto his plate whether he liked it or not.

"Yeah," Albus said, doing a quick re-read in case he had missed anything. "He says thanks for letting him use Womy."

"That's nice of him," said Ginny, casting a quick glance at Harry. Harry had not voiced much of an
opinion over the friendship so far. He was a follower of the parenting strategy that let children make their own mistakes.

"I suppose his parents don't know that he's writing to you," he said now.

"Er… no," Albus admitted.

His parents exchanged another glance. "Secret letter writing," his father sighed. "Brings back some memories. You don't have to send him any food, do you?"

Albus blinked. "I don't think so," he said. "He says his mum's got a job so they've got a bit more money now."

"I was joking," Harry said, frowning. "Is it that bad? I didn't know."

"Well they're not going to come right out and tell everyone, are they?" Ginny pointed out. "Poor boy. I bet he can't wait to go back to school." She nudged Harry conspiratorially.

"All right, all right," he sighed. "I get it. I'll talk to Ron."

Albus began to understand, a little. They were talking about similarities between Harry and Scorpius. Both had grown up with very little, though for different reasons. Both had had to send letters in secret because of their family's disapproval. And both would rather be at Hogwarts than their childhood home.

"Can we stop at the Leaky Cauldron for a bit on the way to Diagon Alley?" he asked his parents, waving the letter. "This is addressed to Lizzie as well."

"Of course we can, dear."

-~R~-

-~R~-

Rose felt very grown up, getting on the train as a second year. The first years all seemed so young, and uniformly terrified. It was strange to think that not so long ago she had been one of them.

She and Albus found a compartment with some other Ravenclaws, including Peter, Gaius and Janey from their year. They sat and chatted about their holidays until Scorpius finally showed up, his pale hair ruffled and face red from running.

"Nearly missed it!" he panted as the train began to leave the station. "Got stuck at customs. Next year I'm getting here a day early and grandmother can take me to the station."

Rose got up and gave him a hug while the others waved a greeting. "You made it, though," she reminded him.

"Oi Scorp, can I read your Potions essay?" Albus asked, grinning.

"Hello to you too," Scorpius replied, stowing his trunk.

They compared notes on homework and how much reading they had all done. Albus bought sweets from the trolley and shared them out, and Scorpius for once didn't even try to argue. He put a handful of fizzing whizzbees in his mouth and leaned back with a sigh of satisfaction. "I think I missed sweets more than anything else," he said. "And Hogwarts food."
"More than you missed us?" Rose exclaimed in mock-horror.

"Maybe. You might be on an even footing with sweets."

"Oh good," Albus said. "Just where I always wanted to be." The others laughed.

"Oh, did you hear?" Rose said, remembering suddenly. "Hannah's going to have another baby."

"Who's Hannah?" asked Scorpius, non-plussed.

"You know, Lizzie's mum."

Scorpius stared at her. "Well how was I meant to have heard that? When did you find out?"

"When we went to Diagon Alley to get our school things. We stopped at the pub - you know they live there?"

Scorpius nodded. It had come up once or twice, but it probably meant little to him as he had never actually been to Diagon Alley.

"Anyway they're really pleased. Neville's always wanted a big family, but I guess when they didn't get any more after Lizzie they thought that was going to be it."

"Well that's great," Scorpius said, because that seemed like the sort of thing one ought to say.

-~S~-

By the end of the first week, they had so much homework that Scorpius wondered why he had ever wanted to come back. Even the Ravenclaws grumbled a little, and the other houses made no secret of their distaste. They had Defence Against the Dark Arts with the Slytherins, and after their third class, Jian made the mistake of putting his hand up to complain.

"Professor Tufty," he said in his imperious 'listen to me I'm always right' voice. "Perhaps you've forgotten that you have already set an essay this week, and a research project."

"Nevertheless, Mr Chung," Tufty said, narrowing her eyes at him. "I expect five inches of parchment on the effects of the disarming charm by next week. If you find this unacceptable there is always an empty seat in my first year class."

"Should've kept his mouth shut," Scorpius muttered to the others that evening as they scribbled their essays in the common room. "You don't mess with Tufty if you know what's good for you."

"Jian doesn't know what's good for him," Albus pointed out. He had got through his first draft quickly and was re-writing carefully so as not to smudge his ink.

Rose peeked over at his work. 'you're finished!' she said accusingly.

Albus shrugged. "Expelliarmus is like, my dad's favourite spell," he explained. "I could probably write ten inches without cracking a single book. Five is nothing. Jian's just making noise, the big whinger."

Scorpius was to find out the extent of Jian's animosity towards Professor Tufty a few days later, however. One of the textbooks for second-year Defense Against the Dark Arts was new on the reading list, so of course he didn't have one. He had managed so far by reading over Albus' shoulder,
until Tufty had caught him at it. To his surprise, she had held him back after class instead of embarrassing him in front of everyone.

"Why don't you have the textbook, Mr Malfoy?" was her question, when they were alone.

Scorpius schooled his expression. He hated admitting that he didn't have the money for anything. He got that from his father, he knew.

"Well?"

"Can't afford it, Professor," he said, low.

Professor Tufty sat back in her chair and regarded him with steely grey eyes. She was a mature lady, perhaps his grandmother's age, but she wore her salt and pepper hair cropped short. Everyone knew she had been an Auror during the war, and he could believe it. It was the way she looked at you as if you were a minor inconvenience which could be destroyed quite easily. "You're on a scholarship, aren't you?" she asked, not unkindly.

"Yes, Professor."

"Are you aware that there is a subsidiary program for scholarship students who cannot buy their own books and equipment?"

Scorpius stared at her. 'No, Professor."

"It's a recent endeavour, but it would have been included in your scholarship paperwork. You should ask your parents to apply." She returned his stare quite calmly. "Yes?" she prompted as if reading his mind.

"Um... it's just that... well, I don't think they will, Professor. Father doesn't like to ask for help from anyone, especially..." he trailed off, not wanting to say the words 'people from Hogwarts'.

"I see," said Tufty, maintaining her blank expression. "Well, do your best to persuade him. It will be difficult for you otherwise, especially next year in your elective subjects."

"Father says I just have to make do," Scorpius replied, doing his best to keep the misery out of his voice. "And I do - I've been sharing with Rose and Albus," he explained.

"Well, in this instance at least I think there may be a solution," Tufty said, apparently not interested in his explanation. "I have a few spare copies of all the curriculum texts in my office. Come when you have some spare time and we'll see if we can't lend you one."

Scorpius nodded gratefully. "Thanks, Professor!"

"You are welcome. Please remember what I said about the subsidiary program."

"I will." Scorpius didn't think he was ever likely to forget. This whole time there had been a way for him to have his own schoolbooks, and his father had just ignored it for the sake of his pride?

His pride, maybe, he thought bitterly as he left the office and hurried to his next class. What about my pride? Does he think I like losing marks when my essays are twenty years out of date? Does he expect me to just do the same subjects as mother to save on books? No wonder he doesn't want to admit we're poor. It's not like he's ever done a day's work in his life.

He didn't get a chance to fetch the book until lunchtime the following day. He made his way to
Tufty's office, hoping she would be there. The door was closed, and he knocked. There was a startled noise from inside, but no one answered.

"Professor?" Scorpius called. He wondered if maybe she had fallen over. She was quite old, after all, and sometimes in the winter she walked with a stick. A war wound, was the popular rumour. Thinking he would just check to see if she was all right, he pushed open the door. The room appeared to be empty at first glance, until he realised there were people trying to hide behind the desk. Pretty unsuccessfully.

"What's going on?" he asked suspiciously.

Four people got to their feet and glared at him. It was the second-year Slytherin boys. Jian took a step forward. "Run along, Malfoy," he commanded in his most imperious voice. "Keep your mouth shut and we'll forget you were ever here. Deal?"

"What are you doing?" Scorpius insisted, knowing he wouldn't like the answer.

One of the other Slytherins grinned meanly. "We're planting dungbombs in the old bird's office," he explained.

"Shut up, Carcer," Jian snapped.

"Why?" asked Scorpius.

Jian sneered. It did not suit him at all. "Teach her to show me up in class."

Scorpius laughed shortly. "Ha. Well maybe if you didn't go around telling her how to run her lessons -"

Jian's olive-skinned face went dark with blood. He drew his wand. "Just go, okay?" he growled, his pre-adolescent voice cracking slightly.

Scorpius drew his own wand without even thinking and shouted "Expelliarmus!"

Jian's wand went flying, but Scorpius had forgotten that it was four against one. The other three didn't bother with their wands but grabbed him by the shoulders and shoved him towards the opposite wall. He felt his ankle brush something that he realised later must have been a tripwire. His head hit the mantelpiece above the fireplace and he fell, momentarily dazed, as an acrid stench began to fill the air.

"Go! Go!" Jian yelled to the others, grabbing his wand from the floor as the four boys ran for it. The door slammed behind them.

Scorpius sat where he had fallen for a moment, holding his head. It felt dented, even if there didn't seem to be any blood. He tried not to breathe, but this just caused a coughing fit, so that he was gulping down mouthfuls of the vile, poisonous air. His eyes started to water and tears began to stream down his face as he crawled over to the door and tugged on the handle. It was locked.

"CHUNG!" he tried to shout. "CARCER! Let me out!" but his voice came out as a croak, and besides, he knew they would be long gone by now. He hammered on the door a few times before his body insisted that he concentrate on coughing. The air was grey with the foul gas - they must have dropped at least a dozen, and one was usually enough to render a small room unbreathable. He needed clean air.

Blinking his eyes furiously to try and clear the tears, he search the floor blindly for his wand. He felt
his heart leap as his fingers closed around it, but what was the unlocking charm? His head was so thick and his vision was starting to swim. It was so hard to think and breathe at the same time. "Alo..." he tried, his lungs failing him before the third syllable. "Alo..." He started to panic, he couldn't breathe at all, it was like when you thought you might die laughing, just a lot less funny.

He could see bright spots in front of his eyes and his head pounded, the room was getting darker... was it the smoke turning black, or was he just dying?

"What in the -" there was another voice coming from somewhere, but he barely heard it over the sound of the roaring in his ears. Then someone had grabbed him under the arms and was dragging him to where there was - suddenly, blessedly - clean air to breathe.

He gulped it down gratefully while someone thumped him on the back until the coughs eventually subsided. He looked up through still-streaming eyes at Professor Tufty. "Good lad," she said. Those words sounded so strange coming from her mouth, and he was so relieved at being alive, that he started to laugh, but this only sent him off into another fit.

"Dungbombs, eh?" she said when this bout had also ceased. "An oldie but a goodie. I didn't think you were the pranking type, Mr Malfoy."

"It wasn't me!" Scorpius exclaimed.

"Who was it, then?"

He opened his mouth to answer, then shut it again. As much as he'd like to see Jian and his mates in detention until Christmas, the fact was that he already had enough enemies. Dobbing was another one of those things that you just Did Not Do.

"Thought you might say that," said Professor Tufty flatly. "Was it the terrible Gryffindor trio? Seems like their M.O." Scorpius blinked in confusion, but she didn't seem to expect an answer. She pushed his hair aside and looked critically at his head. "You'll have a nasty bruise there, in my professional opinion. Get in a fight, did you?"

"Fell," Scorpius said. This was partially true - he had fallen, even if it was only after the fact.

"Of course you did."

"I did!"

"All right then." Tufty turned her face aside and coughed politely, and Scorpius realised that he must smell dreadful. He resisted the urge to sniff his sleeve, thinking he might throw up if he did. His robes would probably have to be burned, and it wasn't like he had loads of spares. "I think we'd better get you to the hospital wing. Not sure what kind of damage those things can do. Never had a near-death by Dungbomb before." Scorpius was just about functioning enough to recognise this as a joke. Perhaps he wasn't going to get in trouble after all.

_-*~S~*-_.

_-*~S~*-_.

So much for that theory, he thought later as he waited outside the Headmistress' office. Madam Pomfrey had, to his relief, confirmed that he wasn't going to die, but she did make him drink a sickly-sweet potion and forced him into a medicinal bath. He quite liked the bath, and at least it got rid of the stink that stuck to him like oil, but he insisted on being able to take it on his own. His head was still a bit sore, and there was an ugly purple bruise already starting to take shape, but the old nurse
had ruled out a concussion. He thought she might heal it with magic, but she explained to him crossly that if she went around fixing every little bump, bruise and cut the students sustained, they would no longer have to watch where they were going.

"Come in," said McGonagall's voice from inside the office. Tufty had picked him up from the hospital wing and led him past the statue, up the staircase and left him there. He had never been inside the Headmistress' office before. He pushed the door open gingerly and closed it softly behind him. "Sit down," came the reedy voice again. He hurried forward and sat in one of the stiff armchairs that stood in front of McGonagall's desk. She looked down at him over the rims of her square spectacles. He was a bit nervous of McGonagall. She had never actually spoken to him directly, and he got the feeling that she didn't like him very much but was doing her best not to show it. He looked up at the pictures on the wall to avoid her gaze, and realised that there were dozens of other old faces looking down at him. He held back a shudder.

"My my, the very spit and image, as it were," said one of them, and a wrinkly old man with twinkly blue eyes.

"Yes, thank you Albus," sighed McGonagall, and Scorpius blinked in surprise. "And how are you feeling, Mr Malfoy?"

"Much better thanks, Professor," Scorpius replied politely, tearing his eyes away from the portraits, though he could feel their interested eyes on him.

"Good. Professor Tufty has explained to me what happened. Or at least, what she perceives to have happened. Perhaps you would care to elaborate?"

Scorpius took a deep breath. He had prepared for this while soaking in the bath and on the journey up to the office. "I went to get a book Professor Tufty said she could lend me," he explained. "She told me to come when I had free time - anyway I knocked and there was no answer, but I thought maybe she might have left it there for me, so I opened the door and went in but I tripped on something and I must have triggered all these dungbombs. I must have hit my head when I fell," he added.

"I see," said McGonagall. "And what is your explanation for why the door was looked behind you?"

Scorpius stayed silent. Damn. He'd known there was a hole in the story somewhere.

"Mr Malfoy, were this merely a matter of an unoriginal pranking," she said the word as if it were something slimy she would like to flush down the sink, "Professor Tufty and I might have been prepared to let the matter slide, however, this is a bit more serious. You might have suffocated. Who locked you in that room?"

Scorpius didn't say anything. He didn't like Jian, but the last thing he needed was to be branded a snitch. He had sort of been hoping that the Gryffindors might forget about him once he was in second year, and he didn't need the Slytherins taking their place as his designated tormentors.

McGonagall sighed. "Mr Malfoy, I feel I must tell you that I accepted you into this school under duress. To be frank, your predecessors have done nothing but wreak havoc and terror upon Hogwarts, and I did not wish to see that cycle repeated. I was persuaded however, that you deserved a chance." She glanced momentarily behind her at the wall of portraits. "I have not said anything to you before now because there has been no reason to do so. By all accounts you are a conscientious student, you interact perfectly acceptably with other students, and you do not go out of your way to cause trouble."
This seemed like a compliment, but somehow Scorpius couldn't be sure. "Thank you, Professor," he said. The news that she hadn't wanted him at Hogwarts in the first place was crushing. "Are you going to expel me?" he asked quickly, the words flooding to his lips almost as soon as the horrifying idea leapt into his brain.

McGonagall blinked. "Not yet, Mr Malfoy. However without further evidence I shall be forced to hold you responsible for today's incident -"

"Oh come now, Minerva." It was the blue-eyed man again. He was giving McGonagall a disapproving look.

"Albus, I thought we had agreed that since I am Headmistress of this School, and your advice is welcomed in private, you would not interrupt during student meetings," said McGonagall, her tone icy.

"It wasn't me, Professor!" Scorpius broke in. "I just went to get my book, and then the bombs went off, and I couldn't breathe, and I fell down - I honestly didn't see who locked the door on me." This was true, he realised triumphantly. He had been too dazed to even realise it was happening.

There was a knock on the door and Professor Tufty came in. "I've got something, Minerva," she said, a triumphant smile on her face.

McGonagall got to her feet. "Wait here, Mr Malfoy," she said. She shot a warning glance at the portraits before hurrying out of the room with Tufty on her heels.

Scopius sat, uncomfortably. Some of the portraits seemed to have lost interest and were doing other things. Some had even vacated their frames. But three were still staring at him - the blue-eyed man, a sallow-looking man with long, black hair, and a narrow-faced wizard in green and silver robes, with black hair, dark eyes, and a pointed beard.

"Well met, Mr Malfoy," said the blue-eyed one cheerfully. "I am Albus Dumbledore."

"I know," said Scorpius, a bit shyly. "One of my friends is named after you." And my father once tried to kill you, he added to himself. One of his father's favourite complaints was that he had come within seconds of killing Dumbledore until Snape jealously beat him to it.

"Ah, yes, young Albus Potter," Dumbledore smiled. "Harry does me a great honour, but then, he was always a very honourable young man. Don't you agree, Severus?"

The long-haired man scowled. "I never asked him to name anyone after me," he said sourly.

"I know you didn't, and I'm sure he wouldn't have if you had," replied Dumbledore jovially. "His great weakness was always reverse psychology."

Scorpius gasped. "You're Severus Snape!" he squeaked. Everyone knew about Severus Snape. He had been Headmaster of Hogwarts during the Year of Terror, and everyone had believed him to be Voldemort's right hand man, until he had revealed to Harry Potter that he had been a spy all along, and somehow - the details were not too clear on this point - helped him before his death in a way that allowed Potter to kill Voldemort once and for all. To some he was a great hero. Others never really believed that he had been on their side. And others -

"My father loathes you," he said, unable to stop himself.

Snape grimaced. "The feeling is mutual, I assure you," he replied. "I did what I could to help him, but evidently he was always an irredeemable coward."
Scorpius opened his mouth to argue - that was his father, after all - but found he had no evidence to present to the contrary. "Sorry," he said instead, meekly.

"Don't apologise, boy!" snapped the third man, the one with the pointy beard and ancient robes. "What have you got to apologise for?"

"Don't shout at the boy, Phineas," Dumbledore chided him.

"He's a Black, isn't he? Show some backbone, boy!"

"Mr Malfoy?"

Scorpius turned around in his chair. It was Professor Longbottom standing in the doorway. "Professor McGonagall sent me to take you to your common room."

"Oh," Scorpius stood up. "So I'm not expelled?"

"They found the ones who locked you in the office. It was the Slytherin boys from your year."

'Oh," said Scorpius again, remembering that he wasn't supposed to know this. "How did they find out?"

"They went back to their dormitory stinking to high heaven. We may be teachers, but we are not idiots." He smiled. "Come on, let's get you out of here."

"I'm supposed to be in History of Magic -"

"Professor Binns knows where you are, and I'm sure you can copy notes off your friends."

"Try not to let him 'fall' into anything else on the way, Longbottom," muttered Snape.

"I'll do my best, Professor," Lizzie's father called back as they left the office and he closed the door behind them. He shuddered dramatically. "That man still sends a chill up my spine," he said as they descended the staircase. "Don't tell anyone though," he added, with a wink.

"He is sort of scary, isn't he," Scorpius said sympathetically.

Professor Longbottom chuckled. "It's just a portrait," he said. "You mustn't take anything they say too personally. They might be intelligent, but they don't have brains. Their basic personalities are painted in. They can't change."

Scorpius nodded. "Dumbledore seems nice."

"He was."

They exited the gargoyle statue and made their way up to Ravenclaw Tower. Scorpius looked down at his shoes as they walked, feeling the emotions of the day begin to drain him of energy. "Sometimes I think everyone must hate my father," he sighed eventually.

Professor Longbottom looked at him. "A few people probably do," he admitted, democratically.

"Do you?"

The Professor paused for a moment, as if thinking about it. Scorpius was surprised. He hadn't really been expecting an answer; not an honest one, at any rate.
"Hate is a strong word," the man said eventually. "I suppose I feel sorry for him more than anything. Not that I don't have plenty of reasons to hate him, mind," he added, reluctantly. "Far apart from some of the more serious things he did, him and his mates picked on me a lot when we were kids, right up to seventh year - what they call the Year of Terror. I even got seriously injured a few times - a bit like you, today."

Scorpius looked up at him and saw, as if for the first time, the thin scar that ran down his teacher's cheek from eye to chin. "Why do you feel sorry for him, then?" he asked, feeling slightly ill again.

"Well..." again, Professor Longbottom seemed to consider his words carefully. "I suppose because he was born into and brought up in a world that didn't give him a choice, or a chance, to change. His parents, his family and all his friends were Voldemort supporters, and they all expected him to be the same. It would have taken more courage than he ever had to break out of it, if he even wanted to."

Scorpius thought about this. He had to admit that there weren't many holes in this logic. "But he's my father," he pointed out after a moment. "Isn't that my world too?"

"Thankfully that world doesn't exist anymore, unless we let it. You always have a choice, Scorpius."

They had reached the entrance to Ravenclaw Tower. They stopped and regarded each other for an awkward moment. Then Professor Longbottom said, "We all thought you would be just like him, you know. Perhaps that was very unfair of us, but your friendship with Albus alone is enough to tell anyone how different you are. You mustn't be surprised when people assume he must have raised you into his own prejudices."

Scorpius shrugged. He could explain that one. "He mostly ignores me," he said. "I mean he's got a few speeches about how Muggles aren't really human and the importance of ancient family values, but they're not really convincing. I guess he was hoping it would just be genetic."

Professor Longbottom coughed into his hand, in a suspicious way that made Scorpius wonder if he was laughing.

"I don't want to be like him," Scorpius clarified. "I'm just not sure how I go about convincing everyone in the whole world that I'm not."

"You will," the Professor assured him. "Trust me. The more you stick with Albus and Rose, the more their inherent Weasleyness will rub off on you, and people will forget that they're supposed to resent you. Believe me."

Scorpius hesitated for a moment. "But... if that happens, my father will be the one who resents me," he said, not able to bring himself to meet the Professor's eyes.

"Well... perhaps. But like I said, you always have a choice." Professor Longbottom sighed, and bent slightly to be on Scorpius' eye level. "I know what its like to feel as if you can't talk to anyone," he said. "I know I'm not your Head of House, but I do have two children of my own, and... well. I hope you'll consider coming to me if you feel like you need a chat, or have questions, about schoolwork, or... anything else."

Scorpius felt a weight that he hadn't even realised was there lift off his shoulders. He smiled. "Thanks, Professor. I will."

"Good. Now you better get some rest, or Madam Pomfrey will be after me for keeping you up." He walked off down the corridor.

Scorpius turned to the staircase and was about to go up when he remembered something.
"Professor?"

He turned. "Yes?"

"Um, congratulations on your... baby."

Professor Longbottom grinned widely. "Thank you, Mr Malfoy."

---R---R---

By the time Rose and Albus got back to Ravenclaw tower, *everyone* was talking about how the Slytherins had nearly killed Scorpius Malfoy by locking him in a room full of exploded dungbombs. "Do you think he's all right?" Rose asked Albus, chewing on her bottom lip, as they entered the common room.

"Has to be," Albus said, sounding a little too sure. "We'd know if he wasn't, wouldn't we?"

"Maybe we should go to the hospital wing," Rose suggested.

"Yeah, maybe. Let's check the dormitory, first." Rose knew that he meant he should check while she waited, but she followed him up, anyway, and he didn't dare argue the point.

Scorpius was lying fully clothed on his bed, fast asleep, with his iPod clutched in his hand and one earphone dangling out of his ear. Rose breathed a sigh of relief. "He's okay."

"Yeah if you don't count the brain tumour he's going to get from that thing," Albus said. "What?" he added at her look. "That's what my mum would say."

Rose leaned over and shook Scorpius' shoulder slightly. "Scorp?"

The boy stirred and his eyelids flickered. "Wher'm I?"

"In your own bed, you plonker," said Albus, rolling his eyes. "Mate, that is one hell of a bruise you've got brewing."

Scorpius sat up and poked gingerly at his forehead. "I bruise badly," he sighed. "I suppose you want to know what happened?"

"Wouldn't mind."

He told them the story, and Rose felt herself get angrier and angrier. "Those... those..."

"Bastards?" Albus suggested.

"Yes!" Rose agreed, though of course she would never use that sort of language, especially around her mother. "They outnumbered you four-to-one, and you were only trying to stop them doing something stupid in the first place!"

"Somehow I don't think they'll see it that way," Scorpius sighed. "Like I need more people holding a grudge."

"You didn't tell on them," said Albus.

"Yeah, but if I hadn't been there they wouldn't have got caught." He sighed again.
"Buck up," said Albus, nudging him. "Who's afraid of a few Slytherins anyway?"

"Precisely," Rose agreed. "We'll protect you."

Scorpius flushed. "I don't need protecting!"

"Uh huh," Albus agreed. "If you say so. Three against four's still better than one."

Scorpius had no argument to this. Rose felt her heart sink slightly at the defeated look on his face, and she gave him a hug. He returned it, just slightly, giving her a slight squeeze around the waist. "Thanks," he said, softly. "What did I miss in History of Magic, then?"

"What didn't you miss?" Albus laughed. "Only the most fascinating goblin war to be explained three times in a monotone with particular emphasis on each goblin's full name and exploits."

Scorpius frowned. "Wait, that reminds me. Do you have an extra brother I don't know about?"

"Er, why?"

"Oh, just something Snape's portrait said about your dad naming someone after him."

Rose giggled. Albus made a face at her. "Yeah, that's still me," he said. "You'd think out of the three of us Dad would have come up with at least one original name."

"Albus Severus Potter?"

"Well don't go shouting it around, but yeah."

Scorpius snorted. "And I thought I lucked out with Scorpius Hyperion."

Rose rolled her eyes. "Okay, you both have beautiful names. Now can we go get some dinner? I'm famished."

Chapter End Notes

Please visit my fanfic blog: http://misssaigonfic.tumblr.com/
Ask me questions, get some insights!
Chapter Summary

Scorpius speared a potato with his fork and swirled it absentmindedly around his plate to mop up the rest of his gravy. "Well... I was sort of thinking about doing Muggle studies."

Hannah beamed. "Oh, what a good idea! Far too many pureblood wizards think they can just go through life without learning anything about the Muggle world."

"Hey, I manage," Neville said, indignantly.

"That's different dear," Hannah told him fondly. "You have me."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

2018-2019

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The tryouts for the Ravenclaw team were held in the first week of October. Albus managed to talk both his friends into coming with him, despite Rose's reservations about time management and Scorpius' insistence that he wasn't that great a flyer. "It's not about getting in," Albus told them. "They hardly ever let second years in, anyway. It's about showing them you're keen so they remember you, next year."

"You do want to get in though," Rose pointed out. Albus shrugged. Of course he wanted to get in, but he wasn't going to get his own hopes up by admitting as much. Being Quidditch mad was practically a pre-requisite of being a Potter, or a Weasley, and he was both. Both his parents and all his uncles bar one had been on their house teams, and now it was his turn. He had been flying, quite literally, since before he was born, and he'd been trained by the best, from his point of view.

The only problem was that Ravenclaw already had a full team, made up of sixth and seventh years, and there would be dozens of younger students jostling for reserve positions. "But," he explained to Scorpius as they walked out onto the pitch, "that means half the team will be gone next year, and there'll be more places open." In his right hand he carried a brand-new Firefly 10, a twelfth birthday present from his parents. Rose had a Firefly 4, and Scorpius was borrowing an old school broom, a rather battered looking Cleansweep 7. They joined the group of about twenty Ravenclaw hopefuls.

"Right then kids." The Ravenclaw captain was a tall, lanky girl with long blonde hair pulled back
into a perfectly straight ponytail. "I'm Olivia Drummond. We're trying to fill four reserve spots for this year, and if you're good enough we might train some extras, just in case. Of course, if any of you are really brilliant we might have to bench some of our old-timers altogether." The crowd tittered. Albus noticed that the rest of the team did not laugh, but regarded the newcomers critically.

First of all, Olivia got them to line up and mount their brooms, then hover just above the ground. They had done this on their very first flying lesson, but some people still managed to fall off. Olivia sent them off the field, shaking her head. "There's always some," she sighed. "Right, the rest of you, in the air at goal height. You're going to do laps, Alex will lead you." A tall, dark chaser stepped forward, broom in hand, a Firefly 7. "We're going to be watching your conformation and balance so no tricks and no speeding, please. Just keep pace until we tell you otherwise."

Albus felt his stomach do a little flip as he kicked off the ground with the others. He wasn't sure why he was nervous - he could fly laps in his sleep. They set off around the pitch, starting off at a leisurely pace before speeding up. The team, clearly visible in their blue and silver Quidditch robes, flew up to hover in the middle of the pitch to watch. Every now and then one of them would fly forward and pull someone out of the group. The rejected players went to sit in the stands, looking disappointed.

Albus tried to concentrate on flying, but after a while he started to get bored. He looked over at his friends. Rose was a natural flyer. She soared easy alongside him, her wave of bushy, fire-red hair streaming out behind her. Scorpius, despite his protests to the contrary, wasn't at all bad in the air, even if the increased speed was starting to take its toll on his old school broom.

Suddenly Albus was forced to pull his broom up quickly, a few seconds too late, as he realised Alex had stopped. He looked around quickly to see if anyone had noticed. There were perhaps ten left in the group, but luckily no one was looking at him.

Alex paired them up and the team tossed them some Quaffles, which they were set to throwing and catching. Albus' partner was a fourth year boy whose catching was all right, but his throws were so wide-ranging that Albus was forced to zoom right and left in order to catch them. After a while though, Olivia tapped him out and partnered Albus herself. After a few throws she caught the ball and grinned evilly at him. "Think fast," she said, and tossed the Quaffle over her shoulder.

Albus didn't bother to think. Must Catch Ball. He went directly into a forward dive, the air singing in his ears as he went almost verticle. Come on, he thought desperately to his broom. Come on, come on, come on...

He came within reach of the ball and slammed into it, collecting it against his chest as he straightened up and twisted to a halt. He had come so low that his knees almost brushed the grass. He let out a huge breath that he hadn't known he was holding, and realised that everyone was applauding.

"Told you," said Olivia. "Potters are all natural Seekers."

Albus turned. She was hovering behind him, beside one of her teammates.

"Actually my grandfather was a chaser," Albus said, feeling as though he might have been tricked, but wasn't sure how.

"Your brother just got made Gryffindor Seeker, didn't he?" Olivia continued, apparently not listening.

"Yeah, he was reserve last year, but their old Seeker quit 'cause of NEWTs. James reckons he's faster than her, but I dunno if its true. He's always saying stuff like that."
"Reckon you're faster than him? If you make the team you'll be playing against him eventually. Can you handle that?"

Albus drew himself up. "Course I can."

"Right. This is Liam. He's a sixth year so we're stuck with him for a while yet, but I want him to train his replacement. You up for it?"

Albus stared, his heart was singing. "Yes!"

"Good."

Albus was left with Liam as Olivia went off to sort out the rest of the newcomers. "Liam Ryan," the boy said holding out a hand. He was small for seventeen, a good build for a Seeker, with reddish-blonde hair and freckles so thick you could barely see skin.

"Albus Potter," Albus introduced himself. "Um, it's not Ryan as in... Barry Ryan?"

Liam smiled. "Yeah, it is."

"But he played for Ireland!"

"Yeah, I know." He peered at Albus with newfound respect. "Most Englanders don't know much about the Irish teams."

"My Dad saw them play in '94, the Bulgaria game," Albus said excitedly. "We've got an old poster of them somewhere. Wow, Barry Ryan."

Liam laughed. "He's all right, but he's no Harry Potter. Anyway didn't your mum play pro for a bit?"

"Yeah, in the Holyhead Harpies. She writes Quidditch for the Prophet now."

"Regular Quidditch family. You got anymore siblings lined up for the team? We could use some fresh blood: another two years and the whole team will be changed over."

"My sister Lily," Albus told him. "Dunno if she'll be in Ravenclaw, though."

"Well, try and get her on the team if she is."

Olivia had finished assigning the other players. Rose had made second reserve chaser. Scorpius hadn't got in, but she told him to try out again next year after working on his hand-eye coordination.

"This is our year, boys and girls," Olivia announced when the remaining unchosen applicants had walked off the pitch. "I can feel it. Bloody Gryffindor have won four years in a row, and now it's our turn. Right?"

"Right," the team chorused, the new reserves chiming in a beat behind.

"Great. See everyone at practice, 5pm sharp Saturday night."

They celebrated with extra dessert at dinner. Scorpius didn't seem at all phased by his loss. "I can work on Herbology while you two are practicing," he pointed out. "I know I slow you up when we try and do it together."

"Don't be silly," said Rose in a rather weak attempt at argument.
The two new Ravenclaw players however found that they were forced to spend more time learning off the pitch than on it. Everyone had to know all the plays and tactics, and the team weren't going to waste valuable practice time teaching them. They had to sacrifice half their free time to studying the plays, while Scorpius lounged around listening to music and scribbling in his notebook.

At practice, Liam often took Albus aside for one-on-one Seeker training. The Seeker was only involved in about ten per cent of the team plays anyway, and Liam was a good teacher.

"There's more to a dive than just throwing yourself into it," he said one day after Albus had nearly brained himself on the frozen mud of the pitch. "You've got to think mathematically. It's all angles. Otherwise you'll try something your broom just isn't made to do, and you've had it."

This was a different approach to that Albus had been brought up with, which mostly involved trusting to luck and instinct. He found that by combining the two, he was developing his own technique that even Liam couldn't argue was effective.

Meanwhile, the team was preparing for their first match against Hufflepuff. Olivia seemed determined that they simply could not lose. The more he got to know her, the harder Albus found it to like Olivia, and he knew that Rose felt the same, because she didn't keep her opinions about the matter to herself.

"It's just that she acts as if she's arranged everything so we'll win," she muttered the night before the match as they did their homework in the common room. "Ugh, and the way she's always calling us 'kids'. It drives me mad."

Albus couldn't argue with that, but it turned out that Ravenclaw did win the match, 230-140. The Slytherin Seeker wasn't great, and Albus, sitting low in the stands with the rest of the reserve players, saw the snitch at least three times before Liam finally swooped down for it, ending the game.

Liam laughed when Albus nervously told him this. "Yeah, I must have flown past it about six times. We needed some extra points to get the season started, so I held off for a bit. Captain's orders." He made a mock salute.

With Quidditch on top of schoolwork, Christmas came around faster than anyone could have imagined. Albus felt guilty leaving Scorpius behind again, but he didn't like to think of how his mother would feel if he announced that he wasn't coming home.

"Oh, I'm fine," Scorpius said, shrugging it off.

"Just watch out for Chung and his mates," Albus warned him sternly. Jian and Carcer were also staying for the holidays. "I don't want to hear that they jumped you as soon as my back was turned."

"Yeah all right, you're not my bodyguard, you know."

"He's only teasing you," Rose told him, patting his arm. "But you will be careful, won't you?"

Scorpius rolled his eyes. "Yeah, yeah. I happen to be a wizard, you know, I'm capable of defending myself."

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Jian had not exactly confronted Scorpius about the Dungbomb fiasco. He and his fellow Slytherins had detention with Professor Tufty every Saturday afternoon for the rest of the year, and they had
lost fifty house points apiece, which put Slytherin at the bottom of the ladder. Hearing that for the first time had made Scorpius wince. He was sure they would be coming after him. But so far, all they had done was glare at him in the corridors and refuse to speak to him, which to be honest suited everyone quite fine. Scorpius got the impression that it would be too risky for them to try anything. If he broke his legs falling down some stairs, or suddenly grew a pustulating green horn, for example, it would be pretty obvious who was behind it.

Still, he found himself spending most of his Christmas holidays in the common room, or in the library, which, as long as you stayed within Madam Pince's field of vision, was undoubtedly neutral territory. He walked up and down from meals with groups of other Ravenclaws - just in case.

He really didn't mind that he hadn't gotten onto the Quidditch team. As much as he liked flying as a hobby, that was Albus' dream, not his. He wasn't sure what his own dream was yet, but he tried not to worry about it too much. After his meeting with McGonagall he was more or less determined to keep his head down for the rest of the year, and possibly the next five after that.

He still took his iPod with him everywhere, and also his notebook. He had started scribbling in it at the start of the school year, after he had found it lying abandoned and empty on a desk and its owner had failed to claim it. What he wrote was mainly scraps of thought, or bits of songs that he liked, but recently he had started trying to write words to his own songs. He had no idea how to write music, but since he was the only one reading them, he knew what they were supposed to sound like.

He begged the House Elves for more treats to send to his friends for Christmas, and accompanied the packages with long letters emphasising how much fun he was having and how he wasn't lonely in the least. He woke on Christmas morning to find packages containing a poster of Jimi Hendrix (who looked nothing like he had imagined him) from Albus, and a small book about delicate potions from Rose. He was so engrossed in reading the book (which contained concoctions he was sure they wouldn't cover in class until fifth year) that it took him a moment to realise someone was knocking on the door.

He got up hurriedly and went to answer it. It was one of the Ravenclaw fifth years, looking annoyed. "Some girl at the knocker for you, Malfoy," he said.

"Who is it?"

"How should I know?"

It was Lizzie. She had her hair tied back in pigtails and her round face was beaming.

"I thought you went home for the holidays!" Scorpius exclaimed.

"I did," Lizzie said, tossing one of her pigtails over her shoulder. "I came to find you. Daddy wants to know if you'd like to come over for Christmas dinner."

Scorpius thought he must have misheard. "You mean... to your house?" he asked when he finally realised he was probably not going mad.

"Well, we don't really have a house, its an apartment over the pub," Lizzie reminded him. "And we're serving guests all day, so its very in and out, but we get to eat, too. Some of Mum and Dad's friends are coming over and we thought you might want to come. Up for it? Dad asked Professor McGonagall and Professor Flitwick and they said it's fine," she added, scarcely pausing for breath.

Scorpius didn't dare refuse at this point. He had a feeling she would be horrendously offended, which would surely extend to her entire family.. "Um, okay. Thanks."
"Great," she said grinning. "Come to Dad's office at two and we'll meet you there."

She skipped off. Scorpius closed the door, attempting to process the last two minutes with difficulty. He had never been invited to someone's house before, apartment over a pub or otherwise. His friends in France growing up didn't count, as they had all accepted him into their homes out of respect or more probably, fear of his father. The thought occurred to him that perhaps the Longbottoms felt sorry for him. He grimaced. He didn't think he could stand that, especially when there was nothing to feel sorry for. On the other hand, Lizzie was his friend, wasn't she? He sat with her in class, sometimes, and she helped him with Herbology, and occasionally he would reciprocate by helping her with Potions. So why shouldn't he visit?

Except that it was Christmas, and Christmas was about family. Or so he heard. Christmas at his house usually involved little more than an owl from each set of Grandparents and perhaps a visit from his aunt Daphne. No one treated him any differently. There was the usual dinner and rarely any presents. He wondered what Christmas at the Longbottoms' was like. He imagined it being very messy and noisy, with possibly a lot of plants around the place. It was a confusing image.

Fortunately he didn't have much longer to wonder. He forced himself to keep reading his book in the Common Room, and then joined everyone at the window to watch a rather splendid snowball fight between Hagrid the old groundskeeper and some of the Gryffindors. It was half past one before he even knew it, at which point he had to go back to his dormitory to decide what to wear. He usually wore his school robes, even on weekends, because the casual clothes he did have were mostly green, some being handed down from his father and some having been bought in anticipation of his being sorted into Slytherin. But he could hardly wear school uniform to Christmas dinner, could he?

He settled on a greyish button-down shirt with a warm, if slightly threadbare, woolen jumper over the top of it. It was green, but bottle green, and he thought it would pass. He combed his hair, which he had been allowing to grow haphazardly since the start of the school year. He found he looked less like his father with long hair, even if his mother would no doubt make him cut it again next summer. He put his new book in his pocket, thinking perhaps Lizzie might like to look at it, and made his way down the many flights of stairs to Professor Longbottom's office.

Lizzie and her father were waiting for him when he got there. "Sorry," he panted, leaning over and clutching his knees for support. "Forgot I had to get to the ground floor."

Lizzie giggled. "Glad you could make it," said Professor Longbottom, smiling at him. "We're Flooing to the Leaky Cauldron. Lizzie tells me you've never been to Diagon Alley before?"

Scorpius shook his head.

"Well it's a bit mad at Christmas time, but I think you'll like it. You can go first, Hannah's waiting on the other side for you."

Scorpius took a pinch of Floopowder and tossed it into the Fireplace. When he stepped out of the fireplace - he had learned at an early age that Malfoys did not stumble or fall when travelling by Floo - Hannah Longbottom was indeed waiting for him, the new swell of her belly just visible under her spotted apron.

"Welcome Scorpius," she said, ushering him out of the way of the fireplace as Lizzie came through after him. "So glad you could come."

"Thank you very much for inviting me," Scorpius said politely. "I hope it's not any trouble for you."

"Oh, don't be silly dear," Hannah laughed. "We've hundreds of guests tonight, one more won't make
any difference."

"Hundreds?" Scorpius gasped.

"Most of them are downstairs, but they're all equally important," Hannah told him. Scorpius had liked Hannah every since he had met her at the memorial last May. She was a little plumper than he remembered, but she had Lizzie's long blonde hair and rosy smile. "Now I must get down there - running two dinners tonight! Madness."

"Don't strain yourself," Professor Longbottom sighed. "Please, love. We have extra staff on Christmas for a reason. You should be resting."

"I'll thank you to keep your medical advice to yourself, Professor," Hannah said, throwing him a challenging stare. "I may be seven months pregnant but I am not one of your students and you do not, I believe have a degree in gynecology."

"She says that every time I ask her to take it easy," Professor Longbottom sighed.

Scorpius took his bearings. He was in a large room that looked as though it was usually a sitting room, though all the chairs had been pushed up against the walls and there was a large table in the middle of it. Sitting at the table was a family of four, a blonde woman, a dark-haired man with a neatly-trimmed moustache, and two boys who looked to be about seven or eight. While it seemed quiet enough in the room, there was a steady rumble under his feet as though there were a lot of people talking and moving around on the floor below.

"This are our friends Luna and Rolf," said Professor Longbottom. "And their sons, Lycan and Lysander. Everyone this is Scorpius Malfoy, one of Lizzie's schoolfriends."

"Hello," said Scorpius nervously. The family waved. He noticed that the lady, Luna, was wearing a sprig of holly in her hair.

"And you know Anthony, I think?" Lizzie's Gryffindor brother had just walked through the door.

"Yeah, a bit," said Scorpius as Tony sat down on Lysander's other side. He had met the boy a few times at school, and found him, if not deliberately grumpy, then at least rather close-mouthed.

"Right," said Professor Longbottom, pulling off his grey jumper. He was wearing a red t-shirt underneath with a picture of what looked like a manticore on it. Seeing his Professor so informally dressed was somehow a bit shocking. "Who wants Butterbeers?"

"Me, me!" chimed the two boys, and Lizzie joined in. "Yes please," said Scorpius, a bit unsure but he reasoned that if he just did everything Lizzie did he couldn't go wrong.

"So did you hear from Albus and Rose yet?" Lizzie asked as they sat down, Lizzie taking the place next to Tony and Scorpius on her other side next to an empty seat.

"Oh yeah, they sent presents," Scorpius remembered, pulling out the book to show to her. "Albus says they're having tea at their gran's place and then they're going to London to see some sort of Muggle game."

"There's a Christmas match on," Tony grunted. "Football."

"Right." This sounded correct and Scorpius wasn't going to argue. He remembered that Lizzie's mum, like Rose's mum, was Muggleborn. Sometimes it seemed like everyone knew more about the Muggle world than he did.
"Are you in Slytherin?" one of the boys piped up, having lost interest in the maze game thing he had been playing with. Scorpius realised he was talking to him, and blinked.

"Um, no, I'm in Ravenclaw."

"I fort all the Malfoys were in Slytherin."

"Um.. most of them are," Scorpius agreed. "But I'm... not."

"Why not?"

Scorpius looked helplessly at Lizzie for some answers.

The parents of the overly inquisitive boy - Scorpius no longer had any idea which was which - were chuckling. "That's our Lysander," said the man called Rolf cheerfully. "Always questioning the very fabric of the universe."

Thankfully Professor Longbottom brought out the Butterbeers at this point, and Scorpius could hide his confusion by taking a long sip. "Wow!" he exclaimed.

Lizzie laughed. "Is that your first ever Butterbeer?" she asked.

He flushed. "I'm not meant to have sweets and things," he said. "I don't know why, nothing terrible ever seems to happen when I do."

"I had that same rule growing up," Professor Longbottom said as he set the table. Anthony, at his father's look, got up and helped. "Never made much sense to me either. Thank the gods for Hogwarts, eh?"

Scorpius grinned. "Too right, Professor."

The twin boys burst into laughter, and Scorpius jumped. What had he done wrong now?

"We're not in school, Scorpius, you can drop the Professor," his teacher told him gently. "You can call me Neville, or Mr Longbottom if you must. Just don't do it in class or you'll never hear the end of it, right Tony?"

"Dad, that was like four years ago!"

"Precisely."

Scorpius drank his Butterbeer and joined in the game of cards that was started. He hadn't played the game before but he picked up the rules quickly and was soon winning, until Lizzie triumphantly flipped over her last card and stole all his points.

Mrs Longbottom eventually came back, taking off her apron and hanging it as she bustled over to them. Neville got up to pull out her chair. "Our dinner's on its way," she told everyone. "Oh, for heaven's sake, Neville what are you wearing?"

Neville grinned and plucked at his manticore T-shirt. "Present from Ron," he chuckled. "In-joke from my Auror days."

Scorpius gasped. "You were an Auror?"

"Yeah, for a bit." Scorpius wasn't sure if it was the home atmosphere or the Butterbeer, but his teacher's formalities were draining away one by one as the day went. "It was necessary work at the
time, I suppose, but I didn't love it. Then old Professor Sprout stepped down, they asked me to fill in for a term and I never left. Harry and Ron tried to get me to come back a few times, but I loved teaching too much, and Hannah was pregnant with Tony by then, so a safer job seemed appropriate."

"Safer my foot," Hannah sighed. "The things those Gryffindors get up to, I'm surprised you haven't been hideously maimed in some 'harmless' joke or another."

"Thanks Mum," said Tony, rolling his eyes.

Suddenly a man and woman came in with platters of food which they laid on the table. Hannah thanked them and set about serving the food onto plates, and Luna helped her, to Neville's obvious relief. The food was simple, roast turkey with gravy, roast potatoes and vegetables, but it was delicious. There were even Yorkshire puddings. One of the little boys piled three onto his plate until his mother scolded him into putting some back. Scorpius ate quite happily, allowing the conversation to wash over him. Some of it was about the pub, funny stories about some of the customers and the difficulties of getting good holiday help, and some was about school, and Tony's OWLs, and the little boys' pets, of which they seemed to have hundreds.

"Have you two decided what subjects you'll choose for next year?" Luna asked eventually, prompting Lizzie and Scorpius to look at each other with barely-disguised panic.

"We don't have to decide until May!" Scorpius protested.

"Well its good to make those kind of decisions early," Hannah said. "That way you've got plenty of time to think about them, do your research, talk to other students, that sort of thing. I advise you not to just choose whatever your friends are doing. That's how I failed my Ancient Runes OWL."

"I think I'll do Care of Magical Creatures," said Lizzie. "That sounds fun." Luna and Rolf both agreed heartily with this idea, but her parents seemed less enthusiastic.

"And you, Scorpius?" Hannah asked, apparently keen to change the subject.

Scorpius speared a potato with his fork and swirled it absentmindedly around his plate to mop up the rest of his gravy. "Well... I was sort of thinking about doing Muggle studies."

Hannah beamed. "Oh, what a good idea! Far too many pureblood wizards think they can just go through life without learning anything about the Muggle world."

"Hey, I manage," Neville said, indignantly.

"That's different dear," Hannah told him fondly. "You have me."

"Muggles are boring!" protested Lycan - or possibly Lysander - who had decided his vegetables were better building materials than a foodstuff and was currently arranging them into a tower.

Scorpius flushed. "Well I think they're interesting," he said, embarrassed. "And Rose and Albus both know lots about Muggles and I always feel like an idiot when they talk about... about computers and movies and things. I mean, I listen, but it doesn't mean I understand any of it."

"I imagine your father would object to your doing Muggle Studies, however," Neville said, quietly. Scorpius sighed. "Yeah."

"Does he have to know?" Lizzie asked. Tony snorted with apparent amusement, though it was hard
"Elizabeth Longbottom," Hannah said sternly. "I hope you are not suggesting that Scorpius lie to his family about the classes he is going to be taking for the next three or five years."

"I was sort of thinking I'd do four extra subjects and just tell him about three of them, if he even asks," Scorpius said, unable to keep a hint of bitterness out of his voice. "Anyway that's not exactly lying, its more like... elimination."

To his surprise, Neville smiled wryly. "Ah, a trick I know well," he said. "Used to use that on my Gran all the time. Well, you'd better talk to Professor Flitwick about picking four subjects, but its not unusual for Ravenclaws, and you're a bright lad."

Scorpius grinned. Hannah still didn't seem happy about the idea, but she didn't seem to want to argue with her husband in front of the children.

All in all it was a great Christmas, Scorpius thought afterwards. After dinner, Lizzie had showed him around the pub, where the evening guests were still revelling in the aftermath of their own dinners, and all around the upstairs apartment, including her own room with a window that opened onto Diagon Alley. He stared down at it for a while. It wasn't busy, this being afternoon on Christmas Day, but it still seemed especially magical somehow, like Hogwarts, even more so than what he had seen of Wizarding Paris.

"It's a shame we can't go down there now," Lizzie said. "Maybe you could come over next summer and we could explore."

Scorpius explained that he would love to but that his parents preferred to stay in France on the holidays. "Maybe I'll ask if grandmother would take me, or Aunt Daphne," he said. "But I don't think father would let me if he knew I was coming to see your dad, honestly."

Lizzie tossed her hair. "Beats me why your dad hates my dad so much. Everyone else likes my dad. You like my dad, don't you?"

"Course I do. My father's just..." what was the word Neville had used? Prejudiced? Or cowardly, said Phineas Nigellus narking at him from the back of his mind. "Different," he settled on lamely.

"Sorry about Tony," Lizzie said, changing the subject with an ease reminiscent of her mother. "He's not always like that. Mum says its a phase he's going through."

But it was still nice to have spent a day with such normal, friendly people. Hannah gave him a hug before he left and said she hoped he would visit after the baby was born. Rolf and Luna both wished him good luck at school, and warned him to watch out for Puff-Eyed Pompleby's, whatever those were. Then Neville took him back through the Floo and wished him good night. Scorpius tried to say thank you for such a lovely dinner, but his Professor waved it off. "You deserve a day away from school," he said. "Stuck in this building for the best part of ten months, don't know how anyone does it." And he went home.

Scorpius told Rose and Albus all about it when they got back, and they told him about their Christmas and the football match, of which he understood very little but nodded and smiled anyway. And then classes and Quidditch practice was starting again, and everything was more or less back to normal.

~*-R-*~

~*-R-*~
Ravenclaw played another game, this time against Hufflepuff, in January. Rose and Albus sat in the stands again, watching with baited breath as Liam saved the game by catching the snitch when Hufflepuff were up by twenty points. Olivia was not happy with their near-failure, and the extra practices she ordered during the following few weeks very nearly had Rose going off the boil.

"This is stupid!" she announced after one session in near-torrential rain after they had showered and trudged up to the common room carrying their wet practice robes. "We're not even playing! Why do we have to be punished like this?"

"It's not punishment," Albus said, though he didn't sound sure. "It's like character building, or something."

She glared at him. "It's all right for you. Try catching a Quaffle or dodging a Bludger when its hurled at you out of nowhere and you've got rain in your eyes. I've got bruises everywhere!"

"The Gryffindor game is important," Albus pointed out. "What if we do have to play?"

"I'm second reserve, I'll play as soon as hell freezes over or when Olivia grows a soul," Rose muttered. "I don't think I'll ever be warm or dry again."

Scorpius, sitting in a nearby armchair, pointed his wand at her. "Siccus," he muttered. Her hair steamed as the water evaporated out of it.

"Very funny," Rose snapped at him.

"Just trying to help."

She gave him a Look. Sometimes he could be so infuriatingly calm about things! "Don't you have anything better to do?"

"Not really."

Albus coughed in a suspiciously obvious way, and she saw the two boys exchange amused glances. "Oh shut up both of you!" she shouted and stormed up to her dormitory.

It took her about a night and a day to calm down and start speaking to them again, during which time she spent most of her time with Lizzie and Belinda. They were good company, though of course she had no one to sit with during Potions or Defence Against the Dark Arts, and eventually she had to admit that she might have overreacted... just a little bit.

"You're just like your mum when you're angry," Albus told her when she grudgingly descended to sit with them at dinner. "It's hilarious."

"Was that meant to be an apology?" she asked him in a dangerous tone.

"Yes ma'am," said Scorpius, nudging Albus in the ribs. "We're sorry."

"Good."

They went to Herbology the next day to find that a short, old plump woman was teaching them. She introduced herself as Professor Sprout (retired), and explained that Professor Longbottom was on leave for a few weeks.

"Mum had the baby," Lizzie explained as soon as Sprout had left them to their own devices repotting some Hiccuping Hydrandgea's. "A girl, last night. Doesn't seem fair I don't even get to go
home to see her until the weekend."

"Oh, what's her name?" Rose asked eagerly. The thought of a newborn baby was enough to make her melt a little inside.

"Alice, after my grandmother. Dad's idea."

"Oh that's just lovely," Rose sighed.

"Yeah, if you like babies," Albus muttered.

Lizzie came back from the weekend with a handful of photos that the girls shared around and cooed over. The tiny creature that featured in all of them already had a mop of dark hair and Lizzie's chocolate-brown eyes. "Your Mum and Hugo came over for a bit," Lizzie told Rose.

"I wish I could go," Rose sighed. "Scorp wants to come too, I can tell. I think he worships your Mum a bit."

"You'll see her on May 2nd," Lizzie told her. "Mum always comes up for the memorial."

Rose sulked a little at not being able to see the baby for two whole months, but then it wasn't as if she was her own sister. After a few weeks Professor Longbottom returned to teach the NEWT and OWL classes, while Professor Sprout continued teaching everyone else. Whenever Rose saw him he had a wide smile on his face, if he did look a bit exhausted. She wondered how he managed, being Head of Gryffindor house, organising twelve different classes of Herbology and looking after his wife and child.

Oddly enough, all this made her miss her brother. Oh he was an irritating little snotface most of the time, but he was her brother. They had special jokes together, mostly about their parents, that even her cousins wouldn't understand. And he wasn't a baby anymore, but she began to long for the chance to give him a cuddle. Rose had an in–built need to cuddle people. She certainly couldn't imagine being an only child.

Memorial day came around eventually. Rose waited impatiently with her parents through the service for the opportunity to talk to Hannah. When she finally got there she found the woman surrounded by girls, mostly Hufflepuffs and Lizzie's friends, fussing over the baby. Rose even got to hold her for a little while. Scorpius had a look at her too, but declined the opportunity to hold her, pleading that he might drop her.

She sat with her parents at breakfast while Scorpius fled to sit with Lizzie, Hannah and the baby. "You'll have to meet my mum and dad one day," she told him with a sigh when everyone had gone home. "And Albus' parents too."

"Yeah... maybe," he replied, looking sceptical.

"Don't blame you mate," said Albus. "Come on Rose, the way your Dad looks at him I'm surprised he doesn't wet himself."

"Hey!" Scorpius protested. "I'm not... not scared, or anything."

"Mate, I'd be scared if Uncle Ron looked at me like that."

"I didn't notice him looking at me!"

"Probably a good thing."
"Oh shut up," Rose sighed. "He doesn't want to hurt you, Scorp, he's just interested."

"In what? I don't think I'm all that interesting."

"You're my friend. Dad's always been interested in my friends."

"Yeah, in case they turn out to be psychopaths," Albus put in, most unhelpfully.

Rose gave up.

Exams were coming up, and they also had to officially choose their subjects for third year. Rose decided on Care of Magical Creatures, Arithmancy and Study of Ancient Runes. Albus was going to do the same, but dropped Ancient Runes when he realised that if he was going to be playing more and more Quidditch, he wouldn't have the time for three extra subjects. Scorpius stuck to his decision by picking Muggle Studies, Arithmancy, Study of Ancient Runes and Divination. "Divination?" Rose asked him, making a face.

"It's interesting."

"It's ridiculous!"

"Don't listen to her, mate," Albus told him flatly. "That's her mum talking. She can rant for hours about the evils of Divination."

"Well you're not doing it either!" Rose reminded him.

"Well, she's my aunt. I've heard almost as much about it as you have." Albus shrugged. "Doesn't mean Scorp shouldn't be allowed to make up his own mind."

And then, in a flurry of revision, pre-exam stress, post-exam stress, and results which made everyone wonder if the stress had in fact been worth it, the year was over.

Ravenclaw had lost the final match against Gryffindor, to everyone's disgust, but it was the closest final score that anyone could remember in recent years, and Rose couldn't help but feel a bit proud of her cousin James when he held the Snitch triumphantly aloft.

"I'm never going to hear the end of that," Albus moaned as the landscape shot past the train window. The intervening weeks between the match and the end of term had apparently not dulled the pain any.

"There's always next year," she pointed out sympathetically. "And at least we won't have to put up with Olivia anymore. I just hope the new captain is a bit more sane."

"I'm still going to have to put up with everyone fussing over James all summer," Albus sighed. "Great Seeker, just like Dad, blah blah blah..."

"You know feeling sorry for yourself isn't attractive at all," Rose told him.

Scorpius by contrast was being very quiet. "You okay?" she asked him gently.

"What? Oh yeah. Just thinking about this summer."

"It'll be over before you know it," she told him. Honestly, people were supposed to look forward to the summer holidays, not complain about them.

"Want us to babysit your favourite toy again, Scorp?" Albus asked, stretching his legs out onto the
Scorpius appeared to think about it. "Nah, reckon I'll risk it," he said eventually. "As long as it's on me they probably won't find it. Anyway if I don't have any music I think I'll go mad."

They got off the train together at King's Cross amid the usual madness. Rose heard her name being called and turned to throw herself into her mother's waiting arms, then hug her dad, who took her trunk from her. She saw Albus and James being similarly fussed over by their parents out of the corner of her eye.

"Come on then," said her dad, but she hesitated, looking around for Scorpius. The boy was standing awkwardly a little way apart from them, looking around with a slightly worried expression.

"What's he doing here?" she heard her father snap, and for a moment she thought he meant Scorpius until she saw a big, burly man elbowing his way through the crowd.

"Who's that?" she asked.

"It's Gregory Goyle, isn't it?" her mother muttered to her father. "He doesn't have a child, does he?"

The big man pushed his way through to Scorpius, who stared, and indicated with a jerk of his hand that they were leaving together. The look on Scorpius' face told her all she needed to know. She ignored her mother's startled exclamation as she hurried forward towards him. He looked at her as if she'd gone mad.

"You okay?" she asked.

"Scorpius!" bellowed Goyle. She watched as the boy flinched, then his expression twisted unbelievably into a sneer.

"Push off, Weasley," he said, in a voice not quite his own, and then he shoved her. She stumbled back, and by the time she had collected herself, he had gone.

"Why that little -!" She looked around to see that her dad was having to be physically held back by her mother and, mostly, Uncle Harry.

"Dad, no!" she said quickly, running back to them. "It's okay, really, he was... he was just giving me something."

"What?"

She realised everyone was staring at her. Slowly she opened her hand to reveal the object that had been pushed desperately against her chest.

"That can't be good," Albus breathed.

"What is it?" Ron asked.

"His sanity," Albus replied. "Do you think he'll be okay? Rose?"

She was staring down at the iPod, only a little over a year old but already battered with use. "I hope so," was all she could say.
Please visit my fanfic blog: http://misssaigonfic.tumblr.com/
Ask me questions, get some insights!
Third Year Part 1: Muggle Studies

Chapter Summary

"Muggles are not worth learning about. They are not worth thinking about. They are under the impression that they own the land they live on, but wizards were here long before them. They are the rejects of our ancient society, those born without magic and doomed to live their lives in deaf ignorance to who are their traditional and true superiors."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

2019-2020

~*-S-*~

~*-S-*~

Dear Albus, Rose and Lizzie.

You would not believe the summer I am having.

Mr Goyle is staying with us. Mother absolutely hates him being here, but at least she can get out of the house. He and Father spend most of the time in the study. No idea what they're talking about. I tried to ask, but I just got told to mind my elders and betters.

I have got some new robes. They took the old ones off me almost as soon as I got home, so it's a good thing I didn't have my iPod on me after all. I don't know where the money for them came from. Mama is still working at the apothecary, but I think all that money is going towards the debts and food and things.

I'm really sorry for what happened at the train station. I hope you understand why I did it. Mr Goyle is an old friend of my father and I knew he would tell on me if he saw me speaking to any of you.

I don't think mother likes me being alone in the house with Goyle either. He was in prison for a while, I guess. She's going to Rue Chouette to see if anyone needs help with odd jobs or whatever. I hope she finds something. It's not that I'm afraid of him, it's just that he always seems to be watching me when he's around, and he's a pig. He just leaves stuff everywhere like he expects someone to pick it up after him.

I'm going to try and send this letter by Muggle post. I hope I can remember what you told me about stamps and things. Al, thanks for lending me the money, I promise to pay you back in September. Seems like ages til then.

There was a noise from downstairs, and Scorpius quickly put down his quill to fold the letter into his
pocket. He shifted the stuff on his desk around and went back to his Herbology essay. Minutes later his mother appeared in the doorway. "I spoke to Monsieur Gerard at Le Moulin," she told him. "They want an aide-serveur."

Scorpius felt his heart lift with hope he hadn't allowed himself to feel until now. "Really? Thank you, Mama!"

She didn't look quite as pleased as she felt. "It's beneath you," she told him shortly. "But I would rather that, than you staying in this house night and day."

Scorpius decided not to mention that she had never minded this before.

"You will have to ask your father," she reminded him.

Scorpius felt his heart sink. "I don't suppose you would ask him?" he ventured.

Her face hardened. "Don't be ridiculous," she snapped. "You are not a child." She glanced at the pile of papers on his desk. "Have you finished your homework?"

"Not quite yet, mother."

"I suggest you do so before you breach the matter with him." Then she left, leaving him sitting alone in the fading light with his heart beating fast.

He stayed up late and did as he had been told, finishing his Herbology essay and putting the final touches on his Potions project. Then he went to bed and slept fitfully with the letter to his friends hidden under his pillow. The Muggle money Albus had leant him was tucked into a pouch and stuffed under the mattress with his private notebook. He was glad that they had decided owl post was too risky. He thought Goyle might strangle any owl that might have come from the Potters if he found it, with his bare hands. And if he got a job in the town, he would have access to a Muggle post office. All he had to do was ask his father if he could take the job.

No big deal, right?

He got up before the sun, put on a dressing gown and slippers and tip-toed past the bulk of Goyle snoring on the sofa to the kitchen. He made himself breakfast. His father was against what he called 'women's work', like cooking, but he was against a load of other things that were impractical when you didn't have a mansion and servants, and things. Sometimes it was as if he forgot that they were living in a small cottage in France, and there was no money for hired help.

When he had finished eating he cleaned the plates and then made up a tray for his father. He might as well be in a good mood before he approached him, he thought. He carried the tray to the study, where the man always seemed to be, even if Goyle was still passed out in the other room.

Draco Malfoy was sitting behind the desk that took up most of the space in the small room. He was reading what looked like a letter - Gergoire was perching on the windowsill. He looked up as Scorpius came in, and quickly folded the letter away. "What is it?"

"Breakfast, Papa."

His father frowned, but accepted the tray when it was put in front of him. "How old are you now, Scorpius?" he asked.

"Thirteen, Papa. My birthday was in March."
"I know when your birthday is, boy."

Why did you ask then? Scorpius thought, trying to keep his expression neutral.

"Thirteen means you are no longer a child. You will call me father, or sir, is that understood?"

Scorpius felt a sort of sharp feeling in his chest that he couldn't quite describe. "Yes, sir."

"Good." There was a short silence, as though his father was expecting him to leave, but Scorpius was still building up the courage to speak. "What is it?" the man asked eventually, with an irritable edge to his voice. "I am very busy."

With what? Scorpius wondered, but took a deep breath and said instead, "Mother says the restaurant on Rue Chouette needs a busser. An aide-serveur. May I?"

His father stared at him for a moment, then his face darkened. "You are asking me if you may accept paid work?"

"Yes, father." Scorpius tried to gauge the look on his father's face, his hopes dying with every second that passed.

"Why?" The man's pale eyebrows were knitted, the edge of his mouth curling into a sneer.

He swallowed. Because you won't, didn't seem like an appropriate answer. "I'd like something to do," he replied eventually. "Unless you'd like me to help with whatever you and Mr Goyle are doing, I'm sure I could - "

His father stood up, so fast that he almost pushed the desk forward. Scorpius forced himself not to take a step back. IMalfoys do not cower, Malfoys do not flinch…/I "That is none of your concern!"

"Yes, P- father," he said quickly. "I'm sorry, I only meant... I've finished all my homework and I thought perhaps I could use the money to get my new school books and things, for my extra subjects." He clasped his hands behind his back so his father wouldn't see them shaking.

His father appeared to calm slightly at this. He sat back down. "Money will not be an obstacle for much longer," he said. "I am endeavouring on a business venture myself that will eliminate the need for any of us to engage in... manual labour." He said the words as if they dripped poison.

"However... I do see the need for you to integrate yourself into wider society." Scorpius translated this as 'get you out of the house where you won't snoop into my business'. "You may take this position, then, on the condition that you let me handle your earnings, as your mother does. I will put some aside for your schoolbooks if you wish."

Scorpius could hardly believe his ears. "Thank you, father! May I go to town with mother, today?"

"Yes, yes," his father seemed to have forgotten he was there already. "Get out."

Scorpius fled. On the way back to his room he passed Goyle, who leered at him as he got up, the debris from his midnight snack rolling off his blanket and onto the floor.

Yes, he thought. Definitely the time to get out of here.

He met Gerard the same day. The restaurant owner was a lanky, black-haired wizard with a pointed nose. He didn't seem entirely pleased to be hiring a thirteen year old with no experience, but Scorpius could tell the wait staff were suitably relieved. He learned from them that their previous summer
busboy had left to go abroad with his family with very little notice.

It was hard work. He cleared plates for the lunch service, washed and stacked them, ate from a plate of rejected salmon which in the face of all adversity was actually delicious. Not quite Hogwarts fare, but Scorpius had never eaten in a restaurant before. Not one as prestigious as the Moulin, anyway. And then he had to do the whole thing all over again for the dinner service.

By the time he fell into bed that night he was starting to regret his decision, and he regretted it even more when he got up to find that his muscles protested his every movement. He had to drag himself out of bed to do it all over again, his arms shaking as they tried to take the weight of heavy plates. After a few days, however, his body was used to the work. Even if he did come home exhausted and stinking of dirty dishwater, at least he was doing something. By the second week, his mother told him he could Floo to and from the restaurant by himself. The money he earned was fairly pitiful, but he handed the sealed envelope over to his father every week. He hoped he would remember what he had said about using it to buy books.

He made tentative friends with some of the waiters, most of whom were in their early twenties. He would occasionally help them out by translating for English tourists. On more than one occasion he even recognised a few people from Hogwarts, travelling with their parents.

*The wizarding world is a small one,* he reminded himself.

Between lunch and dinner he either went home or went for a walk around Rue Chouette, which while not on the scale of Diagon Alley was Paris' closest equivalent. A few times he passed by the Apothecary where his mother worked, but didn't go in. He didn't think she would appreciate the interruption by him. He didn't need her to tell him that the old shop was her escape, her respite from the coldness of the house, her husband's inattention. He might be thirteen, but he was not unobservant. Any fantasy he might have had that his parents had got married for any other reason than necessity had vanished long ago.

Eventually he plucked up the courage to go into Muggle Paris, and made sure both his Muggle money and the letter were in his pocket. He had added a few lines about his job before signing it. It was a bit all over the place but he knew that Rose at least would worry if she didn't hear from him at all, all summer.

He didn't wear robes at the restaurant, it was too hot and impractical in any case, but he still felt incredibly conspicuous as he went through the gate that was the entrance to the main city. No one paid him any attention, even while he stood for a moment as people and bikes and cars streamed past him. No one seemed to have noticed him emerging from what now appeared to be a plain brick wall.

Surpressing a moment of panic, he recited the rules for getting back, thanking his lucky stars that he had thought to ask one of the waiters before he left. Third brick down and four across from the one marked with the double line. Two wand taps. Right.

He stepped onto the road and hastily jumped back as something huge and impossibly fast came roaring and honking past, nearly striking him. He staggered back from the curb, his heart pounding as he looked around. The metal monsters were everywhere, zooming back and forth. *Cars,* he told himself sternly. *Not monsters. Don't be an idiot.*

"Careful!" someone yelled at him in French. It was an eldery lady looking down at him disapprovingly. "Young people today don't look where zey are going!" she told him sternly.

"Yes Madame," he agreed quickly, also in French. "Excuse me but do you know where I can find the nearest bureau de poste?"
She seemed to calm down somewhat at his polite request. "I'm going zat way myself," she told him. Scorpius noticed that she was carrying four or five heavy-looking bags.

"May I help you carry, Madame?" he asked, and she smiled at him. He was apparently forgiven. She led him down the street, stopping once to cross the road. She poked at a button on a post with her stick, and they waited as the cars continued to roar past, stinking of smoke and other Muggle smells that tingled Scorpius' nose. Just as he was preparing to ask if they should try going another way, the cars all stopped and she began to totter across the road, apparently without a care in the world. Had she just done some kind of charm? Was she a witch after all? Then he saw a green light on another pole at the other end of the crossing, in the shape of a man, walking. Muggle magic, he thought incredulously. Like Apple Magic. Al was right.

She led him to what had to be the post office, the word 'post' visible at least a dozen time on posters on the windows. He handed the bags back to her, but she hesitated.

"Your parents are nearby?" she asked, quaveringly.

"Yes," Scorpius lied. "They just sent me to post a letter."

"A boy your age shouldn't be wandering alone in ze city." She sounded disapproving again. "How old are you, twelve?"

"Fifteen," he lied again. "I know I look young for my age."

"Ah." She seemed to take solace from this. "Well… you just be careful on ze road, young man. So few polite people your age around, nowadays…"

"I will," Scorpius said quickly. "goodbye!" He escaped into the post office before she could offer to walk him all the way back again. He realised as he did so that the old lady was the first Muggle he had ever really spoken to. She was nice, for an old lady.

There was only one person inside, a young man sitting behind the desk in the bureau. He was pressing buttons on something in his hands and looked up at Scorpius almost resentfully as he came in. "Yes?"

Scorpius swallowed his nervousness and stepped forward. "I'd like to send a letter please," he said, putting it on the counter. "I'd like an envelope and... and some stamps."

"How many?"

Scorpius blinked. "I'm not sure," he said. He could hardly just make it up. "As many as it will take to go to England." He fished in his pockets and drew out the pouch. There were a couple of pieces of paper in there, both with the number 10 stamped on them. Albus had explained to him that this was Muggle money.

"French Muggle money," he had added. "It's all I've got left from our trip there when I was ten."

"French Muggles have different money to English Muggles?" Scorpius had asked, nonplussed. "What for? Doesn't that get horribly confusing?"

"All Muggles have different money. I think it has to do with politics."

This seemed like a very silly way of doing things to Scorpius.

"Will this be enough?" he asked the man, handing him the little papers. The man gave him a
confused look.

"You've only got the one letter?" he clarified.

"To England," Scorpius repeated.

The man sighed and took one of the pieces of paper. He put the letter in an envelope and peeled off a little sticker from a roll before sticking it on the envelope. Scorpius watched, fascinated. Then he gave Scorpius a handful of coins. Scorpius thought he heard the man mutter 'kids'. "Anything else?" he asked more loudly, and Scorpius stared at him.

"Is that it?" he asked. The letter was still sitting there on the desk. Surely that couldn't be it. He'd just stuck another piece of paper onto a piece of paper. How was that supposed to achieve anything?

"Yeah, that's it. I'll put it in the box for you and it'll go out tonight."

Scorpius decided that since the man worked here, as much as he didn't seem to enjoy it, he must know what he was talking about, so he nodded, and fled. When he glanced behind him, the man had picked up his little thing, which was a bit like his own iPod except black and square and shiny, and started playing with it again. He was glad he had signed up for Muggle Studies. Everything was so confusing here.

When the school booklist arrived in August, however, he was less glad. He had just got up, late, as was his routine, and was just about to get ready for his shift at the restaurant when his father came storming in. "What is this?" he asked, not shouting but his voice dark and dangerous. He waved a piece of paper in front of Scorpius' face.

"Er, is it my letter from Hogwarts?" Scorpius asked, seeing a flash of the school crest as it whizzed past his nose.

"Muggle studies?" hissed his father, taking a step closer so that Scorpius was forced to look up almost vertically to meet his father's eyes. "You told me you were taking Arithmancy, Ancient Runes and Divination."

"I am," Scorpius replied, thinking quickly. "Where does it say Muggle Studies? It must be a mistake."

His father thrust the letter at him. He scanned it quickly. It did indeed list Muggle Studies as a fourth subject, and there were two books that were definitely not in the family hand-me-down pile. "It's a mistake," he said again, handing the paper back to his father and trying to keep his voice level.

His father's expression twisted. "Scorpius, if you are lying to me you shall wish you had never been born, do you understand?"

"Yes, father."

"Muggles are not worth learning about. They are not worth thinking about. They are under the impression that they own the land they live on, but wizards were here long before them. They are the rejects of our ancient society, those born without magic and doomed to live their lives in deaf ignorance to who are their traditional and true superiors."

"Yes father." The response was automatic, but his heart was beating so fast that he was surprised his father could not hear it. He had never lied to his father before, not like this. Oh he had omitted certain details, like the exact names of his friends and how exactly he had spent Christmas the previous year. But this was a real lie. Would his father know it? "I'll tell them its a mistake when I get to school.
Sorry father."

After that, he was surprised when his father took him to Rou Chouette to buy his school things. The texts for the third year subjects, as well as a couple of extras for Defence Against the Dark Arts and the next Standard Book of Spells, made a rather expensive package, and for a minute Scopius thought he might change his mind. But the money was handed over with very little ceremony. His father then bought him a new set of school robes, a cauldron, and some new ink and quills. The whole experience might have even been enjoyable if the man had spoken to him, or allowed him to participate in any way. Scopius stood awkwardly in the background while his father made the purchases, wondering how he was going to get his Muggle Studies books. Was it too late to ask Rose or Albus to get them for him?

Then, as they were walking home, a man came up and stopped them in their path. He was shorter and wider than Scorpius' father, and while he was wearing expensive-looking robes, his toadish face and grim expression reminded him of Goyle. "Malfoy," he hissed. "A word?"

"Not now," Draco Malfoy spat back. "Tomorrow."

"It's urgent. Ezekius sent me."

Scorpius, looking up, saw a flicker of something unknowable on his father's face. Was it fear?

"Very well then. Scorpius, wait here."

He took the toadish man to one side and they exchanged a whispered conversation while Scorpius tried not to look as if he was watching. A few people, recognising him from the restaurant, smiled at him as they walked past. He smiled back, but his gaze kept going back to the discussion which seemed to be dissolving into an argument. The toadish man seemed to win. His father nodded and made an acquiescent gesture. The man leered and walked away. When his father came back, Scorpius knew better than to ask.

-~A~-

The coming year at Hogwarts was, everyone was soon realising, going to contain an unprecedent number of Weasleys. Dominique was entering her NEWT year, Molly was doing her OWLS, James, Roxanne and Fred were in their fourth year, Albus and Rose of course in third, and now Lily, Hugo and Louis were all starting.

"I wouldn't be surprised if McGonagall stepped down," Albus heard his father saying as they began their annual shopping trip at Diagon Alley. "I think I would."

"At least they're a bit spread out," replied his Uncle Ron. "Imagine if we dumped all of them on her at once."

"Standing right here," Albus said.

"McGonagall's not the one who has to deal with them on a daily basis," said Uncle Bill, grinning. The effect this on his scarred face would probably be terrifying to anyone who wasn't used to it. "What about Neville, eh? Louis and Hugo are both busting to be in Gryffindor, and that'll make it at least seven in his House. Maybe we should all buy him a drink to apologise in advance."
"Men," Ginny sighed. "Come on, let's get all the shopping over with so we can go visit Hannah and the baby."

"Yes dear," Harry said diplomatically. He handed a handful of coins to Albus and Lily each. James had already received his pocket money - he had gone early to Uncle George's shop with the twins. "Don't spend it all at once," he cautioned Albus. "School things first, okay? We'll meet you at the Leaky Cauldron in two hours. Come on, first years, let's get your robes."

Lily practically squealed with delight as she, Hugo and Louis were led away. Dom and Molly went with them, stating that they also needed new robes. This left Rose and Albus to do their shopping together. Apart from books there wasn't that much more that they needed, but Rose wanted to go to the pet shop.

"Mum said I could get a kitten," she said, jingling her pocket money. "Dad's not too keen on it, but we're going to school in a couple weeks anyway."

"I'll get some treats for Emmett, then," Albus said. "Not that he needs them." His own owl was rather fat and lazy, the result of overfeeding and not much exercise. Womy, the family owl, was much better at taking letters and not just flying around in circles and bringing them back again.

Rose spent about twenty minutes cooing over kittens. "Come on," he said to her eventually. "We're going to be late. You wanted to see the baby, right?"

"Oh," she said. She picked up one of the kittens out of the cage marked 'female'. It was black with one white forepaw. Even Albus had to admit it was sort of cute, even if he wasn't much of a cat person. "What should I call her?" Rose asked.

"Don't ask me. I've probably inherited my parents' crappiness at naming things."

By the time they got to the Leaky Cauldron, Rose had settled on Midnight. The pub was busy, this being the weekend after Hogwarts letters, and there were a few people there they knew, so they spent ten minutes or so chatting with people about their summers and their new subjects until Lizzie popped up beside them. "There you are," she said impatiently. "Been looking everywhere for you. Everyone's upstairs."

They followed her up to the apartment where everyone was fussing over baby Alice. The little girl seemed to be enjoying all the attention. At six months, she had a mop of dark curly hair and a huge smile. Albus even held her for a while.

"How you're running this place and looking after a baby is beyond me," Aunt Hermione was saying. "It was hard enough for all of us to get Saturday off to bring the children to get their school things."

"Oh, Lizzie's been helping me," Hannah replied, putting an arm around her daughter's shoulders. "I don't know what I'll do when they all go back to school. We can only pay a nanny for a few hours a week."

"I'd look after her for free," Ginny sighed, picking the baby up and cuddling her close again. "Oh, I want another one."

"No you don't," Harry said quickly. Albus hadn't even realised his father was listening, but apparently his ears were very carefully tuned to that sort of announcement.

"But we're going to be all alone in the house now," Ginny said, and Albus was taken aback to see a sparkle of tears in her eyes.
"Just think of all the extra work you'll get done."

"Harry!"

Luckily Neville came in at that point and forestalled any more talk of parental procreation. "There's my girl," he said, scooping Alice up and swinging her around. She laughed with delight and promptly punched him on the nose.

"Hey," Lizzie said, taking the opportunity while everyone was laughing at the scene. "Heard anymore from Scorpius?"

"Nah, not since that last letter," Albus admitted.

"I still can't believe he made it into a Muggle post office," Lizzie giggled.

"He's not an idiot," Rose broke in, bristling a little.

"I know that!" Lizzie said quickly. "He's just such a wizard, you know?"

Albus thought about Scorpius' iPod, which frankly he was thinking about giving a name to, and snorted.

-~R~-

Goyle was at the train station again on September the first. This time Rose made sure to avoid him as he heaved Scorpius' trunk onto the train with both hands before walking off into the crowd. Only then did she approach her friend, giving him her hand to help him up the last step onto the train. "Hi," she said tentatively.

"Hey," he replied, offering her a tired smile.

"Long summer?"

"Hell yes. Where's Al?"

"Helping Lily with her stuff. Oh, by the way, don't laugh at him."

Scorpius frowned. "Why would I laugh at him?"

She grinned. "His voice is breaking. It is pretty funny but James' teasing has got him all worked up about it."

Scorpius grinned back. "Right, I'll be careful. So what's news?"

"Not much - oh, I got a cat. Come on, I'll show you."

The youngest Potter/Weasley students had found a compartment near the end of the train. "Scorp, this is my brother Hugo," Rose introduced them. "And this is Lily and that's Louis, Dom's brother."

"Hi," said Scorpius. Rose was surprised to hear a hint of shyness in his voice. She had hoped they had Weasleyed that out of him.
"And this is Midnight," she said, picking her up out of the nest of discarded jumpers where she had been napping. The kitten mewed in protest.

Albus finished helping Lily with her trunk and came over. "All right mate?" his voice squeaked a little on the last syllable, and he grimaced.

"Fine," said Scorpius, absolutely straight-faced.

"How come Goyle was dropping you off?"

Scorpius made a face. "Mother was working and Father refuses to leave the study. He didn't much want to take me, but he'll do anything Father tells him. I don't think he's ever had an original idea in his whole life."

"So tell us about this job," Rose asked him once the journey was underway and Hugo, Lily and Louis had started a game of Exploding Snap.

"Oh that. Not much to tell. Cleaning tables, resetting, washing dishes, that kind of thing."

She wrinkled her nose. "Sounds awful."

"Sometimes it was. But it was worth it for something to do. And I got new school robes out of it, and new schoolbooks, except for Muggle Studies, of course. Still don't know how I'll get those."

"There's supposed to be a new Muggle Studies Professor," Albus broke in. "And a new Potions Professor, too."

"What?" Scorpius exclaimed. Rose knew he had like their previous teacher, Professor Hillburn. "Who?"

"Dunno, just something Dad heard."

Scorpius sulked for a minute and Rose searched around for a change of subject. "So are you trying out for Quidditch again?" she asked him.

He sighed. "Nah, don't think so. Going to be hard enough with four extra subjects. Who's the new Captain?"

They talked Quidditch for a while, and then, their game concluded with a bang that shook the whole compartment, the other three joined them in eating snacks from the trolley. Louis struck up a conversion with Scorpius in French, and Scorpius, reminded, gave Albus back his change from the Muggle money.

"But this is nearly all of it!" Albus protested. "You didn't just buy one stamp?"

"That was all he said I needed," Scorpius frowned. "You got the letter, right?"

"Course we did, but..." Albus looked at his face and apparently gave up. "Never mind."

-*~S~*-

-*~S~*-
The Muggle Studies Professor was called Professor Clearwater. She was about his mother's age, perhaps a little older, and she had a very endearing smile. When he asked her tentatively about the textbooks, before class, she assured him that they would find a way around the problem.

Scorpius loved his first Muggle Studies class. Nearly everyone in there was pureblood, like him, the rest were halfbloods who had been raised totally in wizarding culture. This meant that everyone was just as clueless as he was, and that was something he'd been afraid of. Professor Clearwater asked them to raise their hand if they had ever had interactions with Muggles, and Scorpius told the story about sending the letter, carefully making it sound like it had been an experiment rather than a necessity. When he described trying to pay the man twenty euros for a stamp, a few people laughed. But then he showed everyone his iPod, and suddenly he was the envy of the entire class.

Professor Clearwater handed out a stack of papers to each of them. They were on bright white paper rather than parchment, and bound along one side with a kind of plastic spiral. They were short stories, she explained, by Muggle writers, and they were required to read at least three of them before the next class. "Readings stories is one of the best ways to learn about Muggle culture," she explained. "If there is anything you don't understand, make a note of it and we will discuss it next class."

He then had Study of Ancient Runes with Rose, which was less fun. The Professor, an older man with a grey beard called Professor Warren, set them even more reading and a translation exercise. Arithmancy, the only new class the three of them had together, involved a lot of note-taking, even more reading and several exercises for homework.

By this point it was almost a relief to go to History of Magic and daydream through Professor Binns' sermon on Goblin wars.

On Wednesday, after Charms, he had Divination while the other two had Care of Magical Creatures. Divination was with the centaur, Firenze, who was rarely seen around the castle for the probable reason that he was too tall to fit inside most of the hallways. Anyway the stone floors probably bruised his hooves. Scorpius sat in the magical forest room with his classmates and listened as Firenze explained that their classes would alternate between him and Professor Trelawny who taught more 'traditional human magic'. Scorpius felt a bit lost after two hours of listening to Firenze talk about stars. He had thought that two years of Astronomy might have prepared him for Astrology, but apparently not.

Al and Rose came back from Care of Magical Creatures looking excited. "Hagrid's great," Al told Scorpius with great enthusiasm. "Told you you should have done his class."

Scorpius did not want to say that the huge man, who had never shown him any particular friendliness, scared him more than he cared to admit. "Lizzie's mum says that Care of Magical Creatures in dangerous," he pointed out. "She didn't want Lizzie doing it. I'd rather stay in Divination than lose an arm or a leg, thanks."

"Oh, like Hagrid would let any of us get hurt," Rose scoffed, blowing a lock of hair out of her eyes.

Scorpius opened his mouth and shut it again. He didn't think anyone would appreciate him repeating yet another of his father's rants. His father definitely did not like Hagrid and he actually had been hurt during his class, no matter what anyone said.

The new Potions Professor suprised everyone by being a young woman. Her name was Professor Padma Patil. Al and Rose knew her, vaguely, from parties they had been to with their parents. Scorpius thought he might have seen her at the last memorial.
The class was disappointingly a non-practical lesson, mainly a catch up on the previous year, introducing everyone and talking about what they would be covering up until Christmas. "I believe the top three students in third year Potions are in this class," Professor Patil said smiling before they left. "So I am sure it will be a prosperous year for us."

Scorpius, Albus and Rose looked at each other modestly.

"She seems nice," Rose said when they had left the classroom. "You should ask her about your extra projects and stuff you wanted to do."

"We'll see," Scorpius sighed. "I'll see if I'm still alive at the end of next week. The way it's going we'll be drowning in homework before it's out."

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Liam, now in his seventh year, was the new Ravenclaw Team Captain. He was also Head Boy, which meant he had much less time for Seeker training with Albus. Al joined in the drills while Liam flew around the team, correcting manoeuvres.

It could be argued that the team was not as good as last year, now that half its players had left. One of last year's reserves was now a full Chaser, which meant that Rose was now first reserve. Albus pointed out glumly that since there were three Chasers, she was about three times as likely to get to actually play as he was.

Rose grimaced. "As long as its not a Gryffindor game," she said wryly. "I wouldn't put it past Fred to try and brain me with a Bludger."

Albus nodded. Whoever had let his cousin onto the team was clearly a masochist. Fred was like a madman with a Beater's bat.

At least Ravenclaw won their first game, against Hufflepuff, and Liam gave them a week off to celebrate, or possibly so that he could catch up on his NEWTs. Everyone else certainly tried to use the extra time to their advantage.

Albus was trying to write a report on unicorns for Care of Magical Creatures, but found himself too tired to concentrate. Instead he peeked over at what Scorpius was scribbling in his notebook. The thing was starting to get tatty around the edges. "Haven't you got any homework to do?" Albus asked after scanning a few lines.

Scorpius looked up and reddened, closing the book. "Probably. I can't quite bring myself to do Ancient Runes."

"What are you writing, is it a poem?" he asked. He couldn't read the words, but they were arranged in a sort of pattern.

Scorpius went, if possible, even redder. "Um. Sort of."

"All right, you don't have to tell if you don't want to," Rose said, giving Albus a cold look.
"What? I was just asking."

Scorpius sighed. "Don't argue about it. Its just a sort of song I'm working on. Happy?"

"Oh." Rose's face softened. "Can I see it?"

"Now who's being nosy," Albus muttered, going back to his essay.

"Maybe... when its finished," Scorpius said, sounding unsure.

Not long after Ravenclaw's win, everyone was distracted by their first visit to Hogsmeade. Lizzie, Rose and Albus had all been to the village before, although Lily, who had despite all Albus' secret hopes become a Gryffindor along with Hugo and Louis, complained that it wasn't fair that first years weren't allowed to go.

"You've been loads of times," Albus told her, sighing, over dinner the day before the outing. Albus and Rose occasionally joined their family for dinner at the Gryffindor table. They invited Scorpius to join them, but he was still wary of Gryffindors, and said he was fine sitting with Gaius and Peter and the Ravenclaw girls.

"Yes, but this is different," Lily sighed, and offered no further explanation.

The Hogsmeade trip was fun, even if the third years were quite carefully supervised by the teachers while the other year levels were allowed to wander a bit on their own.

Scorpius had no money to buy anything, but he seemed happy to look around, all the same. Albus bought a couple of Christmas gifts for his family while he and Rose showed Scorpius around the sweetshop and the Hogsmeade branch of Weasley's Wizard Wheezes. None of their family was working there, to Albus' disappointment. "Dad owns part of the company, and sometimes he works in the Diagon Alley shop, on weekends," Rose explained as they left. "Uncle George is usually in the Hogsmeade shop, but he's travelling right now, on business."

"Going international!" barked Fred from nearby. Scorpius jumped. Albus felt a bit sorry for him - his tall, dark cousin could be intimidating, and didn't seem to realise it. Scorpius had mostly grown out of the pathological shyness that had occasionally crippled him in first year, but it always seemed to pop up again around the twins, or anyone in the Weasley family who wasn't Albus or Rose. Albus thought he should probably try and do something about that. They'd have to meet eventually.

Probably not Uncle Ron though, he thought as they went on to the Three Broomsticks. Start him off small. Aunt Hermione? No, she'd interrogate him into insensibility. Dad's out of the question. Mum, maybe. She'd at least be nice to him.

He ordered Butterbeers for the three of them, all the while formulating a plan. He would have to talk to Lizzie about it, but he was almost sure there was a way it could work.

Chapter End Notes

Please visit my fanfic blog: http://misssaigonfic.tumblr.com/
Ask me questions, get some insights!
Chapter Summary

Fifty all. Sixty all. Seventy. It was clear that the teams were very evenly matched. Ravenclaw's Chasers were perhaps better, but Gryffindor's Beaters, especially Fred Weasley, were relentless, slamming the Bludgers with consistent accuracy towards their opponent.

Suddenly a movement at the far end of the pitch drew Albus' attention. Two players had almost simultaneously started streaking across the pitch, one in red, and one in blue.

"The Seekers have spotted the Snitch!" gasped Laurence gleefully. "And the chase is on between Potter and Ryan, neck and neck as they head for the goal posts - it's Potter - no, Ryan, Ryan in the lead for a Ravenclaw win - oh bloody- !"

Chapter Notes

Important Author's Note: This chapter has music in it!

I have created a page on my tumblr with the music embedded for this chapter. I will be adding the music for future chapters to the same post as it comes up. I have put a lot of effort into choosing the songs and in most cases specific recordings to enhance the experience of reading the story, so please enjoy it.

I advise opening the window now so you are ready when it comes up (don't play it until then, though!)

http://misssaisongfic.tumblr.com/musicpost

See the end of the chapter for more notes

2019-2020

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Scorpius was a bit put out when all he found at the end of his bed on Christmas morning was a letter from his mother. That was nice enough, he supposed, but he couldn't see how Rose and Albus could
have forgotten about him. Perhaps his yearly offering of free sweets was no longer exciting enough to warrant something in return?

He quickly pushed that thought to the back of his mind. His friends would force presents onto him even if he gave them nothing, though they had learned not to do it except for Christmas and birthdays. There had to be another explanation.

To take his mind off his disappointment, he opened the envelope. Five gold coins fell out of it onto the bedspread. He stared down at them for a moment, then he quickly looked back at the letter.

Dear Scorpius,

I hope you are having a productive term. We might have had you home for the holidays this year, but that dreadful man is still taking advantage of our hospitality and I do not find him suitable company for you.

Your father's business dealings are progressing well, and he wishes you to have the enclosed five galleons to buy yourself a treat for Christmas. We are looking for a more suitable house and should have moved into the town by your summer holidays.

with affection,

your Mother.

Scorpius read the letter a few times. It was quite typical of his mother, for certain, formally worded and fuelled by duty rather than any real emotional concern. And the bit about moving, just tacked onto the end as if it weren't important! A townhouse - surely that was very expensive?

He picked up the coins, more gold than he had ever held before in his life, and not for the first time he wondered about his father's 'business'. He and Goyle were involved in something that no one wanted him to ask about. Did it have something to do with the messenger they had met in Paris, and the man called Ezekius?

Maybe it's illegal, he found himself thinking. Why else would it be such a secret? Then he felt guilty for such a thought. It had to be wrong to suspect your own parents of illegal activity.

But what if it is? said a treacherous voice at the back of his mind.

He shook his head and stuffed the money into a drawer for safekeeping. If it is, he reasoned, it's not as though I can do anything about it.

He brooded for the rest of the day until Lizzie came to get him. Professor Longbottom had drawn him aside in Herbology before the end of term to ask him if he was coming to dinner again on Christmas day. "I understand if you'd rather have it here," he had said. "But Hannah's glad to have you, and so am I, of course."

"Oh no, I mean, I'd love to," he replied happily. "I haven't seen Alice or Hannah since last May."

And Christmas at Hogwarts was fine, he supposed, but there wasn't really anyone to talk to, nearly all of his year mates having gone home for the holidays.

Lizzie was certainly pleased to have him come. She bounced all the way down to her father's office, chatting excitedly about the broomstick she had got for Christmas. "Dad said we could use the Floo ourselves this year," she said, rolling her eyes. "Nice, isn't it, not like we've been Flooing for thirteen years, or anything."
He chuckled to humour her, though privately he thought it was nice that her parents cared so much about her. He had been Flooing too and from the restaurant all summer and no one ever worried about him getting lost.

Hannah gave Scorpius another trademark hug as he came through the fireplace. "I think you've grown!" she announced, smiling at him.

"Not much," he said, flushing. To be truthful he was a little embarrassed at his lack of vertical development. Albus and Rose were both taller than him, Rose more so every day, and Albus' voice had already evened out to a smooth tenor. Sometimes he felt like he was doomed to be a child forever.

The Lovegoods were not there this time; Hannah explained that they were having Christmas in Turkey while they searched for something called a long-haired Feeglepot. Instead there was an old woman - very very old, Scorpius thought, probably even older than Professor McGonagall and maybe even Professor Dumbledore. She wore a long black robe and a pointy hat with a sprig of mistletoe in it. She sat at the head of the table, ramrod straight and wearing an unseasonably grim expression. "This is Neville's grandmother," Hannah introduced her, and Scorpius thought he detected a hint of forced politeness in her voice. "Gran, this is Scorpius, he's a friend of Lizzie's."

The old woman peered down her spectacles at him, frowning. "Fellow Hufflepuff, are you?" she asked suspiciously in a sharp voice that didn't match her ancient appearance at all.

"Er... No ma'am, Ravenclaw," he replied.

"Ah. Boyfriend then?"

"Gran!" Lizzie squeaked. "Of course he isn't, I'm only thirteen."

"Does children good to get it out of their system early," the old woman announced to Lizzie as Scorpius' face reddened even further. "It always worried me that your father never talked about girls until his twenties."

"There was a lot of other stuff going on at the time Gran," said Neville as he came through from the small kitchen. He was carrying a tray of little sausage rolls in one hand and his youngest daughter in the other. Hannah took the plate and put it on the table while he handed the little girl to Lizzie. Lizzie proceeded to nearly smother her sister with kisses, which set the infant to giggling. "Isn't she the cutest thing?" she asked Scorpius, who smiled. She was adorable, even by whatever standards he had to judge cuteness by. "You want to hold her? She's heavy."

He only hesitated for the briefest moment. Telling himself sternly not to drop her, he let Lizzie put Alice into his hands. "Bada!" she said happily, and he grinned.

"She's a lot bigger," he observed.

"That happens with babies," said Hannah as she set the table.

"I just got a message from Ginny," Neville said, going over to help her. "She's stopping by with a couple of the kids in an hour or so, just to say hello."

"Oh good!" Lizzie exclaimed. It took Scorpius a minute or two to make the connection with Rose's 'Aunt Ginny', but once he did he felt a little thrill of excitement and a little concern. So far he had managed to avoid speaking to any of the adults in his friends' family. Then again it would be a nice to see Albus on Christmas - if that was what was meant by 'some of the kids'.
It was about an hour later, when they were in the middle of another delicious Christmas dinner and Tony, now a imposingly tall sixth-year, was telling a funny story about a potions accident in his class the week before holidays, when a redheaded woman came through the Floo and greeted Neville and Hannah enthusiastically. She was almost immediately followed by Albus and Rose, Rose shaking soot off a small package and Albus carrying a large, oddly shaped case. They came over and Rose gave him a crushing hug just as he heard Albus' mum explain "they wanted to give him his present in person, sorry for interrupting your Christmas..."

"All right mate?" Albus asked him, grinning, as both Ginny and Rose paused in order to fuss over Alice, whose mouth and bib were covered in gravy.

"Yeah..." he replied suspiciously. "What are you doing here though?"

"We brought your present!" his friend announced impishly. "Sorry it's a bit late but we couldn't figure out how to send it by owl post without shrinking." Al held out the bulky box.

Scorpius stared. "What is it?"

Albus sighed. "What does it look like, you moron?"

Scorpius took the box with a slightly trembling hand and laid it across the arms of a chair to balance it while he carefully flipped the latch and peeked inside. The instrument inside was a dark red-brown colour, polished wood with brass trimming. He touched one of the strings experimentally and it thrummed under his finger.

He looked up at Albus again, helplessly. "I can't," he said, his voice a little hoarse.

"What's the matter, don't you like it?" Rose asked, coming over to put a hand on his arm.

"Course I do," he said, not quite able to meet her eyes. "No one's ever given me a present like... that's... I love it, it's just... all I gave you was sweets!" He knew that everyone, including old Mrs. Longbottom, was now listening to this exchange, but he couldn't help it. He felt like he was about to cry.

Al sighed. "Malfoy pride again," he muttered. "Look, it's my brother's old one, okay? Didn't cost us anything."

"We got you a book, too," said Rose, tentatively handing him the smaller package as if she half expected him to push it away.

"Yeah, but the iPod cost more than that," Albus said. "So say thank you."

Scorpius gave up. It was the expression on Rose's face more than anything, her eyes wide and lips tight with disappointment. He couldn't stand being the one to make her unhappy. "Thank you," he said. "Really, I... Thanks."

"Better," Al said, but he was smiling. "There's no excuse for not learning to play by the time we get back. Oh, by the way... this is my mum."

Scorpius tried to recover from the first shock in order to deal with this new challenge. The redheaded woman was smiling down at him, and he decided he could just about handle this kindly-looking lady. "Nice to meet you, Mrs Potter," he said, bringing to bear all the manners he could remember at that moment.

"Nice to meet you, Scorpius," Ginny said, equally politely, taking the hand he offered her and
shaking it with a surprisingly firm grip. "I've heard such a lot about you."

"You too," said Scorpius, then, flustered, added, "from Al, I mean, and Rose, and I read your bits in the Prophet, sometimes."

"I'm glad someone does," she replied, laughing, and he couldn't help smiling in reply. Behind her he could see Albus and Lizzie grinning conspiratorially at each other, and he began to wonder if he hadn't just passed some kind of test.

The book was 'The Beginner's Guide to Guitar', and he opened it as soon as he had got back to the dormitory with the huge case slung across his back. Some of his fellow Ravenclaws had given him odd looks as he'd carried it into the dormitory, but he hardly noticed, so impatient was he to start. He devoured the first chapter with his eyes, then flipped back to the first page, 'holding your guitar', and reverentially drew the instrument out, balancing it on his knee and positioning his hands the way the diagram showed him. The next step was a couple of simple chords, and then how to switch between them. It was a lot harder than he had expected, but after a bit of practice he started to get the hang of it. Twenty minutes later, however, his fingers were burning and he had to stop, blowing on them and grimacing. The book promised that after a few days the pads of his fingers would harden and allow him to play for longer. He certainly hoped it wouldn't hurt quite so much every time.

On Boxing Day, he alternated between the short lessons in the book and, when he got tired or his fingers too sore, homework. He saved Divination until last. He was starting to regret not listening to Rose about that. Firenze's classes were relaxing but incomprehensible and Trelawny's, while amusing, had so far proved to be no less of a waste of time. He wasn't really fascinated by Ancient Runes as much as he thought he would be, either.

Muggle Studies was another matter. He had already read through all the short stories ahead of time, and devoured the textbook, which was co-authored by Professor Clearwater herself. Muggles were just so interesting! And he considered his guitar practice to be extra credit. The book had been written by a Muggle, after all, and his father would certainly class it a 'Muggle' instrument. Pureblood wizards played the piano, or the harp, or the violin. But he loved the sound of it, the feel of it, the way that after a while he didn't have to think about where to put his fingers, because it all just seemed to make sense.

By the time the holidays were over, he was about halfway through the book. He could play some simple tunes and a few chords. It was difficult to practice them, however, because as he read on, the book assumed that he knew how to play along to the tunes of Muggle songs he had never even heard of. He had owled his iPod to Albus and enclosed one of the Christmas Galleons, asking if he could find recordings of the songs he needed. Once the students returned and he had them, things went a lot quicker, and by February he was using his Galleons to send off for more books. Rose and Albus got him another one for his birthday in March, even if Albus did complain that the constant playing in the dormitory was driving everyone a bit nuts. He learned to wait until the tower was mostly empty before practicing, but this was rare, and he started to get frustrated with the amount of time he had to spend in classes.

"I think I'll drop Ancient Runes," he announced one night, tossing down his quill. "I have no plans whatsoever to become a cursebreaker, and I have no free time."

"Well you knew that would happen when you took four extra subjects," Rose said, in an annoyingly told-you-so sort of way. Scorpius didn't bother pointing out the flaw in this, which was that he hadn't had anything to do back then, and now all he wanted to do was play guitar.

"Maybe Divination too," he said thoughtfully.
"You can't drop two," Albus reminded him. "Your Dad has to think you're doing at least two that don't include Muggle Studies, remember?"

Scorpius sighed. He really didn't want to drop Muggle Studies. In the end he decided on Ancient Runes. He disliked it less than Divination, but there was more homework and Professor Warren would probably be less offended than Professor Trelawny. People had been dropping out of his class all year.

-*.~R~*.-

-*.~R~*.-

The Slytherins had been mostly avoiding the Ravenclaws, for which everyone was thankful, but one week in Defence Against the Dark Arts, Professor Tufty partnered Rose with Jian. The boys looked at her sympathetically, and she rolled her eyes at them. She was good at Defence Against the Dark Arts. She wasn't worried.

Jian had grown a lot over the holidays, towering over the rest of them, even the girls. He didn't make so much as a single facial expression as they turned to face each other.

It was a speed challenge. They stood facing each other in a silence full of tension until Tufty shouted "DRAWA", and they pulled their wands, aiming to be the first to disarm the other. Rose won the first two rounds, and she could see Jian getting red in the face with annoyance.

"Think you're good, don't you Weasley," he snarled at her when Tufty had turned her back.

She stared at him in surprise. "There's no need to be rude," she told him, in her best impression of her mother's 'you're-being-a-baby' tone. "You just need to practice more."

He went, if possible, even redder. It did not suit him. "You three think you're all right, always 'top of the year'," he muttered. "Anything you're not good at?"

"Putting up with little boys making stupid faces at me?" Rose suggested. She had had enough of him - she hadn't forgotten that he had nearly killed Scorpius the year before through idiocy and cowardice. She didn't plan on being the one to bring that up, though, since she was above such petty bickering.

"DRAWA!"

Rose pulled her wand, but her thoughts had momentarily distracted her, and Jian was yelling already. Rose felt her body being pulled tightly in on itself and she fell backwards, hitting her head on someone's leg as she went down.

"MR CHUNG! That is enough, THANK YOU!"

"Rose! Rosie, you okay?" Albus was there, and she tried to say that she was okay, but couldn't move her mouth. She couldn't move anything. She started to panic and struggled frantically against whatever was holding her, but it was like being paralysed.

"Finite petrificus!" she heard as if from far away.

Suddenly she could move again. She took a deep breath, even though she hadn't been unable to breathe. She felt herself go limp against Albus' chest. "Ow," she said softly.

"Well done, Mr Malfoy," Tufty was saying. She had Jian held firmly by the shoulder. "Mr Chung,
my office please, I trust you remember where that is. Wait for me there and do not touch anything."

Albus helped her to sit up and she rubbed her eyes. It all felt very strange.

"Of all the bloody dangerous things," Tufty was muttering. "Listen you lot, I know you think that Petrifying someone is a fun joke, but I've seen people die from headwounds after falling on stone or a sharp edge, which you might notice this classroom is full of," she said exasperatedly. "Ten points to Ravenclaw for knowing the countercurse, Mr Malfoy."

Scorpius wasn't listening, Rose noticed as she looked up at him. He was looking down at her, and he was angry.

"Miss Weasley?"

"Hm?" she turned back to Professor Tufty.

"Are you all right? Do you need the hospital wing?"

"Oh, no Professor. I'm all right... just a bit surprised, is all."

"Well, consider it a lesson in when your opponent doesn't fight fair. Take your seats please, the practical is over for today."

"That BASTARD!" Albus raged when they had helped her back to Ravenclaw Tower. She didn't think she actually needed help, but they had insisted on flanking her the entire way back.

"I'll kill him," Scorpius said darkly. His frank, quiet statement was a lot more worrying than Albus' anger, though in other circumstances it would have been funny, coming from a boy who probably didn't come up to Jian's chin in height.

"I'll help," Albus agreed vehemently. "Do you know how to get into Slytherin?"

"No."

"I bet Dad knows - I could owl him and ask, and then we'll go down there and bloody smother him."

"I'd prefer to hex off some part of his body," Scorpius replied. "Like some bit he really needs."

Albus' answering grin was enough to make Rose shiver. "Stop it," she told them firmly. "I'm fine."

"Yeah, but you might not have been," Albus told her. Scorpius nodded quickly in agreement.

"It was just a stupid joke. Anyway I bet he loses points. You know Slytherin was mad at him for months after they lost the House Cup last year."

"He won't lose two hundred points all by himself this time," Albus muttered. "And his mates will back him up. Can't believe he keeps thinking he'll get away with it."

"One day he'll do something worse and he will get away with it," said Scorpius. "Just wait."

"You two are driving me mad," Rose groaned. "I'm too tired to spend all night stopping you plotting revenge on Jian. Let's do something else."

"Homework?" Albus suggested dimly.

"No, that's not nearly distracting enough." Rose turned to Scorpius and gave him a little smile. "Play
us something."

"What?" he gave her a slightly panicked look.

"Go on. You're always shut up in the dormitory, and I've barely heard you. Al says you're getting good."

"Oh really?" Scorpius turned to Albus enquiringly.

"I might have said that you're not as godawful as when you started," his friend admitted grudgingly.

"Please?" Rose begged.

Scorpius looked around. "But there are people here," he protested.

"So?"

"So? I can't play in front of people! It's embarrassing."

Rose rolled her eyes. "Oh fine. Your dormitory, then."

"You know you're not actually allowed in there," said her cousin. She glared at him.

"Who cares? Come on."

She practically had to drag them up the stairs to the third-year boys dormitory. Scorpius drew his guitar out of its case and sat on his bed, looking extremely self-conscious to the point where she almost felt bad for doing this to him. "What should I play?" he asked.

"Whatever you want," she said, sitting next to Albus on his bed. Peter and Gaius were both out, and it was pleasantly quiet in here after the noise of the common room. "Something we know."

He plucked at a few notes, making a face. "None of them are much good."

"Don't care. Play."

Albus snickered. "Go on mate, before she starts rapping your knuckles with a ruler."

"That's pianos, idiot," she told him, giving him a shove.

"Fine, but if you laugh," Scorpius warned. "I won't ever do this again."

Rose watched his fingers for a moment as they found their place on the strings. Once he started playing though, she found her eyes drawn to his face, his eyes narrowed in concentration. She watched in fascination as he began to sing, his voice a little shaky with nerves and onset adolescence.

_I've heard there was a secret chord
That David played, and it pleased the Lord
But you don't really care for music, do you?
It goes like this
The fourth, the fifth
The minor fall, the major lift_
The baffled king composing Hallelujah

Hallelujah, Hallelujah

Hallelujah, Hallelujah

Your faith was strong but you needed proof

You saw her bathing on the roof

Her beauty in the moonlight overthrew you

She tied you to a kitchen chair

She broke your throne, and she cut your hair

And from your lips she drew the Hallelujah

Hallelujah, Hallelujah

Hallelujah, Hallelujah

And now there was a change in him, as though he forgot they were sitting there and played now only for himself, for the sake of the music rather than his audience. His voice evened out and his playing was smoother, and the whole thing was somehow... beautiful.

Baby I have been here before

I know this room, I've walked this floor

I used to live alone before I knew you.

I've seen your flag on the marble arch

Love is not a victory march

It's a cold and it's a broken Hallelujah

Hallelujah, Hallelujah

Hallelujah, Hallelujah

There was a time when you let me know

What's really going on below

But now you never show it to me, do you?

And remember when I moved in you

The holy dove was moving too

And every breath we drew was Hallelujah

Hallelujah, Hallelujah

Hallelujah, Hallelujah
Maybe there's a God above

But all I've ever learned from love

Was how to shoot somebody who outdrew you

It's not a cry you can hear at night

It's not somebody who has seen the light

It's a cold and it's a broken Hallelujah

Hallelujah, Hallelujah

Hallelujah, Hallelujah

Rose let out a breath she hadn't realised she'd been holding as the last notes faded away. "Wow," she said softly. "That was great."

"Yeah, not bad mate," Albus said, grinning. "Knew you'd pick it up. You sound better than James ever did trying to play that thing."

Scorpius smiled.

-*~A~*- 

-*~A~*- 

The very last game of the season was Ravenclaw vs. Gryffindor for the second year in a row. Both teams had crushed Hufflepuff and Slytherin had lost to Gryffindor by just ten points, which meant that Ravenclaw just needed thirty to win. Liam looked more determined than the team had ever seen him during the pre-match pep talk.

"Last year was a close call," he reminded them all bleakly. "Their side is stronger than ever, you all know that. But we're good too, guys. Slytherin thought they had us and we turned the tables on them. And that's what we're going to do this time, yeah?"

Albus watched with clenched jaw from the reserve stands as the team kicked off. He saw his brother James in Gryffindor red, zooming up to hover above the pitch, and Liam followed him, a streak of blue.

"Ravenclaw in possession," announced the commentator, a sixth year Hufflepuff called Will Laurence. "Ravenclaw currently thirty points behind Gryffindor in the tournament, but a very impressive side this year. Gryffindor playing for their sixth Quidditch Cup in a row, both teams have had significant turnover since last year but going strong, and both Seekers of course from professional Quidditch playing families! And Jenna Lee puts one away, making it ten-zero to Ravenclaw! Gryffindor with the Quaffle now - now Ravenclaw - no, a Bludger sent by Fred Weasley almost puts Lee out of play there, and... Gryffindor score! Score is now ten-all, Ravenclaw have the Quaffle..."

Rose nudged him, and Albus realised he was tapping his foot nervously. "Sorry," he muttered automatically, not taking his eyes off the game as the score continued to climb, his eyes open wide as they searched for the Snitch. They had to win by at least thirty points, but that was nothing as long as Liam got the Snitch, as long as Gryffindor didn't get too far ahead.
Fifty all. Sixty all. Seventy. It was clear that the teams were very evenly matched. Ravenclaw's Chasers were perhaps better, but Gryffindor's Beaters, especially Fred Weasley, were relentless, slamming the Bludgers with consistent accuracy towards their opponent.

Suddenly a movement at the far end of the pitch drew Albus' attention. Two players had almost simultaneously started streaking across the pitch, one in red, and one in blue.

"The Seekers have spotted the Snitch!" gasped Laurence gleefully. "And the chase is on between Potter and Ryan, neck and neck as they head for the goal posts - it's Potter - no, Ryan, Ryan in the lead for a Ravenclaw win - oh bloody- !"

The announcer's next words were lost in the roar from the crowd as a Bludger went cannoning into the end of Liam's broom. Liam was hurled off, twisting through the air before colliding with a goalpost, which twanged nastily.

"Liam!" Albus shouted helplessly, getting to his feet to see as Madam Hooch's levitation spell caught the seventh-year before he hit the ground, and Madam Pomfrey came hurrying over.

"Looks like our Head Boy is out of play, ladies and gentlemen," said Laurence to a groan from the Ravenclaw stands. "Time out, play resumes in ten minutes provided Ravenclaw have a reserve Seeker..."

"Al, that's you!" Rose was poking him in the shoulder. "Go on!"

"But, Liam..." Albus stared at her blankly.

"Madam Pomfrey will look after him, you have to go before we forfeit!"

Albus finally realised what she was talking about, blinked, and set off down the stairs, only half-hearing the shouts of encouragement from the Ravenclaws around him, and the booing from the Gryffindor stands as he emerged onto the pitch, carrying his broom in a death grip.

The team was waiting for him, looking dejected. The new Chaser, Jenna, offered him a weak smile. "Try and catch it fast," she suggested. He nodded as the rest of the team gave him silent pats on the back.

"Hey, Al." The Gryffindor team were also on the ground, and one of them was approaching. James offered his hand. "I won't go easy on you," he warned, grinning.

"You better not," Albus replied, shaking the offered hand.

"A brotherly handshake there as third-year Albus Potter takes the field for Ravenclaw!" Laurence's voice came booming over the pitch. "I'm sure one of you Quidditch nuts out there will know if this is a Hogwarts first - rival sibling Seekers! And they're in the air again - Gryffindor with the Quaffle and, yes, they've put it away! Ninety-seventy to Gryffindor, let's hope morale hasn't totally gone out of the Ravenclaw team at the loss of their captain!"

It seemed that it had, however. Gryffindor scored more and more goals until they were dangerously close to being a hundred and twenty points ahead, which meant that even if Ravenclaw caught the Snitch, they would draw for the cup.

Albus stayed high above the pitch, scanning the whole area for the snitch. A few times he darted forward only to find he had been chasing a reflection of the sun off a goalpost.

The crowd roared - Gryffindor had reached their hundred and twenty point lead. Heart pounding,
Albus looked around for James. His brother was circling the Ravenclaw goalposts. Al started to fly towards him, thinking that he could at least knock him off his broom if he saw the Snitch, at least to stop him until there was a chance...

He blinked. There was a flash of gold somewhere below him. He didn't stop, but kept flying for a few yards before doing a leisurely turn and raking the ground with his eyes. Yes, that was definitely the little golden ball this time, fluttering teasingly close to the grass. But he mustn't catch it yet! He had to wait until they had enough points...

He looked over his shoulder and felt his heart plummet as he saw James go into a forward dive.

"Potter's seen the Snitch!" yelled the announcer.

Albus dove. He was closer, much closer, so that the dive was practically vertical, but the difficult angle meant he had to try a lot harder to stay on his broom, and James, doing a longer but much shallower dive, had the advantage of seeing the right way up, and James' broom was newer, faster, but all Albus had to do was block him until -

"RAVENCLAW SCORE!" shouted Laurence, almost shrieking with excitement. "It's anyone's game now, ladies and gentlemen, both Potters are flying for the Snitch - look at that! Have you ever seen flying like that?"

It was the fastest, sharpest, most terrifying dive Albus could ever remember doing in his life. The ground was coming up so fast it seemed as though it were moving of its own accord. The Snitch buzzed around the grass, he could practically feel James breathing down his neck. He heard a Bludger whistle past his ear and the crowd screamed, the air tore past his face as he reached out a hand and pulled up not a second too soon.

He could hear James swearing as he settled his broom with shaking knees, the feathers of the little ball's wings brushing weakly against his hand.

Then the rest of the team were landing around him, pulling him off his broom and patting him madly on the back. It wasn't until someone handed him the enormous Quidditch cup that he realised they had won. He grinned and held the cup up high as the crowd roared.

"Won't your father be disappointed?" she asked nervously. He had always worried about that before.

"Maybe, if he even reads my results," he said. He was more disappointed with his results in Muggle Studies, having only got eighty five percent in the written exam.

"Professor Clearwater says some things are especially hard for wizard-borns to understand," he sighed as they sat together in the sunshine-soaked grounds. "And the only way to really grasp it is to
spend some time in the Muggle world. Like that's ever going to happen."

"Maybe we could fly to the nearest Muggle town," Albus grinned mischievously. "And leave you there for a bit."

"Very funny," said Rose. "You just have to wait till you're a bit older and you can go where you like. We'll take you into Muggle London!

He brightened up a bit at this. "I'd like that."

"Yeah, take him to the Apple store," Albus snickered. "He'd never leave."

Scorpius gave Rose his iPod again before they went home, though he left his guitar under the bed in the dormitory after begging some House Elves to look after it. He was miserable for the whole train ride back to King's Cross, and Rose struggled to come up with a way to cheer him. They said goodbye on the train to avoid any unpleasantness like the year before. Rose sniffled a little as they disembarked, Midnight perching proudly on her shoulder.

"Don't cry," Albus told her. "It's only three months."

Rose was about to reply but they were quickly set upon by their family, everyone wanting to congratulate Albus on his Quidditch win. James, she noticed, looked rather sour about this.

"How was your term, dear?" asked her mother, hugging her tightly as Midnight protested at being squashed.

"Fine," she replied. She just wished it didn't seem so long until the next one.

Chapter End Notes

Please visit my fanfic tumblr: http://misssaigonfic.tumblr.com/
Ask me questions, get some insights!
"Let them fight it out," Albus shrugged after a particularly vicious Potions class which had seen the Gryffindors come to dinner with green feathers sprouting from under their clothes, and more than one of the Slytherins looking pale after spending an hour in the hospital wing as elderly Madam Pomfrey attempted to stanch the flow of blood from their hexed noses. "They seem to enjoy it so much."

Chapter Notes

This chapter features some music. It's not a whole song but I've uploaded it anyway because it's great and you should listen to it! It's Jealousy by Darren Criss.

Visit http://misssaigonfic.tumblr.com/musicpost for this song and all the music featured in this story so far.

Scorpius had almost forgotten about the new house that had been promised in his mother's Christmas letter until he and Goyle Portkeyed to an out-of-the-way corner of a Parisian street. He stared up at the house the big man pointed to. "They can't afford that!" he couldn't stop himself saying.

Goyle only grunted and carried Scorpius' trunk bodily up the stairs, muscles bulging under his robes. Scorpius hurried after him, opening his eyes wide in the dimly-lit hallway. It was very bare, the old wood floors quite clear of furniture, but the ceilings were very high, giving it the impression of elegance. Still, it needed some pictures on the wall or something.

There didn't seem to be anyone at home, at first. Goyle dumped his trunk at the bottom of the stairs, puffing with the effort. "Your room is third on the right," he told Scorpius, sneering. "Need help with it?"

"No thanks," Scorpius said quickly. He'd rather not have Goyle anywhere near his room. The older he got, the more the man spent a chill up his spine just by looking at him.

"Your father wants see you in his study when you're changed," Goyle told him, startling him a little. It was like he was a servant. Scorpius knew his father was used to having servants, but he had imagined Goyle more on the lines of a colleague. Not a very respected colleague… but then again,
his father had a knack for making weak-minded people behave the way he wanted them to.

Scorpius levitated his trunk up the stairs and eventually found his bedroom. The few books he had left behind last summer were on the shelf, which was basically the only clue. The bed had black sheets and a dark green coverlet. He wrinkled his nose at it - house pride uncharacteristically rearing its head - and pulled off his school robes.

It took him a while to find anything to wear that his father wouldn't turn his nose up at. He had grown enough that even his newest robes didn't fit him properly, and he regretted not buying something during the last Hogsmeade weekend. Eventually he found a pair of trousers and a shirt, quite informal by his father's standards but at least not too ill-fitting. He washed and put them on, mainly wanting to go to bed after the long train journey. He wondered how he would sleep without listening to music, first.

Before he went downstairs, he looked around for a good hiding place. There were a few things he had really needed to bring home, like his Muggle Studies books. He had no doubt of what would happen if he was caught with them, and they were borrowed. He couldn't afford for them to be destroyed. He eventually charmed up the bottom of the big wardrobe in the corner and stuffed them into the small space that opened up beneath. It was quite handy, so he put a couple of other things in there as well, for safe keeping. The little pouch of Muggle money Albus had leant him again. The novelty Ravenclaw socks Rose had got him for his birthday. He wasn't sure if he would actually get in trouble for those things, but better safe than sorry.

He had to wander around a bit before he found the study, knocking on doors until he heard his father's sharp voice say "come!"

He opened the door to see the man reading something at his desk. He looked different. In the year since Scorpius had last seen him, he seemed to have come out of the shell of self-pity he had been wallowing in ever since his son could remember. He looked bright eyed, determined, focused. So focused that he didn't even look up when Scorpius entered the room.

"Father?" Scorpius said, more to encourage a reaction than anything else. The man gestured to a chair without looking up.

Scorpius sat, looking around at the room. It was big, like the others, tall, long and narrow. There was a bookcase that seemed to be more for show than any actual use, and a desk covered in drawers that he was sure would be magically locked. It was that sort of desk. His father was wearing robes of a dark green that was almost black, with silver and gold embroidery at the collar. Put together, the scene was almost opulent. Scorpius started to wonder if there was some secret family money he hadn't known about that hadn't been used to pay fines and debts after the war. Maybe his grandparents had died and this was his father's inheritance? It seemed a likelier explanation than the alternative: that his father had somehow bought this house, the furniture and the new robes with legitimate earnings.

His father finally looked up from his parchment, folding it and pushing it aside. He met Scorpius' eyes and frowned.

"Your hair is a mess."

Scorpius forced himself not to move a finger. His mother usually cut his hair the second he got home, but he had forgotten about it in the confusion of navigating the new house. "Sorry," he said, not feeling particularly apologetic. A 'hello' might have been nice, he thought bitterly. It's only been nine months or so since you've seen me.
"I trust you have made yourself at home," his father continued. "We will have dinner in the dining room at seven."

"Where’s mother?" Scorpius asked, struck suddenly with the realisation that he hadn't seen her.

His father's expression darkened considerably. "Your mother insists on continuing to... attend the apothecary," he said, as if the word 'work' was too difficult to pronounce. "It was my error in agreeing to it in the first place, perhaps."

Scorpius had planned on asking if he could go back to the Moulin, if they would have him, or find work somewhere else, more for something to do than any real desire for money, but now thought better of it.

"And how were your exams?" his father asked now.

"Fine."

"Good. I will read your results later. I expect you to maintain a high standard."

"Yes father."

There was a pause in the conversation while the man gave his son a searching look. Scorpius did his best to sit still and straight-faced. "Very well," he said eventually. "I will see you at dinner."

Scorpius was about to get up to leave, but something stopped him. "Father?"

"Yes?" Draco raised a pale eyebrow.

"I… was just wondering… this house… wasn't it terribly expensive?"

For a moment, there was no reaction, and Scorpius thought his heart must have stopped, and all of time with it. Then a smile spread slowly across Draco's face. It was weird, and it was not a nice smile, it verged on the edge of being a sneer. "Yes," was the answer when it finally came. "Yes it was."

"But… the debts…"

"You are too young to be concerning yourself with financial matters," his father snapped, the smile vanishing as unexpectedly as it had appeared. "My business has been very successful over the last few months. We should be considerably more comfortable from now on, and that is all you need to know."

Scorpius decided he had pushed his luck far enough. He made his exit, and closed the door quietly behind him.

His mother returned only just before the agreed dinner hour, and was almost as undemonstrative as his father had been. "How was school?" she asked, without much interest, and didn't seem to listen when he gave her the very abbreviated version. She hid it well, but he caught her occasionally staring at a point above his head and nodding in the wrong places.

The dinner itself was almost completely silent and extremely uncomfortable. Scorpius, picking unenthusiastically at his food, found himself wondering what his friends would be doing, their first night home. He knew they usually went to their grandparents' house for dinner, five or six families all squashed in together. Jealously he imagined them talking and laughing and sharing stories over a feast, while he sat here in a dimly-lit, ominously bare room with parents who would speak neither to
him nor each other.

He excused himself as soon as he could and fled back to his bedroom. After five minutes of lying on his bed, digesting the disappointing nature of the evening, he pulled out his notebook from the hole he’d made in the wardrobe and started scribbling furiously. After a while the disjointed and angry half-sentences became lines, as a rhythm flowed through his imagination and onto the page.

*I hate where I’m at*

*Acting crazy like that*

*I know that I’ve been wrong*

*It’s something I’ve been working on*

*And I don’t know what to do*

*It’s changing me, it’s killing you*

*I’d tear out my insides if I could*

*But I don’t know if it’d do me good*

*I can’t stand what I’m feeling*

*It’s just like poison in my veins*

*I know that I’m speaking*

*But I don’t know what I’m saying*

*Cause every time that I feel like the world just got lighter*

*It seems like my muscles give out*

*It’s got nothing to do with me*

*It’s not even you, you see*

*It’s part of my chemistry*

*It’s this jealousy...*

Eventually he went to bed, exhausted after the train ride and using all his willpower not to scream for the whole evening. He could only hope the summer couldn’t possibly get any worse.

As it turned out, Mr Malfoy was distracted enough by his work - Scorpius still couldn’t quite figure what this entailed, except that it involved buying and selling, and occasionally men in broad-rimmed hats who met with his father for hours in the study - to pay any attention whatsoever to what his son did during the day. He didn’t even blow up at Scorpius when he saw his exam results. He seemed to put the blame on the Hogwarts teachers, instead.

"Incompetent fools," he muttered, tossing the parchment aside. "Perhaps we should reconsider Durmstrang."

Scorpius replied quickly that he was happy at Hogwarts thanks, and promised to do better next year.
His father merely grunted and dismissed him. Even this brief interaction, however, was more enjoyable than the boredom. His father was always in the study, his mother in the town. The only other one around was Goyle, and he was not that desperate. A maid brought his meals to his room, but she was haughty and distant, and he gave up trying to get to know her after a few attempts at conversation.

He refused to start his homework on the first day, but moped around instead, writing and drawing (badly) in his notebook. On the second day he lounged around in bed in as late as he could stand before grudgingly making a start on his Transfiguration essay. With nothing else to do, all his homework was done after a week.

After a few more days of sitting in the empty house by himself, he was bored enough to risk leaving the house to walk around the town. He didn't bother to ask permission. His father wouldn't notice he was gone, and there was always the real possibility that he might say no. The only problem was, he didn't really know where they were. He fretted about that for a while before deciding that the only way to figure it out was to explore a little.

He snuck out of the back door, wearing his least wizardly clothes, and after strolling to the end of the street, found himself at the entrance to the Rue Chouette. He looked behind him and realised that his parents' townhouse was one of the few located in wizarding Paris, surrounding the main shopping street. He whistled. Despite the lack of furniture and decoration, it seemed that his family had come into some serious money.

His first stop was the restaurant, of course. He had spent so much time there last summer that his feet found their way there automatically. It was still early, but a lot of the waiters he knew were already there, setting up for lunch, and they greeted him cheerily. "I will tell Monsieur Gerard you are back," the head waiter said to him in French, smiling. "Our current serveur is not very good."

Scorpius felt flattered, and stopped himself at the last moment from saying that he couldn't work this summer. After all, his father hadn't actually forbidden it, right? Would he even notice if Scorpius went out for a few hours each day? After a short consideration, he told the waiter he would be pleased if he would give Gerard the news, and went back to the street, where he spent a peaceful afternoon in the sunshine, window-shopping.

In the end it was easier than he thought. His parents ate dinner in their own private rooms, and apparently expected him to do the same except on special occasions. The haughty maid - having servants was extremely uncomfortable but at least, in this case, convenient - was easily bribed with a share in his pay. After a while he started leaving the house even on days when he didn't have to work. He had to be careful only to avoid his mother, who worked on the same street, but apart from that it was child's play to sneak out of the house and back in again through his window.

Being at the restaurant again felt much more like being home than sitting alone in the new house. He deliberately wore himself out, moving quickly between tables and dashing back to the kitchen with piles of dirty plates during service and fetching and carrying dozens of things the waiters or kitchen staff needed. Most of the washing was done by magic, but he helped where he could, and hardly ever used his own wand despite the laws in France that allowed him to do so with supervision. By the time he got home he was exhausted enough that it didn't matter that he had no Albus to joke with, no Rose to tell him funny stories, and no music to listen to as he fell asleep. He just closed his eyes and woke again the next morning, and if he dreamed, he didn't remember it.

After a few weeks of this madness, however, this routine was starting to chafe. He decided to dare himself to try ducking into Muggle Paris again.

He didn't dare go too far, but he walked unobtrusively through some of the shops, trying not to stare
too much at the people, the pictures that didn't move, or products that he had never seen before. There were a lot of elderly women on this side of the street where he wandered, and after a few days of this wandering they began talking to him. He made up a story about visiting from the country and making himself busy while his parents worked. Some of them were enchanted by his interest in music, and made suggestions of what he might listen to, if he had the time. They talked about a big shop on the far side of the city where they sold music and musical instruments. He wished he could risk going there. It sounded like heaven.

There was nothing to write to his friends about, and they didn't send him anything. He had told them not to, just in case, unless he wrote to them first. But he hung around the post office for a bit, just so he could say his understanding of the system had improved. He took two tentative steps inside a Muggle bar, but thought better of it when he encountered an enormously muscled and tattooed man who asked him for a light. After that, he stuck to the little shops, on the one or two more occasions he found himself on the Muggle side of town.

It wasn't a bad summer after all, he decided, the week before school was about to start. By now he had a tidy little amount of pocket money saved up, after the maid's cut, and he didn't think his Muggle Studies books would be a problem this year, or even the next. He might even be able to afford some decent Christmas presents, for once.

He had taken the risk today of staying out quite late, since it didn't seem to matter what time he came back. He was just about to go home when he spotted a blonde woman just down the street, and recognised his mother. He hissed in surprise and ducked behind a wall. This is it, he thought miserably. I'm done. It's over. I'll be locked in my room for the rest of my life.

But after a minute, when he risked a peek around the wall, his mother was walking in the opposite direction, towards the Apothecary. A bit late for work, he thought. The shop closed at eight, and it was gone eleven now.

He waited until she had gone inside and then, curiously, and knowing he could quite well live to regret it later, he walked quietly up to the dark-windowed building. He had been in there once or twice before, to buy Potions supplies, and he had met the Apothecary, Monsieur Belanger, a big, dark-haired man. The building looked much more ominous in the dark - the contents of the bottles and jars in the windows either too dark to see or glowing eerily.

He crept up to the back door, which was standing slightly ajar where Mrs Malfoy had gone in. By standing quite close to the gap, he could hear low, murmuring voices. Curiouser than ever, he held his breath and gently pushed the door forward a few more crucial inches until he could take a step into the hall. He could see the main shop floor ahead of him, but the voices were coming from a back room nearby. He stood as still as possible and strained his ears. He recognised his mother's voice straight away.

"Of course I'm sure," she was saying, a strange, nervous tone in her voice. "Draco and I haven't... we've slept in separate rooms since we moved to town."

"Very well then." this was the deep, sonorous voice of the Apothecary, his English heavily accented. "Vot will you tell heem?"

"Nothing, not yet, anyway. Until I have a chance to... correct the situation."

There was a momentary silence, followed by a low murmur from Belanger that Scorpius did not catch, except that it sounded angry.

"Well, what do you expect me to do?" Astoria snapped, and Scorpius almost flinched. "If he found
out, the best thing he would do to me is throw me out of the house."

"And would that be so bad?" replied Belanger in French, forcing Scorpius to pause his brain momentarily in order to switch languages. "I thought you hated him."

"He is my husband," Astoria hissed back, her French slightly less flowing than his. "And if he disowned me, my family would do the same. I would have nothing. And there's my son..."

Scorpius bit his lip hard, his mind racing. What could his mother have done that was so terrible his father would disown her? And why was she talking to Belanger about it?

The Apothocary said something else low and unintelligible, and then there was a strange noise, and his mother gasped sharply. Scorpius took a step forward and peered carefully around the door to the back room. His mother was sitting on the edge of a tall wooden workbench. Belanger was standing very, very close to her. And -

Scorpius drew back, quickly, hurried back down the hall and out of the door. Aware that he hadn't been nearly as quiet on the way out as on the way in, he kept running until he was at the very end of the Rue. Here he stopped to catch his breath, and looked back. No one was following him.

He had been kissing her! The tall, dark Belanger had been kissing his mother!

Questions began immediately to race through his mind. How long had this been happening? How far had it gone? Who else knew about it? Were they in love?

The thought of his father's reaction made his blood suddenly run cold. No wonder she was so afraid of him finding out! Privately, Scorpius thought that his father wouldn't stop at throwing her out of the house. He might actually hurt her. He shivered miserably at this thought.

His mind still racing, he made his way quickly back to the house and climbed back in the window. No one noticed him come in - the house was dark, quiet. His mind still racing, he went to bed, but could not sleep. His mind kept replaying the scene, over and over.

Eventually he heard soft footsteps up the stairs - his mother, coming home. He lay very still and tried to calm his breathing as the steps stopped outside his door. A shaft of dim light fell across his face as the door opened slightly. Scorpius could feel his heart pounding. He was sure she knew he had followed her. But after a second, the door closed again, and the footsteps moved away down the hall, towards his father's bedroom.

~*-A-*-~

~*-A-*-~

"So," Albus asked Scorpius when they met on the train on September the first. "Good summer?"

Scorpius shrugged. "Fine. Yours?"

"Great!" Rose said cheerfully. "We went to the zoo in London for Lily's birthday, and it was actually really interesting, I've never been before. And Uncle Charlie was visiting from Romania and he took us to see the dragon museum in Edinburgh!"
"Cool," said Scorpius, flatly. His voice had finally broken, not as deep as Al's but a kind of soft tenor, and his French accent had faded to where it was quite inaudible unless you really listened. He didn't seem to have gained any height at all, however, to the point where Albus almost felt like he was towering over his friend, even sitting.

"Manage to keep your books and stuff safe then?" Albus asked. "I guessed you did or you would have owled me."

"Yeah fine," he replied. "Found a neat hiding place in my new room."

Albus frowned. Scorpius seemed in an even worse mood than he had been after last summer. Rose started asking about the new house, and Scorpius replied in short, non-committal sentences. Albus knew his friend struggled with balancing his family life with his Hogwarts friends. He couldn't imagine not being able to talk to either of his parents about anything that happened at school.

"So, I guess you're official Ravenclaw Seeker now," Scorpius said when the opportunity to change the subject finally presented itself.

"I s'pose," Albus said, with a little jolt of nervous energy as he remembered. "Unless someone better tries out."

Rose blew a lock of hair out of her eyes. "Right, like that'll ever happen. We'll have to be prepared to be background noise from now on, Scorp, now that Al's the hero of Ravenclaw house."

Scorpius snorted as Albus felt his cheeks burn. "Everyone will have forgotten by now," he said, with certainty.

"A catch like that? No one's ever going to forget that. Even James was impressed, even if he won't admit it," Rose scoffed. "And he's starting his NEWTs this year, so maybe he'll be distracted from Quidditch."

Albus shot her a look that embodied all his feelings behind the sentiment, 'not bloody likely'.

For the most part, the start of fourth year seemed to go incredibly quickly. Lessons began as normal, with apparently impossible new material to learn and twice as much homework as before, but which after a few weeks became part of the routine again. A few weeks after term started, a feud kicked up between the fourth year Gryffindors and Slytherins, which the Ravenclaws couldn't help feeling glad about, as it kept Jian's attention away from them. Rose started to suggest that maybe they ought to do something about it.

"Let them fight it out," Albus shrugged after a particularly vicious Potions class which had seen the Gryffindors come to dinner with green feathers sprouting from under their clothes, and more than one of the Slytherins looking pale after spending an hour in the hospital wing as elderly Madam Pomfrey attempted to stanch the flow of blood from their hexed noses. "They seem to enjoy it so much."

Albus found himself thinking mostly about Quidditch, which wasn't really a surprise. The Ravenclaw team this year was hopelessly unbalanced, consisting of one sixth year, two fifth years, two third years, and two fourth years: Rose, and Albus himself. The new captain, the sixth year, wasn't nearly as good as Liam had been, with the result that they lost their first game of the season, against Gryffindor, 240 to 30. Albus was in so much despair over the score that he didn't even notice the Snitch until it was too late. James took the opportunity to gloat over this for weeks afterwards.

Although Rose was a full member of the team now, she was not nearly as disappointed by this
crushing defeat as Albus was. While she had inherited the Weasley talent for Quidditch, she was sadly lacking in the maniacal enthusiasm that was the curse of most of the family. "It's just a game," she kept reminding him whenever he went off into a sulk. "We'll do better next time." Then she went back to whatever book she was reading, or essay she was writing. She seemed to spend most of her time doing homework.

Scorpius, by contrast, was paying less and less attention to his studies as he spent more and more time playing his guitar. The first night in the dormitory that year, Albus thought his friend might try to sleep with the thing. Albus had to admit that he was getting pretty good, but Rose was less than impressed when he actually failed to show up for Defence Against the Dark Arts one day.

"I just wanted to finish the song," he explained meekly, when she rounded on him that evening.

"You missed a class!" she exclaimed, so loudly that people in the Common Room turned round to see what was happening. "I had to lie to Professor Tufty and say you weren't feeling well."

"Er... thanks." Albus could have told him that was a mistake, but he had no opportunity.

"Don't thank me!" Rose squeaked, her face turning a dangerous shade of red. Albus, giving his friend up for lost, made a show of unpacking his homework from his bag. "I can't believe you skipped class just to mess around on that stupid instrument!"

Albus winced inwardly and risked a glance upward. Scorpius looked rather hurt, and Albus didn't really blame him.

"Sorry," he muttered, not meeting Rose's eyes. "Won't happen again."

"Well I should think not." Rose sat defiantly in an armchair and pulled out her own homework. "Here's the Charms essay we're meant to do. I hope you at least did the reading."

The look on Scorpius' face prompted Albus to interrupt before his friend made the fatal mistake of telling the truth. "What were you playing anyway? Did you get a new book?"

Scorpius flushed. "Er no. I'm sort of writing something."

Rose harrumphed and tossed her hair, though Albus could tell she was trying not to look interested. "Yeah? Can we hear it?" he asked.

"Not yet," Scorpius said quickly. "It still needs polishing. Anyway I probably should do some work for a bit."

Unfortunately this only satisfied Rose for a few days, and Albus soon became tired of his two friends arguing all the time. Usually Scorpius had the sense to mollify Rose with a promise to do better, but her constant reminders eventually culminated in a row, a few weeks before the Christmas holidays. Rose's cat Midnight, who had been dozing on the arm of a sofa, got up and left in indignation at all the noise.

"It's not as if anyone cares how I do in exams!" Scorpius snapped. "I don't see why you should care more than my own parents."

"Well someone has to!" Rose replied exasperatedly. "Anyway the teachers will notice if you fall really far behind."

"I won't fall behind, I'm not an idiot," he shot back. "I can catch up over Christmas, it's not like I've got anything else to do while I'm here by myself."
Albus winced as his friend stormed up the stairs to their dormitory. "He always says he doesn't mind," he said.

"Of course he minds," Rose snapped, rounding on him. "You would mind if your family didn't want to have you back for the holidays."

Albus stared at her. "If you know how he feels, why are you shouting at him?"

Rose didn't seem to have any answer to this, but merely glared at him and returned to doing her Potions homework.

Because it was so hard to concentrate while the tension between them was so difficult to deal with, Al started coming up with excuses to do his homework in the library instead of the Common Room. With Quidditch, he really didn't have the time to get distracted. Unfortunately, the library eventually presented another distraction in the form of the fourth year Slytherins, who had apparently given up their feud with the Gryffindors in favour of lounging around in armchairs, pretending to read. Instead they spoke to each other in sneering tones about people they looked down on, the list of which seemed to be growing longer by the day. One of the Gryffindors in particular, Warren, was one of their favourite subjects. That boy had grown about a foot and a half over the summer and at the age of fourteen was almost as tall as Firenze the centaur.

"Bet his mum had a dalliance with a giant," Albus heard Jian mutter one afternoon. "Or a half-giant - perhaps he's secretly the spawn of Hagrid."

"Great Gryffindor oaf." That was Carcer, a boy who while not as intelligently mean as Jian, was certainly catching up to him in terms of general nastiness. Both boys were thin and tall, but Carcer was snow-pale where Jian was dark, and while Jian had a princely sort of look about him and always had, Carcer had a mouth that was too big for his face, eyes that were too heavily lidded and a forehead so huge that it rendered most of his other features obsolete. Albus wondered that he had the gall to go about criticising anyone else's looks. The other two Slytherin boys, Daws and Sutton, were unremarkable by comparison, but just as unpleasant to listen to.

"Is Hagrid a giant?" Daws asked, while Albus made every attempt to tune them out in favour of his Charms assignment.

Jian laughed. "Oh come on. You'd have to be blind not to notice. No one can get that big without being at least part giant."

"And they let him teach here?" Sutton sneered.

"Oh, for years and years. Did you know he never even did his NEWTS or OWLs? He was expelled in his third year. I heard him telling someone, when they were whining about passing their exams. I'm not surprised if he's not even human…"

At this point, Albus had had enough. "Watch your mouth," he growled.

There was a brief, surprised silence from the group, as though they hadn't realised anyone could hear them. Then Jian laughed. "Oh, I'm sorry Potter, is the old mutant man your friend?"

Al put down his quill and glared up at them across the tables. "Actually he's more of an honorary uncle, if you must know. So you just shut up about him."

Jian nodded. "That's right, I forgot your family has a soft spot for freaks of nature."

"What's that supposed to mean?"
"House Elves, werewolves, centaurs... are there any creatures they don't like, Potter? My family used to have two House Elves before your aunt decided they had to have rights and pay. And didn't your father sign that ridiculous edict that allows werewolves to come to Hogwarts? There could be dozens of them here now, for all we know. But then, most werewolves are Muggles, aren't they? Good thing too, wouldn't want them breeding with wizards, we'd end up with a whole mutant race. Mind you, by the look of your bushy-haired cousin, there already is one - is someone in your family perhaps a night troll?"

Albus drew his wand and stood up, a fiery red anger fully taking over. "Say that again," he hissed.

Jian had drawn his wand and was standing gracefully, a look of utter contempt on his face. "I wouldn't dream of it," he said condescendingly. "My deepest apologies for any offence."

"Chung, you can take your damn apology and stick it up -"

"Now now, let's not say anything we'll regret," Jian was smiling, and Albus belatedly realised he had started a fight with four boys, not just one. All the other Slytherins had their wands in their hands.

"What'll you do?" Albus muttered. "Lock me in a room full of Dungbombs and let me suffocate to death?"

Jian rolled his eyes. "You're still going on about that? Ancient history."

"You were the ones who lost four hundred points. You'd think you'd have learned by now not to mess with Ravenclaws, Chung."

"Malfy is a rat, and he deserved what he got," Jian snapped, and Albus thought he saw a crack in the carefully constructed facade of calmness. "And you might be a Ravenclaw, Potter, but your attitude screams idiot Gryffindor. You really want to fight all four of us, for your honour?"

No, Al didn't, but he was banking on Jian not having the guts to start a brawl in the library, with the old, half-deaf librarian only a few shelves behind them. It was true that he had a lot of Gryffindor blood, and whatever that meant, it wouldn't let him back down now. James would never let him hear the end of it, and although he knew his dad would tell him off for fighting, it was just what he would have done, and that was important, for some reason. "Try me," he said, with true Gryffindor idiocy.

Jian hesitated, and Albus felt a rush of triumph. But Carcer had apparently not caught on to the risks of duelling in a public place, and he stepped forward, brandishing his wand. "Petrificus Totalus!"

"Protego!" the words were out of Al's mouth before Carcer had even finished the hex, and the spell bounced harmlessly off the shield. Jian was turning, no doubt to berate Carcer for being an idiot, but Daws and Sutton had already decided to join in. Two more curses came Al's way, and he dodged both of them, ending up on the ground and rolling under a table. "Stupify!" he shouted, aiming his wand at someone's legs, and he heard a body topple, but too late he realised that going under the table had been a mistake: there were chairs everywhere and he had effectively trapped himself in a cage.

Something hit him in the back. It felt like a small Bludger right at the base of his spine. From where it hit, a deep, terrible cold began to spread, down his legs and up his chest to his throat. It was as if someone had immersed him in ice, or if a ghost had walked into him and refused to leave, he was drowning in cold. Taking an icy breath he gripped his wand and aimed another Stunning spell. There was a loud bang and something very big went crashing to the ground.

"What in Merlin's name is going on here?" demanded the reedy voice of the librarian. Albus was
unable to answer him, his teeth were chattering, he was shivering all over and all he could do was wrap his arms around himself and try not to panic. The chairs were being moved aside. "Finite incantatem!"

Suddenly Al could breathe again, and warmth, delicious warmth, came flooding through his limbs. It was like drinking hot cocoa after falling over in the snow, except ten times better. He sighed with relief and let the old man drag him out from under the table. He was surprisingly strong for such a small, elderly person. Daws was the one lying

Stunned on the floor. The other three Slytherins were getting to their feet amid a mess of dust and books. Evidently a bookshelf had toppled, narrowly missing them. Jian's dark hair was all over the place, and he was glowering.

"Fighting in the library!" the librarian exclaimed. "Damaging valuable books! You will all come with me to the Headmistress' office, at once!"

Professor McGonagall was unimpressed, to say the least. Luckily she seemed to be mostly annoyed at the Slytherins, but after she had shouted at them for half an hour, taken forty points each for fighting, given them detention and sent them packing, she turned her steely eyes onto Albus, and sighed. "And what am I going to do with you, Mr Potter?" she asked him wearily.

He shrugged. He wasn't afraid of Professor McGonagall, though of course he respected her. He had known her since he was a child, and she had let him beat her at chess when he was six. He remembered his dad saying 'she's just an old softy really. If only we'd known!'

"It was dumb," he admitted. "I'm sorry."

"Are you, though?" McGonagall asked him with interest.

He thought about it for a moment, letting his eyes rove over the portraits behind the desk. Most of them were empty. "Not really," he admitted eventually. "They insulted Hagrid, and Aunt Hermione, and Rose, and Teddy, and my parents. They deserved a lot worse than a bookshelf falling on them. You can punish me if you want."

"Oh, I will," McGonagall said, still looking at him with more amusement and a sort of resigned weariness, rather than real anger. "The library, Mr Potter, really? In the middle of the day? Your father at least had the sense to attempt to be discreet. Your brother, who has given me more grey hairs so far than any of the Potters or Weasleys I have had the misfortune of teaching, is not even that brazen."

"They started it, Professor," Albus pointed out.

"And the reason you didn't just walk away?"

Albus did have to admit that this stumped him a little. "Er… instinct?"


The portrait of Dumbledore made a lip-zipping motion with his hand and mimed throwing away the key. Albus grinned, but quickly straightened his expression as the Headmistress turned back to him. "Thirty points from Ravenclaw for using magic against another student," she began, "and ten points from Ravenclaw for damaging library property."

Albus was about to argue, until he realised that the sentence could be a lot worse. Still, he had never lost so much as a single point for Ravenclaw before, and Ravenclaws did not take point-losing
lightly. "Yes Professor," he said grudgingly.

"And I will be writing to your parents."

"But Professor -" 

"No buts, Mr. Potter. It is in fact school policy to inform parents in these situations, as no doubt your mother and father are already more than aware."

Albus sulked about this all the way back to the Common Room. He didn't think his dad would be too angry, but his mum did not approve of fighting. Perhaps he could write to them and explain that it wasn't his fault, but that seemed a bit like whining, really.

"You got in a fight?" Rose said incredulously when he had reluctantly imparted the story to his friends, who had by now forgotten about griping at each other in favour of wondering where on earth Al had got to.

"Finally!" Scorpius chuckled, to Al's surprise. "It's about time you had a turn."

"I did not get in a fight," Rose protested, as though the word was unsanitary. "Jian hexed me, you two were the ones who wanted to take his head off…"

"I'm just saying, now he's had a go at all three of us," Scorpius pointed out.

"Can we just forget about it, please?" Al sighed. "I've lost forty points and mum's probably going to send me a Howler, isn't that punishment enough?"

"She won't send you a Howler," Rose said sensibly. "She never sends Howlers, not even to James when he's done something really stupid."

Annoyingly she was right, there was no Howler. There was a short letter, signed by both his parents, warning him to be more cool-headed in future. It was almost disappointing. At the end his father had written,

Believe me when I tell you I understand the circumstances that can lead to drawing your wand in a public place, against someone else who may not have directly threatened you, and I'm not saying it's a good idea. You are much cleverer than I ever was, and I know you can think of a way to solve any such dispute without magic or violence. On the other hand, you are learning Defence Against the Dark Arts for a reason and I never saw much sense in taking lumps when you don't have to, even if it might be the more 'right' thing to do, school-rules-wise.

For some reason that made him feel better. After that incident, Jian and the rest of the Slytherins left all three Ravenclaws alone, and Albus went back to studying in the Common Room.

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Scorpius had Christmas with the Longbottoms again that year. It was turning into quite a tradition, and Hannah assured him that they liked having him over and it wasn't ruining their family Christmas at all. It was true that they usually had other guests, like the Lovegoods and Neville's grandmother, and this year it was Hannah's father, a Muggle man who jumped at every single magical event. Scorpius could see that he was pretending to be relaxed about it for his daughter's sake, but he saw his eyes go very wide when the turkey came floating into the room to land gently on the table.
Scorpius had met a few Muggles by now, but he had never had the opportunity to talk to one who knew he was a wizard. It was also refreshing to realise that Mr Abbott didn't know anything about the Malfoys, and was therefore not the slightest bit judgemental of him at all.

"Muggle Studies?" he said, confused, when Scorpius tentatively brought it up. "You mean you have to have a class dedicated to learning about us?"

Scorpius explained that some wizards grew up with very little knowledge of Muggle society. "The first time I went into a post office I made a total fool of myself," he admitted. "I'm better at it now, but I don't like going too far into the city in case I get lost or get hit by a bus, or something."

Lizzie snorted into her dinner, causing her mother to give her a very wearing look.

"What?" Scorpius asked innocently. "Those things move really fast!"

"You could try staying off the road," she told him, giggling.

"Scorpius likes Muggle music, too, Dad," said Hannah, encouragingly.

"Do you?" said Mr Abbott, with enthusiasm.

"Oh yes," said Scorpius emphatically. "Especially some of the older stuff - I'm really into the Beatles right now."

Mr Abbott's face lit up, and the two of them basically shut out the rest of the conversation for a good half an hour as they compared notes on their favourite bands. Alice was enough of a distraction for her parents as she had learned the trick of throwing her food practically everywhere except in her mouth. Tony, Lizzie's brother, had to keep ducking when she flung food his way. Eventually she managed to get a spoonful of mushy peas down his shirt, which sent everyone into hysterical laughter. Tony merely grimaced and went to change. The look of triumph on Alice's face made Scorpius laugh harder than he had in months.

After such a great day it felt particularly depressing to go back to the dormitory, which this year had been vacated by all the fourth year Ravenclaws except him. On the upside, Rose and Albus had both chipped in to buy him a huge book called *A History of Wizarding Music Tradition: from the Ancient Bards to the Wireless of Today*, full of pictures, and some pages even played music when you turned them. He decided he could forgive Rose for getting on his back about school, and promised himself that he would do all his homework before she got back.

The thing was, he was pretty sure in the back of his mind that he wanted to be a musician. And who needed Defence Against the Dark Arts or Herbology for that? Muggle Studies was important, because being a wizard musician was all well and good until you wanted to play for more than a few dozen people at a time. Still, after reading *Wizarding Music Tradition*, he decided he had to pay more attention in Charms. It turned out that there were spells you could put on musical instruments to let you play more than one tune at a time, or create sounds from several different instruments using just one. There were spells you could use to sing in harmony with yourself. And you could Transfigure instruments as well, if you knew what you were doing. Scorpius wondered if Rose knew that reading the book would make him want to pay more attention in class.

The holidays were almost over when he got a very unexpected owl that put paid to his good mood entirely. It was from his mother. She had sent an envelope with money in it for Christmas, more money than last year but with only a short note to say they would see him when he came home for the summer. This letter was different.
Scorpius,

I am writing to tell you, as your father and I agree you should be informed, that I am expecting a child, to arrive in April next year, in which case you shall see him or her when you return home in July.

That was it. One sentence. Scorpius read it over three times. Then he folded it up and stuffed it in the back of his Transfiguration textbook, fell back onto his bed and stared up at the ceiling for what felt like an age.

He had tried not to think too much about the scene he had witnessed with Monsieur Belanger since school started. After all, it wasn't really any of his business. He had decided he couldn't really blame his mother for falling in love with someone else, when her own husband barely acknowledged her existence. And as long as she was careful and he never found out, there was no reason for Scorpius to get involved.

But now he thought back to that whispered conversation at the apothecary, his mother's fear, her lover's anger. "Draco and I haven't... we've slept in separate rooms since we moved to town." She admitted it. And then she had said something about correcting the situation.

Scorpius suddenly felt sick. They hadn't just been talking about the affair. She was telling Belanger about the baby, and trying to find a way to convince Scorpius' father that it was his.

She must have convinced him, he thought, turning his face into the pillow. Because the note said 'your father and I agree'. Nice of them to think of telling me after five months, he thought bitterly, forgetting for a moment the danger his mother had put herself and the child in by taking such a risk. It's not like I need to be 'informed' about things like moving to a new house or new members of the family until the very last minute.

He wondered what would happen when the child was born. Both Scorpius' parents were delicately built, pale, and fair-haired, hence the resemblance that Scorpius was really starting to despise. Belanger was big and dark. Would anyone notice? If they didn't, what would happen to Belanger? Surely he wouldn't be all right with his child being raised by another man. And if he was, would Astoria treat it differently? Scorpius felt a stab of jealousy that he knew was unwarranted, but he couldn't help it. His mother loved Belanger, like she had never loved his father. Did that mean she would love the child more?

He was so intent on depressing himself with these thoughts that he missed dinner entirely, and his stomach grumbled uncomfortably as night fell and he crawled automatically into bed, holding A History of Wizarding Music Tradition on his lap, unseeing. In the end, he snapped it shut and hurled it across the room, where it banged against the far wall and toppled to the floor. What was the point? Nothing he ever did was going to be enough. He pulled the sheets over his head and recited goblin wars in his mind, but for once the tried and tested method failed to work. Sleep was a long, long time in coming.

Chapter End Notes

Please visit my fanfic tumblr: http://misssaigonfic.tumblr.com/
Ask me questions, get some insights!
The Potter-Weasley households were in a bit of an uproar, because on Christmas day it had come to light by some not-very-subtle teasing on behalf of the twins, that James had started dating one of the Gryffindor girls in their year. The subject had most unfortunately come up again during the back to school dinner at the Potter house, after James had left the table to finish some last-minute homework.

"He's fifteen, not five," Ron said from behind the evening edition of the *Prophet*. "Let him have a bit of fun, for Merlin's sake." The paper did not quite protect him from the spurious looks of his wife and sister, who were doing the after dinner clean-up in the kitchen around everyone else.

"As long as he doesn't have too much fun," Hermione said pointedly. "From what Fred and Roxanne were saying, this girl is very..."

"Enthusiastic?" Rose suggested. Albus snorted.

"That is not what I was going to say," her mother said, somewhat disapprovingly.

"I notice you haven't ventured an opinion, Harry," said Ginny to her husband. Rose looked up at her uncle. He had that look on his face that suggested he was only half listening. "Harry?" Ginny prompted, with mock furocity. "Our son is walking out with some random harlot. What do you have to say about it?"

"I don't see what the problem is, as long as he behaves the way we brought him up to behave," Harry said after a brief pause which suggested he was reacquainting himself with the situation. "After all, some of us weren't even fifteen when we started dating."

"Oh really?" Albus said, clearly fascinated by this turn of events. Rose looked up with great surprise to see her mother going red.
"Mum!"

"Viktor did not count," Hermione said firmly, slapping the back of her husbands head when he started to laugh. "We were friends, we were not dating."

"Try telling him that," Ron said, still sniggering.

"Who's Viktor?" Rose demanded.

Hermione sighed. "Never you mind."

"I was talking about Ginny, anyway," Harry put in.

Ginny shot him a dark look.

"Oh really?" Albus said again, grinning widely.

"That is not the same thing," Ginny protested, though she looked doubtful of her own words. "Albus, have you packed?"

"Mum, now is not the time to change the subject."

"Are you packed?"

"Yes!"

"Rose?"

Rose sighed. "Yes."

"Good. Now you had both better go along to bed, you've got an early start tomorrow."

As she and Al left the kitchen reluctantly, they could hear Ginny berate her husband for apparently telling trade secrets. Rose did think it was a bit hypocritical for her to fret about James, if she had started dating at fourteen. The idea seemed a bit foreign, to Rose. Having to share your whole life with another person seemed like a great deal too much effort, and anyway, she had her friends.

She had made up her mind to be nicer to Scorpius when they got back to school. After all, while she cared about his education, she hadn't meant to remind him that she was the only one who did. And she did feel terrible that they had to leave him every year to endure the Christmas holidays practically alone in Ravenclaw tower. She hadn't dared suggest to him that he come over for the holidays, since he always got nervous whenever her father or Albus' were mentioned. She got the feeling Draco Malfoy had portrayed them as fire-breathing, pureblood-hating monsters to his son, and while he had got on all right with her Aunt Ginny, she rather dreaded to think what sort of effect her own mother might have on the occasionally still shy Ravenclaw boy.

When they got back to school, however, it was to find Scorpius in an utterly black mood. He greeted them politely enough, but he seemed upset, and Rose hardly dared ask what was wrong. After a few days she realised he hadn't even touched his guitar. He sat in the Common Room, robotically doing homework or staring into space while Albus ranted about Quidditch. All tentative enquiries resulted in a short, vague reply such as 'I'm fine,' or "just tired". She started to really worry that he had taken her criticism to heart.

About a week into the term, she came back from Quidditch practice alone. Scorpius wasn't in the Common Room, and she wondered if he had finally gone up to his dormitory to practice.
Disregarding as usual the rules regarding girls in the boys' dormitory, she went up the stairs and peeked into the fourth-year boys room. At first she thought it was empty, until she saw a mop of blond hair on one of the beds. She tip-toed into the room, thinking he might be asleep, but when she went round the other side of the bed, his eyes were open.

"Thought you were Al," he said flatly, glancing at her only for a brief moment.

"He's in the hospital wing," she explained.

He started and lifted himself onto his elbow. "Is he okay?"

"Yeah, just sprained his wrist a bit. Nothing Madam Pomfrey can't fix with a quick charm."

He relaxed and thumped back onto the bed again. "Oh."

She bit her lip. He looked so sad. Guilt swirled around her stomach, making her feel queasy. "Scorp, look... I'm really sorry I shouted at you so much. I didn't mean for you to give up music altogether. You're really good and I want you to keep playing, it's just I didn't want you to get in trouble. Please stop being so sad."

He stared at her, blankly, for a moment. Then he sat up and offered her a hand. Tentatively she took it and allowed him to tug her onto the bed beside him. "It's not you," he said, firmly but without quite meeting her eyes. "It's not about that. I promise."

"Then what is it about?" she asked, somehow feeling both relieved and more worried at the same time.

He seemed to consider his answer for a moment. Then he reached onto the bedside table and picked up his Transfiguration book, thumbing through it until he found a loose bit of parchment, which, after a brief hesitation, he handed to her. "Malfoy family drama," he explained, with a tired, half-hearted smile.

Rose read the letter, which only took half a minute. "Oh," she said, surprised but not feeling any the wiser. "But that's good... isn't it?"

"Maybe on the surface," Scorpius said, with an expression that seemed much older than his fourteen years.

"I mean, it seems a very formal way to tell you you're going to have a brother or sister, but you knew they were like that..." Rose continued, watching his face. "What is it?"

Scorpius sighed. "Thing is... I know some stuff I probably shouldn't know. I think the baby... okay, I know the baby is only going to be a half brother or sister. My mum's having an affair with the man she works with. It could have been going on for years."

Rose gasped. "What! But that's terrible!"

Scorpius shrugged. "Not really. I understand that part. I wouldn't want to be married to him either. I mean, he barely speaks to her anymore, let alone..." he reddened and looked away, his fingers bunching into fists on his knees. "But she's going to pretend that the baby's his! If he finds out..." he stopped, his face slightly green with anxiety.

"Maybe he won't find out," Rose suggested. "That's possible, right?"

Scorpius still looked miserable. "Maybe," he admitted. "He hardly pays attention to anything either"
of us does anymore."

"There you are then," Rose said, though secretly she was somewhat horrified at the indication of his father's total indifference to his family.

He looked at her helplessly. "It's mad," he said in a small voice. "It'll all come out eventually, I know it. And I don't know whose side I should be on... I don't really want to take a side at all, but I'll have to..."

"Scorp, this doesn't have anything to do with you," she said, as gently as she could. "I mean, of course it does, but it isn't your fault. You're not responsible for anything your parents do."

"I know that!"

"Then why worry? Worrying won't help. Whatever's going to happen is going to happen."

Scorpius sighed. "You just don't know my family. It'll blow up, and someone could get hurt... or killed..."

She hesitated. He had talked like this before, but it always seemed like a figure of speech. Now it all sounded very serious. With an effort she forced herself into logic mode. "Okay, let's look at the options. Tell your dad about the affair."

"No fear," Scorpius muttered.

"Tell your mum you know about the affair?"

He shuddered. "No."

"Tell someone else in your family, like your grandparents or your aunt - "

"No!"

"Well then, the only thing left to do is to not tell anyone and hope for the best. Maybe it'll all just work out. Doesn't mean your whole life has to end."

They told Albus when he got back from seeing Madam Pomfrey, and luckily he was of the same opinion, though Rose thought some of his advice probably didn't help the situation. "Not your problem mate," he said after the explanation had been made. "You're not the one sleeping around, right? Let them work it out between themselves."

Despite Rose's reservations, it seemed that Scorpius decided to do just that. He threw himself back into schoolwork and Albus reported that he was playing music again, and eating up the new songs Albus had loaded onto his iPod during the summer. He even managed to be marginally cheerful on his birthday in March, a day which normally seemed to depress him.

Before anyone could blink, it seemed that exams were already upon them. The seventh years, which this year included Lizzie's brother Anthony, suddenly became secluded and anxious all the time. The fifth years in the Weasley family were even more unbearable to be around than usual, as they simultaneously tried to study for their OWLs and made it nearly impossible for anyone else to do so.

"You tell your brother and his mates," one of the Ravenclaw boys said crossly to Albus in April, "that he is not making any friends by setting off fireworks in the library. Some of us actually care about our OWLs."
"Like I had any control over it," Albus complained to Rose later. "What do they expect me to do? Fred by himself is twice my size! What chance do I have against all three of them?"

"That'll be us next year," Rose said anxiously. "Not setting off fireworks, obviously, but doing OWLs. I can't wait to spend a whole summer listening to mum go on and on about how important they are..."

"Uh oh," said Albus, not looking at her but staring across the common room at something else. "Looks like news."

She followed his gaze to where Scorpius was standing by the window, a brown owl perched on the sill and a small bit of parchment in his hand. They hurried over. "What's up?" she asked, trying not to sound too concerned.

Scorpius looked up at them. "What? Oh, it's a boy," he said. "That's all it says, really."

"Oh, well... great," she replied, watching his face for any danger signs. "It would say if anything else had happened, wouldn't it?"

"I guess," he said, folding the parchment carefully and putting it in his pocket. Rose shot Albus a warning look to urge him not to ask any further questions. She sensed the whole half-brother situation was a sensitive topic.

~*-S-*~

~*-S-*~

Before exams, there was the compulsory memorial ceremony to get through. Scorpius didn't enjoy it any more than he had the first time. As usual, he stayed out of the way of the combined Weasley and Potter families, watching from afar as they joined the hundreds of other people making small offerings at the memorial stone. He didn't even have his usual comfort of being able to talk to Hannah, as she had had to stay in Diagon Alley with two-year-old Alice, who had a fever. So he stood at the back, trying to ignore the chatter of the other disinterested students, most of whom were Muggleborn or whose families had not been in Britain during the war.

He wandered on the edge of the crowd on the way back to the castle, deep in his own murky thoughts. Since the one-line notice of his brother's birth, he had received no other news, despite the letter he had written home asking if his mother was well, what they had decided to name him, and all the other innocuous questions he could think to ask. There was more than one explanation, of course. Perhaps his mother was too busy with the new baby to reply. Except he was sure that now the family was back in pocket, they would hire a nanny. He had lost count of the times his mother had complained about having to look after Scorpius herself when he was born. Perhaps she was ill, or the baby was ill. He doubted his father would pay much mind, though at least, he reminded himself, he would have been pleased to have a second boy. He didn't think Draco would have a clue what to do with a girl, even less than he did with boys...

"Hey!"

An unfamiliar voice roused him from his gloomy thoughts. He looked up to see a tall, sandy-haired young man coming up behind him. He was perhaps in his early twenties, with handsome, angular features, and was dressed in a Muggle buttoned shirt and dark jeans. It took Scorpius a moment, but as the man drew closer he recognised Albus' cousin Teddy.
"Er... hi," he said, uncertain. He felt a little better that the newcomer was offering him a smile, but not much better. "Mr Lupin?"

The man chuckled. "Who are you, my lawyer? Call me Teddy. Can I walk with you?"

Scorpius blinked. "Um... okay," he said, somewhat hesitantly. He didn't want to be rude, but he was always nervous meeting strangers. It helped that Teddy was really, well, cool. Scorpius tried not to stare enviously at his Muggle clothes. He looked so natural in them, and he moved with a roguish, mischievous sort of air that reminded him of Albus' brother James.

Teddy came up into step with him, closing his eyes briefly as the newly-risen sun bathed his face in its warm light. "Rose sort of mentioned you might like a chat," he said after a moment, and Scorpius felt a few things fall into place. He made a mental note to take this up with his friend later.

"She seemed to think you might need convincing that your entire family isn't mad," he said, causing Scorpius to redden and drop his gaze. "Not sure why she thought I could convince you of anything of the kind," Teddy added, apparently as a joke. "But I guess we are cousins. Second cousins or something, anyway."

"Or something," Scorpius agreed, quietly.

"Our grandmothers are sisters," Teddy clarified. "You close to your gran?"

Scorpius shook his head. "Only met her a few times. She spent most of the time trying to stop Grandfather from gnawing on the furniture. He really is mad," he added. "I don't think either of them are really aware I exist."

"Merlin," said Teddy. Scorpius looked up at him. His hair seemed to have gone from sandy blond to a depressing sort of grey. "The Blacks must be cursed or something. We're the only young ones left, as far as I know. Not that the Blacks would have ever considered me one of them. You, they might have allowed." He stopped to pick a few flowers that grew near the path to the Quidditch Pitch. Scorpius watched him curiously.

"Why wouldn't they have accepted you?" he asked eventually, unable to bear the suspense any longer.

Teddy looked back at him in surprise and chuckled. "You know the Black motto is 'always pure'? Me, I'm part Muggle, part Metamorphmagi, part we - well. Not pure, is the point. Luckily there aren't too many families left who care about that sort of thing."

Scorpius rolled his eyes. "Just my luck to be in one of them."

Teddy grinned. "You should meet my gran. She could tell you some stories. When she married my grandfather, they cut her out of the family. They didn't even talk about her, like she never existed. I don't think she minded too much, though."

Scorpius shuddered. He couldn't imagine anything worse. "I don't want that to happen to me."

Teddy looked puzzled as he got to his feet. "Really? Rose says you don't get on much with your family."

"Well..." Scorpius glanced up at the castle doors where the last few people were filing in. "It's not like we spent a lot of time together. I only see them during summer and they both work a lot. But that's not the same as... as not having any family at all."
"Well, you've got me," Teddy said, smiling. "And Gran."

Scorpius didn't know how to say in a polite way that a distant cousin and a great aunt he had never met before was not the same as a mother and father. "Are you really part Metamorphmagi?" he asked, purely to change the subject as he already knew the answer. Albus and Rose were more subtle about it, but James, Fred and Roxanne were more vocal than they probably should be about the fact that their adopted cousin was a spy who could *shapeshift*.

"Well, more than part, since you either are or you aren't one, but yeah," he replied, turning his nose bright blue for a moment as if to prove it.

Scorpius sighed inwardly. *Cool* didn't seem to be a strong enough word. "That must be useful."

"Sometimes. When I was at school it was a nuisance. I couldn't walk down a corridor without people asking me to do a pig nose or bat's ears, or something. Or copy someone's face, that's a popular one."

"Can you do that?" Scorpius asked, suddenly intrigued.

"Yeah, sort of. It's easier to just make stuff up, though. If I wanted to look exactly like someone else it'd be easier to take Polyjuice Potion. Not that I would," he added. "It being illegal for me to do so without a license. And working for the Ministry I would *of course* never do anything illegal."

Scorpius chuckled. "Is someone listening?"

"You never know." Teddy grinned at him. "Anyway that's the sort of thing I used to have to put up with. People ever give you a hard time about your dad?"

The question came so unexpectedly that Scorpius was surprised into answering. "Sometimes. Some people think I shouldn't be allowed to go to Hogwarts after my father almost destroyed it all - "

Teddy's eyes widened, and Scorpius immediately regretted his words. "Let me guess, Gryffindors?" Teddy asked.

Scorpius frowned. "Were you a Gryffindor?"

"No, but I know what they're like," Teddy muttered. "It is, isn't it?"

Scorpius shrugged. "They don't bother me much anymore." The truth was that that problem had somewhat paled in comparison to the whole half-brother situation.

"Does Neville know?"

"No!"

"I figured. No way he'd put up with it if he knew anything like that was going on."

"It's fine. The Gryffindors and the Slytherins are having some kind of underground war at the moment, so they pretty much ignore the rest of us."

Teddy rolled his eyes dramatically. "As it was meant to be. Seriously though, I know most of the snotty nosed brats in the upper years. I was Head Boy not too long ago, you know. Anything really messed up goes down, you owl me and I'll come up here and box their ears for them."

Scorpius smiled despite himself. "Thanks, but I'm okay. Mostly I just hate the idea of people judging me on stuff I have absolutely no control over."
Teddy nodded. "Actually, you know who you should meet?" he said thoughtfully. "Harry."

Scorpius started. "Harry Potter?"

"Yeah, you haven't met him yet, have you?"

"Not exactly," Scorpius muttered. He had no intention of going anywhere near Albus' father, thanks.

"He's all right, you know," Teddy told him, apparently sensing his hesitation. "I reckon you'd find that you two have a lot in common."

They started walking again, climbing the stairs to the big doors and making their way through the Entrance Hall. Scorpius thought about what Teddy had said. It sounded crazy to him. What could he and Harry Potter possibly have in common? Except Albus, of course. Albus said that his parents didn't mind him being friends with Scorpius, and Ginny had been friendly enough, but... well. It was Harry Potter, wasn't it? His father's enemy, the destroyer of the Dark Lord, famous for tracking down dark wizards as Head of the Aurors. Scorpius thought Mr Potter was probably more likely to tell Albus not to have anything to do with him than start chatting about whatever it was they had in common.

Victoire was waiting for them at the door to the great hall. "Where've you been?" she asked Teddy accusingly, to which he bowed to her and offered her the handful of flowers.

"Oh!" she said, in an entirely different tone of voice. "They're lovely, thank you. Hello Scorpius."

"Hi," he replied. She asked him, in French, how his schoolwork was going, and he made automatic replies until he saw an opportunity to escape. When he looked back, Victoire had her arms around Teddy's neck and was kissing him. If they got married, he thought glibly, My family would be connected to the Potters. Harry Potter would be my second cousin's wife's uncle by marriage. Then he snorted. Now I do sound like a Malfoy.

~*-A-*~

~*-A-*~

Ravenclaw lost their last Quidditch game of the year, against Slytherin. Albus sulked about this, especially after Gryffindor went on to win the Cup, until the fury of exams took it clean out of his mind.

"Just think," Rose said triumphantly as they came out of their last exam in Greenhouse 3. "This time next year we'll be finishing our OWLs."

"Joy," muttered Scorpius, flicking through his Herbology textbook as they walked back to the castle. "I just can't wait till sixth year when we can drop some subjects."

"Herbology and Divination?" Albus suggested.

"Well they're both useless. Whose stupid idea was it for me to do Divination anyway?"

Rose laughed. "As I recall, I tried to warn you against it."

"That you did. If you want to choose my NEWTs for me, I swear I'll listen this time."

"How did you guys do?" Lizzie came up beside them with Belinda Ascott trailing after her.
"I think I messed up the essay question," Scorpius sighed, still thumbing through his textbook. "Here's an idea, I'll help you with Charms next year if you tutor me in Herbology. My father may not take much mind of these little exams, but if I fail any OWLs, he definitely will notice."

"Deal," said Lizzie, grinning. "As long as you don't mind being the only Ravenclaw being tutored by a Hufflepuff."

"Shut that book, will you?" Albus yawned as they reached the stairs. "It's over. Summer has basically started. No more studying until the absolutely last minute when its time to do holiday homework - joking, joking," he added, rolling his eyes at Rose's warning look. "You looked just like your mum then."

Rose crinkled her nose. "Did not."

"Two weeks till we get to go home," Belinda said, swinging her bag enthusiastically. "I miss my family so much!"

"I want to see Alice," Lizzie agreed. "It's been ages since half-term. Scorpius, are you excited to finally meet your brother?"

Albus looked at his friend for his reaction. A few select people knew about this by now; it wasn't exactly a secret, after all, though of course the more scandalous facts had been kept between the three Ravenclaws.

"Oh, you mean the as-yet-unnamed three-month-old I now have to split my inheritance with?" Scorpius said, finally returning his book to his bag. The girls laughed. Albus thought Scorp might just be getting a little too good at deflection.

"Leaving your guitar at school again?" he asked, by means of changing the subject.

"As long as no one tells," Scorpius said meaningfully. "The House Elves don't mind looking after it for me."

"I've never even seen a House Elf," said Belinda. "How do they do all the cleaning and washing and cooking and things and I still haven't seen one in four years?"

"Have to know where to look," said Albus, tapping his nose. "It helps to have a Hogwarts alumni family that passes on such important knowledge."

That effectively steered the conversation away from Scorpius' mother, as Albus and Rose regaled the Hufflepuffs with second-hand stories about House Elves. "You good?" Albus asked Scorpius quietly as they went in to dinner, the chatter of the Great Hall drowning out his words to anyone else.

"Fine," the blond boy said, shrugging. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Just look after yourself this summer, all right? And owl me. Call me a fake name, if you have to."

Scorpius smiled grimly. "Will do."

~*.S.*~

~*.S.*~

It was a total stranger that picked Scorpius up from the train station this time, clearly visible from the
train window. He was wearing a tight-fitting navy-blue robe, and holding up a card with the Malfoy crest on it. Albus patted him on the back, Rose gave him a final hug, and then he had to get off the train while pretending he didn't know them.

He heaved his trunk down onto the platform, attempting to keep his head down as people tittered. "This is really embarrassing," he murmured to the man. "You couldn't have at least held up my actual name?"

"Mousieur Malfoy, votre père vous attend à la maison," the servant - Scorpius could only assume he was some kind of servant - replied.

"Fine, I'm coming, just keep a low profile," Scorpius replied, still in English, and the man stared at him blankly.

He kept his silence for the trip back, which involved the man driving him in a large black car - which actually drove itself - to a Floo point Scorpius had never seen before, not the official international ones they usually used. They came out in the back room of a store in Rue Chouette, and had to walk the rest of the way. The servant at least offered to take Scorpius' trunk, but when they got to the house, the man left him alone while he took the trunk upstairs.

Scorpius decided to look for his mother rather than go straight to the study for the annual visit to remind his father he was still alive. He checked the living room, then the dining room - both of which looked better furnished and looked-after than last summer. He surprised a maid in the kitchen, but there was no one in any of the upstairs rooms. He wondered where the nursery was. There were a few rooms on the bottom floor that hadn't been used last year. He had just decided to go and look around them when the navy-blue servant popped up again and told him firmly that his father was expecting him in the study.

Scorpius sighed and went back downstairs again. His father was sitting behind his desk, but not working. "Where have you been?" he demanded as soon as Scorpius came in. "I told Jean to send you to me as soon as you arrived."

"I was looking for mother," Scorpius explained. "Do you know where she is? I'd like to see the baby."

For a moment, his father's face went dark with anger so furious that Scorpius almost took a step backwards. Then it went blank and expressionless. "Your mother no longer lives here," Draco Malfoy said, coldly.

Scorpius stared. "Why? Where is she?"

"I don't want to hear any more on the subject." His father's grey eyes were very dark, and there was a telltale tinge of red in his pale cheeks.

"Where is mother?" Scorpius demanded, throwing caution to the winds. "Is she all right? Did something happen to the baby?"

Before he knew what was happening, a wand was in his father's hand, and he found himself thrown against the study door, all the breath knocked out of his lungs. "ENOUGH!"

Scorpius tried to move but he was locked in place, his arms stuck to the door as though encased in lead. "But -"

Unable to dodge, he bore the full brunt of a backhand armed with a signet ring that left a stinging pain across his cheek. "I said no more," his father hissed in his ear as he choked for breath. "As far as this
family is concerned, that women is dead. Mention her name ever again and you will regret it. Do you understand me, Scorpius?"

Scorpius wished he hadn't put his own wand in his trunk before getting off the train. Or that he was able to move. His heart was pounding, but he wasn't afraid. He was angry. He didn't think he had ever been so angry.

"Do you understand me?" his father repeated, and Scorpius felt the sharp point of the wand pressing against his stomach.

"Yes sir," Scorpius forced out.

"Very well. Then get out of my sight."

Suddenly he found he could move again. Still fuming, but grateful to leave, he fled the study and went up to his room. He found his trunk at the foot of the bed, rummaged in it for his wand and locked the door behind him. He was sure his father, and probably the servants, knew how to break such spells, but it made him feel better anyway. Then he glanced into the mirror. There was a thin, red line across his cheek. Furiously he slashed his wand across his reflection. The wand sparked blue and a lightning-shaped crack appeared in the glass.

How dare he? How dare he keep the truth from him?

He leaned over the desk chair, breathing hard. His eyes burned but he refused to cry. He had to find out. He had to know where his mother was, if she was even still alive… if his brother was alive. He didn't want to believe that his father would do anything so terrible… but some dark voice in the back of his mind was whispering threateningly. He had to know for sure.

An hour later he sat at the desk, his still-shaking hands spotted with ink, folding the fourth draft of a letter. He had, after all, promised to write.

Chapter End Notes

Please visit my fanfic blog: http://misssaisonfic.tumblr.com/
Ask me questions, get some insights!
"You probably shouldn't have laughed at her," Scorpius said, putting his instrument down carefully, and Albus realised with chagrin that he'd started a Serious Conversation.

"Oh come on, you heard her. That was the most awkward proposal I ever heard." Scorpius gave him a hard look. "Oh fine." He chucked his quill onto the table and slumped in his chair. "It's just that I keep worrying why all these girls want me to go with them. Is it because they actually want to go with me, or because they just want to say they went with me?"

Chapter Notes

MUSIC WARNING! This chapter has music in it! Visit the music page and get ready to play the song when it comes up (you'll know when!) Here's that link again:

http://misssaigonfic.tumblr.com/musicpost for this song and all the music featured in this story so far.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

2021

~*-A-*~

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The Weasleys were hosting a birthday dinner for Rose a few weeks into the summer holidays, but the men of the family were running late. Everyone was sitting around the table, except Ginny and Hermione, who were banging things around in the kitchen.

"Wouldn't want to be Dad right now," James said, stretching in his chair. He was now a lanky sixteen year old, resembling his uncle Ron more than his own father in stature.

Hugo, in comparison, was as short and stocky at thirteen as he had been at ten. "What do you think's keeping them?" he asked.

"Probably a Dark Wizard on the run," Lily said excitedly. Lily had been top of her year in Defence Against the Dark Arts, and had recently announced her intention to become an Auror. She was the only one who was enthusiastic about this idea.
"That would have been on the news," Albus pointed out.

"I'm sure its important, whatever it is," Rose said loyally.

"It better be," said Hermione as the two women came into the dining room carrying plates. "We better get started, they'll get here when they get here."

In fact it wasn't until half an hour later that Harry, Ron and Teddy came traipsing into the house, still in their work robes. "Where have you been?" Ginny demanded. "I Floo'd the office twice and they said you weren't available. What am I supposed to make of that?"

"I'm sorry," Harry said, kissing her lightly on the cheek. "This Shadow business has got everyone worked up."

Hermione had her turn admonishing her husband as well, but Albus could tell that both women were relieved to have them back. The life of an Auror, even in relatively peaceful times like these, was unpredictable.

"Happy birthday, sweetheart," Ron said, coming over and kissing Rose on the cheek.

"What's the Shadow business, Dad?" Lily asked once three more portions of food had been served and the meal had resumed.

Harry, Ron and Teddy exchanged glances. "Well, it's no secret," Harry said after a moment. "The Ministry is looking into a European gang of Smugglers who have just started trading in Britain. The black market on cursed objects is becoming a real problem."

"I thought Aurors only chased Dark Wizards," Hugo piped up. "How come you're worried about a bunch of smugglers?"

"Well, based on the stuff they're smuggling, they probably are Dark Wizards," Harry replied. "Or are at least in league with some. You don't buy some of this stuff unless you're planning to do some seriously illegal magic. Anyway, even if they aren't, it's still part of my job as Head of Magical Law Enforcement to oversee things."

"So what's the Shadow?" Lily asked excitedly.

It was Teddy who answered this time. "Shadow's not a what, its a who. Its the Department's nickname for whoever's in charge of the organisation. They call him Shadow because he's so impossible to find."

"The German and French Ministries have been searching for him for ten years now," Ron put in. "Its a clever organisation, hardly anyone knows the people who are really behind it all."

"All right, that's enough Auror talk at the dinner table," Hermione announced, causing Lily to groan, and the subject was changed.

Albus saw his chance when the main meal was over. "No Mum, I'll clear the plates," he said quickly when Ginny started to rise.

"Oh, thank you dear," she said gratefully, sinking back into her seat. Albus grabbed a couple plates and nudged Teddy with his elbow.

"I'll help too," Teddy said quickly, and Rose, seeing what was happening, gathered up the rest of the plates.
"So?" Albus asked when they were safely out of earshot. "Any news?"

"Yes," Teddy looked solemn as he put down his pile of plates. "Mrs Malfoy is living in a house in the south of France with a man called Belanger and a baby boy. No wonder she left - Malfoy would have to be an idiot not to realise something was up."

"Oh thank Merlin," Rose breathed with a sigh of relief. "Scorp was so worried something had happened to the baby."

"He did sort of make it sound like his father might have bashed its head in," Albus added.

"Al!" Rose protested. "Don't be so horrible. I know Mr Malfoy isn't the nicest person in the world..."

"Word on the street is they had a flaming row and she walked out," Teddy said. "Servants talk, I guess, and they say the child had hair and eyes like a Spaniard." Albus, remembering that both Scorpius' parents were blond, saw the immediate problem with that observation.

"Poor Scorp," Rose sighed. "All alone in that house with his father, not knowing if his mother's anywhere near."

"I'll write to him as soon as the party's over," Albus promised. "I'll use Emmett - he might get lost but he doesn't stand out as much as Womy does."

"Teddy, how did you even have time to look for Mrs Malfoy when this whole Shadow thing is happening?" Rose asked, pointedly.

Teddy winked. "Multitasking. Anything for my poor estranged cousin, of course. Let me know if you need anything else, yeah? And he can always write to me direct if he wants."

"I'll tell him," Albus promised. "We better get these plates sorted out before Mum starts to wonder if we got lost."

The others nodded and they finished clearing the table.

"So, you two, OWLs this year," Albus' mum said unexpectedly half-way through dessert.

Albus slapped his palm against his forehead. "Darn, I completely forgot," he exclaimed. "That's THIS year?"

"Mum, fifth year is about way more than OWLs," James said, winking at his brother.

"What's it about then?" Rose countered.

James shrugged. "Getting girls."

Lily giggled.

"James," Ginny sighed. "Just because you started seeing 'Shana' last year doesn't mean your brother has to do everything you do."

"Shows how much you know," James said. "Mate, trust me, get a date for the first Hogsmeade weekend before all the good ones are taken."

"Excuse me?" Rose said darkly.

"Well he can't go with you, can he?" James replied, missing the point of her distaste.

"How are things with you and Shana, anyway?" Harry asked quickly.
"Daa-ad," James sighed. "Keep up, I'm with Flora now."

"Flora," Ginny muttered. "Silly name for a girl."

"Even sillier name for a boy," Ron pointed out, and both Lily and Hugo burst out laughing.

"Do people really take dates to Hogsmeade in fifth year?" Albus asked James later, when they had gone home.

"Hell yes mate," James said, grinning. "Don't worry, though. There are *some* advantages to being famous. Someone will ask you, or at least make it clear that she wants you to ask her. Trust me."

Albus flushed. "I don't want to go out with someone who only wants to go out with me because of Dad!" he protested.

"I didn't say you had to marry her," James rolled his eyes. "Play the field a bit. Even Ravenclaws are allowed to have fun, you know."

Albus wondered about the sensibility of this statement, however, as he went to bed. Brotherly assurances aside, it was hardly comforting to know that he knew had a lot more than OWLs to worry about for the year ahead.

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"Worst. Summer. Ever."

Rose looked up to see Scorpius enter the train compartment. He was late, as usual, the whistle was already blowing and parents had begun to wave goodbye by the time he dragged his trunk over to them. "What happened to your hair?" she asked, sympathetically.

Scorpius ran a hand over his head, rubbing at the back of his neck where the short cut was bristling. "Father said I was starting to look 'improper,'" he sighed. "It must have been long for him to notice. One of the maids charmed it off - believe it or not it was worse than this a week ago."

He slid into the seat next to her and she ran her fingers through it experimentally. He flinched a little, but allowed it, although he gave her an odd look.

"Did you get out of the house at all?" she asked him, to cover the awkward moment.

"Hardly," he said. "The restaurant didn't need me, they've got some new kid working there. Anyway I dunno if I could have snuck out all the time like I did last year. Too many nosy servants."

"Jeez, how many are there?" Albus asked, his eyes widened slightly.

Scorpius shrugged. "Eight or so. It's nice to have a bit more noise around the place, even if they all insist on calling me 'Mr Malfoy' and expect me to ignore their existence the way he does. I guess he had them all pretty well trained by the time I got there, more's the pity."

"Eight!" Rose exclaimed. "To look after two people?"

"Most of the time," Scorpius nodded. "Though people stay over a lot. Goyle, mostly." He shuddered. "That guy still creeps me out. Anyway, please tell me you two at least did something fun
so that I can live vicariously through you?"

"Mostly I listened to lectures about OWLs," Rose admitted. "I've been reminded by my parents and both sets of grandparents, repeatedly, that Mum got ten of them. No pressure, or anything."

"We can't all be Hermione Weasley," Albus pointed out.

"You won't fail anything," Scorpius told her. "When have you ever failed anything?"

She smiled at him.

~*S*~

~*S*~

It was good to be back at Hogwarts again, surrounded by people who waved to him in Great Hall at the welcome feast, to eat whatever he liked, and hot food! He was beyond tired of meals that arrived cold on a tray. It felt like a huge relief to climb the stairs to Ravenclaw Tower, even if he was puffed at the end of it, to answer the riddle to get in in competition with about ten other Ravenclaws, and collapse on his own blue-coverleted four-poster bed, which felt more like home than his green and black sheets in the townhouse ever had. He didn't care a jot when the boys teased him about not even getting undressed before bed. And best of all, the House Elves had left his guitar on a stand next to his bedside table. When he reached over and strummed his fingers across it experimentally, it was perfectly tuned. His fingers itched to play, but everyone else wanted to sleep, so he forced himself to join them.

The next morning he woke before dawn, packed his bag for classes and shoved his guitar into its case before tiptoeing out of the dormitory and down the stairs. He decided against the Common Room since the sound might travel into rooms where people were still sleeping, and left the tower in the direction of the Great Hall. There were a few early birds - mostly Ravenclaws, it was fair to say - and a couple of teachers already eating. Scorpius went in to grab a roll and some cold meat from the Ravenclaw table, and went back out again.

The great door was open on one side, and he went through it onto the stone staircase that led down to the grounds. He sat on the bottom step and ate his breakfast, brushing crumbs off his school robes onto the grass. It was a warm morning for September, and he pulled his sleeves up to his elbows before unzipping the guitar case.

His fingers found their way automatically onto the strings. His fingertips were a little soft, as they always were after three months of not playing, but he ignored their tenderness as he picked out an experimental melody, pausing occasionally to adjust a string. The sun was just coming up over the horizon, and the sky was a greyish purple shot through with orange.

He changed to a new chord and began one of his favourite tunes from his old Learn-To-Play books.

_Early one morning_

_Just as the sun was rising_

_I heard a maiden singing in the valley below_

_Oh don't deceive me_,
Oh never leave me,

How could you use a poor maiden so?

Remember remember your vows to marry

Remember remember your promise to be true

Oh don't deceive me,

Oh never leave me,

How could you use a poor maiden so?

He hadn't realised how hard it would be, all summer with no music, harder than it had ever been before. Even if the restaurant had needed him back, he doubted he would have been able to make enough money to bribe all the servants that would notice his absence. And his father was angry with him enough already. He barely spoke a word to him, even on the few occasions that they ate together. His mother was never mentioned again.

Gay is the garland, and fresh are the roses

I've culled from my garden to bind upon thy brow.

Oh don't deceive me,

Oh never leave me,

How could you use a poor maiden so?

Thus sang the maiden, her sorrows bewailing

Thus sang the pretty maiden in the valley below

Oh don't deceive me, Oh never leave me,

How could you use a poor maiden so?

He had been worried that his father might have hurt her, or the baby. He knew he shouldn't think such things about his own father, but Draco had boasted enough in Scorpius' youth about his ability to kill that he couldn't help but return to it again and again in his mind.

He had written to Albus out of desperation, not really sure what would come of it, but Teddy's information had lifted a great weight off his mind. In hindsight it would have made more sense to contact Teddy directly, but he didn't have his address, and without an owl he was still forced to use Muggle post unless someone sent him an owl first. He had to keep his Muggle money well-hidden, too, in defence against all the maids who seemed so insistent on cleaning his room every day. He was glad, in any case, that his mother and half-brother were safe. Even if it did hurt that his mother did not once contact him. He could only hope that it was because she feared angering her husband, not because she didn't care.

Early one morning

Just as the sun was rising

I heard a maiden singing in the valley below
Oh don't deceive me,
Oh never leave me,

How could you use a poor maiden so?

He thumbed the last few chords gingerly and blew on his fingers, then flinched as someone behind him clapped. He looked round and let out a sigh of relief when he saw who it was. "Morning Professor," he said, firing off a three-fingered salute.

Neville chuckled. "Just when you thought you were safe. You should know I check all the Greenhouses at about this time, most mornings."

Scorpius shook his head and put the guitar back in its case. "So you weren't spying on me?"

"Perish the thought, Mr Malfoy. You're very good with that instrument. I hadn't realised."

"Thanks," Scorpius said, making a show of zipping up the case to hide his embarrassment.

"And how was your summer?" Professor Longbottom asked as he joined Scorpius on the climb up the stairs to the Entrance Hall.

Scorpius rolled his eyes. "Don't ask."

"That good?"

"Fan-bloody-tastic."

Neville raised his eyebrows. "I'll ignore that, since it's the first day back. Remember, you can always…"

"Come and talk to you, yeah, yeah, I know. See you in Herbology, Professor."

Albus and Rose were sitting at the Ravenclaw table, and Rose gave him a look of mingled annoyance and relief as he came in. "Where on earth were you?" she asked, handing him his timetable.

"Just outside," he said defensively. He could hardly hide the reason for his early morning outing - the guitar case was attracting a few looks from students and teachers alike. "I didn't want to wake anyone."

"Did you at least eat something?" she demanded.

"Yes mother," Scorpius told her, stealing a piece of sausage off her plate. She swiped at his hand, too late.

"Boys," she muttered.

"Oh good, Muggle Studies first," he said, examining his timetable.

"We have Care of Magical Creatures," Albus sighed. "I wonder what new way Hagrid will have come up with to kill us all this year?"

"I vote griffins," said Peter, the new Ravenclaw Prefect, from across the table.

"I call fairies!" called out Janey, the other new Ravenclaw Prefect, and everyone laughed.
Scorpius left them all joking about Care of Magical Creatures, and dropped off his guitar at Ravenclaw Tower before going to Muggle Studies. He made it just on time, as Professor Clearwater was just closing the door.

"Oh good," she said, smiling as he hurried up to her. "I was worried we might have lost you this year."

"No fear, Professor," he replied, grinning at her, and looked around for a seat. The only one remaining was near the back, next to a Gryffindor girl he didn't know well. He had to peek at the name scribbled on the cover of her textbook to remind himself of her first name. "Hi Stacy," he said, smiling at her.

She looked up at him in surprise. "Hi," she said, after a moment's hesitation. The awkwardness of this exchange soon had to be set aside, however, as Professor Clearwater starting writing the year's reading list on the blackboard. It seemed to go on forever, and this time there were no printed and plastic-bound versions to be handed out, they were entire books. Scorpius wondered, as he copied the list, how he was going to afford them all. There weren't many spare copies around of Muggle books, especially as many of them had only been added to the list recently. Perhaps he could come up with an excuse to write home for money.

He worried about this for most of the lesson, while they went round the room and shared Muggle-related experiences they had had over the holidays. When they came around to him, he had to admit that he hadn't been able to go into Muggle Paris at all, except to send one letter. Since the previous year he had spent a good fifteen minutes raving about the shops, and cars, and street theatre, this announcement was met with some surprise and disappointment by his classmates.

"Is that why you look so upset?" Stacey asked him unexpectedly at the end of class.

"What?" he said, before the question had really registered.

"You keep frowning. Because you didn't get to meet any Muggles this summer?"

He blinked at her for a minute as he tried to understand the question. He noticed that she was quite pretty, with thick chocolate-brown hair tied elegantly into a braid wound around her head, smooth olive skin, and very dark eyes. "No," he said eventually. "I guess I was just wondering how I'm going to pay for all these books." He flushed at that, he didn't usually like to discuss his financial problems with anyone, but her question had more or less startled it out of him.

"Oh," she said, putting out her bottom lip and chewing on the top one. "What do you usually do?"

"Borrow them from people," he explained. "Or use my parents' old ones, but they don't have any Muggle books at all. Obviously," he added, lamely.

She giggled, and he couldn't help smiling back. "How about this," she suggested. "I'm going to owl order some this week and get the rest at Hogsmeade. We can share them if you want."

At this he thought he must have flushed even redder. "I can't do that," he protested. By now, the rest of the class had left, and Professor Clearwater was standing expectantly by the door for them to follow. "I do have some money - maybe I could help you pay for them?"

She shrugged. "If you like," she agreed. "We could go to Hogsmeade together and look for them."

"Er... okay," he said.

"Hurry up you two, I haven't got all day," Professor Clearwater called, and they were forced to exit.
the classroom. Scorpius wasn't sure if he should say something else to Stacey, but she was already walking down the corridor with a friend, and he was left staring after her in confusion.

"She said what?" was Albus' reaction, later, when Scorpius pushed through his embarrassment enough to tell the story. "You mean you've got a date for Hogsmeade already? It's the first day!"

"It's not a date," Scorpius said quickly. "We're going book shopping."

"She obviously likes you," Rose said, without looking up from her book.

"I've hardly spoken to her before today! She's a Gryffindor, and most Gryffindors won't even meet my eyes in a corridor - family and friends of present company excepted," Scorpius argued.

"I can't believe you've got a date already," Albus groaned.

"Oh shut up."

~*-R-*~

~*-R-*~

Albus needn't have worried. Over the next few weeks, no less than six girls asked Rose, some more outright than others, whether her cousin was taking anyone to Hogsmeade. By the time the actual weekend rolled around, he had three or four serious offers.

"Just pick one already!" she said exasperatedly, interrupting the boys' discussion on the subject. "They're all just as silly as each other."

"Thanks," Albus said, bristling.

"I think this whole thing is stupid anyway," she sighed, not for the first time. "Who decided it was compulsory to go in pairs to Hogsmeade?"

"No one's asked her yet," Albus said to Scorpius in a stage whisper. Scorpius gave her a look so pathetically pitying that she thought she might scream.

"If you must know," she said through gritted teeth. "Someone has actually asked me, but I didn't see the point in saying yes. We're all going to the same place, aren't we? What does it matter who I 'go with'?"

"Who asked you?" Scorpius asked.

"None of your business," she said.

"You're making it up," Albus accused. She threw a book at him, which he dodged. Damn Seeker reflexes.

It was one of the Hufflepuff boys who had tentatively asked her, a few days ago after Herbology while the boys were busy talking to Lizzie and Belinda. His name was Gary, and he was quite sweet, she supposed. It was certainly nice to be thought of. But something had made her say no, some sense of ridiculousness that she found hard to put into words.

After another two days of Albus' agonising over his decision, however, she found peer pressure starting to weigh on her. Sitting with the other Ravenclaws at dinner, she saw Gary passing and got
out of her seat to catch up with him.

"I was wondering if your offer was still open?" she asked, using all her willpower not to blush.

He blinked at her, plainly as embarrassed as she was. "Of course," he said after a moment's hesitation, and then frowned as if wishing he had said something else.

"All right then," she said quickly before he could change his mind. "I'll meet you in the Entrance Hall, I guess."

When she got back to the Ravenclaw table, Albus was almost doubled over with paroxysms of laughter. Scorpius didn't seem nearly as amused. "There, now you're the last to have a date," Rose said sharply to her cousin, which sobered him up quickly. "Now put all but one of those girls out of their misery and have done. You're as bad as James."

Albus gave her a hard look, muttered something about having homework to do, and left the table.

"What?" Rose demanded, at Scorpius' expression.

"You did that just to make a point," he said, frowning.

"So?"

"So, that's a bit unfair on Gary, isn't it? Imagine how you'd feel if someone asked you out to make a point."

She stared at him. It wasn't like him to even notice social problems, let alone comment on them. "It wasn't just to make a point," she said lamely, refusing to admit that his words made her feel just a bit ashamed.

"You still needn't," he said, picking up his bag. "I'd be going alone too if Stacey hadn't asked me. It's not a competition."

"I didn't say it was!" she snapped.

He seemed to flinch - for a moment she saw the shy, eleven-year-old child she had determined to befriend, all that time ago. Then he shrugged. "Suit yourself," he said, and followed Albus out of the Great Hall.

She was forced to avoid both boys for the rest of the week. She felt deep down that she was sulking over something, though she wasn't sure what. It wasn't as though she hadn't been asked, after all. Unfortunately, since the girl's dormitory was the only place she could be sure of not being bothered by Albus or Scorpius, she was forced to endure her dorm-mates opinions on the subject.

"You're probably just jealous that they're spending time with other girls," Yuni said matter-of-factly, a suggestion which everyone else seemed to agree with.

"I am not," Rose gasped in horror. "Al is my cousin! And Scorp is... is... my best friend. Why should I care what girls they want to hang out with?"

"Maybe you should make some new friends," Priya suggested, in her quiet way. "You do spent a lot of time with them."

Rose didn't quite know what to say to that, since it was true, but it just made her angrier all the same. "Al is being a git," she argued, mainly to herself. "Stringing all those girls along. And Scorp just said yes to the first random Gryffindor to ask him! He doesn't even know her! And all Al's girls just want
to go with him because of who his dad is, and you can't tell me that shouldn't bother him, and I think it would have, last year."

"Boys get that way," Janey said knowingly. "I have three brothers. Trust me, once the hormones kick in, they'll go after any pretty face."

"Or a pretty bum," Yuni put in, and the girls giggled. Rose felt her face blush bright red.

"Screw them," Janey said shrugging. "Go have a good time with Gary, why not? You like him, right?"

Rose hesitated. "Er... he's a nice guy, I guess..."

"And nice looking!" Yuni agreed. "Sometimes he looks like he's a bit lost, but he is a Hufflepuff."

"That's House-ist," Rose sighed.

"True though."

Hours later, when everyone had gone to sleep, Rose lay looking up at the canopy of her four-poster bed, listening to the rhythmic sound of Midnight's purring where she lay curled up on the pillow.

She knew that boys 'got that way', as Janey put it, as well as anyone. She was old enough to remember how Teddy had got at Albus' age, less interested in playing with his Godfather's kids, spending most of his time writing bad poetry and spending hours getting his hair just right to impress girls. James and Fred had both got the girl bug early. But for some reason she had just never imagined it happening to Albus. And if you'd have told her a year or two ago that Scorpius would agree to go on a date with an almost complete stranger, she'd have laughed in your face.

She rolled over and tried to go to sleep, but it was several hours before her brain would stop worrying at her with excuses for her friends and for herself, trying to decide what she should do next.

~*-A-*~

~*-A-*~

Albus could tell how much it had cost Scorpius to come down on his side, and he was grateful for it. It was times like this you needed a best mate. They spent their evenings either in the common room or in the dormitory, Albus inventing Quidditch plays while Scorpius fiddled with his guitar. The last night before the Hogsmeade weekend, they were alone in the room, Gaius and Peter having stayed in the common room to do their homework.

Albus doodled on the corner of his playbook without really thinking about what he was supposed to be reading. "Am I really getting like James?" he asked eventually, unable to hold back his concern any longer.

Scorpius' fingers paused on the strings. He looked up and regarded him carefully. Albus almost squirmed under the examination - Scorpius could be quite intense when he was concentrating. "Not really," he said eventually. "I guess it's only natural you should have some things in common, being brothers."

"As long as we don't have being an ass in common," Albus muttered. There was a brief silence.
"You probably shouldn't have laughed at her," Scorpius said, putting his instrument down carefully, and Albus realised with chagrin that he'd started a Serious Conversation.

"Oh come on, you heard her. That was the most awkward proposal I ever heard." Scorpius gave him a hard look. "Oh fine." He chucked his quill onto the table and slumped in his chair. "It's just that I keep worrying why all these girls want me to go with them. Is it because they actually want to go with me, or because they just want to say they went with me?"

Scorpius smiled wryly. "The price of fame."

"It's not fame, it's noteriety," Albus shot back. "You get famous by actually doing stuff."

Scorpius sighed. "Honest truth?"

"God, please."

"The truth is, it might be a bit of both. People are going to be interested in you because of your father. Even Muggleborns know who he is within weeks of starting Hogwarts, so anyone who asks you out is going to know."

"Comforting, thank you," Albus muttered.

"You asked for the truth. But anyway, you can only hope there are other reasons. If you were an utter creep like Jian, I'd say it was all a fame thing. But you're not. So odds are at least one of them really likes you." He grinned, and Albus had to resist the urge to throw a pillow at him. "So which one did you pick, in the end?"

Albus sighed. "None of them."

"What?"

"Rose's right. It was dumb to let them all think I was going to go with them. I don't really want to spend my weekend with some girl I don't even know, anyway."

"Oh." Scorpius' face fell a little, and Albus realised his mistake.

"I'm sure Stacey's great, though," he said quickly.

"Yeah..."

"You'll have a good time."

"Mnhm."

"I'll probably just go to Honeydukes and WWW and make myself sick on sweets. I think Uncle George'll be there, he'll give me some free stuff."

"Okay."

"You can come too if you want, you know."

Scorpius made a face so pathetic that Albus almost laughed, but he held it back just in time. "Nah, I can't back out now," Scorp sighed. "Probably upset her no end. I'll see you when we get back."

"Yeah, probably a good idea," Albus agreed. "We need to spend less time together, people are going to start thinking we're a couple."
"Like you'd be so lucky," Scorpius muttered.

~*_S_*~

~*_S_*~

Scorpius started to wish, once the Hogsmeade trip finally came around, that he had spent more time getting to know Stacey beforehand. They had their first real conversation on the walk to the village, and he was surprised to find out that she had been born in Australia.

"You don't have an accent," he told her, almost accusatory.

"Neither do you," she shot back. "Didn't you grow up in France?"

"I phased it out," he told her. "It was just another thing for people to make fun of me for. You?"

She giggled. "I grew up here," she told him. "We moved here a couple years after I was born."

"Oh," he said, feeling a bit foolish after his initial confusion. "And Muggle Studies?"

"I was terrible at secrecy when I was little. Mum wanted to send me to a Muggle primary school, but I talked about magic all the time and we nearly got in trouble with the Ministry. I'm still a bit of a loudmouth, honestly. Muggle Studies was Mum's idea. I like it though."

"Me too," Scorpius said, glad they at least had an interest in common.

"Oh everyone knows you do," she said, grinning. "Did your parents want you to do it as well?"

"Er... not exactly," Scorpius replied. "They don't actually know I'm doing it - don't tell anyone!"

She stared at him, apparently shocked. "You're doing a subject they don't know about?"

"Well they weren't going to let me do it if I told them, so yeah. It's not like I've murdered anyone," he added uncomfortably, when she continued to stare as though he'd grown an extra nose.

"Sorry," she said, "it's just that I can't imagine doing anything like that. Don't they read your exam results?"

"I get the owls before my father does and I just magic off Muggle Studies and reseal it. He never notices." Saying it out loud, and seeing the expression on her face, he was sorry they had even visited the subject as he now felt as though he had done something really wrong, where before it had all been just necessary. "So... bookshop?"

"Let's do that last," she insisted. "Otherwise we'll just be carrying them around. Do you want a drink or something?"

"Sure, okay," he said gratefully, thankful at the suggestion that he could do something other than awkward conversation. They went to the Three Broomsticks and ordered two Butterbeers. Scorpius had the presence of mind to pay for the drinks, though he could ill afford it, he thought it was definitely expected. She didn't argue, in any case, but sank into a squushy booth seat, leaving him to squeeze in after her.

From where he was sitting he could see several of the other students, from nervous-looking third years being eyed carefully by the teachers, to a few swaggering seventh years. James Potter was, for
once, not with the Weasley twins but sitting very close to his new girlfriend, his hand over hers as he whispered something in her ear.

"So," Stacey said after her first sip. "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

Scorpius blinked. This seemed like a very random enquiry. "You mean after Hogwarts?"

She laughed. "Yeah, of course."

"Right. Er. Well, not sure, really."

"What NEWTs are you taking?"

"I hadn't really thought about it." This wasn't exactly true, but he wasn't sure whether or not she would understand if he told her the truth. "Do you know?"

"I think I'll start my own business. Like Madam Malkin's, you know, but not just robes. More fashionable stuff. There's some new gear in the continent that's like a fusion of Muggle and Wizard clothes, really cool. I'll show you a catalogue."

Scorpius was non-plussed. His clothes were not really something he thought about beyond being clean and fitted. "Sounds good," he said, his throat constricting slightly so that his voice squeaked unhappily. Inwardly he cursed his late development - he had thought for sure that his voice was done breaking. But maybe it was just nerves. He certainly felt more nervous than he had at the beginning of this whole outing.

He was quickly realising that he was not good at talking to people he didn't really know. It was hard to show an interest in things he knew nothing about. And perhaps worst of all, he didn't think he could share anything about himself, not after her reaction to his semi-secret timetable. His family problems were something he didn't feel comfortable talking about with anyone, even his best friends. And as for his music - the one thing he really liked about himself - what if she laughed at him?

Out of the corner of his eye he saw a flash of red hair, and looked over Stacey's shoulder to see Rose coming into the pub with Gary. Suddenly he felt an inexplicable surge of anger at them - or perhaps just Gary - as the big Hufflepuff boy helped Rose to take off her cloak and went to buy her a drink. What was she doing, coming to Hogsmeade with that boy she hardly even knew, just to show that she could?

"Scorpius?"

He tore his eyes away and looked back at Stacey.

"You're frowning again."

He ran a hand through his hair, scratching where the bristle at the back of his neck was starting to grow and itch. "Sorry. Go on."

She launched into another speech about the European wizard fashion label, and after a while he was counting down the time until they could leave, get their books and go back to school, and feeling horribly guilty for it.

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Rose was also finding it hard to focus on her partner for the afternoon. He had brought her to the Three Broomsticks for drinks and seemed to be happy to just stay there for the whole afternoon, chatting to his mates in Hufflepuff, until she managed to convey as subtly as she could that she wanted to do some shopping. Lizzie and Belinda waved to her as they left, and she had to pretend she didn't see them giggling and blowing kisses. She went to the bookshop and the Apothecary, all the while feeling like she was boring Gary, who picked up a few things but didn't buy anything. Then she hesitated. "My uncle is supposed to be working," she said, pointing to Weasley's Wizard's Wheezes. "Is it okay if we pop in for a moment?"

He shrugged. "Sure, why not? I forgot you were one of those Weasleys."

Rose wasn't sure what to make of this. "Which Weasleys?"

"You know, the joke shop. It's just a name until you realise it's, like, your name."

She couldn't help but laugh at that. "That makes no sense."

He smiled shyly. "If you say so."

They went into the shop, by now full of Hogwarts students. A few harried looking salespeople were doing their best to keep up with demand, running from the counter to the shelves to get products, put through purchases and answer questions. The crowd was thick and bustling, and she took Gary's hand in order to drag him through the throng towards the back room. The door was ajar and she went in.

The room was larger than the available standing space suggested, most of it being taken up by boxes and crates of stock. There was a desk and chair, behind which her Uncle George was sitting. Albus was there also, perching on the edge of the desk and eating some kind of orange toffee on a stick. He raised an eyebrow at them as they came in, and Rose dropped Gary's hand quickly as though it had burnt her.

"Rosie!" George exclaimed, standing and coming to give her a hug. "I was hoping I'd see you."

"It's madness out there," Rose said, putting a hand to her flushed face.

"Biggest sales day of the year for Hogsmeade," George said, grinning. "Who's your friend?"

"Gary Thornton," Gary introduced himself, shaking the man's hand. "Pleasure to meet you, sir."

"Good, good. Hufflepuff, eh? Well. Wheezes' fan? Excellent. Have a toffee." He handed them each one of the toffee sticks, which Rose regarded dubiously.

"What does it do?" she asked, peering at it as thought it might go off at any moment.

"Just turns your tongue different colours. Not everything we do is designed to kill or maim."

The things we do, Rose noted, not for the first time. George did almost all of the design and magic behind the products, but he still said 'we'. The casual listener might assume he was referring to his business partners, manufacturers and store assistants, but she knew he was unconsciously including his late brother.

"So how's things?" George said innocently. Rose sensed immediately that Albus had already told him about their argument. She shot him a glare, but he wasn't looking at her, suddenly very interested
in his toffee stick.

"Fine thanks," she said defiantly.

"Not getting into any mischief?"

"No, uncle."

"Shame."

"You've got Fred, Roxie and James for that, George," Albus pointed out, the first thing he'd said so far.

"I know, but the more the merrier, right? What am I going to do when those three pack up and leave? Someone has to be there to keep me updated on the market."

"I'm sure Lily and Hugo would be more than happy to," Rose said flatly.

"Ravenclaws," George sighed, shaking his head.

Rose had wanted to spend some more time with her uncle, but she knew that Albus was resenting her interruption, and he didn't look like leaving any time soon. "Well then," she said decidedly. "Just wanted to say hello. Say hi to Mum and Dad for me."

"Will do." She could sense both their eyes on her and Gary as they left, and when she closed the door she thought she heard a chuckle. Suddenly she was so furious she could scream. Gary had to chase her out of the shop as she stormed through the crowd and out onto the street.

"Want to go back to the Three Broomsticks?" he asked.

She looked up at him. She had done all that she had come to do, after all, and he had been nice enough to trail around after her. She should probably do what he wanted to do, now, even though all she wanted was to go back to her dormitory and curl up on her bed with Midnight. "Okay then," she said decidedly. "Just wanted to say hello. Say hi to Mum and Dad for me."

"It's okay if you don't," he told her, earnestly. "I can walk you back."

"But I feel bad," she said, chewing anxiously on her lower lip. "You did all the stuff I wanted…"

"I don't mind, honestly," he said, so that she could almost believe him. "Come on." And he led her past the pub and back onto the path towards the school. She felt terrible, and even worse still when the walk back to the castle was completed in almost total silence, broken only by a half-hearted comment by him on the colour of the sky, which was turning a greyish purple as the sun dove behind clouds and drew intricate patterns in the atmosphere. She found she didn't have the heart to enjoy it, however.

They went through the grounds, up the main stairs and into the Entrance Hall, where Gary paused. "I'm this way," he said, gesturing in the direction of the Hufflepuff common room.

"I'm this way," Rose said, with a kind of guilty relief, nodding towards the marble staircase. Another awkward silence.

"So… I'll see you in Herbology," he said, smiling.

"Yeah," she smiled back at him. Perhaps it would be all right, after all.
Then he leaned forward, and almost before she knew what was happening, he had kissed her on the mouth.

For a second she was too shocked to do anything at all. Then, with a cold tremor that ran through her body like a ghost, she took a hurried step back and her hand went inexplicably to her pocket for her wand.

"Jees," Gary exclaimed, holding up his hands. "Sorry!"

"What are you doing?" she demanded, her eyes flooding with tears despite all her willpower bearing against it.

"Sorry, it's just… we were having a good time, you introduced me to your family, you let me walk you… I thought it was - "

With a thrill of agonised embarrassment, she realised that he had actually enjoyed the walk back. Where for Rose, who was normally a vibrant, vocal and expressive girl, it had been an agony of silence, he was a shy Hufflepuff boy who liked being quiet. "No!" she said, so firmly that she regretted it straight away, the expression on his face became pure hurt and confusion. "It's not - I - I'm sorry, it's just… I'm sorry."

"Oh."

"Sorry," she said again, crossing her arms over her chest as her hair fell forward into her face. She didn't know what else to say.

"No problem." He gave her one last look of unhappiness that made her stomach churn with guilt, and turned away. "See you."

She watched him for a few moments as he walked back towards Hufflepuff with his shoulders slumped forward, before she fled up the marble staircase. The only blessing, she thought, as she made her escape, was that no one had been around to see.

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When Scorpius got back to the common room - at long, long last - he found Rose tucked into the corner of an armchair, a book propped up on her knees. He was glad to see her - since the start of her sulking fit, she had mostly stayed in the dormitory, where he didn't dare go even if he thought she would talk to him. He went over to her and collapsed face-first into the nearest sofa. "Hi," he mumbled, his voice muffled by the squashy cushions.

"Hi," he heard her say, a strange tone to her voice that he couldn't quite place. "How was your day?"

"Bloody awful," he admitted, pulling himself up with reluctance onto his elbows. She was still looking down at her book, but the way she was sitting and the way she spoke made him feel almost at once that something was wrong. "You okay?"

"Mm hm."

He sat up and ducked his head to see under the shelter of her hair. He frowned when he saw that her eyes were red-rimmed. "You've been crying."
"No I haven't." But her voice caught and gave the lie to her words. Then she made a sad little noise and covered her face with her hands, and he didn't know what to do. Girls crying was not something he had any idea how to deal with.

"Rose…"

"Oh just go away," she sniffed. "I'm fine."

"No you aren't," he said, getting up and crossing to her chair. Midnight was curled up on the chair's arm, and she hissed at him angrily as he put out a tentative hand to her shoulder.

"Oh hush, you silly cat," she said, wiping at her eyes. But she didn't object to his hand.

A few people in the common room were staring, and Scorpius glared at them. "Come upstairs with me," he said firmly.

To his surprise, she didn't argue, but let him drag her out of the chair and up the stairs to the boys' dormitory. Peter and Gaius were in there, but at Scorpius' pointed look, they gathered up their game of Exploding Snap and vacated the room. He sat her on his bed and brushed her hair back from her face. "Talk to me?" he suggested. If there was one thing he had learned from Stacey, it was that girls liked to talk.

She looked up at him and burst into tears almost immediately. He was forced to sit awkwardly on the edge of the bed, one foot slowly going numb, with his arm around her as she sobbed into his robes. She had to lean down considerably to do so, since he was still a head shorter than her, but if she was getting a crick in her neck, she didn't seem to care at all. He patted her hair and tried to make sense of the snatches of explanation that came between sobs.

"He did what?" he demanded, when she got to the climax of the story.

"Oh it was my fault," she sniffed, which in no way made Scorpius feel any less angry. "It's not that he did it, it's just that… that it was… it was my first kiss and it was … it was so terrible."

Scorpius recovered from his plots of revenge against Gary momentarily enough to say, "what did he do, slobber in your ear?"

She laughed wetly through her tears, and it was at that point that Albus came in. "What's going on?" he said, a concerned edge to his voice. "Peter said you were having a mental breakdown, or something."

"Oh Al." Rose sat up and rubbed her eyes. "Al, I'm so sorry for being so stupid. You were both right, it was silly and selfish and I was jealous - let's please be friends again?"

"We weren't not friends," Al said uncomfortably, coming over to them. "What's up with you?"

"Boy problems," Scorpius explained, rolling his eyes, and Rose punched him half-heartedly in the stomach. "Ow!"

"Was it Thornton?" Albus growled. "I'll hex his hands off."

Rose put her hand out to him and he reluctantly allowed her to pull him onto the bed so that she could hug him. Scorpius took the opportunity to shake out the numbness in his foot. "I missed you two," she sighed. "Let's not fight ever again."

"Deal," Scorpius said, and Albus shrugged.
"What's in this arrangement for us?" he asked with mock superstition.

"I'll try extra hard in Quidditch from now on," she promised him. "And I won't say another bad word against Scorp's music - unless he misses any classes," she added quickly.

"Are we allowed to date?" Albus enquired.

"No," Rose giggled. "I want you both just for myself."

"Rosie!" Albus protested. "Yuck."

"Not like that, plonker," she said, putting her arms around both of them. "Just promise we'll stay friends. No matter what happens."

"I still dunno," Albus sighed. "It seems incredibly final. Can we read the small print?"

Rose started laughing, unable to hold back, and everything seemed to be all right again.

Scorpius, nevertheless, determined to keep a close eye on both Rose and Gary Thornton in future.

Chapter End Notes

Please visit my fanfic blog: http://misssaigonfic.tumblr.com/
Ask me questions, get some insights!
Chapter Summary

"That's not the point, there's not going to be another Tournament, if there was, I wouldn't be in it, and I have no desire to go splashing around in the deep end of the lake," Albus said firmly. But he did want to come top in Defence Against the Dark Arts. It was practically expected of him. And if he hadn't known that before, it was brought into sharp relief by the announcement that the Recent Wizarding History class would be held on the 10th of March.

Chapter Notes

Music warning: There's music in this chapter! Visit the music post and set yourself up before you start reading!

Visit http://misssaigonfic.tumblr.com/musicpost for this song and all the music featured in this story so far

See the end of the chapter for more notes

 Scorpius felt a bit guilty when he found himself looking forward to Christmas at the Longbottoms' before he had even been asked. He was very sensible of the fact that they had, for three years now in a row, offered to share with him a day that was usually reserved for family. Of course, the pub had hundreds of visitors on Christmas, and they always claimed that one more made no difference, but it wasn't as if the pub guests got to sit with the family in their own dining room.

"Course you're coming," Lizzie said, when he tentatively and awkwardly enquired. "Thought you knew that already." She tossed back her long blonde hair and turned their Tamerine bush towards her. Scorpius, despite all his best efforts, was still no great shakes at Herbology. For a Ravenclaw he was positively dismal. Sitting with Lizzie in class helped, since she was a natural with plants and was able to explain things more patiently than Albus or Rose would have. "Everyone's looking forward to seeing you," she said now, stroking the leaves with her wand and smiling when they quivered in response.

"Everyone?" Scorpius said, raising his eyebrows.

"Well, Mum is," Lizzie conceded. "And Alice will too, I expect, when she sees you."
Scorpius doubted rather that the three year old girl would remember him in the slightest since last
year. "Will Tony be there?"

"Oh yeah, he's coming back for a week. Mum will be fussing over him a lot, fair warning, but it's
own fault for running off to Africa as soon as his NEWTs came."

Scorpius privately thought that being a Cursebreaker in Africa would be a pretty awesome job. Tony
had come top in Defence Against the Dark Arts, Herbology and Potions, much to his father's
obvious delight, though of course he couldn't boast about it except to other teachers.

"You have to take NEWT Herbology to be a Cursebreaker," Albus pointed out cruelly when he
brought this up at dinner.

Scorpius sighed. "Yeah. I wasn't really considering it. It'd just be nice to have an excuse to travel
around a bit. See more of the world."

"You could do that without an excuse," Rose suggested. "Just for fun."

Scorpius shrugged ruefully, thinking that no matter how many NEWTs he got, his father would not
be okay with travelling 'just for fun' under any circumstances.

It was difficult as usual to say goodbye to Rose and Albus as they left for the Christmas holidays. He
moped around Ravenclaw tower for a few days, doing homework in dribs and drabs and
occasionally borrowing a school broom to go flying. He had resigned himself to the fact that he
would never be much of a Quidditch player, but he thought cross country flying might not be out of
the question.

As usual there were very few Ravenclaws left in the tower, which made for a very lonely holiday.

Finally he woke up on Christmas day to a small pile of presents on his bed. He sat up eagerly and
turned them over, surprised to find that there were more than usual. He opened Rose's first. A
Muggle book - as if he didn't already have enough of those to read - and he smiled ruefully when he
saw the title. He must have told her that he liked Robin Hood, right? She couldn't have just known
that…

Albus had sent him a book on musical charms that had him engrossed for at last half an hour as he
flipped through the pages. Eventually he had to force himself to put it down in order to look at his
other presents. There were two more, one large and one small. The large one turned out to be from
his father. The note attached read:

Scorpius,

This box is spelled to keep anything you need safe. Use wisely.

Intrigued, he unwrapped the plain paper to find a wooden box, quite heavy, with iron hinges and a
small round keyhole. There were some strange runes around the side of the box, burnt black into the
wood. He studied them for a moment but was nonplussed. If only he hadn't dropped Ancient Runes
in third year! He could ask Rose or Albus when they got back, he supposed. He opened the box
experimentally, to find it lined with velvet, and a small scroll with instructions for using the box in a
just-legible spidery script. The keyhole was for a wand, it turned out, and only the first wand to close
the box would be able to open it again.

He puzzled over the gift, which was the first his father had ever sent, if you didn't count the money,
which had been sent by his mother in any case. He wondered if the man was trying to tell him
something - about secrets? The only secret Scorpius could think of that his father knew about was
why his mother had left. Or perhaps his father was telling him that he knew one of Scorpius secrets - he shivered inwardly at this very real possibility. There were so many by now that it was hard to keep track of them, and the only reason he'd kept them for so long was that his father chose to isolate himself in his study, miles away in France, with no contact to anyone at Hogwarts. With a shudder he remembered the day he had come home from school, when his father had attacked him just for wanting to know the whereabouts of his own mother. How far would he go if he knew that his best friend was Harry Potter's son? But then why would he be giving him a way to keep more secrets? It didn't make sense.

In the end he gave up. Maybe it was just an old box he had found lying around (though a suspicious voice in his mind pointed out that the box looked new - and expensive). He turned his attention to the last gift. It was from Stacey.

Dear Scorpius,

Saw this and thought of you. See you in class when term starts!

He turned the little package over in his hands a few times. He had sat next to Stacey in Muggle Studies since the Hogsmeade village, but always managed to avoid her outside of class. It wasn't that he didn't like her, she was all right enough to get along with, but he wanted to make it clear that he had no further interest in dating her. He didn't think he could sit through another conversation about European wizarding fashion, and she was so disapproving of his familial relationships that it was difficult to share anything private with her whatsoever. He didn't want her to make the same mistake Thornton had made with Rose - he wasn't sure either of them could survive the embarrassment. She didn't seem to mind too much, and it had seemed that he could get away with it without having an awkward conversation. Until now, anyway.

He undid the wrapping very slowly, dreading whatever was inside. Eventually the contents of the gift fell into his lap, and he laughed. It was a pack of flash cards for wizards, with short explanations and translations of Muggle phrases. He flicked through them with amusement. He knew he was still a novice when it came to girls, but it seemed that she couldn't have sent a less romantic gift. It seemed that she just wanted to be friends after all.

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Christmas dinner came around too quickly, in the end. He had been so busy trying out some of the musical charms from Albus' present that he nearly didn't notice the time. He got dressed quickly in the shirt and trousers he had bought at Hogsmeade - between the Three Broomsticks, the bookshop and meeting all of Stacey's friends in the square. He was about to leave and was packing his guitar into its case when an idea struck him, and after a short internal struggle, took it with him.

Neville and Lizzie were waiting for him as usual in his office, and though they gave him some interested looks, didn't comment on the case slung across his back. He had to take it off to carry it through the Floo, and then Hannah was there to greet him. "Scorpius," she said, delightedly, and came over to hug him. He felt a little pang as her arms closed around him, remembering suddenly how long it had been since he had seen his mother, let alone hugged her. But then Hannah was ushering him into the dining room. "You brought your guitar!" she said, with pleased surprise. "How nice, you must play for us later - how are you? You look just the same!"

Scorpius sighed. "Yeah, I still hold out hope for a last minute growth spurt," he said, crossing his fingers dramatically.
The rest of the Longbottoms were already seated at the table. Tony, who on Scorpius' first visit had been pale and moody, was now lounging back in his chair, tanned, and, there was only one way to describe it - cool. In fact, Scorpius thought he looked very like Neville must have at eighteen. He wore a fiery-red robe open over a black vest and trousers. He returned Scorpius' wave with a smile that carried no trace of the sulky boy he had been at fifteen.

Alice was sitting in a chair raised to allow her to reach the table, swinging her chubby little legs, sporting a bright red ribbon in her short brown hair. "Alice, you remember Scorpius, don't you?" Hannah prompted, pointing him out to her daughter. "Say Happy Christmas!"

"Hee Cwismas!" Alice giggled.

"Happy Christmas," Scorpius said, grinning. "You've grown a lot!"

"Too fast," Hannah said fondly, kissing the little girl on top of her head.

They were all about to sit down when one of the bar staff knocked on the door looking harried. Hannah hurried over and came back frowning.

"Problem?" Neville asked.

"It's all falling apart down there," Hannah said. "I'll have to go help, I'm afraid."

"But you'll miss dinner!" Lizzie exclaimed.

"I'm sorry sweetheart, they just can't manage without me at the moment."

"Suggestion?" Neville put in. "Why don't we all move downstairs, that way we'll still see you, me and Tony can give you a hand if you need it..."

"What about me?" Lizzie demanded.

"Lizzie, you have a guest..." Hannah pointed out, and Scorpius suddenly felt extremely awkward and in the way.

"I could help too," he said hurriedly.

"Yes!" Lizzie said quickly. "Scorp's been a waiter, Mum."

"Have you?" Neville was frowning at him.

"Yeah, two summers," Scorpius said quickly, leaving out the fact that the last summer had been a year and a half ago, and he hadn't been a waiter so much as general dogsbody. "It was a busy restaurant too, I'm sure I could - "

"All right, all right, you can all help," Hannah said, throwing on her apron. "So long as someone stays with Alice, unless you want to suggest that she starts carrying plates around herself!"

The Leaky Cauldron was indeed full to bursting, and some customers were clearly becoming impatient for their Christmas dinner. The staff, though clearly stressed by the unexpected flood of people, were all friendly and welcomed all the help they could get. Neville went to help tend the bar while Scorpius and Tony joined forces in getting food out to the tables. Scorpius soon got the hang of their numbering system and, being smaller, was much more able to manoeuvre around the heaving tables, even if he did struggle a little under the weight of some of the courses. He worked up a sweat within half an hour, and shortly afterwards was happy to swap with Lizzie, who was minding Alice
in the kitchen. The Longbottoms' Christmas dinner had been left in a haphazard pile on a counter, from which the girls had been picking bits and pieces, and Scorpius gratefully started digging into some turkey. He was a bit nervous at first at being in charge of Alice, who was, for her size, incredibly wriggly and inexplicably heavy, but he discovered the trick of bouncing her up and down on his knee when she got fidgety, and within minutes she seemed to have decided that they were best friends.

Tony came back after a while and started his own dinner on a hastily-washed plate, shaking his head when Scorpius asked if he should relieve him. "We can afford a break, I think," he said. "Most people are eating, and the people who are getting paid for this have things under control now. Thanks for helping out though, it's chief of you."

"No problem," said Scorpius.

"Man I missed this food," Tony said, shaking his head as he dug into his turkey. "When I think of the years I spent moaning about how all I got at home was pub fare!"

"You did?" Scorpius couldn't imagine anyone complaining of Hannah's menu.

"Oh yeah, I was the worst kind of teenager, you must have noticed. Still a bit of a smartarse, really, but my mentor's working on beating that out of me." He grinned, and Scorpius realised this was a joke. "You must have thought I was a right git."

Scorpius wondered awkwardly how he was supposed to answer this.

"Thought so," Tony nodded, correctly taking his silence as assent. "It's no excuse, but I was pretty sore back then. Dad being my teacher and my Head of House, and all. Got better after fifth year, but I just felt like I had to prove something all the time."

"I get that," Scorpius said meaningfully.

Tony paused in the act of picking apart his turkey with his fingers. "Yeah, I guess you do," he said after a moment.

"Scor!" Alice prompted then, flexing her fingers in demand for more food.

"Is she being a nuisance?" Hannah asked, bustling in from the bar with gravy stains on her apron, and lifting Alice onto her hip while the child made whimpering protests at being separated from her new friend.

"No, not at all," Scorpius said quickly. He realised he quite liked looking after Alice, and, with another one of those uncomfortable pangs that being around the Longbottom family seemed to set off, wondered if he would get along so well with his own brother, if they ever met.

Lizzie and Neville came back for food before much longer, and they ate around the tiny table in the kitchen, informally with all the wrong types of cutlery and sometimes none at all, heaping food randomly onto plates or scooping directly into their mouths off of platters. Despite the madness of it all though, Scorpius found himself having the best time he had had in ages.

When they had eaten, Hannah took Alice upstairs to bed, and everyone else went back into the bar, apparently to socialise. Scorpius went with them, unsure of what else to do, as Neville introduced him to some of the regular patrons.

"Dean!" he exclaimed when he reached one of the back tables. "I didn't know you were here! When did you get back?"
"Last week," replied the tall, dark man, standing to shake Neville's hand. "The food here is good as ever mate, and the alcohol even more so, tell your wife for me."

"Tell her yourself, she'll be down soon," Neville said, slapping the man on the back. "Scorpius, this is Dean Thomas, one of my old Gryffindor Housemates. Dean, Scorpius Malfoy."

"Thought it might be," Dean said, turning his attention to Scorpius. "He brought our food - I tell you mate, I damn near shit myself."

"Dean," Neville said warningly. Scorpius looked up at his teacher, startled. He had never heard that tone of voice from him before.

"No offence meant," Dean amended, nodding his head in Scorpius' direction. "But he is the spit and image - I nearly went for my wand." Scorpius realised miserably that if he was Neville's housemate, he would have known his own father as well.

"Sorry," Scorpius mumbled.

Dean looked as though he might be about to say something else, but Neville interrupted him. "Scorpius, do me a favour, hop back to the bar and see if Evan needs any help."

Scorpius nodded, and fled. He risked one quick back, but could only see Neville's back as the conversation continued. The look on the tall man's face though, was that of someone being admonished.

He helped the barman wipe glasses for a while, until Neville came back around and beckoned to him. Scorpius followed him to a door that led out to a walled courtyard - the entrance, he would find out later, to Diagon Alley. "Sorry about that," Neville said, before Scorpius could say anything. He looked embarrassed, Scorpius realised. Or even ashamed.

"It's okay," Scorpius replied hurriedly. "Really, I'm used to it - I don't mind."

"People don't have any right to say things like that to you," Neville said, his brows knitted tightly. "You don't have to put up with it - or apologise! For Merlin's sake, it's not your fault people are idiots."

"I know."

"Dean's a good guy," Neville explained, sighing. "He just went through a lot - we all did - hard to forget, sometimes… he's been in Italy, wouldn't have heard about you being at Hogwarts…"

"It's really okay," Scorpius said.

Neville looked as though he would have liked to say more, but thought better of it. "I didn't know you were a waiter," he said instead.

"At Le Moulin, in Paris," Scorpius explained, rubbing his arms - it was freezing in the courtyard, and the corners of the walls were decorated with little heaps of snow.

"And… your father was all right with that, was he?"

"Yes sir," Scorpius said, then, at Neville's dubious expression, realised that his teacher was imagining the worst. "He was!" Scorpius protested, then realised that this was not entirely true. "I mean, he agreed to let me take the job." This was true, after all, he just hadn't known that there was any more to it than that first summer. "We needed the money, and he let mother had a job, so I said
why not me, and he said yes as long as I let him manage the money."

This did not seem to mollify Neville at all. "It helped buy my school books and robes and things," Scorpius tried.

"I see." He still didn't look happy, but to Scorpius' relief did not pursue the subject. "Well, you're good at it. Thank you for helping, I know it's probably not what you expected when we invited you…"

"Oh I don't mind," Scorpius said, grinning. "I enjoyed it!"

At this point the door opened and Hannah poked her head out. "There you are!" she said, relieved. "What on earth are you doing out in the freezing cold - come in at once, both of you! Scorpius, I was wondering if you should like to play us some music now, before the drunk singing starts? I'm sure everyone would love to hear…"

Scorpius slowly realised that she meant he should play for the entire pub. He wouldn't have minded just the Longbottoms, he thought he could have faced up to any teasing from Lizzie or polite fiction of interest from Tony, but everyone? He felt himself go pale despite the sudden heat of the pub as they stepped inside. "Er…" he stammered. Hannah was looking at him expectantly, and when he opened his mouth to refuse, he found himself saying "Yeah, all right."

"Are you mad?" he demanded of himself as he went slowly up the stairs to the apartment to get his guitar. The biggest audience he had ever had was his three dormitory mates, who were not so much an audience as a group of people who, for the sin of living with him, had no choice but to listen to him practice. He paused on the stairs on the way down again, feeling his stomach roll and half hoping he would throw up so he could plead over-indulgence.

But that would hurt Hannah's feelings, he realised dimly, and made himself go down the rest of the stairs and into the kitchen. Lizzie was taking her turn with Alice, and she looked sympathetically at the look on his face.

"You don't have to, you know," she reminded him. "Mum can get carried away, just tell her you'd rather not."

Scorpius took a deep breath. "Your mum and dad have been nice to me, and they didn't have to," he reminded her, though part of him was protesting in her favour. "They let me share their Christmas. Anyway if I'm going to be a musician I have to start somewhere, right?"

She grinned and lifted Alice onto her hip. "C'mon then. We don't get live music a lot, but there's a sort of fold-out stage." She led him into the pub and past the tables, still full of people taking their time over their Christmas dinners; couples and families alike. There was indeed a small platform in the corner that Scorpius' hadn't noticed while hauling food between tables. Someone had thoughtfully put a stool on it, but Scorpius had to take a couple more deep breaths before he could bring himself to step onto it, where everyone could see him. As he sat and swung his guitar around, however, no one turned to stare at him. In fact, everyone kept on with their conversations, drowning out Lizzie saying 'good luck!' as she went to stand at the bar with her parents. Scorpius relaxed a little. If no one was going to take any notice of him anyway, surely it didn't matter what he did...

He strummed a very experimental chord, leaning close to the strings to hear the tuning, and as he raised his head, the babble gradually faded away, until there was almost total silence, except for the occasional clink of glasses. Scorpius swallowed, his fingers paused over the strings. His mouth felt dry as a bone and his leg was shaking under the curve of his instrument, his stomach felt as though he had spent half a day at sea. More silence.
Suddenly he realised he couldn't go through with it, but the thought of the humiliation of just getting up and leaving kept him frozen in his seat. What the hell was he going to do?

Then he heard a little child's giggle and the word "Scor!" shouted into the frozen silence. He looked up to see Alice and Lizzie waving from the bar, and Neville nodded encouragingly. Hannah made silent clapping motions, and he felt the worst of his terror fade. Keeping his eyes on the family who had been kind enough to welcome into their home, four years in a row, he took a deep breath, and sang into the silence;

*I'm dreaming of a white Christmas*

*Just like the ones I used to know*

*Where the treetops glisten,*

*and children listen*

*To hear sleigh bells in the snow*

*I'm dreaming of a white Christmas* With every Christmas card I write May your days be merry and bright *And may all your Christmases be white* I'm dreaming of a white Christmas With every Christmas card I write May your days be merry and bright *And may all your Christmases be white*

He felt a flood of sweet relief go through him as he played the final chord and the room burst into applause. He didn't care if they were clapping because he was good, or because it was over, or just because they'd had a few too many Firewhiskeys, just that they were clapping, and the sound of the room clapping was like an elixir that gave him the strength to stand up, bow, and leave the stage. When he finally reached the bar, Hannah came around to give him another hug, and Tony shot him a thumbs up. Suddenly it didn't matter that he felt as though he was about to collapse. He was no longer scared of anything, and he knew that this - *this* - was what he was supposed to do for the rest of his life.

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It was a good thing he decided this, because an incident a few weeks into the start of term was fated to put him off one of his former favourite subjects forever.

He woke drowsily to Albus yelling his name. "Scorp, wake up! C'mon damnit! SCORPIUS!"

For some reason, despite the obvious urgency, he couldn't be bothered to sit up. "What?" he murmured, opening his eyes a crack to see a pale bespectacled face looking down at him in panic. "M'tired."

"Mate, I've been trying to wake you for five minutes. Peter's already gone for Madam Pomfrey - no, don't you dare go back to sleep again - "

When he woke the next time, he felt a little more alert, Madam Pomfrey was leaning over him and there was a taste like grass in his mouth, which was as dry as parchment. "What 'appened?" he asked, rolling his tongue around in an effort to regain some moisture.

"You had an allergic reaction," the old nurse informed him crossly, as though this was his fault. "Did you have Potions yesterday?"
"Yeah..."

"What ingredients did you use?"

Scorpius stared up at her blankly. Tuesday morning suddenly seemed like a hundred years ago.

"We were making nightlights," Gaius volunteered. Scorpius saw the three other Ravenclaw boys hovering nearby. "Those glow-in-the-dark floating globes - Professor Patil thought it would be a fun -"

"I asked for ingredients, Mr Cooper, not your memoires. Did you use moonsilver?"

"Yes," Albus cut in quickly. "Dust of moonsilver - Professor Patil said that's why the globes are so expensive."

"Moonsilver is a rare but not unheard-of allergen among wizards," Madam Pomfrey said sternly. "Did Professor Patil mention that?"

The three boys looked at each other.

"Er... am I going to be okay?" Scorpius asked. His head still felt very heavy and his eyelids even more so. When he tried to move, his head swam uncomfortably.

Madam Pomfrey sighed. "This time, Mr Malfoy. Just don't handle any more dust of moonsilver without protective gloves and a facemask, and whatever you do, don't let anyone ever give you Veritaserum. That potion is laden with moonsilver, as you will no doubt learn at NEWT level."

"Fat chance of me doing NEWT potions," Scorpius complained after Madam Pomfrey had left and he had drunk the entire jug of water on the nightstand.

"You used to love Potions," Albus reminded him. "Remember?"

"That was back when I didn't know I was allergic to random ingredients," Scorpius replied. "Professor Patil's all right, but she's not like old Hillburn used to be." Hillburn probably wouldn't have nearly killed me, he thought ruefully. "Anyway it doesn't really matter what NEWTs I do. I'm going to be a musician."

"Yeah mate, good luck telling that to Professor Flitwick." Albus rolled his eyes. He and Rose had been surprised to hear of his Christmas performance, but were noticeably less than sanguine about his fresh and firm announcement of his life goal.

Scorpius sighed. "Times like this I wish I was in Gryffindor," he said. "Neville wouldn't think I was being silly."

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Scorpius was not the only one concerned about his NEWT selection. Of course, it depended on one's OWLS, so there was no real need to decide straight away, but even the Ravenclaws, by the end of February, were starting to feel the need to prioritise their OWL study towards subjects that were really going to matter in the long run. Albus felt guilty doing a rushed job on his Care of Magical Creatures homework, but he could only hope Hagrid would understand that he needed to read three chapters for Transfiguration and memorise all the ways of defeating various dark creatures for Defence Against the Dark Arts. Luckily he already knew quite a lot about werewolves, but he failed
to imagine what possible scenario would lead to him encountering a Grindylow, in real life.

"Didn't your dad fight a Grindylow during the Triwizard Tournament?" was Rose's answer to this complaint.

"That's not the point, there's not going to be another Tournament, if there was, I wouldn't be in it, and I have no desire to go splashing around in the deep end of the lake," Albus said firmly. But he did want to come top in Defence Against the Dark Arts. It was practically expected of him. And if he hadn't known that before, it was brought into sharp relief by the announcement that the Recent Wizarding History class would be held on the 10th of March.

Albus already knew about the class, of course; his brother and older cousins had all taken it towards the end of their fifth year. It was held with all four houses at once, and taught by Professor McGonagall herself. It had been introduced when it became necessary to educate the new generation of Hogwarts students about the Year of Terror and the war that had almost destroyed wizarding society in Britain, and held in fifth year despite the chaos of OWLs because it was the earliest age the students were considered able to handle the realities of the story. James had not said much about it at the time, but Al had sensed that his brother's classmates, even those he had been close with for years, were suddenly treating him differently, and privately dreaded the same thing happening to him. Scorpius was also miserable, not without good reason. Even Rose seemed nervous, and she was usually above such petty concerns.

"At least it's only one day," she said, though she didn't sound convinced. But it was a whole day.

When it came, they filed into the biggest classroom in the school, tables shoved together to fit them all in, feeling eyes on them already.

"Hurry up, please," Professor McGonagall called out from the head of the classroom. "It's not a formal dinner, your seating position is not important." The Gryffindors and Slytherins bunched up on opposite sides of the classroom, with the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs higgledy piggledy in the middle.

"Welcome," McGonagall continued, coming to stand in front of the teacher's desk. Despite her advanced age, she stood tall and ramrod-straight, her pepper-grey hair pulled back into a tight bun.

"As I'm sure you all know, today will be dedicated to educating you about the last rise and fall of Voldemort -" a few people jumped - "and to answer any questions you may have. I teach this class one day each year, so that Hogwarts students are prepared to ensure that such a terrible period in our history is not repeated.

"Some of you will know, personally, some of the people we are about to discuss, and it may even concern your fathers and mothers, grandparents, aunts and uncles. I understand that today may be difficult for some of you, for various reasons." It might have been Albus' imagination, but her gaze seemed to pause over the three Ravenclaws and Lizzie, sitting with them. Scorpius shuffled down in his chair. "If it becomes too much for you, please let me know." She raised her wand and used it to guide the chalk onto the chalkboard, drawing a timeline as she spoke.

"I would like to ask you to raise your hand if someone in your family was killed during the war."

Albus raised his hand and so did Rose, next to him, and Lizzie, on her other side. Over half the people in the room raised their hands, including Jian and a few of the other Slytherins. Scorpius was trying to sink even lower into his seat.

"The Year of Terror began with the death of Albus Dumbledore and ended on May 2nd 1998, the day we commemorate every year to remember those who died for us, and those who were killed
needlessly during the rise of Voldemort in the 1990s."

The chalk filled in the dates near the end of the timeline, and then McGonagall began at the beginning, describing how Voldemort had begun his political journey, condoning pureblood superiority and recruiting dark wizards to his cause. She told of how Dumbledore had formed the Order of the Phoenix to oppose him, and with another piece of chalk wrote their names on the board, the original members, in alphabetical order.


"Of these twenty-five," McGonagall continued. "Only five have survived. Two died of natural causes, the other eighteen were murdered by Voldemort or his Death Eaters, or were injured and died later from their injuries." No one made a sound; she had their full attention. "On Halloween night, 1981," she continued, and Albus resisted the urge to cover his face as she told the story of how Voldemort had attempted, and failed to kill the infant Harry Potter. "What happened that night was unclear for many years to come," she explained. "And the majority of the wizarding world believed Voldemort to have been killed, although his body was never found...." and so on, and so on. There was a break for lunch before they even got to the Year of Terror.

"He was fourteen!" Lizzie exclaimed as they pushed food unenthusiastically around their plates.

"What?" Albus roused himself from his stupor, thinking he must have missed half a conversation.

"Your dad, he was only fourteen when Voldemort rose again, and he fought him and still got away!"

"I thought the bit with the Basilisk was the best, when he saved your Mum's life," Belinda said, wide-eyed. As a Muggleborn, most of the story was new to her, except bits and pieces of common room gossip.

Albus nodded. "Yeah, he is... great," he said. He sighed and shrugged at Rose. "I give up. There's no point in trying to live up to it. I'm fifteen and I have yet to defeat a single dark wizard."

"Only because there aren't any left," Lizzie said loyally. "I'm sure you'd defeat them easily if there were still some around."

"Of course there are some left," Rose said sternly. "Or we wouldn't have Aurors."

"All right, no dark lords, then," Lizzie countered.

"Thank goodness," Belinda shuddered. "It all sounds horrible, imagine being twelve years old and fighting a snake bigger than you that can kill with its eyes." There was a momentary silence as they all considered this.

Albus knew his father was a hero. He was reminded of it all the time. And he was proud of him, and looked up to him, of course he did, and sometimes knowing that was the best motivation he could possibly have for doing anything at all... but when you put it like that, some of the insane things he'd done...

"Almost time to go back in," Rose said quietly.

"I dunno if I can," said a small voice from beside Albus. He was surprised to see Scorpius' looking
more like the terrified first-year version of himself than he had in a long time. They all stared at him, sitting there hunched into himself, unable to meet anyone's eyes.

"Tell Professor McGonagall you don't want to, then," Rose suggested, but he shot her such a dark look that she shut up instantly.

Albus understood that being labelled as a coward would not help his friend's situation any, but privately he thought it couldn't make things much worse.

Chapter End Notes

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"That is part of the reason," McGonagall agreed, nodding sagely. "The other part is that, as difficult it is to relay these events once a year, the complete story is too complex - and too personal for some - to be explained in full. If your father ever gets around to writing his autobiography, Mr Potter, you may be assured I will tell students to read that, instead. Until then, there are certain details that I feel I do not have the right to include in the curriculum. That goes for Professor Snape, as well."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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If the first part of the Recent Wizarding History class had been uncomfortable, the next part was terrible. The forty-odd students sat in utter silence as McGonagall began the story of the Year of Terror, which began when Draco Malfoy had opened the way into Hogwarts for an army of Death Eaters, resulting in Albus Dumbledore's death.

After a while, Scorpius crossed his arms on the desk and leant his head on them, so that no one could see his face. Albus could feel the eyes of some of the Gryffindors glaring in their direction. And still they had to sit and endure an explanation of what the Ministry, under Voldemort's rule, had done to Halfblood and Muggleborn families. What Hogwarts had been like under the Headmastery of Severus Snape, how students had been tortured… Albus felt sick after a while, and Rose, Lizzie and Belinda were all pale and silent beside him.

He realised as the explanation continued that what McGonagall was telling them was, while horrible, not the whole truth. She was vague on the question of the Horcruxes, mentioning only that Harry, Ron and Hermione spent the Year of Terror tracking down powerful dark objects that were tied to Voldemort's power, like the diary. She didn't mention the Hallows at all. He exchanged glances with Rose, and knew that she saw the gaps in the story as well. He had no intention of bringing it up, however - anything to make this peculiar form of torture go faster.

And then it was almost over - McGonagall scrubbed the board clean and used it to illustrate the Battle of Hogwarts. A ragged cheer went up from the Gryffindors and a couple of Hufflepuffs when she described how Professor Longbottom had summoned Dumbledore's Army, but it soon faded as the old woman's voice cracked slightly, describing the fight that ensued. Students, teachers and others who had been killed in front of her eyes, or out of her sight.

"It was then we heard Voldemort's voice," she continued, gathering herself for the last part. "He told us that Harry Potter was dead, that we should surrender and our lives might be spared. There was
confusion, and despair, for we had put almost all our hope on the shoulders of a seventeen year old boy." She sighed heavily. "We went out into the grounds, and I saw Professor Hagrid carrying Harry's body in his arms. I thought we had lost, then, and I was not the only one. Neville Longbottom then did something so foolhardy - and yet one of the bravest things I have ever seen - he defied Voldemort to his face. Voldemort summoned the Sorting Hat from the Headmaster's office, forced it onto his head, and set it alight."

Albus heard Scorpius gasp, and saw that his friend had come out of his ball of misery and was paying rapt attention. Lizzie had tears brimming in her eyes.

"I thought he was killed, another one of my students, killed. But then all was confusion, the giants and the centaurs began to charge from the forest - but in the next moment, Longbottom had pulled off the hat and pulled out a sword. I found out later that it the sword of Gryffindor that Harry had recovered from the Chamber of Secrets. And before any of us could realise what was happening, he cut off the head of the great Basilisk, that sat by Voldemort's side."

The class let out a collective breath.

"I found out later that Harry had asked him to do this, if he had the chance. The snake carried within it some of Voldemort's power, and he could not be killed while it still lived. But the fighting had begun again in earnest and we had no time to realise the meaning of what had happened. We were forced back into the castle by the fighting, and then… then…" She paused, as though momentarily at a loss for words. "Harry was there. Alive. To this day I am not sure of how he survived. He told us not to help, that he must fight Voldemort alone." Another silence, this once seeming to last for an age. "The duel was short, one of the shortest I have ever witnessed. Voldemort cast the Killing Curse, and Harry cast a disarming charm. The two spells collided, and Voldemort fell to the ground, dead."

Albus jumped as some people cheered. It seemed very loud after such a long time listening just to McGonagall's voice growing steadily hoarser.

There was only a little more. McGonagall talked about the rebuilding of the school, and gave a brief explanation of Snape's role, a kind of belated behind-the-scenes that, despite his impatience for it to be over, Albus thought did not do it justice.

"I thank you for listening," she said finally. "If any of you have any concerns, I invite you to come and see me during office hours, or ask your Head of House - they are all well versed on the subject, I assure you. In the meantime, you are all dismissed, and I wish you all good luck in your OWLs. Mr Potter, Miss Longbottom, stay behind, please."

Albus blinked, even as most of the group fled the classroom. Scorpius didn't even look at him but made his escape with his head down. "You should go with him," he said to Rose.

"I think he wants to be alone for a while," she said sadly. "Anyway I want to ask Professor McGonagall something."

McGonagall did not object to her staying, but waited until everyone else had left before speaking. "Are you all right, Miss Longbottom?" she asked with a gentleness that before today, Albus had not thought her capable of.

Lizzie wiped her eyes and nodded. "Yes, Professor McGonagall. I didn't mean to get so weepy, it's just…"

"Your father told me that he had told you the details," McGonagall explained, offering her a bottle-
green handkerchief.

"He did, just… not like you told it, Professor. He makes it sound like it was easy… I mean, not easy, exactly but…"

"I am sorry to have upset you," the old Headmistress said. "Professor Longbottom will be in his office, I'm sure, if you want to visit him."

Lizzie nodded. "I will, thank you Professor." She left, leaving Albus and Rose standing uncomfortably in front of the desk.

"Well?" McGonagall said, expectantly.

Albus had no idea what she wanted him to say, but Rose interrupted before he could express any confusion. "You left out a lot," she accused.

McGonagall smiled wryly. "Indeed?"

"Yes! You hardly talked about Snape at all, and he was one of the most important people! And the Horcruxes… well, they were a bit… dumbed down, and you didn't mention about the cloak, or the wands, or anything."

Albus raised his eyebrows, admiring her bravery.

McGonagall steepled her fingers on the desk in front of her. "I think, if you consider it for a moment, Miss Weasley, you might understand why."

The two cousins looked at each other. "Dad did say…" Albus admitted slowly, "he did say he didn't want people knowing for sure about the Resurrection Stone. Because people would go looking for it and bringing back people and going mad all over the place. The other Hallows too, I expect."

"I guess you wouldn't want everyone knowing how to make a Horcrux," Rose said insightfully. "Or even knowing it was possible… in case it happened again."

"That is part of the reason," McGonagall agreed, nodding sagely. "The other part is that, as difficult it is to relay these events once a year, the complete story is too complex - and too personal for some - to be explained in full. If your father ever gets around to writing his autobiography, Mr Potter, you may be assured I will tell students to read that, instead. Until then, there are certain details that I feel I do not have the right to include in the curriculum. That goes for Professor Snape, as well."

"Oh." Rose seemed to accept this answer.

"I thought it would be Mr Potter with questions of this nature, but naturally I should have assumed that, as your mother's daughter, you would be the one to bring it up," McGonagall added apologetically. "You may go then, if there is nothing more."

Albus paused at the classroom door. "Er, Professor… perhaps you should have asked Scorpius Malfoy to stay back. You must have seen…"

"I noticed his discomfort, Mr Potter, but unfortunate as it may be I thought he might appreciate a night to calm down. You may tell him to come see me tomorrow, if he still has concerns."

"Discomfort," Albus muttered to Rose as they walked slowly down the corridor together. "Talk about your discomfort."
"It is a good story, though," she admitted. "I like the part where my parents fell in love, though. Shame she skipped that part."

Albus chuckled. "That's probably one of those things she thinks is too dangerous for the 'curriculum'."

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Scorpius was not at Ravenclaw Tower. "Think he's all right?" Albus said, when Peter and Janey, the fifth year Ravenclaw prefects, reported not having seen him at all since the end of class.

"I'm sure he's fine," Rose said. "He just wants to be alone. I would want to be alone, if it was me."

Thinking he might have come back and then gone out again, like the first night back after summer, Albus went up to the dormitory. His school things were nowhere to be seen and his guitar was still there, which put paid to that theory.

Unbidden, uncomfortable memories of first year came back to haunt him. The first time they had really spoken was when the shy Malfoy boy had been bullied by people who thought he didn't deserve to be at Hogwarts. Then it had been older boys - the same age they were now, he belatedly realised. A suspicion grew in his mind then, nothing solid, but enough to know it probably wasn't a good idea for his friend to be wandering around alone, right now.

After a while of trying to think about anything else, he grabbed his cloak and went back to the Common Room. It was still freezing outside, but Scorp liked being outdoors, when he could, after spending the whole summer cooped up inside. He moved through the castle, past students coming to and fro from their last classes, or on their way to Quidditch practice, or an early dinner. The Entrance Hall was bustling, the door closed against the chilly March air. It took a huge tug to get it open enough to let himself out, and he started to doubt that Scorpius could have managed it - even at fifteen he was still a bit scrawny, and the shortest of the Ravenclaw boys. But he must have, because there he was, sitting at the bottom of the stairs with his head on his arms. "Mate," Albus sighed with relief. "I was worried." He trudged down the stairs to where he was sitting, his bag still slung over his shoulder, a copy of *The Hobbit* poking out.

"Leave me alone," Scorpius muttered, in a warning tone that Albus hadn't heard before.

"It's freezing out here," Albus pointed out. "Come inside and have some dinner. Look, there's no sense in being miserable about it, people have known for years, and -" but he stopped, suddenly, because Scorpius had raised his head. His lip was bloody and there was a line of it down his pale chin. A bruise was coming up around his eye, dark and ominous looking. Albus stared. They couldn't have been separated for more than an hour or two. "What happened?" he asked darkly.

Scorpius shrugged.

"Who was it?"

Another shrug.

Albus was sure he already knew, however. "Bloody Gryffindors! Like they haven't sat in class with you for four and a half years!" He felt rage overcome him like a raging fever. These were not random Gryffindors who didn't know better, these were people they knew, that he talked to, even knew some of their families. "Like they don't know that we're friends, that you couldn't possibly be -"
"It was my fault," Scorpius said shortly, interrupting him and completely derailing his train of thought.

"What?"

"It was my fault. All right? Can we leave it alone now?"

"Absolutely bloody not. I'm taking you to Madam Pomfrey."

"It's a split lip and a black eye, you arse. Leave it."

"But -" Albus paused for a moment, forcing his anger back in favour of sense, for what good it could possibly do. "Look… how was it your fault, then?"

Scorpius glared up at him, his grey eyes very dark and angry against the whiteness of his skin. "They wouldn't have done anything," he said, after he had established that Al wasn't backing down. "They were just staring… and whispering. So I told them they could take off, or have done with it if they thought I was going to murder them all in their sleep. One of them pulled their wand on me… I panicked."

"What did you do?" Albus asked, low.

"Disarmed him. I guess they thought I was going to attack them, and they rushed me. They got my wand off me, but one of them said, no hexes. I guess you could prove who did it if you had their wand."

"Yeah you could," Albus said darkly. It was all very well for Scorpius to claim provocation on his behalf, but if the perpetrators had had enough control to limit themselves to a beating, it seemed there was more premeditation in it than otherwise.

"Stacey called them off," Scorpius added, belatedly. "She looked ready to kill. I would have laughed, any other time."

Albus was not in the mood to laugh. "Is it just your face?"

"Couple of ribs, maybe." Scorpius shrugged again, and winced.

"Right, Hospital Wing. Or do you want everyone seeing the shiner you're going to have tomorrow morning? Or Rose fussing? She'll take you if I don't, you know she will."

This last seemed to get through to him, at least. "Fine," he muttered. "But…"

"We don't have to tell," Albus rolled his eyes. "I know what you're like. We went flying and you fell off, right? Madam Pomfrey doesn't ask too many questions."

"They still have my wand," Scorpius muttered.

"What?" They never gave it back?"

"No."

Albus resisted the urge to go into another rant about the so-called Gryffindor 'chivalry'. "I'll take care of it."

"But…"
"I won't tell! Don't be such a child."

He went quiet and sulky at that, and submitted to being led back into the castle.

After seeing his friend to the Hospital Wing, and after being assured firmly that he did not need a babysitter, Albus made off in the opposite direction. He knew the way to Gryffindor Tower, though he'd never been inside. "Password?" asked the woman in the painting, pompously. Albus ignored her and knocked.

"Is that necessary?" she asked haughtily, and vacated the portrait seconds before it opened. Albus didn't know the girl standing there, but she obviously recognised him, as her eyes widened.

"You're not a Gryffindor," she said, unnecessarily.

"I want to see my brother, please," he said, as politely as he could manage.

James came, after a few minutes of obvious confusion beyond the portrait hole. "Al!" he said, surprised, when the portrait finally opened again. "What are you doing here? You all right?"

"Fine," Albus said shortly. "We had that Recent History class today."

James grimaced. "Yeah, I know. Was it awful?"

"Yes, but that's beside the point. Some Gryffindors ganged up on Scorpius after and blacked his eye."

James stared. "Fifth years?"

"Yeah, obviously."

"Which ones?"

"No idea, he wouldn't say. Not Stacey, she helped him, but she would know who it was."

There was a pause while his brother took this in. He was being uncharacteristically serious about it, Albus thought, and was grateful. "What do you want me to do?" he said ominously.

"I don't want you to do anything," Al said firmly. "Not like that. They took Scorp's wand and he needs it back. And tell them from me that if they come after him again, I will tell Neville."

James rolled his eyes. "Owch."

"Neville likes him, and he's your Head of House," Albus pointed out. "Remember when Tony used to get into fights?" Professor Longbottom's reputation for non-favouritism towards members of his own house - even his own son - was somewhat legendary.

"Good point. All right then." James winked. "Sure you don't want me to take it a step further?"

Albus was about to say no, when he hesitated.

"Don't get in trouble," he said, instead, wondering if he would regret it later.

"Little brother, when have you ever known that to happen?" James said, with an injured, yet somehow mischievous expression.
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Fifth Year Part 4: OWLs

Chapter Summary

Scorpius' eyes widened. *He should have expected it, he realised. Her hair had dark strands woven through the grey, but her face had the same narrow, pointed shape as his grandmother, the same sharpness that spoke of beauty from once upon a time. She was very regal-looking. He wondered if he should bow. "Nice to meet you," he said instead. It came out a bit flat, but she didn't seem to notice. She was staring at him almost as much as he was, bending over so that her eyes were on a level with his.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Scorpius did not comment when three of the Gryffindor fifth years came to breakfast the next day with various magical abnormalities - one of them with chicken legs, which were undoubtedly hilarious - or when his wand was dropped onto his plate from above, and he turned to see James, Fred and Roxie walking back to the Gryffindor table. Albus cravenly chose not to meet his eyes, so he decided not to ask. In any case, the problem did not come up again for the rest of the year, and the oncoming onslaught of OWLs put paid to any ongoing protest he might have made under other circumstances.

It did make his next conversation with Stacey very awkward. "I'm so sorry," she whispered to him as they scribbled notes on *The Hobbit* - magical creatures from a Muggle perspective - over the scratching of quills, while Professor Clearwater marked papers at her desk.

"Forget it," he said, reddening.

"I didn't even get a chance to see if you were hurt…"

"M'fine, its taken care of." The nib of his quill snapped, and he cursed under his breath before rummaging around in his bag for another.

"I told Warren to apologise to you," she said after a brief silence.

Scorpius snorted. "Let me guess, he said no."

"I think he's a bit afraid of what might happen… after the chicken legs…"

"I didn't do that!" Scorpius protested, before he noticed she was giggling. "Very funny," he said, unable to help a small smile.
"Shh, please," called Professor Clearwater, and put an end to any more discussion on the subject.

But it was one thing to know your father had been a Death Eater at the age of sixteen. It was quite another to hear his crimes read out. To know that he had let an army of Death Eaters into Hogwarts. That he had helped one of the most evil wizards of all time come into power for a second time. He had always clung to the assumption - naive as perhaps it was - that his father had never actually killed anyone… but what he had done was in a way, worse. And his grandfather definitely had killed people, as Professor McGonagall had reminded him in front of forty of his classmates, while all the time carefully avoiding his eyes.

No wonder she hadn't wanted him at Hogwarts.

He turned down her belated offer of answering his 'concerns' as soon as Albus relayed it. What could she possibly say that would make things better? He started to dread the coming summer more than ever, knowing he would find it difficult to even look his father in the face. He wished more than ever that he could find his mother and stay with her, but despite having sent a dozen letters to the address Teddy had found, she still had not replied. Clearly she didn't want him around, even if his father would agree to such an arrangement. Which he most definitely would not.

He was so depressed that by the time the Careers Advice appointments rolled around, in the first week of the summer term, he had no energy to think up an alternative to the truth.

"I want to be a musician," he told Professor Flitwick flatly. The little wizard gave him an odd look, and a handful of pamphlets to look at. He should have known he wouldn't be taken seriously.

"He said I need more broad goals than Professional Quidditch," Albus sighed after his own appointment. "I think he's prejudiced against people who don't want to spend the rest of their lives with their heads in books."

"I thought he was quite supportive," Rose said. "He got very excited when I told him I wanted to be on the Wizengamot one day, and he suggested since I'm so good at Ancient Runes I should try curse breaking!"

"Point," Albus muttered.

After the mess that was the Recent History class, the last thing Scorpius wanted to do by the second of May was attend the memorial service, and remind everyone all over again.

The day had a new, more profound meaning to all the fifth years after the Recent History class, and he didn't dare complain, even to Rose or Albus, but he stuck to the back even more than ever while the procession wound through the grounds in the early morning drizzle. The rain couldn't put out the tiny candles held by the families of the dead, which were magically lit, and they shone through the sunrise as people put flowers and gifts on the great stone. He had every intention of slinking off to Ravenclaw tower and skipping breakfast altogether, but Rose called him back.

Teddy was waving, and standing with him was a thin, greying woman wearing a long black robe and cloak, her only touch of colour a little pink flower pinned to her breast.

Scorpius wanted more than anything to escape, but Teddy had, after all, done him a big favour over the summer. He trudged over, his boots sinking into the damp ground, while the Potters and Weasleys went into the castle with everyone else. "Scorpius," Teddy said, grinning. "This is my Gran, your Great Aunt Andromeda."

Scorpius' eyes widened. He should have expected it, he realised. Her hair had dark strands woven
through the grey, but her face had the same narrow, pointed shape as his grandmother, the same sharpness that spoke of beauty from once upon a time. She was very regal-looking. He wondered if he should bow. "Nice to meet you," he said instead. It came out a bit flat, but she didn't seem to notice. She was staring at him almost as much as he was, bending over so that her eyes were on a level with his.

"She came just to meet you, didn't you Gran?" Teddy prompted.

"I find this day very difficult," Andromeda admitted, her eyes never leaving Scorpius' face. "I lost people very dear to me, and no amount of remembering will lessen their loss."

Scorpius nodded, not knowing what to say. With a sick feeling, he wondered just how Teddy's parents had died. Someone must have cast the killing blow. Could it have been his father? His grandfather? He tried desperately not to think it, in case she read the guilt in his face.

"You look very like your father," she said after a moment.

"I know," he sighed. "I'm trying not to, but he makes me cut my hair whenever I go home." His hair had by now escaped the dramatically short cut his father had insisted on the previous summer, but it was still not quite the way he liked it.

"I'm not surprised." She blinked, the endless stare finally over, and stood up straight. "Traditionally only the patriarch of a pureblood wizarding family wears his hair long."

"That's not why I do it," he said hurriedly, but she was smiling.

"Come in with us," Teddy said, patting him on the shoulder, and he found himself being led into the Great Hall after all. Space had been saved for them, and Scorpius realised with horror - too late - that they intended on making him sit with the Potters and the Weasleys.

It seemed liked the worst possible timing, though of course he couldn't imagine a good time for this meeting... but it was a miracle he had avoided it so far. Even so, he didn't feel ready in the slightest, especially with the Recent History class hanging over his head like a black cloud.

Teddy pulled out the end of a bench for his grandmother, and Rose and Albus, looking up with surprise, made room for Scorpius. "Have you all met my cousin?" Teddy said, deliberately cheerful.

"Hello Scorpius," said Albus' mum, smiling over at him from where she sat next to Lily. "It's been a while - how are you?"

"Fine thanks," he forced himself to say, coughing as all the moisture in his mouth abandoned him.

"This is Harry," Ginny continued, nodding towards the dark-haired man sitting beside her. His heart pounding, Scorpius met the man's eyes, bright green behind a pair of spectacles. His expression was unreadable, but he nodded and offered his hand. Scorpius took it, knowing his palm was sweating madly. "And this is Rose's mum and dad..."

Scorpius turned to face the other couple at the table, and realised immediately that Harry Potter should not have been his immediate concern. The redheaded man sitting beside Hugo was, while not actually frowning, giving him a look so poisonous that Scorpius felt his pounding heart drop into his stomach. It said: I do not want you here. I do not approve of your friendship with my daughter. You should not be sitting at this table, with my family. A couple of seats down, George Weasley was giving him a very similar look from when he was sitting with his wife and the twins.

"How nice to meet you at last," Rose's mum was saying, oblivious to this exchange. "Rose has told
Scorpius couldn't answer, he wanted to sink into the floor and never emerge. He could think of nothing to say even if his voice would work.

Then Rose's hand slid onto his lap under the table and caught his fingers in hers, giving them a squeeze. He looked at her helplessly. "You all right?" she asked. "You've gone pale."

Albus was instantly on the alert, to Scorpius' embarrassment. "Was it Warren again?" he asked, looking around. He had evidently been expecting something like that to happen today.

"No!" Scorpius hissed. "Shut up, I'm fine."

The adults exchanged confused glances, but luckily the breakfast began to arrive, a welcome distraction.

"How is your music going?" Ginny asked, conversationally as a large jug of pumpkin juice appeared on the table. "Hannah told me you performed at the Leaky Cauldron over Christmas, that must have been fun."

"I was scared shi - um, terrified," Scorpius replied hoarsely, grabbing a glass of pumpkin juice and downing it. He could at least speak now, if he ignored the death glare from Rose's father.

"She told me it was very good," Ginny assured him. "Good to know James' old guitar isn't going to waste - he only played it for about five minutes before giving up."

"What sort of music do you play?" Teddy asked, causing Scorpius to momentarily forget his terror in favour of embarrassment.

"Er… it's kind of all sorts… I just make it up as I go along."

"Don't listen to him," Rose said firmly, patting his hand and letting it go so that she could start her breakfast. He wished she hadn't - it had been like a temporary anchor in a storm. "He's good."

"Naturally," Great-Aunt Andromeda said, daintily cracking off the top of a hard-boiled egg. "His father was quite a fine soprano, as a boy."

"What?" Scorpius knew he was not the only one who had spoken - Ron Weasley was looking at Andromeda with disbelief - but he didn't care, he thought he must have misheard, or maybe his aunt was making a joke?

"Oh yes, he performed at several high society parties Narcissa was hosting. I was never invited to any of them, of course, but I heard he was very talented. Pity," she added, apparently unconscious of Scorpius' utter shock. "I suppose he gave it up once he started Hogwarts."

Scorpius realised his mouth was hanging open, and shut it hurriedly. "You are kidding me," he exclaimed.

"Gran never kids," Teddy shook his head.

"He could play the piano, too," Andromeda added, as if Scorpius' apoplexy was not already bad enough.

"My mind is officially blown," Scorpius said, burying his face in his hands. "Please, don't tell me anything else." There were chuckles from the assembled Potter-Weasley clan, and he thought even
Ron Weasley was relaxing, somewhat, too intrigued by the story to be really angry anymore. When he looked back up at Great Aunt Andromeda, she winked at him.

"There, that wasn't so bad, was it?" Rose said, nudging him, after the visitors had all left and the students, it being Saturday, had dispersed to their Common Rooms, or, in the case of the upper years, the library.

"Mm hmm," Scorpius assented. It could have gone worse, he had to admit. The conversation after Andromeda's revelation had steered towards school, and Lily and Hugo had chatted happily about their new subjects, with only the occasional subtle question from Rose's mum about OWLS. Rose was surprisingly reluctant to talk about school to her parents, but Scorpius' confusion over this was not so much that it drowned out his discomfort completely. "Don't think your dad likes me much," he ventured. "Or your uncle George."

"Don't be silly. They'll come round to you."

Scorpius was switched on enough to note that this was not strictly a denial, but the old Librarian came round to shush them and there was no opportunity to carry the point. He would just have to avoid both Weasley men in future, if that was at all possible.

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They spent a lot of time in the library in the intervening weeks until the exams, to the point where there was very little time to do anything else. Albus and Rose still had Quidditch, of course, beating the Hufflepuff team for the fifth year in a row only to be beaten by Slytherin for the cup. The only upside to this, in Albus' opinion, was that at least Gryffindor had also lost.

"If you can't win, shouldn't you at least shout for your brother's team?" Scorpius asked, though he already knew the answer.

"Hell no, this way he doesn't get to lord it over me all summer. And he'll spend the whole time plotting with Fred on how to get Slytherin back instead of coming up with new and inventive ways to ruin my holiday."

Scorpius tried not to think about his own holidays, which were as good as ruined already. He concentrated on OWLs, determined not to give his father any more reasons to be angry. By the time the actual exams came around, he was pretty confident on passing everything except Herbology and Divination.

They rolled into the Great Hall the morning of the first exam feeling like a bunch of first years all over again. They could see Lizzie and Belinda comforting one of the other Hufflepuff girls, who in other circumstances might have been diagnosed with seasickness.

"Look, look," Rose hissed, as a group of people came into the hall. They saw the examiners every year, of course, but this year they actually paid attention as they sat at the extended staff table and chatted good naturally with the other teachers. Scorpius spotted old Professor Sprout (retired), who had substituted for Professor Longbottom when Alice was born, smiling and hugging Professor Flitwick, who was almost lost in her ample bosom.

Rose was still staring at the examiners minutes later, and Scorpius had to poke her and push her plate towards her. "Dunno why you're nervous," he told her. "You're good at exams."

She did not answer, but the look she gave him was worthy of her father, so he didn't say anything
Somehow he got through the Charms theory exam. It felt so weird to be sitting in the Entrance Hall at his own individual table, all his year mates around him, the scratching of pens very loud in the otherwise silent room. He wrote as though on automatic, and afterwards could barely remember any of the questions.

The practical that afternoon, however, was easier than he had expected, at least at first. He had no problems with any of the spells he had to demonstrate. He did a cheering charm - on a portrait - levitation, unlocked a chest, and several more. And then, unexpectedly, the examiner asked him to perform a charm of his own choice. He blinked, considering. He should probably do something impressive, but he couldn't think of anything. He was totally blanking! He looked around desperately at the other people being examined. One of them was drawing a picture in the air with their wand.

Well he knew how to do that, but he couldn't draw to save his life... and then suddenly it struck him what he should do. He raised his wand and launched into one of the music charms from the book Albus had given him for Christmas. It was one of the simplest in terms of execution, but one of the hardest to do. There was no incantation, you just had to focus your mind in the right way, imagining the music the way you wanted it to sound. The book recommended starting with one instrument and working your way up - Scorpius could do a small band by now. He played the first minute of an instrumental version of *Bohemian Rhapsody*, and stopped to find all the examiners - and the other students - staring at him.

"Very, ah... very good," said the examiner, and made a note on a piece of paper. Scorpius left the exam room not actually knowing if he had done well, or not.

The rest of the exams seemed to go past in a blur, except for Muggle Studies which he actually enjoyed. He made a mental note to thank Stacey again for the shared books arrangement - without it, he wouldn't have been able to write nearly seventeen inches about Tolkien. The practical involved making toast and a cup of tea without magic. His toaster smoked a little half way through, but the examiner assured him this nearly always happened due to the amount of magic in the air.

*One day I will own a toaster,* he thought to himself absurdly as he left the Great Hall. *And a kettle. And a computer. Just bloody watch me,* he laughed to himself at the madness of this statement, but at least, if it ever *did* happen, he would be prepared.

He had the day off at the end of the exam period, since he didn't do Care of Magical Creatures. He enjoyed the peace of the dormitory to play his guitar until everyone came back, some nursing bloody fingers. "Well," Albus said with a sigh. "That's over. Farewell, childhood. Hello, post-OWL-hood."

"I can't wait to go home," Rose said, curling up on an armchair with Midnight. "I want to go to sleep in my own bed and not wake up for a week."

"You can't," Albus reminded her. "Italy, remember?"

"What?" Scorpius had been half dozing. Albus looked at him guiltily.

"We're going to Italy. Mine and Rose's family. Er... all summer."

"All summer?"

"There's about a week at the end where we'll come back and do our shopping and things," Rose said. "I thought we told you."

"No," Scorpius said dully. He didn't have any right to be offended at this, he knew. He couldn't
expect them to put their lives on hold just because he was going to be spending the holiday cooped up in the creepy townhouse with a man who thought he was something quite different to who he was.

But this was not to be. The day before they were due to catch the train to King's Cross, Scorpius got a letter.

_Son,_

_I have business I must attend to over the next few months. The townhouse will be empty and as such there is little point in you returning home for the summer holiday. You will be staying with your Grandparents until September. My mother will pick you up from the station._

_Your Father._

"At least you'll still be in England?" Albus said, in an attempt at comfort. "That's better, right?"

"Are you kidding, it's ten times worse," Scorpius said angrily, crumpling the letter into a ball and hurling it into the fire. "A whole summer in that horrible house all covered in dust sheets with a woman who barely knows I exist and a man who doesn't even know he exists half the time. Bloody effing brilliant."

"I wish you could come with us," Rose said, quietly.

"Well I can't," he snapped. "My lot won't let me and your lot wouldn't have me."

She looked genuinely hurt by this, but it wasn't his fault if she was offended by the truth. "What do you mean, my parents would -"

"Oh come on, Rose, your Dad thinks I'm the scum of the earth, just like half the people in this school!"

"You don't even know him!" Her eyes, while angry, were wide and shining.

"Don't bother," Albus told her darkly. "He's in a mood."

Scorpius glared at him. "Doesn't matter anyway, does it? Enjoy your holiday. You can try writing, unless you want your owls getting tainted with _Dark Magic._"

"Leave it," he heard Albus saying behind him as he stormed up the stairs. "He'll be sorry tomorrow."

He barely slept that night, tossing and turning as his traitorous brain dug up every memory of his grandparents and paraded them in front of his closed eyelids. He hadn't seen them since starting Hogwarts, but he had been to Malfoy Manor as a little boy, when money became desperate and there were no other options. He remembered a huge, dark, empty house, where his grandparents occupied only a few rooms. His grandmother, a skeletal woman with absurdly long white-blonde hair, had forced him onto her lap and stroked his hair with inch-long fingernails, scraping over his scalp and muttering nonsense to him, like he was a baby. After that he stayed out of her way, especially when she started calling him 'Draco', it was just creepy. As for his grandfather…

Even his father was afraid of Lucius. That was why they stayed away from the manor as much as possible. At first the old man had seemed harmless - he leaned on a cane and didn't even seem to notice Scorpius was there. He stayed mostly to his study, even slept there, though it was just as empty as all the other rooms, all the Malfoys' possessions having been repossessed years ago to pay of debts and fines and probably bail for all three of them, Scorpius added to himself. They had all
gone to prison for a while, he knew, but his father never spoke about it and Scorpius had no way of knowing if it affected him. On the other hand, his grandfather, already teetering on the edge of sanity after a long spell in Azkaban and years of terror under the Dark Lord, the return to prison had snapped something in him.

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Scorpius woke, suddenly, to shouting and banging. He crept out of bed - hardly more than a cot, hastily cleaned of dust with magic and still smelling of mothballs - and tip-toed along the hall towards the noise. It was coming from the study. "Bastard!" someone was yelling. "Useless - pathetic - your fault! Our lives - ruined!" Scorpius felt a shiver of fear go through him, but still something drew him on. The door to his grandfather's study was ajar, and he peeked around it.

His father was on the ground, his arms sprawled over the filthy carpet. Standing over him, no longer looking frail and harmless but tall and terrifying, his grandfather, with his silver-tipped cane brandished in a white-knuckled hand.

Scorpius gasped, and the man looked up at him, meeting Scorpius' wide-eyed gaze. His eyes were mad, totally mad, red and blazing. He changed his grip on the cane, turning it in his hand as though he was going to throw it - Scorpius knew he should move, or run, but his feet seemed frozen to the floor - and then with a noise that shook the very floorboards, Lucius was blasted back across the room, falling backwards onto the desk, gasping and wheezing. Scorpius' father got to his feet, brandishing his wand with fury in his face and a trickle of dark blood down his brow. "Papa?"
Scorpius whispered in terror.

The man spared him only a glance. "Back to bed, Scorpius," he said firmly.

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He woke again, this time in the fifth-year boys' dormitory, and cursed to himself. He hadn't had that dream in years, though he had woken terrified and unable to breathe, several times for months after it had happened. He was sweating, and he threw his duvet off, covering his face with his hands against the moonlight coming through a gap in the curtains. How could his father send him there? His grandfather was insane enough to be committed to St. Mungo's, and his grandmother could barely look after herself, let alone a teenage boy.

Eventually, when sleep failed to happen, he crawled out of bed, grabbed a book off the bedside table and went down to the Common Room to read until people started waking up, most dressed in Muggle clothes, chatting excitedly about the train ride home.

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"Sorry," he mumbled to Rose, later. "Shouldn't have taken it out on you."

She smiled sadly and threw her arms around his neck. "I'll miss you," she said quietly. "I do hope you don't have too horrible a time."

He did not answer, as he held out no such hope whatsoever, but he made a weak attempt at a smile.
"Write to us when you get your OWLS, yeah?" Albus said as they got on the train.

"If I can," he replied. He wasn't sure if his grandparents even had an owl.

It was the shortest train journey ever. He couldn't even concentrate on the game of Exploding Snap that started at Lily's insistence, resulting in his losing spectacularly when the whole pile went up in his face, nearly singeing his eyebrows. He ran a hand through his hair, finally long enough, wondering if his grandmother would make him cut it. He thought wistfully of his guitar, shut up in the dormitory, his iPod, stuffed into Albus' bag for safekeeping, and the Muggle books he half owned that Stacey was taking home with her. He thought he had the right to sulk. No one else had to hide who they were from their own family. No one else had to pretend to be something they were not.

He was still brooding over this when they rolled into King's Cross, and people started pulling their trunks out of the overhead compartments. He absent-mindedly helped Albus get Lily's trunk, which was right up the back, then his own, and then he had to get off the train and pretend that he hadn't spent the last several hours playing cards with the offspring of his father's worst enemies. He couldn't even bring himself to properly say goodbye, but nodded at them and hurried off into the crowd without a word.

Narcissa was waiting for him by the Floo point. Her face fell when she saw him, and she reached out a bony, long-nailed hand to brush her fingers against his face, without even saying anything. He did his best not to recoil, but kept a firm grip on his trunk and followed her to the Floo, where she called out 'Malfoy Manor' in a reedy voice and beckoned him to follow her.

The only upside to the coming summer, he decided as he took a deep, calming breath and stepped into the fire, was that it would be his last one while underage. He would be seventeen next March, and not obligated to go wheresoever his father decided to send him. Next year, things would be different.

Chapter End Notes

Please visit my fanfic blog: http://misssaigonfic.tumblr.com/
Ask me questions, get some insights!
The Best Summer Ever Part 1

Chapter Summary

Rose stared. For a moment - a long moment - she didn't recognise him.

Chapter Notes

MUSIC CHAPTER! That's right! This one's actually quite important as it sets up a new skill set for our hero. Open the page now to listen when you see the lyrics in italics. And let me know if you enjoyed it.

Visit http://misssaigonfic.tumblr.com/musicpost for this song and all the music featured in this story so far.

Edit Note: The music in this chapter was changed in June 2015, due to the original video being removed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

2022

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Rose Weasley turned sixteen in Italy that year. She spent her days walking around Muggle Rome with her mother, who had never been but had done a lot of reading in preparation, and Wizarding Venice, well-connected as they were by a series of Floo points set up specifically for tourism - a concept quite alien to the wizarding population of Britain except for special occasions like the Quidditch World Cup. It was a bit chaotic - the two families made up nine people, after all, and there was the problem of disguising Albus' dad sufficiently to avoid being mobbed in the street. There were still a couple of incidents despite all the precautions they could legally take.

"Wishing you brought the cloak, now?" she heard her father saying to Harry after one such incident where they had been held up for half an hour on the way to dinner. "We could always Disillusion you, I suppose."

"I'm not going invisible to go to a meal with my own family," her uncle replied hotly.

"We could apply for some Polyjuice," Ron suggested, grinning. "I think Dean knows a guy at il Ministero."

"Remember when it was still legal to cook it up in a school bathroom? Good times."

"Yeah, we ruined it for everyone, breaking into high-security Ministry buildings like wanton
criminals. Shame."

Her father and uncle were also not always with them. They assured everyone that they were not working, they were after all on **holiday**, but the Italian Ministry were also having problems with the Shadow. It seemed that he had feelers everywhere in Europe, and might even be branching out to other parts of the world. It made him incredibly hard to track down, as her father was wont to complain in private.

"The stuff's getting worse," she heard him tell her mother. "It started off your generic Dark objects, ancient curses, that sort of thing, but there's so much of it that it has to be coming from somewhere. There aren't that many old dark objects just lying around, unless they've got a secret mine of them."

"You mean they might be *making* them?" Hermione sounded disgusted by the suggestion. "Do we know if they're real? If it's so widespread…"

"Oh, it's real, what we've got of it, anyway," Ron said darkly. "Some of the things blew up Harry's Sneakoscope. It's only a matter of time before people start dying. Probably they already have, we just don't know it yet."

Rose was left with a paranoid feeling that lasted a few days, wary of everything she touched. Lily insisted that she was going to help catch the Shadow when she left Hogwarts and became an Auror, but Rose hoped that he would be caught long before that.

Apart from that, though, it was a very good holiday, and Rose felt they deserved it after the stress of OWLs, the results of which she awaited anxiously while trying to feign indifference. "Are you sure they'll get here, Mum?" she asked after a few weeks of nail-biting in private. "Maybe the owls won't be able to find us."

"Hogwarts owls can find people anywhere, dear," Hermione assured her. "If one could find me in Bulgaria and your father in Egypt, it'll get here."

"Maybe we should borrow one," Albus muttered. "That's the third time Emmett's come back, useless bird."

Rose thought privately that his owl's inability to deliver his letter to Scorpius had less to do with Emmett's abilities than it did his grandparents' ability to receive them. The lack of correspondence was, while not unexpected, still worrying. But as her mother pointed out, there was little she could do about it.

The OWL letters did arrive, a few days later while they were all sitting around the breakfast table in their shared villa. The adults cheered as they landed on the windowsill, but Rose was suddenly a bundle of nerves and could do nothing but take her letter silently from her mother's hand. She shared a look with Albus, who rolled his eyes and ripped his open with a 'how-bad-could-it-be' attitude. Rose swallowed and followed suit.

**OWL Results**

*Examinations Completed in May of 2022*

*Rose Weasley has achieved the following:*

*Arithmancy - O*

*Astronomy - O*
Rose looked up, and realised everyone was staring at her. "Well?" her mother prompted.

"Er… not too bad," she said, weakly.

"Passed everything," Albus said triumphantly. "Just an A in Astronomy, but who cares, I was half asleep that night."

"Ten OWLS!" Ginny exclaimed. "Rose? How about you?"

"Yeah." Rose stared at the paper again. She had spent the weeks since the exams trying not to get her hopes up, and it felt very odd now that she didn't have to hold it back anymore.

"Oh well done, darling!" her mother had come round to hug her warmly, before peeking nosily at her letter. "Rosie! Nine O's! I'm so proud of you."

"Which one did you miss?" Albus asked, incredulously.

"Al!" Ginny said warningly.

Rose grinned and swapped papers with her cousin. He had got seven O's, as well as the aforementioned A in Astronomy and E's in Ancient Runes and History of Magic.

"This calls for a celebration," Harry said, in his quietly approving way. James, Fred and Roxie were pulling faces. Rose remembered with amusement that James had only got seven OWLS, and the twins had scraped six each, their only O's in Charms and Defence Against the Dark Arts. "Here's to the Ravenclaws." They clinked classes, and Rose saw Albus flushing slightly.

"Oh hell," he said later, after they'd spent half an hour deciding where they'd gone wrong in History of Magic - probably by interchanging some Goblin's names, they were all so similar - "you realise what this means? We're NEWT students now."

"What subjects are you doing?" she asked him cruelly.

"We are on holiday," he reminded her. "I'm not filling that form out till the last minute."

"Those classes have limited places, remember? Do you want to miss out on Charms or Transfiguration because you didn't get it in on time? You need those to get nearly any Ministry job."
"Quidditch, Rosie, Quidditch," he said firmly.

"You can play Quidditch and be good at academics," she told him. "You've managed it so far, right? Anyway what happens when you fall off your broom and get a season-ending injury?"

He had no answer to this, but he did do his form the same time she did, and sent them both with Emmett the next evening. "At least he knows how to find Hogwarts," he muttered.

"You do suppose Scorp's okay, don't you?" she sighed as they watched the owl soar off into the night.

"He's been okay every other summer." He sounded surer than he looked. "I'm sure he's fine."

~*-R-*~
~*-R-*~

Two months went by very fast, although with the help of Hermione's vigorous scheduling skills, they had seen nearly everything there was to see by the time they had to go home. The train would be leaving King's Cross in a week and a half, and they still had to go to London and do their school shopping. Fred, Roxanne, Louis and Lucy, who was starting Hogwarts that year, had already done their Diagon Alley trip. The list of books on the NEWT list was daunting.

"Hannah's asked us to have dinner at the Leaky Cauldron tomorrow," Hermione said, reading the letter over breakfast. "She says she's got a surprise for us."

"Another baby?" Rose's father suggested.

"Ron!"

Hugo snickered, and Rose heard her father high five him under the table. Boys, she thought, rolling her eyes.

"We may as well do our shopping on the same day then," Hermione continued, choosing to ignore them. "And have dinner afterwards. I hope it's not too busy," she added.

"Nothing like the last minute school rush," Ron said cheerfully. "Anyone need new robes, or is it just books this time?"

"Hugo needs new robes," Hermione said, before either of them could answer. "He's starting to grow like a weed."

"Mu-um."

"Rosie? Do you need robes? You haven't grown much since last year, have you?"

"No," Rosie said. At least not in height, she added to herself. She would be filling out her old robes a little more in the front, perhaps, but she was hardly going to say so in front of her dad and brother.

They left for Diagon Alley by Floo after lunch the next day, later than they would have usually started, the adults normally preferring to get in and out before the real crowds. Rose wore Muggle clothes, as usual, but dressed up a bit since they were going out to dinner, picking a knee-length skirt over her usual jeans, and a cream-coloured lacy singlet she had bought in Italy. She left her hair out - there was very little to be done with it, anyway.
"Guess what?" Albus said when they met the Potters at the Leaky Cauldron, and flashed her a badge on his jumper.

She grinned. "Quidditch captain?"

He looked a bit put out that she wasn't more surprised. "Well, yeah."

"Good for you."

He flushed. "I thought it would have been Reina or Benjy," he said, naming the two seventh years on the team. "They're older."

"So? You're better than them. You're a good Seeker, but you know more about the whole game, too - you'll be a great captain."

"Thanks, but - watch it!"

They were being shoved almost back into the fireplaces by the sudden rush of people coming through the pub.

"Oh, I'm so glad we don't have to do this again after Hugo leaves school," Hermione sighed, pulling Hugo towards her and holding onto his shirt despite his protests.

"Keep your head down, Dad," Albus muttered. "Wouldn't want you getting mobbed."

"Very funny," Harry said. "Come on, let's get out of here, we'll come back later."

As they walked through the pub, elbowing their way through the mass of people making their way to and from Diagon Alley as well as the many patrons at the tables and servers rushing to and from the kitchen, Rose thought she thought someone call her name. She looked over her shoulder, but there were too many people, even if she hadn't just imagined it.

They decided to do the bookshop last, as those were the heaviest things to carry. Ginny took Hugo and Lily to get fitted for new school robes, and Harry went to the bank. James split off to go to Weasley's Wizard's Wheezes, since he had all his NEWT things already. The rest of them went to the Apothocary to get Potions ingredients, and then the petshop for a year's supply of owl and cat treats.

As they walked back towards the bookshop, Rose heard her name again. "What is that?" she muttered, looking around.

"What?" said Al, confused.

"Over here!"

Someone was coming towards them from the direction of the Leaky Cauldron. He came up to them, grinning widely. "Hello," he said, cheerfully.

Rose stared. For a moment - a long moment - she didn't recognise him. He was tall, much taller, at least half a head taller than she was. Where she was used to seeing wizard's robes, he was wearing dark jeans and a black t-shirt bearing the slogan "I listen to bands that don't even exist yet". His usually pale hair gleamed golden in the sunlight, and it was slightly curly, and his skin, usually almost marble white after spending months indoors at the end of summer, flushed with a healthy colour.
Oddly enough it was the guitar case she recognised, battered as ever and slung across his back with a strap much newer than the rest of the ensemble; it had an Eagle on it in some kind of native-American motif, in Ravenclaw colours. She blinked, and realised she had forgotten to breathe.

"Scorp?" she gasped.

He grinned, and she felt her heart do a funny sort of hop-skip in her chest. "It is you!" She ran towards him and he caught her up, lifting her slightly off the ground as her momentum nearly knocked him over, but he was laughing. "What happened?" she exclaimed. "You got so tall!"

"I know right, finally!" he said, putting her down. He didn't seem to notice - or perhaps he didn't care - that her parents were there, watching. "I always refused to accept I was going to be short forever."

"Mate," Al was staring at Scorpius with a similar expression to what Rose herself must be wearing. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"I live here," he replied, innocently.

Rose punched him, hard in the arm. "We've been worried about you, you ass!"

"Ow! Look, I'm in a rush, I can't really talk - but you're coming to the Leaky for dinner, right?"

"Yes, but -"

"I'll see you then. I've got a surprise for you."

"Other than that you're here and not murdered and buried in a shallow grave?" Al asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah, other than that - I have to go, I need new strings - bye! Nice to see you again, Mr & Mrs Weasley."

He waved to Rose's parents and hurried off, to the end of the street where it junctioned into Knockturn Alley.

"What the hell?" Albus said, with feeling. "No wonder Emmett couldn't deliver the letters, if he's been here the whole time - where is he staying?"

"The Leaky Cauldron, I suppose," Hermione said, looking thoughtful. "That must have been what Hannah meant by having a surprise for us."

Ron snorted, as if to say he could imagine better surprises.

Rose wanted to go after Scorpius and drown him in questions, and Albus was not far behind her, but her parents dragged them back. "We still have to get your books before dinner," Hermione pointed out.

"Do you think he ran away?" Rose whispered to Albus anxiously.

Albus thought about it for a moment as they went into the bookshop. "You'd think so, but Neville's a teacher, right? He can't just harbour a runaway, he'd lose his job, and probably get in trouble with the Ministry. Hannah, too. Scorp wouldn't do that to them."

"But his grandparents can't have just let him stay here."

She ran her fingers along the bookshelf dedicated to Transfiguration, looking for the NEWT textbook. "He'd never be allowed."

"Well it has to be one or the other, doesn't it," Albus said grimly.
"At least he seems... happy," Rose admitted. "He always comes back after summer looking so pale and miserable. And he's done something with his hair... I hardly recognised him."

"Just what he always wanted," Albus said, frowning.

Rose shot him a look. "You're just jealous because he's taller than you, now."

"I am not. I'm just thinking... what if he's done something really dumb?"

"Well I'm sure he'll explain it all later." She felt much calmer now that she had thought about it a bit. If there were any danger, surely Scorpius wouldn't have been so cheerful. "Aha, NEWT Transfiguration." She tossed him a copy. "Now Ancient Runes."

It seemed to take ages to find all their books, pay for them, and round up everyone else. She could hear her father muttering to uncle Harry, and she thought she could guess what the conversation was about, but she didn't care. "Let's go," she prompted, tugging at her mother's sleeve impatiently like a child. She was starting to think she might have imagined the whole thing, it had been so quick. She needed to see him again to prove it had really happened, that she hadn't just made it up out of hope that he was happy and well.

Since it was so late, the Leaky Cauldron had calmed down somewhat, but there were still plenty of people sitting and eating. The smell of good food wafted up from the tables, making her tummy rumble, but she was too busy looking around to notice. She scanned the faces of all the guests, but couldn't place them. For a moment she thought he wasn't there, but then she saw a flash of blonde hair out of the corner of her eye, and turned to look. He was coming out of the kitchen door, backwards, wearing an apron over his t-shirt and carrying a large tray with plates and drinks. As she watched he made his way over to a group of young people, some of whom she recognised as former Hogwarts students, who cheered his arrival as he lowered the tray onto the table.

"There you are!" Hannah had appeared from behind the bar, wearing a bright yellow apron. Her hair was tied in a single plait down her back, and she was beaming. "Hello all of you - how was Italy? Lizzie's so looking forward to seeing you, come in, come in." She led them to a large table, thrown together out of several smaller tables, in the middle of the room. Usually when they visited, they went upstairs to eat in the apartment where Neville and Hannah lived, but Rose realised that there wouldn't be enough room, for three whole families. "Sit down, go on, put your bags under, I'll just go get everyone." She bustled off as quickly as she had come. Rose craned her neck to see over her shoulder as Scorpius picked up his empty tray and hurried off in another direction. He works here, she realised belatedly, feeling stupid. When he had said he lived here, she had imagined him crashing at the Leaky Cauldron the way she herself had done a few times when she was younger - though probably they wouldn't let him bunk in Lizzie's room, she added to herself. Again she wondered how he had managed it. Surely his father would never have allowed him to sink to what in his opinion must be a level of indignity far below those of the ancient house of Malfoy.

Everyone was sitting down and chatting, Hugo, the family's future naturalist, rattling off the creatures he wanted to study with Hagrid after peeking through his new Care of Magical Creatures book, James clearly just wishing he wasn't the only one his own age at the table, Lily re-tying her hair and complaining that it never stayed up - only Albus seemed to share her curiosity, and even he didn't seem surprised to see his friend in an apron. Rose supposed that she should have expected it too, after all he had already served at the pub for an afternoon, last Christmas. But this was different, from the look of him he'd been here for weeks if not almost the entire summer...

The Longbottom family arrived in a flurry of noise and excitement. Neville, holding Alice by the hand, happily shook hands with the men and kissed cheeks with the women while Hannah fussed over how tall Lily was getting and how much she looked just like her mum, and everyone wanted to
cuddle Alice. "Rose, Albus!" Lizzie exclaimed, coming over to hug them both. "How was Italy?"

"Great," Albus told her. "How was your summer?"

"Oh you know, just normal," she said, smiling innocently, pulling out the chair next to them.

"Why didn't you tell us he was here?" Rose asked immediately.

Lizzie looked surprised. "I thought he must have. Anyway you know our owl's getting old, no way she could go all the way to Venice and back."

"When did he -" Rose began, but Neville was already waving everyone back to the table. He lifted Alice up and plonked her into a seat.

"Quietening down, finally," he observed. "I think we should close early tonight, dear."

"Who runs this pub, me or you?" Hannah said sternly, but she leaned over and kissed his cheek in recompense. "Where's Scorpius?"

Rose saw her father's head go up. The other adults, she noticed, did not look uninterested.

"Over there, Mum." Lizzie pointed to where Scorpius was now removing plates from an abandoned table.

"Oh for goodness -" Hannah shook her head. "He should have stopped an hour ago." She hurried over to him, and Rose saw her waving down another server to take over.

"We've been short-handed today," Neville offered by way of explanation. "I'd help, but I'm no hand with trays, and plates, half the time they end up on the floor. I'd levitate them if it wasn't against Hannah's strict food handling rules."

"Sorry, sorry," Scorpius was saying, pulling his apron off over his head as Hannah dragged him over, practically by the ear. "Felicity went home early, cos her grandfather's ill, and it all went pear-shaped for a while..."

"Well it's under control now, so sit down," Hannah said firmly, leading him to the empty chair at the end next to Alice. "Before you fall down."

"Yes marm," he said meekly, tickling Alice's tummy as he sat down so that she giggled and slapped at his hand with her small pudgy one.

"Scorpius, you're looking very well," Ginny said politely.

"Thanks," the boy grinned. Rose was struck yet again by how he didn't seem to mind all the adults staring at him. At the memorial breakfast last year, his first time meeting most of them, he'd been almost catatonic with shyness. "How was Italy?"

"Oh, it was beautiful. We so rarely have the opportunity to travel as a family, Harry and Ron are so busy..."

"I'll see about the food," Hannah said, bustling off.

"I'd offer to help, but she'd hex me to the chair," Scorpius sighed.

"Hex me, hex me!" Alice demanded, drumming her fists on the arms of the chair.
"I'll hex you silly in a minute, you menace," Scorpius told her, tickling the back of her neck and making her laugh even more.

"He's totally brainwashed her," Lily said, sticking her tongue out at Scorpius, who shrugged.

"We can't help it if we're best friends, right Ally-pally?" The child's answer was to stick her own tongue out at her sister in turn.

"Manners, girls," Neville said sternly, though Rose thought she saw a hint of an amused smile on his face.

"All right," Albus said, cutting through Alice's giggles to ask Scorpius directly. "Spill. How did you get here. And when? And why didn't you say anything?"

"You didn't run away, did you?" Rose asked quietly, feeling guilty for asking, especially in front of everyone.

"No, I didn't run away," Scorpius sighed. "Not that they would have noticed if I had," he added in a low murmur. "I put up with them ignoring me for a week, then I asked grandmother if I could visit friends."

"And they let you?" Rose asked incredulously.

"Well I didn't say which friends. She didn't even ask. Honestly I expected her to say no, but I wasn't going to stick around to see if it was a test. I was starting to get asthma from the dust. I hadn't even really thought about where I was going to go… this was the first place I thought of."

"We're glad to have you," Neville said, nodding encouragingly. "We'd have had him for nothing," he explained, "but he insists on earning his room and board."

"Well it's not like I've much else to do," Scorpius shrugged. "And I like it. And I've made extra, for clothes and stuff." He plucked at his 'bands' T-shirt. "Lizzie took me shopping in Muggle London!"

"We only got as far as Westfield, I thought his head was going to explode," Lizzie said.

"Oh lor', you didn't take him to an Apple store, did you?" Albus winced. Scorpius laughed. "It was brilliant!"

"We were in there for hours," Lizzie groaned. "You can take him next time."

"No fear!"

"But, surely your grandparents didn't expect your visit to last all summer?" Hermione broke in. "Won't they be worried about you?"

Scorpius shrugged. For a second, Rose thought she saw something of the old Scorpius, the miserable cloud that had hung over him at the end of fifth year, flicker across his face. "I wrote to them after a week and told them I was staying. No answer, so I guess they're okay with it."

"What if -" Rose didn't want to press the issue, but there seemed to be so many holes in this plan. "What if they write to your father?"

Scorpius shot her a hard look, and there were a few seconds of heated silence. She half expected him to yell at her. "They won't," he said eventually, relaxing slowly as though he was willing it on himself. "Trust me."
"So Rose, Albus, how were your OWLs?" Neville asked, neatly changing the subject as Hannah came back leading three other servers with trays of food that were put down on the table for sharing.

"They both did very well," Hermione said proudly - and loudly - before either of them could reply. "Ten each! Rose got nine Os, though of course I wouldn't have expected any less."

"Mu-um," Rose protested automatically.

"Lizzie got seven," Hannah said proudly.

"Mum!" Lizzie exclaimed.

"Sweetheart, I'm just so proud of you!"

"Just so everyone knows, I was only taking nine to start with," Lizzie put in quickly. "I just failed Astronomy and History of Magic because I could barely think straight. And I don't need either of them so I'm not disappointed at all."

"Darling, you got three Os, you should be very proud, don't focus on what you failed."

"I keep telling her I only got one O," Neville said. "Kids these days expect too much of themselves, if you ask me."

"No one was, Dad," Lizzie muttered.

"Scorp?" Rose asked, speaking gently just in case. "Did you pass Herbology?"

"Hey!" Scorpius looked offended. "Did you expect me not to?"

"Of course not, I just know you were worried about it…"

"He passed," Neville interrupted. "And never has the term 'Exceeds Expectations' been more accurate, if you don't mind me saying, Scorpius."

Scorpius sighed, giving up. "No, that's fair. I failed Divination, though."

"What!"

Rose turned with surprise to hear her father's voice. She would have thought he would be the last person to add his two Knuts to a discussion on Scorpius' OWLs. "How does anyone fail Divination? It's telling the future, just make something up, no one can prove you wrong!"

Scorpius frowned. "But… isn't that cheating?"

"Yes it is - don't listen to him, Scorpius," Hermione said firmly. Ron glowered.

"But you passed everything else?" Rose prompted.

He grinned. "Yup. NEWTs in Charms, Transfiguration, Defence Against the Dark Arts and Muggle Studies. But if my father asks," he added. "I'm doing Potions instead."

"I didn't hear that," Neville muttered. Rose thought her mother, uncle and aunt also looked less than sanguine at this announcement, but the conversation veered off in another direction, from OWLs back to Italy, and everyone started tucking into their dinner, enjoying the classic Leaky fare which had really become something to desire since Hannah had taken over the pub. Rose was only half listening to the conversation, eating without really noticing what she was doing. It didn't make sense
to her how Scorpius could suddenly be so flippant about lying to his father for two years about his subjects. She remembered how he had agonised about the decision to even take Muggle Studies in the first place, and an extra subject was much easier to hide than a completely alternative one. Not to mention where he had spent the entire summer, when there was so much risk that it could fall apart at any second. There had been something in his face when he spoke about his grandparents that told her there was something he wasn’t saying.

She didn’t realise she was staring at him along the table, until he looked up and met her eye. She looked away, quickly, feeling her cheeks flush.

"Right," Neville said when the dinner was mostly cleared away, although Alice had managed to get some of it on the floor. "It's about time for your set, isn't it Scorp?"

Scorpius looked up and grinned. "Be right back!"

"Set?" Rose mouthed at Albus, who shrugged in confusion as their friend left the table for the stairs. The question was more or less answered, however, when he came back down in possession of his guitar, the Ravenclaw eagle strangely luminescent in the lamp light.

"This is your surprise," he explained as he came by the table. "I wrote you a song."

Rose felt her heart do that weird hop-skip thing it had done when she first saw him. "For me?" she said, breathlessly.

"Well, for both of you," Scorpius corrected, nodding at Albus. "Hope you like it - scuse me."

There were people clapping already, Rose realised, cheering him onto the stage. "He's played nearly every night for the last month," Hannah explained, leaning over the table to speak over the applause. "People are starting to come just to hear him, it's really good for business… not that I'd make him do it if he didn't want to, of course…"

Scorpius was settling himself, perching on the edge of a stool that had been set up on a small stage Rose hadn't even noticed until now, positioning the guitar and playing a few experimental notes. Then, inexplicably, he drew his wand and fastened it to the neck of the instrument - there was a clip that seemed to have been added just for that purpose. When he strummed the guitar again, the sound that came out was unlike any she had ever heard any guitar make.

"Evening everyone," Scorpius said, calming the cheering crowd with ease, and somehow his voice travelled clearly across the crowded room. "I'm going to play something new for you tonight… another cheer. "It's a song I wrote for my two best friends. I wouldn't even be here without them, so… this is thank you." He saluted in Rose and Albus' direction, and Rose felt her cheeks flush even redder.

He started playing, and after a few seconds Rose’s mouth fell open. There could have been three instruments on that stage, not just one, but he seemed to be controlling all of them with his fingers. As she looked closer, the movements of his hands were slightly different than she was used to, and, yes, the strings were multicoloured. It hadn't been noticeable before, but as he played, they glowed slightly, illuminating his hands in green, red and blue as his fingers moved swiftly over them. She had never seen anything like it, and even the cheering crowd was silenced for the first few verses by this spectacle.

If you ever find yourself stuck in the middle of the sea
I'll sail the world to find you
If you ever find yourself lost in the dark and you can't see
I'll be the light to guide you

We find out what we're made of
When we are called to help our friends in need

You can count on me like 1, 2, 3
I'll be there
And I know when I need it
I can count on you like 4, 3, 2
And you'll be there
’Cause that's what friends are supposed to do, oh yeah

Is he singing in harmony with himself? Rose thought, incredulously. Yes, one of the strings - or part of the string, she couldn't quite work it out - had to be a recorded voice. But there was no denying, the effect was incredible. In the second chorus people got over their initial surprise and started cheering again, and Rose found herself joining in, unable to stop herself as though the music carried with it some kind of infection.

If you're tossin' and you're turnin'
And you just can't fall asleep
I'll sing a song beside you
And if you ever forget how much you really mean to me
Every day I will remind you

We find out what we're made of
When we are called to help our friends in need

You can count on me like 1, 2, 3
I'll be there
And I know when I need it

I can count on you like 4, 3, 2

And you'll be there

'Cause that's what friends are supposed to do, oh yeah

You'll always have my shoulder when you cry

I'll never let go, never say goodbye

You know...

You can count on me 'cause I can count on you.

Rose felt a rush of disappointment as he strummed the last chord, and the music died away. People were applauding, Al was whooping, even her parents were clapping, her mother wearing her interrogation face - of course she would want to know how he's doing it, Rose realised, I want to know how he's doing it! Scorpius bowed, to even louder applause. Hannah waved to him and made a sign with her hand, and he nodded. "Last orders, ladies and gentlemen," he said smoothly.

There was a rush to the bar, amid the chaos of which Scorpius climbed off the stage and started packing his guitar away. Rose left her seat and, ducking through the crowd, went over to him. "That was amazing," she said, in a rush. "How did you - I didn't know you could do that!"

He smiled at her, clearly pleased by her enthusiasm. "It's easy once you get the hang of it," he said, modestly.

"But how - I mean, is it the strings, or the wand?"

"Both," he said, swinging the guitar over his shoulder again and walking back to the table with her. "I had to get some of the strings made specially - you have no idea how hard it is to tune strings to different instruments! But that book Al got me had most of it. I had to improvise a bit," he admitted, as Neville passed him a Butterbeer, and he paused as he took a long sip. "A lot of it was pretty indecipherable because the author was a lutist - lutes and harps! Catch me playing a harp." He grinned impishly.

"Very impressive indeed," Hermione interrupted. "But I wonder, doesn't that constitute a breach of the Statute for the Prevention of Underage -"

"Muu-um!" Rose protested, almost stamping her foot in embarrassment.

"I'm registered with the French Ministry, Mrs Weasley," Scorpius explained, giving Rose a surprised look as though confused by her reaction. "I'm allowed to practice magic with supervision."

"In France, surely," Hermione said, frowning, ignoring the pained look on her daughter's face.

"Actually no," Neville assured her. "I checked - there's a neat little loophole there. Don't worry, Hermione, I'm keeping an eye on him."

She only looked half-convincing, Rose thought, but her curiosity about the technique was clearly
more than equivalent to her concerns. She plied Scorpius with questions about the strings, and he explained that he had charmed some, and others had been custom made at an old run-down knick-knacks shop on Horshom Alley, the little second-hand street past Knockturn where Rose had never even been. It wasn’t a big shop, he explained, but there was an old wizard there who was very skilled with music charms. "He loves to talk too, I must’ve learned more from him for free in the last two months than I did for my whole Charms OWL," Scorpius laughed. "He gets lonely, I suppose. The magic wears off fast, though. Apart from the clothes I’ve spent nearly all my money on strings. I’m going to ask Professor Flitwick if there’s a way I can get it to last longer, when we get back."

"Oh he’ll love that," Albus said, rolling his eyes. "Didn’t he give you a bunch of pamphlets on being a Ministry stooge?"

"Al," Ginny said warningly.

"What, he did! No offence, Dad."

"Oh, none taken," Harry said flatly, emerald eyes twinkling with amusement behind his glasses. "Just don’t expect me to pull you out of hot water if you ever get yourself arrested."

The last orders were made and they spend a happy hour in the bright and cosy atmosphere of the Leaky Cauldron as the evening drew on. Rose found that every time she felt Scorpius’ eyes on her, she would look up to find him looking in a totally different direction. And while he joked around with Al, helped Hannah put Alice to bed and teased Lily about her hair, part of her ruminated that there was more than just a lack of parental influence that had led to the transformation from shy, introverted boy into confident, dashing, creative young man. Privately she wondered if she would ever know, if it was even her place to try and find out. She would wait, she decided. If he wanted to tell her, he would. And yet, amid plans to meet the next day and kisses and handshakes all round - except between Scorpius and her father, she noticed - she found she was already less than satisfied with that decision.

Chapter End Notes

Please visit my fanfic blog: http://misssaigonfic.tumblr.com/
Ask me questions, get some insights!

This chapter's song was brought to you by Bruno Mars.
Looking over at him again, now thoroughly engrossed in killing whatever was on the screen, she tried to imagine him with a girl - any girl. She would be hanging off his arm while they played, he would turn and kiss her when his turn was over. Probably he would serenade her in front of the whole arcade. The thought put a sickening pit in her stomach.

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

They went back to the Leaky Cauldron the next day. At some point during the evening it had been suggested that they all go see a film, 'or something'. The look on Scorpius' face at this suggestion had been so hopeful and excited that no one had even considered saying no.

He and Lizzie were waiting in the pub, which was already starting to fill up with more last-minute Hogwarts shoppers, and Lizzie's friend Belinda was with them. Hannah gave Lizzie a handful of Muggle money and told them to behave around the Muggles. Everyone was in Muggle clothes, and it felt very weird to be walking out into Muggle London, as a group, like a trip to Hogsmeade but not in school uniform.

Albus had Googled the location of the nearest cinema, and he took charge of where they were going while Belinda, who was Muggleborn, explained the functions of the various Muggle things they saw as they walked. Rose wasn't so at home in Muggle London that she didn't find these explanations interesting and occasionally informative, and she could tell Lizzie was listening in as well. Scorpius was drinking in every word eagerly.

He stopped at one point, staring at a poster on the back of a bus stop. "I don't get it," he said, confused, while the Muggles walking past him gave them odd looks. Rose looked at the poster. It was of a man and a woman kissing, and they seemed to be coming out of a ball of fire. He was right, it didn't seem to make any sense, but it gave her an odd feeling.

"Don't stare at it!" Belinda laughed, pushing them back onto the pavement proper. "It's an ad for… well, you know."

"I don't know," Rose said defensively.

Belinda rolled her eyes. "Contraception," she said, with exaggerated eyebrow movement.

"What?" Rose blanched. "They just advertise that in the middle of the street?"
"Well yeah, it's not like you could see it being used - Scorp, will you move? People are looking at us!"

"Okay, but I still don't get it," Scorpius complained.

They managed to distract him minutes later however with a window display of video games, giving Rose just enough time to regain her composure, and then they had to go into a large shopping complex to get to the cinema. There they amused themselves for half an hour by reading all the posters and debating which film they should see. Nearly all of them were in 3D, the new high-tech kind where you didn't have to wear glasses. Quite a lot of them seemed to feature explosions and huge muscled men being thrown out of cars. They paused for a while at a poster for a film about a girl who - by the look of the glowing ball of light in her hand - could do magic.

"We should see something without magic in it," Rose said. "Something realistic."

Albus snorted, and Lizzie gave her an incongruous look.

"You know what I mean!" she exclaimed. "Realistic for Muggles, so we - so Scorpius learns something about Muggle culture."

"Let's face it, none of us know what we're doing," Albus shrugged. "Let's just pick the next one showing and go in."

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" - and that bit, where he jumped off the roof and landed on the bike, and the whole place blew up, and then he drove the bike up the wall - how did he do that?" he demanded. "Come on, you can't tell me that's not some kind of weightlessness charm -"

"He didn't actually do it, you idiot," Albus explained, for the third time. "It's CGI, or something - I don't know how it works, go ask Professor Clearwater."

The film had in fact turned out to be one of the ones with explosions, something to do with an MI5 operative who chased some bad guys across the country, but there was a sub-plot about his on-again, off-again relationship with a girl who happened to be the daughter of one of the bad guys. Rose hadn't seen a film since she was little, and had found the special effects very impressive, but Scorpius was taking his enthusiasm to extremes.

"There is no possible way that any OWL in Muggle Studies could prepare me for that!" he sighed as they wandered into the arcade on the other side of the level. "Who says Muggles can't do magic? That right there was magic, computers or no computers." They sat down at a plastic table on plastic chairs, and Lizzie bought five cokes and some chips with the rest of the money. Scorpius tasted the coke and nearly choked.

"Careful, you'll give yourself the hiccups," Rose warned him, grimacing when she realised how much she sounded like her mum.

"It's good, I just… didn't expect it to fizz so much," he said hoarsely, bravely making a second attempt through a straw.

"Maybe you should ask Professor Clearwater to take the NEWT class on an outing into the Muggle world," Belinda suggested. "There's only so much you can learn by sitting in a classroom, reading books."
"Sounds great, except I bet we'd need permission from a parent or guardian," Scorpius pointed out. "Like Hogsmeade, and I had to practically beg my father to sign that piece of paper. Somehow I don't see him saying yes to a field trip into Edinborough, or somewhere." He took another sip of his coke and swallowed, screwing up his face but apparently determined to enjoy it.

"So, make it next year," Belinda said, shrugging. "You're all seventeen, no permission needed, problem solved."

Scorpius stared at her as though she had just told him he had won a thousand Galleons. "You're a genius!" he croaked.

Albus laughed. "C'mon Scorp, I've got a few coins left, let's go shoot some mafia bosses, or something."

"I have no idea what that means, but I'm game." Scorp got up and followed him through the rows of plastic tables to the cluster of arcade games. Rose watched them go with a faint smile on her face. She had never seen Scorpius so happy. He followed Albus like an excitable puppy, all perked up ears and waggly tail. All her concerns of the previous day seemed almost silly, now.

From beside her, she heard Belinda let out a long, deep sigh.

"What's the matter?" she asked, glancing around.

"Oh, nothing. Just… Scorpius. I was going to ask him out, but I don't think it's worth having to fight you for him."

Rose blinked, her grip inexplicably tightening on her glass. "What?"

Lizzie giggled. "Oh, please. You haven't stopped staring at him since you got back. Mind you, now he doesn't look like a little boy anymore, I don't blame you."

"I don't fancy Scorp!" Rose hissed, looking up quickly to make sure the two boys were out of earshot. Albus was showing his friend how to hold the plastic gun and shoot into the computer screen, and Scorpius was laughing at the absurdity of it. His laugh seemed to bring out the curve of his cheekbones in a way she hadn't noticed before.

Lizzie was nodding. "Right. Of course you don't. You're just in love with him."

"Lizzie, don't be ridic- "

"He likes you too, you know."

Rose stopped, her mouth hanging open. "What do you mean?" she asked eventually, as calmly as she could possibly manage.

"He never shuts up about you! Rose this, Rose that… when he found out you were coming to the pub, he was in the shower for about a day and a half, and I think he spent the rest of the week deciding what shirt he should wear."

"I feel like I should congratulate him on his choice," Belinda said dreamily, resting her chin in her hands and staring in the boys' direction. "Of shirt, I mean. Look at him. I don't suppose you might share him just a little bit?" Rose stared at her. It was absurd, of course. Scorp was her friend. They had been friends ever since she had decided they would be friends. He was like an honorary cousin, like Teddy.
"Look, this is stupid," Rose said firmly. "I am not in love with - and he isn't - neither of us are in love with each other! We're friends."

"So you don't mind if I ask him?" Belinda asked.

"Ask away," Rose said crossly, although for some reason she was less than happy with the idea. Scorpius and Belinda would not work together, any more than he and Rose would. Looking over at him again, now thoroughly engrossed in killing whatever was on the screen, she tried to imagine him with a girl - any girl. She would be hanging off his arm while they played, he would turn and kiss her when his turn was over. Probably he would serenade her in front of the whole arcade. The thought put a sickening pit in her stomach. She hadn't liked him being with Stacey either, she realised. Back then she had thought it was because Scorpius was being silly, going out with someone he barely knew, but she had done the same thing, hadn't she? The memory of her last date sent a shiver of unpleasantness down her spine. But she wasn't in love with him. She had been annoyed at Albus for dating, as well, and no one could accuse her of being in love with her own cousin.

She found to her deep embarrassment that she couldn't even look at Scorpius for the rest of the afternoon. Luckily they had to leave for the Leaky Cauldron not long after they had finished at the arcade, so that Scorpius could get ready for his set that night. "Are you going to stay for it?" Lizzie asked. "Oh, and Bel's staying over, if you want to do that, Rose can sleep in my room with us and Al can crash in Tony's room, or bunk with Scorpius."

Rose wanted to say no. She really needed to go home and sort out all the thoughts and feelings that the uncomfortable conversation at the arcade had stirred up. "Sure," Albus said, before she could say anything. "I'll go Floo mum."

There were less people in the Leaky that night, but a few regulars were obviously pleased to hear Scorpius play again. He played a different song, this time, and without his wand attached to the guitar, the coloured strings played normally. One of the older ones was starting to fade magically, he explained.

"Well I know what I'm getting you for Christmas," Albus joked as his friend made a thorough double-check of all the others, tapping them with his wand and listening to the sound they made.

"I'll need six by then," Scorpius said as he put the instrument away.

"We'll get you three each, then, right Rosie?"

Rose started, having distanced herself so far from the conversation that it was a shock to be brought back to it. "Right," she said, nodding but still not quite able to meet Scorpius' eyes.

Albus frowned at her. "You okay?"

"I'm fine," she said quickly. "Just thinking."

"No need for that sort of thing, you know, we're still on holiday," Scorpius said. She looked up quickly and smiled before dropping her gaze again. There was a moment's silence that seemed to Rose to last about an hour before someone changed the subject, but she could feel his eyes on her, questioning.

The pub was closing around them before long, and there was nothing left to do but get ready for bed. Scorpius had his own guest room on the third floor, and he wished them goodnight in the pub before the rest of them went up to squeeze themselves into the Longbottoms' apartment. Lizzie showed Albus Tony's old room, and then got Hannah to conjure two extra beds in her own room, and loaned
them pyjamas. There were only a few minutes of the customary chatter before both Hufflepuffs fell asleep, leaving Rose alone to stare up at the dark ceiling.

*It couldn't be true, could it?*

The song, she thought, had been about friendship. Not love. But he had written it for both of them, and he could hardly sing about being in love with Albus. Then again, even if he did love her, she couldn't believe he would sing her a love song in front of her whole family. Just because he had been excited to see her, that didn't mean anything. But Lizzie had seemed so sure, and she would know, having lived with him all summer, surely she would know better than anyone. But she hadn't said that he had come right out and *said* it. So maybe she was just mistaking a particularly strong friendship for love.

Love. How had they gone, in less than two days, from being best friends to having this word 'love' thrown around like it was a given? All right, she was prepared to admit that she didn't want him dating other girls. But she wasn't sure she wanted to date him herself, either. And whether she wanted to or not, it hardly mattered unless he *did* want to go out with her, which it still wasn't clear that he *did*. He hadn't singled her out at all, today. It had just been a group outing. He hadn't even tried to sit next to her in the cinema. Lizzie was just twisting things around to how she thought they really were. Unless… he did like her, but didn't quite realise it? Like Rose herself, before today? Maybe he didn't want her dating other boys, either.

After what seemed like hours of her brain going round and round in circles, she sat up and rubbed at her eyes. This was stupid. She was a Weasley, dammit. Weasleys did not mope around waiting for something to happen, they *made* things happen. She had to ask him.

She slid out of the conjured bed, still dressed in Lizzie's spare pyjamas, and slipped her shoes onto her feet. Belinda let out a loud snore as she crept out of the door, closing it gently behind her.

Despite the late hour, and it must have been past one in the morning, there were still people up. She could hear them talking, laughing behind one of the closed doors on the first floor guest rooms. She tip-toed past the door and made her way up to the third floor. Luckily only one of the doors had an occupied sign on it. She stood outside it for a moment, wondering if she really wanted to do this. But it was freezing out in the hallway in thin cotton pyjamas, and the sooner she got in, the sooner she would be warm. She took a deep breath and knocked on the door.

There was a moment's silence, but just as she was about to knock again, a hoarse voice called, "who is it?"

"It's me," she said softly. "Rose."

The door opened. He stood there rubbing his eyes, his hair tousled. He was wearing only a pair of loose track pants that slung low on his hips. They looked old, but perhaps that had belonged to Tony. "What is it?" he asked, his voice still gravelly with sleep.

She still couldn't meet his eyes. She was afraid of what she would see in them, though what she was afraid of she couldn't quite decide - was it love she was afraid to see? Or was she afraid not to see it? Unfortunately the only alternative was looking at his bare chest, and trying desperately not to stare any lower. "I need to talk to you," she said.

"You know it's like two in the morning, right?" he mumbled.

"Yeah. Sorry."
He shook his head. "Come in then."

He closed the door behind her and fumbled around in the dark for his wand. "Lumos," he muttered, and balanced it on the dresser, giving them just enough light to see each other by. Rose sat on the rumpled bed - it smelled like him... Oh Merlin, how did she even know what he smelled like? - while he found his T-shirt. The wand-light flickered against his back as he pulled it on, muscles moving under the skin until the dark fabric fell to his waist.

He didn't turn back to her straight away, as though he was gathering himself. "So what do you want to talk about?" he asked, crossing his arms and leaning back against a bare patch of wall.

She forced herself to look up at him. It was easier in the dark, his eyes shadowed by his hair and the expression on his face unreadable by the wand light. "It's... it's hard to say," she said, catching a lock of her hair between her fingers and twisting it nervously. "It's just something Lizzie said..."

He sighed, and his head drooped slightly over his chest. "She told you. I knew it. You were acting weird all day."

She swallowed. So he did know.

"She promised she wouldn't tell," Scorpius muttered, and she felt, despite the shocking nature of this revelation, a stab of anger. If he was in love with her, didn't she have a right to know? How dare he deliberately try and keep it from her?

"I wish you'd told me yourself," she said shortly. "You didn't need to know!" he shot back, so harshly that she jumped. "And I just wanted... it's been such a good summer, I just wanted to forget about it...."

She frowned. Something wasn't quite right with what he was saying. He uncrossed his arms to run his hands roughly through his hair, and she thought his hands shook, though it was hard to tell in the gloom. He didn't offer anything more. "Scorp?" she prompted, after a while.

"I should've known you wouldn't buy that story about staying with friends," he said, low.

She stared at him. "No, I didn't." Was that what he thought she wanted to talk about? Yesterday she had wanted to ask him, it was true, but she had almost forgotten about it completely while dealing with Lizzie's ridiculous suggestion. "That's not what happened, then? Your grandmother didn't just let you leave?"

He let out a short, derisive breath. "No. No, she didn't let me leave. She told me to leave."

Another short silence. Rose tried to understand what he was saying to her, and didn't feel any the wiser. "Tell me," she said, finally, as gently as she could manage. He looked tense, as though ready to either explode or break down at any second.

He pinched the bridge of his nose and scrunched his eyes up tight. "Rosie, I..." and another harsh breath.

Suddenly, she didn't want to know. She was imagining all kinds of terrible things without the need for him to confirm any of them. But she saw in him the same need to speak that she had felt, almost a year ago after the Hogsmeade weekend, when Gary had kissed her. Part of her had dreaded the thought of anyone knowing, hated the idea of the humiliation she would suffer having to say the words. But deep down, she had known that she needed someone to talk to, that the worst thing she could possibly do was keep it bottled up inside her. And it was the same now, she knew. He wanted
to tell someone. He needed to tell someone. He just couldn't.

She got up and went to him, gently pulling his hands away from his face so she could look into his eyes. She didn't know what she had expected to see, but what she did see was the Scorpius she remembered from their first year. A frightened little boy who needed her help.

He gave her a pleading look, and she pulled him over to the bed and sat him down before climbing on beside him and taking both his hands in hers. "Tell me," she said again.

"She told me to leave, because… because my grandfather did something to me… and she was afraid of what would happen… what would happen to him, if anyone found out," he said. His voice was unexpectedly steady, and she squeezed his hands a little tighter, trying to keep her own voice from shaking as she asked.

"What did he do? Did he hit you?" Horrible as it was to admit it to herself, she realised she would not be surprised by this. The way he had spoken about his grandparents, she should have known something like that would happen.

"No." He sighed. "He's totally mad. Worse than before. He didn't know who I was, at all. He thought I was… that I was my father."

Rose didn't know what to say to that, so she just held his hand until he felt ready to go on.

"He's afraid of my father, I think. When I was little there was a fight… but anyway. At first it wasn't so bad, he was calling me his boy and saying he was going to buy me things, stupid things, like a racing broom… then suddenly it all changed. He kept saying I had ruined his life, that I had betrayed him… he pulled his wand on me. I didn't even have mine on me, I left it in my trunk, it was stupid…"

"He cursed you?" Rose asked, feeling sick. Hexes and little jinxes were one thing, but she couldn't imagine actually being cursed by someone in her own family, let alone her grandfather who was the sweetest old man in the world.

A pause. "Remember… Defence Against the Dark Arts, last year, we learned about the Unforgivable Curses? The Cruciatius Curse?"

Rose felt her heart sink even further. "Oh Scorp, no…"

"It was worse than anything… you have no idea. I thought I was going to die from the pain. It was like knives… and fire, and drowning, all at once." He was speaking faster now, his need to get through it overtaking his reluctance. "It seemed to go on forever and ever. Grandmother stopped him eventually, I don't know how… she told me he would die if he went back to prison, and if I stayed he might do something worse. She gave me Floo Powder, said I had to leave and not come back, and never tell anyone. I was shaking all over, I could barely walk, I couldn't think of where to go. I wanted…" he faltered for a moment, awkwardly. "I wanted to see you… you and Albus, but then I remembered you were in Italy… the best I could think of was the Leaky Cauldron. I came out in their living room - fell over in the grate. Neville found me."

Rose found she could hardly breathe. "Did you tell him what happened?"

Scorpius shook his head slowly. "No. But he knew, anyway. He said he knew the signs. He said we didn't have to tell the Ministry if I didn't want to, but I shouldn't go back, and I could stay here. That… that's it, really."

Rose stared at him. "But didn't Neville want to report it? He's a teacher! And he used to be an Auror,
"surely he can't just ignore someone using an Unforgivable Curse on his own student -"

"Yeah, he wanted to report it. I've never seen him so angry. But I asked him not to -"

"But why, Scorp?" she asked, leaning forward to peer under where he was hiding behind his fringe.

"Because, because…” he swallowed and shook his head. "Because it's illegal, because he'll go back to Azkaban, because he'll die there and everyone will blame me, don't you get it? This is my family - "

"No families I know use unforgivable curses on each other!" Rose protested. "Who cares if he goes to prison, he deserves it!"

"I care!" he almost shouted, pulling his hands away. "This is why I didn't tell you, because you wouldn't understand…"

"No, I don't understand," she said. "Explain it to me."

"I don't want to be responsible for anyone in my family going to prison, again," he said, slowly and painfully. "They've already been through enough - I know, I know they deserved it," he said quickly at the look on her face. "Mr Potter is the only reason they're not all still in prison, that I was even born… I know that. But it has to stop. I want it to stop. And it will stop, with me," he said firmly. "I decided that my very first year at Hogwarts, that things are going to different… but if he goes back, Rosie, it'll start this all over again, it's hard enough already… people will always think that I'm one of them."

"Okay," she said, reaching out to put a gentle hand on his shoulder. She still thought he was wrong, but the desperation in his voice was such that she could believe he had convinced Neville not to press charges. "But, Scorp… your father, surely he should know…"

He snorted, a trace of his usual self rearing its head. "Even if I could tell him where I've been all summer, which I obviously can’t… look, he might come up here and beat the living daylights out of my grandfather, but I think it's more likely that he'd tell me I should have done it myself. And I don't want to hear that."

He met her eyes, finally, and she knew he was telling the truth. "But… you're so different," she said, helplessly. "You seem so happy."

"I am happy," he assured her, hard as it was to believe. "After that, being here… it's been great. The Longbottoms treat me like a real person, like I'm worth something, and I know I've helped Hannah bring people in in the evenings, and I've got used to convincing people that I'm not going to murder them in their sleep. After a while you just… brush it off. I just be myself."

"I wondered why you were so relaxed around dad and uncle Harry," Rose admitted.

"Trust me, I wasn't, I've just gotten better at pretending," he said, smiling weakly. "And I couldn't write to you or Al… I'm sorry, but I couldn't explain all this in a letter, and I just knew you guys wouldn't accept the same story we told everyone else. Except Hannah, and… Lizzie knows a bit," he added darkly. "Because she saw me when I was still shaky and sick - I still can't believe she told you."

"She didn't," Rose said. "Don't worry about it. That was… something else."

"Oh."
"I still wish you would have told me."

"I wanted to." He pushed his hair back out of his eyes. "I did, Rosie, honestly. It's just we were having such a good time, I didn't want to ruin everything. I knew you'd figure it out eventually, though. You're annoyingly clever, even for a Ravenclaw."

She sighed, and reached forward to hug him around the neck, resting her head on his shoulder. "I knew something horrible was going to happen," she said softly, "I just knew it… I'm so sorry."

"It's okay," he said, low, and she felt the weight of his hand come up to rest on her back. "Even with all that… it really has been the best summer ever."

She felt tears come to her eyes, and closed them tight, defensively. He had not cried, and she was not going to make things worse by doing it for him. Instead she held the hug for as long as she could. "What do you want to do now?" she asked, softly.

"Er…" he looked oddly guilty. "Well, I don't suppose we could go back to sleep, could we? It's been a long day, and I was having a great dream about that guy from the film…"

She slapped him on the shoulder. "What!" he exclaimed in a low hiss. "It's two in the morning! You're the one who woke me up to talk about all this personal stuff, and I have a breakfast shift tomorrow and I have to shower and do my hair…"

She burst out laughing. "What have you done with your hair?"

He made a face and ruffled it ruefully. "Lizzie showed me a curling charm - just a little one! It was starting to look girly from the back, it got so long. And Hannah suggested I charm it darker blond - not so it's really noticeable, but it works, right?" He looked so hopeful that she had to laugh.

"Yes, it works. I hardly recognised you."

"Good. Now get out, woman, I need my beauty sleep." He made shooing motions, so she patted him fondly on the knee and got up to leave. "Hey… Rosie?"

"Yes?"

"What did Lizzie say that made you come all the way over here, if it wasn't about my grandparents?"

Rose paused. She had almost forgotten the reason she had come over in the first place. If she was honest, however, the conversation had already tired her out a lot, and the idea of what would happen if she added more fuel to the fire now…. anyway. It was stupid. He obviously didn't feel the way about her that Lizzie thought he did. He had just been worried about telling her about his grandparents. She smiled at him. "That was nothing," she said, slipping out of the door and back into the cold, dark hallway. "Nothing at all."

Chapter End Notes

Please visit my fanfic blog: http://misssaigonfic.tumblr.com/
Ask me questions, get some insights!
Sixth Year Part 1: Going NonVerbal

Chapter Summary

Scorp blew hair out of his eyes and shrugged. "Who wants to be a Prefect, anyway? Peter's much better at herding first years around and helping them with the riddles." The truth was, he had been a bit disappointed at the time, wondering if McGonagall and Flitwick had agonised over it or if he hadn't even been considered. But now he knew he would be a dreadful Prefect, so clearly no matter what the reasons were, the right decision had at least been made.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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2022

When the time came, it was incredibly hard to leave the Leaky Cauldron. Scorpius had never thought he would ever not want to go back to school. Hannah had become a very close friend, and he thought he would never respect any man as much as he did Neville. The Professor would be returning to Hogwarts, of course, but Scorpius was no longer doing Herbology; he would see much less of him.

"You must come, on Christmas Day," Hannah insisted, hugging him just as tightly as she had Lizzie, on platform nine and three quarters. "Promise? Write a new song for us?"

"Course I will," he said thickly, as she reached up to ruffle his hair.

"All our regulars will miss you!" she said. "What am I going to do for evening entertainment?"

"Mum, leave him alone or he'll quit school just to go back with you," Lizzie said, rolling her eyes. If this wasn't bad enough, saying goodbye to Alice was one of the hardest things he had ever had to do. He would have just given her a quick hug and run away before it all got too much, but she seemed to understand that he was leaving and refused to let go of him. "Scoooor!" she screamed, loud enough for nearly everyone on the platform to hear. "Nooooooo!"

"Oh bloody Merlin," he muttered. "You menace, people are going to think I'm kidnapping you!"

"She doesn't care that I'm leaving," Lizzie said, offended. "Alice, stop being a baby and let him go, the train's leaving, come on…" She tried to detach the little girl, but she only screamed even louder and clung on for dear life. Hannah made a motion to pull her away, but Scorpius shook his head. He didn't want anyone to have to drag her off him. He didn't want her to remember him as something she had been torn unfairly away from.
"It's okay," he said, taking a breath and putting his arms carefully under and around her so she didn't have to hang by his t-shirt like a monkey. "Ally-pally, it's okay. It's only for a little while, and I'll see you at Christmas, all right?"

She stopped screaming, but only so she could bury her face in his shoulder and cry. He stroked her hair, helplessly. It had only been three months, but in that time she had become just like a little sister to him. Even now he was afraid that he would come back at Christmas to find that she didn't remember him at all.

"Oh, that's so sweet."

The Potters and Weasleys had chosen the most inopportune time to arrive. Scorpius could see Ginny, Hermione, Fleur, Rose, Albus, Hugo, Louis, Lily, James, Fred, Roxie, the twins' mum Angelina, and Molly's mother Audrey holding the hand of a tiny little red-headed first year he could only assume was the youngest cousin, Lucy. It was Ginny who had spoken, coming forward with her hands outstretched. "Alice? Come to Aunty Ginny, sweetheart. Come on, remember Aunty Ginny?"

Alice finally, finally allowed herself to be peeled away after several minutes of cooing and cajoling, and sat sulking in Ginny's arms, sucking her thumb.

"Thanks," Scorpius breathed, straightening out the creases in his beloved 'Bands' T-shirt. He picked up his guitar and swung it over his shoulder. It felt odd to be standing here on the station with it. Some people from other houses he didn't know were giving him odd looks as they passed by. He would have been ashamed if he didn't know how to deal with looks by now, though.

The youngest Weasley, who looked very small compared to everyone else with her red hair in neat little pigtails, burst into tears at this point. The new sixth and fourth years managed to escape the platform at last while everyone made attempts to comfort her.

"Poor Luce," Rose said as they dragged their trunks onto the train. "She's had her mum and dad to herself while Molly's done all seven years. She'll miss them like crazy."

"Baby," Lily muttered. "I didn't cry, my first time."

"No, but you cried the first time James left," Albus pointed out, and she glared at him. They found a compartment with only a couple of first years in it, and Albus shooed them out, much to Rose's disapproval.

"What? We're sixth years now, we're one year away from ruling the school. First years are basically our slaves."

"That's not funny, Al. No wonder you never got made a Prefect."

"Speak for yourself."

"Why didn't Professor McGonagall make any of you Prefects last year?" Hugo asked. "Mum was sooo disappointed..."

"Shut up!" Rose hissed. "Anyway I don't have time to be a Prefect, with school and Quidditch, neither does Alby."

"Scorpius doesn't have Quidditch," Lily pointed out.

The three Ravenclaws looked at each other, awkwardly. "Professor McGonagall hates me," Scorpius said eventually, by way of explanation.
"Scorp! She does not."

"Right, so that conversation we had about her not even wanting to let me come to Hogwarts was in my imagination?"

"That was four years ago. I'm sure she's come around to you, by now."

Scorp blew hair out of his eyes and shrugged. "Who wants to be a Prefect, anyway? Peter's much better at herding first years around and helping them with the riddles." The truth was, he had been a bit disappointed at the time, wondering if McGonagall and Flitwick had agonised over it or if he hadn't even been considered. But now he knew he would be a dreadful Prefect, so clearly no matter what the reasons were, the right decision had at least been made.

The Weasley parents came to the compartment window to say their final goodbyes. Listening to Louis chattering to his mother in French, Scorpius realised just how long it had been since he had spoken in that language, except in his head, or when he particularly wanted to curse.

Hannah waved at Lizzie, then at him, and he felt a slight pang as he remembered that the last time his own mother had seen him to the station, he had been twelve. He hadn't seen her now for two years.

Ginny held up Alice, who took her thumb out of her mouth to wave tiredly. His own brother would be two and a half, by now.

Audrey had finally convinced Lucy to get on the train. Rose got up to give her tiny cousin a hand onto the step, and then they all stood at the window, waving as the train let out an ear-splitting whistle and set off from the station.

Scorpius, Lizzie, Rose and Albus sat around a table at a booth while the Gryffindors coaxed Lucy into a game of Exploding Snap, pulling out their wands with excitement after a whole summer of being forbidden to use them, and showing her some of the things she would be learning in Charms and Transfiguration.

"How come none of your dads came?" Scorpius asked, as King's Cross disappeared from view out of the window. He had thought it was strange that only the women had come to see off their children, when normally it was like an annual family reunion on the platform.

"Too busy," Albus shrugged. "Soon as we got back from Italy, the whole Shadow thing blew up. Everyone's tracking down the operatives, interrogating them, staking out drop-off points... they don't seem to be getting any closer, though."

"He's a very clever smuggler," Rose explained. "None of the lower down people, who do the actual smuggling, know who he is."

"Or who they are," Al interrupted. "There's still no evidence that it's just one guy."

"So your whole family is hunting him, or what?" Scorpius asked, confused. "I thought it was just the Aurors."

"Well more and more people are getting involved," Rose said. "Teddy's doing spy work in Europe, Uncle Percy's in Portugal as a liaison, Uncle Bill is trying to work out the spells they're using on the packaging, even Mum's been to some of the interrogations. Apparently she's really good at it," she added, unsurprised.

"The trade's getting worse and worse here, that's why," Albus explained. "Dad said a few people might have already been killed by this dark stuff, but it's hard to tell because there's no way to trace..."
any of it."

"Anyway," Lizzie was already bored by the conversation. "What classes do you think we'll have together?"

"Well, Charms, Defence and Transfiguration are big classes, there might be two of each, so I don't know," Rose mused, instantly distracted by the topic of schoolwork. "I'm the only one doing Ancient Runes -"

"Nice knowing you," Albus muttered.

"But you and Al will probably have Care of Magical Creatures together, Lizzie, and me and Al will have Potions together, and Scorp…"

"Will be doing Muggle Studies by himself, as usual," Scorpius sighed dramatically.

"What about Stacey?" Albus grinned. "Any future touching of hands over the textbook?"

Scorpius laughed dryly. "I don't know if she's taking it. It'll be a small class, either way, there are so few ignorant purebloods like me in our year."

"You're not ignorant." Rose was suddenly looking sour, for some reason. "At least you're making an effort. And it's not like the rest of us are experts on Muggles…"

"Your grandparents are Muggles!" Scorpius pointed out incredulously. "Okay, but we don't see them that much, and we were all just as clueless as you at the cinema."

Scorpius frowned, wondering why she was so defensive all of a sudden. He thought guiltily back to their middle-of-the-night conversation, nearly a week ago but clear in his mind. It had been hard, very hard, to relive the first few days of his summer after so long trying to forget it completely. But he had felt better afterwards, like he had been keeping secrets from her and was now free of them. Oddly, he didn't feel the same compulsion to tell Albus, and he didn't think Rose had, either. Then again Albus had always been fiercely protective, and Scorpius didn't think he needed anyone to protect him anymore. He was taller, stronger and able to take care of himself, and he was turning seventeen in March. Yes, Al could definitely live without knowing.

~*-S-*~

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His grandmother, at least, had seemed genuinely sad to see him go. Of course, this could have been confused with her terror at coming in to find him thrashing on the floor in the throes of the Cruciatus Curse. He still didn't know how she had stopped it. He remembered only her dragging him by the arm into the dark, dust-covered sitting room as he stumbled blindly along behind her, and pressing half a handful of Floo powder into his hand. "You mustn't tell anyone," she had said in her husky voice. "Your grandfather is ill… very ill… if he goes to Azkaban again it will kill him."

"But where do I go?" he had asked, holding himself up by the mantelpiece, trying to focus beyond the lingering pain, the shakes that wracked his body, and the double vision.

"Anywhere else," she told him firmly, though the look on her face was one of regret. Her wand was held tight in her right hand as though she expected to have to fight at any second. "Just don't stay here. You grandfather… he's very…"
"Ill, yes, you said," Scorpius muttered. His legs were shaking madly and he wasn't sure how long they would hold him. Every now and then there was a stab of pain through his stomach, like a cramp. "What about you?"

"I am in no danger," Narcissa told him. She raised a hand and stroked his cheek with the back of her fingers. Her touch was very cold. "Just like your father," she said, sorrowfully. "Just like him."

For once, Scorpius didn't have the energy to argue. He looked down at the Floo powder in his hand. Where could he go? Back to school? Would anyone even be there? He had confused visions of living in the kitchens with the House Elves for an entire summer. And if someone was there, what would he say? They would just owl his father to pick him up, and he could just imagine how well that would go. For a brief, hopeful moment he thought of Rose and Al, and then remembered crushingly that they were in Italy, and would be for months. His next thought was the Leaky Cauldron. The only people who had ever made him feel like he belonged. But they weren't his family. He wasn't as close with Lizzie as he was with Rose and Albus, and while Hannah and Neville had been kind to him so far, he wasn't sure how they would take his imposing on them for months. He didn't have nearly enough money to rent a room for that long…

There was an agonised roaring sound from the study, and his grandmother flinched. "Go," she whispered. "Don't come back. Please."

There was no more time to think. Scorpius threw the powder into the fireplace, "Leaky Cauldron, publican's apartment!" and stumbled into it.

The next thing he remembered was someone bathing his face with cool water, and muttering. Coming to, he realised he was lying on a soot-stained carpet, and his head was in the lap of his Herbology Professor. He tried to sit up and fell back, his whole body shaking.

"Stay still," Neville muttered, flicking his wand over Scorpius' limbs, and the shaking was suddenly not quite as bad.

"I'm sorry!" Scorpius exclaimed, seeing the mess he had made of the Longbottom's living room. He must have tripped over the grate, something he hadn't done since his father had taught him not to from the age of four.

"Shh. Don't try to move, you'll make it worse. I haven't seen shakes this bad for years. Do you have cramps?"

Scorpius squinted up at the man. There was concern in his face, but also a terrible, frightening fury. "Yeah, a bit," he said, unable to tell anything but the truth in the face of that look.

"It'll pass. It depends on how long you were under. There's no countercurse, as I'm sure you know, but I know a few charms to relax the muscles so it doesn't hurt as much. Tired?"

"God yes."

"We'll find you a bed. Bloody hell, I should have known something like this… when you're settled I'll go straight to the Ministry. Who was it, your father?"

"No, I…" Scorpius stared. "How did you know…?"

Neville looked grim. "I've seen this curse used more times than I care to count. Trust me, I know the signs." He helped Scorpius to his feet and helped him limp into one of the back rooms. It was decorated in Gryffindor colours, very neatly arranged, and clearly unlived in. Tony's room, he realised. Scorpius collapsed on the bed and put his hands over his face. The light was burning his
eyes - at least, that's what he told himself later. Neville switched it off and leaned against the door jamb for a moment, gathering himself. "You rest," he said eventually. "I'll be back in a bit."

Scorpius sat up, every muscle protesting fiercely. "Professor - please don't go to the Ministry."

Neville sighed. "I have to report this, Scorpius. You're my student."

"Not now, though," Scorpius pointed out. "It's the holidays."

"Mr Malfoy," Neville's tone turned hard and Professor-like. "As I'm sure you are aware, the use of the Cruciatus Curse warrants a life sentence in Azkaban. I can't simply overlook."

"But not without evidence, right?" Scorpius interrupted again. "I'll deny it if you tell them."

There was a pause while Neville stared at him incredulously. "Why?"

Scorpius had not been able to answer. He hadn't been to put the reasons into words until much later, when Rose had asked him, and even then it still seemed jumbled in his mind. Neville tried a few more times to convince him otherwise, but he was adamant, even between stages of fitful sleeping. Lizzie, on hearing that he was there, walked in on him during a shaking fit, and had to be calmed down. He heard his Herbology Professor arguing loudly with Hannah in the living room, and though he couldn't quite make out the words, he knew it was about him. It took him about a day to recover completely, and Neville told him that meant he must have suffered the curse for a long time, longer than most wizards would dare. Much longer and he might have been killed, or driven mad. Hearing that sent a chill down his spine.

Hannah and Neville sat down with him and told him he was welcome to stay, but warned him that some of the patrons of the pub might be less than friendly. He was ready for that, though. He begged to be allowed to work for his keep, and they in turn insisted on paying him a wage above it. He was good at the work, and he enjoyed it, especially when Hannah convinced him to play his guitar in the evenings - Neville used the Floo to go back to Hogwarts and retrieve it from under his bed in Ravenclaw Tower. He knew he should have written to Rose and Albus, but some deeper instinct told him that any lies he could come up with, they would see right through. Rose especially. And she had seen right through it.

He thought back to that night, when he had woken blearily to find her at his door, wearing borrowed pyjamas and her face full of concern. How she had sat with him, held his hand and put her arm around him, and suddenly none of it seemed to matter anymore. He couldn't believe how lucky he was to have friends like that.

"Dude, are you okay?" Al's voice brought him back to reality with a jerk.

Scorpius shook his head. "What? No, I'm fine - what's 'dude'?"


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There were three people Scorpius knew at the Sorting that year - unusual, for him, as the first years were usually faceless randoms he clapped for on automatic. Lucy was one this year, looking very small and timid at the back of the line. Halfway down were the twin boys that he had met during his first Christmas visit to Diagon Alley. He still couldn't tell which one was which, but he remembered...
them asking a lot of annoying questions.

They alone out of their year group looked confident and excited to wear the hat, as Professor Longbottom began reading out the names. The rest seemed to be following Lucy's example, trembling in their shiny new school shoes.

"Were we ever that small?" Scorpius asked over the sound of applause from the Gryffindor table as 'Beggs, Tui' was Sorted.

"You were," Albus said, smirking. Scorpius shot him a quelling look in reply and turned his attention back to the first years. When the twin boys' names were called, one after the other, they sauntered up to the hat without a care in the world.

"Scamander, Lycan!"

"RAVENCLAW!"

"Scamander, Lysander!"

"RAVENCLAW!"

"Oh great," Albus sighed, clapping politely as the dark-haired twins found seats at the end of the table. "We'll be jumping off the tower just to get away from them in two days."

"Be nice," Rose scolded him. "Listen, it's almost Lucy's turn."

"Travers, George!"

"SLYTHERIN!"

"Vane, Emily!"

"GRYFFINDOR!"

"Weasley, Lucy!"

Everyone watched as the last Weasley in the current generation made her way to the stool. The hat seemed to take its time with her. Scorpius supposed it must be talking to her, because she seemed to calm down a bit, her hands releasing their death grip on the stool to rest in her lap.

"RAVENCLAW!"

"Oh good!" Rose exclaimed, almost giving her cousin a standing ovation in her enthusiasm.

Scorpius thought the girl might be disappointed - nearly all her family was in Gryffindor, after all - but she seemed cheerful enough as she handed the hat back to Neville and came over to the Ravenclaw table. Rose made Albus scoot over so that she could sit between them. "I'm so glad," Rose whispered to her as Professor McGonagall began her welcome speech. Lucy smiled back at her.

For the first time, Scorpius was not quite overjoyed to sleep in his four-poster in the Ravenclaw boys' dormitory. It was nice to see Gaius and Peter, of course, and to put his guitar back in its accustomed place under the bed. He left his father's lock-box in his trunk. After the events of the summer, it made him uncomfortable to look at it. But as he went to bed, he found himself missing his little room at the Leaky Cauldron, the sound of Diagon Alley nightlife outside his window. It was hard to sleep, and when he finally did sink into unconsciousness, it seemed like only minutes before Albus was shaking
him awake again to go down to breakfast.

"We need timetables," Al reminded him when Scorpius muttered that he'd rather not go. Grumbling, Scorp forced himself out of bed and made for the shower. He was so despondent that he forgot to do anything with his hair, so that it hung flatly around his face like a curtain. Rose gave him an odd look when they met her in the Common Room. He did his best to ignore it, but he felt self-conscious all the way down to the Great Hall.

Professor Flitwick was all over the place at breakfast, trying to determine whether the students had done well enough in their OWLs to get into their preferred subjects. Of course, most of the Ravenclaws had passed all their OWLs, and wanted to do the more advanced classes, which seemed to make it even more difficult for the old wizard.

"Here's a thought," Albus muttered while Flitwick finished up with Gaius. "Why don't the school and the OWL examiners talk to each other? Then they could sort all this out before we even get here."

"Brilliant," Scorpius mumbled back, trying to eat toast without getting any in his hair, and contemplating Transfiguring something to tie it back with.

"Mr Malfoy!"

Scorpius flinched and grimaced. No one had called him by his last name in months. "Yes, Professor?"

Flitwick handed him a timetable. Even sitting, Scorpius had to bend down to receive it from him. "All your subjects are acceptable, but you had better pull your socks up in Transfiguration this term or Professor Davies will let me know!"

"Who in Merlin's name is Professor Davies?" Albus asked, once his and Rose's subjects had also been confirmed.

"He must be the new Professor, the youngish one. He was on the staff table, last night."

"Another one? What happened to Professor Ashborne?"

"Oh come on, Alby," Rose sighed. "They're all getting old, you know that. Mum says all the older teachers will be retiring soon - McGonagall and Flitwick are next, she thinks. They've been here the longest."

"McGonagall's been here about three hundred years," Scorpius agreed, earning him a giggle from some nearby first years who included Lucy Weasley. She seemed to have found a few friends among her year group - not including the Scamander boys who were apparently carrying on an in-depth discussion with each other about the contents of their boiled eggs.

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Rose's vague description of 'youngish' translated into a tall man in his mid to late forties, with thick dark hair. Even Al could tell he was good looking. As they entered the Transfiguration classroom for their first class of the year, he noticed that the entire front row and most of the second were occupied by girls. Albus rolled his eyes and took his customary seat on Scorpius' left, with Rose on his right. They had flanked him like this for years, and it was a hard habit to break, even if he clearly didn't need it anymore. Lizzie came and sat on Al's other side, though even she seemed to have eyes for the
"Welcome class," David said, smiling, and a few girls made little sighing noises. "My name is Professor Roger Davies, and I'll be your new Transfiguration teacher for this year… and perhaps beyond, depending on how things go. I went to Hogwarts myself, like most of your teachers… Ravenclaw class of '96, if anyone's interested. Now, congratulations everyone for getting through your OWLs. However I must warn you that sixth year is likely to test some of you more than you were expecting. I'm sure you're all aware that it's the time when you start practicing non-verbal spells…"

A few people groaned. James had warned Al about this, but he had mostly forgotten.

"…harder than a lot of people think!" Davies was saying now. "So today we'll start it slow. I'm sure you remember turning matches into needles in your first year, well, let's see if you can still do it, eh?"

A few people snickered. Al could see Carcer and Daws making cynical faces - Jian evidently having either failed his Transfiguration OWL or deigned not to take the subject at NEWT.

The matches were handed out. Everyone got out their wands and sat staring silently at their matches, turning red as they held their breath and willed them to turn into needles.

"No cheating!" Davies called out cheerfully as one of the Gryffindors muttered the incantation audibly enough for him to hear. Al had to admit that the man's attitude was a bit more enjoyable than the dry and dusty tones of old Professor Ashborne, or the sharp, no-nonsense rhetoric of Professor McGonagall, who had filled in a few times.

By the end of the class, no one had managed to turn their match into a needle, although Albus thought his looked greyer than normal, and Rose's had gone quite pointy. Scorpius had got further than anyone else. His match still had four noticeable edges, but it was silver, sharp at one end, and there was a hole at the other end. Rose was visibly unhappy about this.

"But how come you can do it?" she asked as they left Transfiguration for Defence Against the Dark Arts.

"I dunno," he said helplessly. "I guess, maybe because of the music charms?"

She looked at him blankly.

"You know, keeping track of all the different instruments, controlling them in your head… it's hard! I spent ages learning it, and there's no incantation."

Al supposed he was right. He had been doing non-verbal spells for months, and they hadn't really thought twice about it.

Defence Against the Dark Arts turned out to be pretty similar to Transfiguration. Professor Tufty had them line up in pairs and try to jinx their partners while the other tried to repel them with a shield charm. After a while it got really boring, standing for over an hour and glaring at each other while they strained to make something happen.

Rose paired with Scorpius, apparently determined to wrest the secret of his success from him, leaving Albus to partner with Lizzie. He stood there waiting as patiently as possible while she screwed up her eyes and brandished her wand at him.

"Switch!" Tufty announced, to everyone's relief.
"Don't you dare hex me," Rose muttered to Scorpius as they swapped places.

"That's kind of the point!" Scorp hissed back.

"Don't worry," Albus said to Lizzie, who was looking worried. "I'm rubbish at this." She didn't look convinced.

After a few minutes, Rose let out a shriek. Albus looked, just in time to see her cast a flickering shield charm that only just failed to stop Scorpius' hex. It hit her in the shoulder, nearly all its power sucked out by the shield. "Ow!" she cried.

"Very good, Mr Malfoy," Tufty said wearily. "Miss Weasley, your shield charm will have to be a bit more solid to deflect any real attack."

Albus knew his cousin well enough to read the expression of fury she wore behind the facade of forced calmness. When the class finally ended, they left the room with a great deal of tension. "I can't believe you're angry!" Scorpius was protesting. "I just did what we were meant to do - it can't have hurt that much. Anyway it made you do a shield charm, right?"

"You're making it worse," Lizzie hissed to him.

"But -"

"Just leave me alone," Rose snapped. She stormed off to Ancient Runes while Scorp threw up his hands in frustration.

"What's the problem?" he demanded. "You guys wouldn't care if I accidentally hexed you, right?"

"I wouldn't, but… she's a girl," Al pointed out.

"What was I meant to do?" Scorp said helplessly. "Just not do the exercise?"

"Yes," Lizzie said firmly.

"What? Why? You were doing it."

Lizzie gave him a long-suffering look. "You two are so clueless," she sighed. "No, you weren't supposed to hex her. Honestly."

Scorp stared at her, then frowned at Albus, apparently looking for answers, but Al didn't get what she was hinting at, either. "I give up," Scorpius sighed. "I've got Muggle Studies - see you at lunch."

Lizzie and Albus had Care of Magical Creatures. Hagrid was pleased to see them, as usual, and if he was disappointed that Rose had been unable to continue with his class, he didn't show it.

"'Ello Albus!" the old Professor called out as they approached. "Ow was Italy?"

Albus grinned. Hagrid was one of the few people he didn't mind being singled out by. "Great," he replied. "How was your summer?"

"Ah, not too bad," the man smiled widely through his great bushy beard. "Me and Grawpy went exploring in the Highlands."

Everyone who did Care of Magical Creatures had met Grawp, Hagrid's half brother, at one time or another. For a gigantic, illiterate, half-dumb giant, he was very interesting to be around.
"So what was that about?" Al asked Lizzie, when they had each been given samples of different eggshells to identify and the class had begun chattering away to each other. "Why shouldn't Scorp have cursed Rose? It did help her do the shield charm without the incantation."

Lizzie rolled her eyes. "Boys! Are you blind? She likes him."

Albus frowned. "Come on."

"He likes her too, if he'd just admit it to himself." She flushed a little, a crack showing in her air of social superiority. "I… might have mentioned to Rose last week that Scorpius has a crush on her."

"You what?"

"Well I didn't realise they'd start biting each other's heads off! It should have been happily ever after. Why are Ravenclaws so stubborn?"

Albus groaned. "It's not Ravenclaws, it's Rose. She wouldn't admit to fancying anyone if you put her under torture." Certain things were starting to fall into place. Rose had been acting oddly since they had got back from Italy, and now he came to think about it, it might have started that night when they had met Scorpius at the Leaky Cauldron. She had got all shirty when Albus had brought up Stacey on the train, and she didn't like the way Scorp put himself down, even as a joke. Albus had to admit that someone probably shouldn't hex their girlfriend and expect to get away from it, even in class - but she wasn't his girlfriend, and that was why Rose couldn't say the real reason why she was so upset.

"Someone's got to tell him," he said flatly.

Lizzie shrugged. "Go on then! Rather you than me."

Albus immediately blanched from the humiliation he could imagine ensuing from that conversation. "Er… no thanks. They'll work it out." He realised he wasn't totally thrilled about the idea of his cousin and his best friend getting together, either. He had a terrible impending sense of third wheel syndrome.

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Rose didn't speak to Scorpius at all for the rest of the week. Any hope of the situation working itself out was rapidly starting to fade, but luckily Al had less and less time to worry about it. This was because on top of all the homework that was already starting to pile up, most of which involving practicing non-verbal spells and charms, Albus had to think about trying out the new Ravenclaw Quidditch team. He had organised the tryouts for the next Saturday, directly after Gryffindor had had their tryouts.

James, now the Gryffindor team captain, waved at him cheerily as he passed. "Choose wisely, little brother! You're going to need some decent backup this season."

Albus considered making a rude hand gesture, but decided it was beneath him.

He watched as the Ravenclaw hopefuls lined up on the pitch. There were a lot more than there had been last year, or the year before. "Big turn out," he muttered as Rose came up behind her, wearing Quidditch robes and with her hair tied back into a loose braid.

"Not surprised," she said, tossing a Quaffle up and down in one hand.
"Why?"

"It's you, you ass. Remember when your dad told us he had about a hundred people show up for his first try out, and some of them weren't even Gryffindors? Everyone wants to see how you're going to coach the team. No pressure or anything." She grinned and tossed him the ball.

"Thanks," he muttered. "Right, any first years, you're forbidden by school policy to join the team, so scoot."

Lysander and Lycan skulked away from the group, looking disappointed.

Albus rolled his eyes. "Okay. Can we split into groups please?"

After about two hours of watching people fall off brooms, get hit in the face with Quaffles and injure themselves with their own Beater's bats, he had a team. One of the seventh years from the old team had chosen not to rejoin it, but Benjy, the Keeper, had got back in after a great trial. Rose had been by far the best Chaser out of all the applicants, but there were two fourth years, Emerson and Wendy, who had managed to score enough goals between them to join her. There was actually a lot of good competition for the Beater positions, but Albus ended up picking a third year, Thom, and Rose's dormitory-mate, Janey, who turned out to be a bit of a dab hand with a bat. He made sure to nominate plenty of reserves for all the positions. It meant more work for him in terms of coaching, but he had always thought it would be a good idea to have more so that they had someone to practice against.

Still, he waited until he and Rose had a bit of space on the way back to Ravenclaw Tower before asking. "So… did I pick right?"

She smiled at him. "You have to ask?"

"You know as much about Quidditch as I do. C'mon, I'm under a lot of pressure here…"

"You picked right. The only problem is going to be getting Janey to stop chatting long enough to get her in the air."

"You know, the girls are right, you really should try harder to make more friends."

"Shut up."

"Rosie?"

"Yeah?"

"How long are you going to keep giving Scorp the silent treatment?"

She stopped and gave him a cold look. "How do you know I - "

"Because I know you, and I know your evil methods of getting people to apologise to you." He sighed. "Look, why don't you just tell him you like him?"

Her eyes widened. "What? I don't -"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Lizzie told me."

"She what? That girl is such a gossip - "

"Look, you're making him miserable for no reason. At least, no reason he understands. Either tell
him, or stop treating him like he just killed a puppy."

She frowned, and then her face crumpled. "I can't tell him," she said softly.

"Why the hell not?"

"Because - because what if I do tell him? I'm afraid… I think he'll think it's stupid. I don't want things to be weird… it'll ruin our friendship..."

"Okay, but if you don't tell him, you're going to keep getting mad at him when he doesn't treat you the way you want him to treat you, and your friendship will be ruined anyway."

She put her hands over her face and took a deep breath. "Okay. Here's what we're going to do. I will apologise for blowing up over the whole Defence Against the Dark Arts thing, and we will start speaking to each other again. And you are not going to say anything about this to him, okay?"

"Hang on -"

"No. You say nothing. Got it?"

Albus rolled his eyes. Clearly he wasn't going to win. If a stalemate was all that was achieved for now, he would just have to deal with it. "Okay, okay. Let's go then."

They walked the last few stairs to Ravenclaw Tower. There weren't a great deal of people in the common room, it being a sunny Saturday and most people wanting to spend time outside before the weather became too cold. Scorpius was sitting by the window reading *The Taming of the Shrew*. "Oh… hey," he said when he noticed them approaching, eyeing Rose suspiciously as though afraid she was about to blow up at him.

"Hey," she said shyly as he stared up at her.

Al could not believe that he hadn't seen it before. Now that he knew, it was painfully obvious, from the way they looked at each other to the palpable tension in the air whenever they spoke. He felt like banging their heads together.

"I'm sorry," Rose said after a painfully long moment. "I shouldn't have shouted at you."

Scorpius relaxed noticeably. He closed his book, keeping his fingers between the pages as a temporary marker. "It's okay. I need to be shouted at occasionally. It tames my ego."

She smiled gratefully at him and Al had to suppress the urge to slap himself in the forehead in frustration.

"Oh just kiss and make up already," he muttered. Rose shot him a glare that, if looks could kill, would have had him prostrate on the ground with green foam bubbling out of his mouth. Scorpius had gone slightly red. He stood up and hugged her. It was incredibly awkward to watch, and Al was glad when it was over, even though Rose returned to glaring at him. He had a feeling he was going to get an earful the next time they were alone.

Chapter End Notes

Please visit my fanfic blog: http://misssaigonfic.tumblr.com/
Ask me questions, get some insights!
Chapter Summary

"Well... you make me laugh... I make you laugh... you're... very pretty..." he tried, hoping he wasn't blushing all over the place.

She beamed at him. "Really?"

He smiled. "Well yeah, since you grew out of pigtails it's hard not to notice."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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It was soon becoming apparent that, with the possible exception of Scorpius, non-verbal spells were a lot more difficult than any of them had realised, and it was required in nearly all of their classes. While Scorpius at least had the sense not to gloat about his comparative success, he was rather smug about the fact that he was forced to do less of them, as the whole point of Muggle Studies meant not having to do any magic at all.

"Bully for you," Al said as they walked outside to eat lunch after Charms. His head was pounding after yet another hour of straining to do a simple levitation spell without speaking. They flopped down under a tree near the lake and spread out the food they had filched from the Great Hall. From a distance they could see a Herbology class ending, the students dispersing in different directions. "What's the point, that's what I want to know."

"Well, what if one day you have to cast a spell without people knowing you've cast it?" Rose suggested.

"That sounds like something you would disapprove of."

"Not if you're an Auror, or a Cursebreaker, or something."

"But I don't want to do either of those things, so why should I have to do all the work?"

Rose sighed. "Stop complaining. We must be able to get the hang of it eventually, or people would be constantly failing Charms and Transfiguration NEWTs. Even my dad does some non-verbal spells, I've seen him, and he's always saying how terrible his marks were at school..."

"I think that's just to make you feel better about not getting an O in your History of Magic OWL."
"Hey, Lizzie!" Scorpius, apparently tired of this argument, was waving over the nearest of the emerging Herbology students. Lizzie came over to them, scowling. Her hair was coming loose from its customary braid and there was a long red scratch along her cheek, bleeding at one end and dangerously close to her eye.

"What happened!" Rose exclaimed, sufficiently distracted.

"Snargaluff Stump got me," Lizzie muttered. "My own stupid fault - oh no, is he coming over here? This is so embarrassing…"

The Ravenclaws looked over to see Professor Longbottom hurrying away from the Greenhouses in their direction. "Lizzie," he panted when he was close enough to be heard. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Professor," Lizzie insisted, rolling her eyes to the sky in a show of mortal humiliation.

"I'm sorry sweetheart, I know you didn't want me making a fuss in front of everyone."

"You're making a fuss now!" she squealed, stamping her foot in what Albus couldn't help thinking was quite an adorable way. "There are people watching!"

Albus thought privately that this was a bit of an overreaction as they were surely the only ones within hearing distance. A couple of the other students from the class were standing over by the stairs, chatting and laughing with each other.

Neville looked a bit taken aback. He leaned closer to look at the scratch. "At least let me heal - "

"No! Please Dad, just leave me alone."

"I can do it, Professor," Albus offered.

Neville hesitated for a moment, then took one look at Lizzie's face and thought better of making any further argument. "Thank you, Mr Potter," he said, putting back on his professorial attitude. "Miss Longbottom, I'll… see you in class, on Wednesday." He turned away and walked back up to the castle, straight-backed and stiff.

Albus drew his wand and pointed it carefully at Lizzie's cheek. "Episky," he incanted gently, and the scratch closed and stopped bleeding. When she wiped her hand over it it was gone.

"That wasn't very nice," Rose said quietly.

"Well he's being ridiculous," Lizzie sighed. "He wouldn't fuss so much over anyone else, so he shouldn't over me. He's always going on about how he can't give me any special treatment, but the second I let a stupid piece of sapient wood get one over on me…"

"He's your dad," Al pointed out. "All dads go mad when their kids get hurt - you should have seen my dad when Lily fell off her broom a few years ago. It was scary."

"Your dad isn't your teacher," Lizzie muttered. "Look, I need to go to lunch, I'm hungry."

"Have lunch with us," Albus said quickly. Lizzie blinked in surprise. "There's plenty to go around," he added, only just now glancing at the others to make sure they were okay with it.

"Oh, but…"

"Yes, come on Lizzie," Rose said, and Scorpius nodded agreement.
They spent a pleasant lunchtime in the last of the autumn sun. Albus couldn't help thinking that he understood where Lizzie was coming from. They were getting to an age where it was important to be your own person, and it was hard to do that with parents looking over your shoulder every five minutes. It was true that he didn't have his dad around at school, but Lizzie probably didn't have to deal with people mobbing her dad every time he walked into a public place.

He hung back with her when they had finished, letting Scorp carry the basket for Rose up to the castle.

"Any progress with those two?" Lizzie asked him when the others were beyond hearing distance.

"Not yet," Albus muttered. "I'm sure they'll get around to it eventually."

She giggled. "So who are you cheering for at the next game?"

The match, the first of the season, was Slytherin versus Gryffindor. Albus grimaced, but answered honestly. "Slytherin."

"What?"

"C'mon, you know my brother. The more he wins the more unbearable he gets."

"I heard Gryffindor are the favourite this year, again."

"Yeah," Al muttered. It stung that Ravenclaw hadn't won the cup since he had joined the team as a full player, in his fourth year. Rose might have argued that the year he had come in at the end as reserve Seeker had counted, but he could only take credit for the last half an hour of that game. Liam had done the rest of the work.

"Ah well," Lizzie said, smiling. "I have complete faith in you as captain."

Al looked at her sidelong. "Shouldn't you be barracking for Hufflepuff?"

She put a finger to her lips conspiratorially. "Don't tell anyone. Go you eagles! Your mascot is the only one who can fly, right?"

He laughed. It felt like the first time he'd laughed properly since the madness of Quidditch and schoolwork had descended. It felt good.

They reached the castle in very little time at all. Rose and Scorpius were waiting for him by the stairs. "Well," Lizzie said, shrugging her bag onto her shoulder. "I have Potions. See you round?"

"Yeah." Al hesitated, on the verge of a decision. His palms were suddenly sweaty, and he wished he had some pockets to stuff his hands in. "Lizzie?" he called, just as she reached the door to the dungeons.

She turned on her heel and looked at him expectantly. "Mm?"

He swallowed. "Er… do you, er… want to go to Hogsmeade with me, this weekend?"

She grinned. "Sure. Meet you here?"

"Er… yeah. Good. Cool."

"Okay." She beamed at him, flipped her braid over her shoulder and left the Entrance Hall through the narrow doorway.
Scorpius and Rose were both staring at him. "Er… what the hell just happened?" Scorpius asked, raising an eyebrow as Al approached them, his heart still beating a little quicker than usual.

Rose punched Scorp in the arm. She was doing that a lot, lately. "Be nice. I thought it was sweet."

"Oh, you thought it was sweet. So if he asks a girl it's okay, but if a girl asks him it's like what, blatant narcissistic celebritism?"

She hit him again, and he winced. "How long were you planning that?" she asked Albus, only a slight hint of suspicion in her tone.

"I wasn't! I mean, I just thought of it then."

"You better not break her heart," Scorpius said with mock concern. "That girl is like a sister to me - maybe I should tell Neville!"

"Please don't," Al sighed. "Not that I mind him knowing…." though secretly he wasn't entirely sure what the reaction would be, "but he'll tell Hannah who will most definitely tell my mother, and I would rather get the weekend over with before I have to face that particular humiliation."

"Boys," Rose muttered. "You talk about going on a date like you're being led to the gallows."

~*-A-*~

~*-A-*~

Albus surprised himself by really enjoying his Saturday afternoon at Hogsmeade. As much as he liked spending time with his fellow Ravenclaws, it was nice to get away for a while. It helped that he had known Lizzie forever, so it was hard to run out of things to talk about. They alternated between school anecdotes and reminiscing about their childhood. She remembered several incidents from when they were little that he had completely forgotten about.

At one point he had her almost in stitches with laughter with stories about the Lovegood twins and the antics they had been getting up to in Ravenclaw tower.

"No!" she gasped, theatrically, after he had regaled her with the thrilling tale of Ravenclaw versus the Lovegoods and the strange hissing creature they had let loose in the tower the previous evening.

"I swear, we still don't know what it was, but it was big and loud and invisible," Albus said in all sincerity. "There were girls jumping on tables, guys with their wands out, accidentally cursing each other… madness."

Lizzie giggled, imagining the scene. "Did anyone catch it?"

"It scuttled off somewhere, I think. Peter gave them a talking to, but I dunno if they listened. They're kind of a law unto themselves, if you know what I mean."

She made a face. "Ew, so it could still be in the castle somewhere? What if it gets into my dormitory?"

"You could call Hagrid. He'd love it, it's probably been a while since he was in a girl's dormitory." Albus grinned.

She burst out laughing. "You're terrible!"

He shrugged. "True, though."
It was about this point that Belinda and a couple of her other friends came into the Three Broomsticks. To his surprise, she did not immediately abandon him to talk to them, but pushed her empty Butterbeer glass to one side. "Finished?" she asked him.

"Er… yeah."

"Want to go outside for a bit?"

"Okay."

Belinda called her name and waved as they passed, but she merely waved back. "You can go over there if you want," Albus assured her. "I don't mind."

She looked surprised that he would think she would want to. "I see those clowns every day," she said. "I'm here with you."

_Oh yeah_, he thought, his stomach twisting slightly with nerves. He had been enjoying himself so much that he had almost forgotten he was supposed to be on a date. He followed her out of the pub with his hands awkwardly in his pockets.

It was pleasantly warm outside still, the last days of summer trickling uncharacteristically late into October. They took off their cloaks and folded them over their arms. "So," Lizzie asked casually as they walked. "What made you ask me?"

He swallowed. "Um… I thought it would be fun?"

She cocked her head on one side as if only partially satisfied by this answer. "Oh?"

"Well… you make me laugh…. I make you laugh… you're… very pretty…" he tried, hoping he wasn't blushing all over the place.

She beamed at him. "Really?"

He smiled. "Well yeah, since you grew out of pigtails it's hard not to notice."

She slapped him good-naturedly on the arm. "Twit."

"Oh that's nice, and I was going to take you to Honeydukes."

"Aw." She pursed her lips and made puppy-dog eyes at him, and he burst out laughing.

All in all it was a fantastic afternoon. They went to the sweet shop and he bought her a big chocolate bar, which she shared with him as they wandered around the village. They avoided Weasley's Wizard Wheezes at Albus' insistence.

"You sure?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said, nodding firmly. "James and the twins are probably there."

"So?" she frowned at him. "You're not ashamed of me, are you?"

"What? No! It's just… well, I know I'll have to put up with teasing, eventually, but I'd rather you didn't have to deal with it, on the first… I mean, today. You might decide I'm not worth the hassle after all."
Her frown morphed into a grin. "So you're protecting me? How very Gryffindor of you."

"Hey, Ravenclaws can be chivalrous too, I'll have you know. Especially when their families are dicks."

She giggled and took his hand in hers, decisively. He took that to be a good sign.

They walked slowly back to the castle together, still chatting amiably and finishing off the chocolate one-handed. There were a few other students, in pairs or groups, making their way back, including Al's sister Lily and some friends. So much for temporary secrecy, Al thought, but Lily only waved and turned back to giggle with her friends. There were also some particularly annoying third year Slytherins who ran up behind couples and made kissy-kissy noises until Al wanted to hex them senseless.

Perhaps as a result of this, or maybe it would have happened anyway, when they got back to the Entrance Hall there was an awkward sort of pause. Albus wondered what she actually was expecting from him at this point. He had a feeling a handshake would not be appropriate, but he didn't want to do anything too forward. He kept remembering how upset Rose had been after her first Hogsmeade date.

_This is a lot of bloody pressure_, he thought to himself, as they made awkward small talk for about five minutes. _How are you supposed to know what she wants you to do? Is there some kind of secret signal I'm not aware of?_

In the end, she solved the problem for him. She put a hand lightly on his shoulder, reached up and kissed him briefly on the mouth. Her lips tasted like chocolate. "See you later?" she asked, as though she did this every day.

He stared unblinkingly at her for a moment. _Snap out of it, Potter!_

"Yeah," he said, finding his voice at last. "Definitely."

"Great." She turned and skipped off towards Hufflepuff - or at least, it seemed to him that's what she was doing. He felt a bit like skipping, himself.

~*-S-*~

~*-S-*~

Since Al was spending the day with Lizzie, Scorpius and Rose went to Hogsmeade together by unspoken agreement. It was mostly a business trip as Rose needed more school supplies, but once that was done, they wandered aimlessly around the village, enjoying the atmosphere. They watched some third years, ecstatic at their first Hogsmeade trip, unload an entire basket of Honeydukes sweets onto the floor and share them out before proceeding to stuff their faces.

"Oh, gross," Rose said, with amusement, wrinkling her nose.

"Making me hungry," Scorpius laughed. "Remember our first Hogsmeade trip?"

"I remember you nearly wetting yourself over Honeydukes, yes."

"Hey! It's all right for you, I bet you had loads of chocolate growing up. it was like heaven for me, suddenly having as much as I could... well, as much as you two would buy and share with me, for which I will definitely repay you one of these days."
Rose grinned. "Come on, let's go to Weasley's Wizard Wheezes."

He hesitated a moment before hurrying after her. He hadn't forgotten the cold reception her uncle George had given him at the post-memorial breakfast last year. Still, he had been in the shop a few times before and never come across the man. He did after all have another shop at Diagon Alley, so perhaps he wouldn't even be there.

They walked into the joke shop, which as usual was full to bursting with Hogwarts students. Rose led him over to where Fred and Roxie were demonstrating the use of some mini firebangers, tiny little fireworks that wouldn't go any higher than your head. "Hi guys," Rose said breathlessly as they finally managed to get through the crowd. "Where's James?"

"Gone off with his girlfriend," Fred sighed dramatically. "Where's Al?"

"Ditto," Scorpius grinned, and both twins laughed.

"Good for him," said Roxie. She was pulling another firebanger out of a bucket of samples.

"This is madness," Rose said, standing on a crate to observe the crowd better. It was indeed busier than they had ever seen it.

"I know, right," Roxie smiled. "Lucky for me and Fred, we stand to inherit this mess." She tossed a firebanger in the air and it went off with a pop and a flash of multi-coloured light, to the great appreciation of the assembly.

"Here, Scorp, you'll like this one," said Fred, handing him a blue firebanger. Scorpius looked at it dubiously. James and the twins had been friendly to him ever since the incident with the fifth-year Gryffindors after the Recent History class last year, but he knew it was foolish to consider himself above their 'little jokes'.

"Go on, let it off," Fred prompted him. "Ravenclaws. Have a little adventure, why don't you?"

Scorpius shrugged and tossed the little canister into the air, copying the flicking motion Roxie had used. To his surprise, it didn't go off straight away, but started to do an elaborate dance in the air, emitting a tuneful whistle.

_Oh my darling, oh my darling, oh my daaarling Clementine…_

"Cool," Scorp grinned. "Got any more?"

"Heaps," Fred said, handing him another.

"They're two Sickles each."

They looked around to see Fred and Roxie's father, George Weasley, standing behind them wearing an extravagant robe with WWW embroidered on the breast. His expression was less than disapproving, and Scorpius' heart sank. "Free samples for family only, Fred, you know that," he said, avoiding Scorpius' eyes.

Fred looked confused. "But Dad…"

"It's okay," Scorpius said quickly. "I'm sorry Mr Weasley, I can pay…"

Belatedly he realised he had spent his last Galleon on a book on enchanted instruments by owl order. He handed the firebanger back to Fred quickly.

Belatedly he realised he had spent his last Galleon on a book on enchanted instruments by owl order. He handed the firebanger back to Fred quickly.
"Dad, Scorp's a friend," Roxie was saying.

"Rose," George said, ignoring his daughter. "May I speak to you alone for a moment?"

"I'll just…" Scorpius said awkwardly, backing away.

"You don't have to go - " Rose started.

"It's okay, I'll er… meet you outside." He hurried away, feeling Mr Weasley's angry gaze on him all the way to the exit. "Hell," he muttered to himself. He knew it had been a mistake to go into that shop in the first place. Still, it was a shame. He would have liked to find out how they got the music into the firebangers. Maybe Fred or Roxie would know.

Rose came out a few minutes later, the tell-tale tinge of red in her cheeks that meant she was angry. "Er… what did he want to - " Scorpius tried.

"Nothing," Rose said shortly. "Nothing at all. Let's go. I'm not in the mood for jokes anymore."

They walked in silence back up the hill towards the path that led out of Hogsmeade. Rose was clearly fuming, and Scorpius didn't want to poke the proverbial bear. Still, he had a feeling he knew what the problem was.

"You can tell me," he said after a while. "I won't be offended."

She looked up at him with angry tears brimming in her eyes. "It's not fair."

He shrugged. "I figured that. People are rarely fair. Let me guess, you're not allowed to play with me anymore?"

She stopped dead. "Don't. Don't make fun."

"It was that, though, wasn't it?"

She looked down. "He said… he said I should be more careful… that some things are built in, and… but it's just stupid!" she exclaimed. "I know you're not like… why can't people just mind their own business?"

He laughed, despite the awkwardness of the situation. "Because they're people," he said. "Look, I want your family to like me as much as you do…" probably more, he added to himself. "But after this summer…"

"What? You're just going to accept that some people treat you like dirt for no reason?" She paused, and ran a hand through her hair, which was starting to tangle in the wind. "I know his twin died, in the war, and it's hard… but that doesn't mean… it's just not fair, that's all."

He frowned at her. "Why are you getting so upset? You've always known people felt this way about me, and me coming to Hogwarts. I should be the one getting upset."

She opened her mouth to say something, but seemed to think better of it. "Oh… never mind," she sighed, as though he was being an idiot not to read the thoughts that lurked in the deepest part of her mind.

He gave up. "Well… hurry up then," he said. "I've got a meeting with Professor Flitwick."

~*-A-*-~
If anyone noticed that he looked or felt any different when he got back from Hogsmeade, they didn't say anything. To Albus this seemed like a disappointing anticlimax. His whole world seemed to have turned slightly on an angle, so that it all seemed much brighter and more exciting than before. There was a girl out there who wanted to kiss him. Possibly they would kiss more, later. There could be an infinite amount of kissing in his future.

He lay back on his bed and stared dreamily up at the ceiling. At some point he was vaguely aware of Scorpius coming in and changing out of his school robes into the Muggle clothes he had worn over summer. He shook himself out of his stupor and looked up at his friend. He found he was disappointed by the lack of questions about his afternoon, and realised he was desperate to show off. He couldn't exactly just blurt it out, though.

"How was your day?" he asked innocently.

Scorpius glanced at him, surprised. "Oh, hey," he said. "Didn't see you there."

Albus wasn't buying that for a minute. "You all right?"

"Hm? Oh, yeah. Your cousin's just crazy as a Niffler in Gringotts, that's all. How was your date?"

Finally. "Great," Albus said, grinning conspiratorially.

"Good," Scorp said, and started packing his guitar.

"Hang on, where are you going?" Al asked.

"Flitwick's office. He said he'd look at my strings. You… want to come, or something?"

"No," Al said, rolling his eyes. "Bugger off then."

Scorpius frowned and shook his head. "Bloody Weasleys today, seriously," he muttered, and took off with his bag and the guitar case.

Al laid back on the bed and made a face. Did no one care that he had just kissed the fittest Hufflepuff in the year? In his mind it had already evolved from a peck on the lips to a full make-out session. It felt like people should be paying more notice rather than thinking about themselves all the time.

In the end he sat up and put his shoes back on. He would go find Lizzie now, he decided. Later could be now. At least she would care enough to talk to him. Or they could just kiss some more.

Chapter End Notes

Please visit my fanfic blog: http://misssaigonfic.tumblr.com/
Ask me questions, get some insights!
Chapter Summary

"Scorp..." Rose pulled the cloak a little tighter around her. Her long red hair fell in tumbling waves over her face, still ruffled and frizzy from flying. "I don't want to talk about Quidditch right now."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

2022

~*-A-*~

~*-A-*~

Albus paced in front of the Ravenclaw team, twisting his broom in his hands. It was a new broom, a present from his parents, the new prototype Phoenixer. It had arrived with Womy on the morning of his seventeenth birthday, which had given him five days to practice flying it. It went like anything.

Wendy, Rose's fellow Chaser, had had one go on it and nearly thrown up her lunch. Thom, the third year Beater, had fallen off, two feet off the ground, though he was usually a good flyer. It was a mad little thing, and Al loved it. It did crazy things in the air that he still didn't expect after days of flying on it. Still, if his mum and dad had hoped it would do anything positive for his nerves in his first Quidditch game as captain, they were wrong.

"It's just Hufflepuff, guys," he said, realising this was a bit of a lame start to a pep talk. "Their Beaters are useless, the Chasers are all right but don't even get me started on the huge dude they've got in Keeper..."

"Maxie," Janey giggled, from where she was putting a final polish on her Beater's bat. "He's not as big as Warren, in Gryffindor."

"Bigness aside," Benjy muttered, his pride as rival Keeper looming its head. "He can't catch to save his life. If he stops any balls it'll be because they bounce accidentally off his tree trunk arms -"

"Right, which is why we're basically a shoe-in," Albus said, trying to regain control of the conversation. "Just try and score as much as possible so we've got a head start for the rest of the season. "Gryffindor's already about a hundred points ahead," he added ruefully. "Since they smashed Slytherin the other week. I know we're basically a new team and we've been working on a lot of new stuff, but just keep it simple, everyone. I'll have a good view, so listen out for me."

"You just concentrate on the Snitch," Rose said, standing up and shaking out her Quidditch robes before putting her hand in. "We've got this."

Albus felt she had rather stolen his thunder with that, but he put his hand in with the rest of the team, and the volume of the seven of them shouting "GO EAGLES!" must have been heard out on the
pitch, because a roar of applause followed.

"Let's go then," he said, swallowing the lump that had risen in his throat. They walked out to a standing ovation from the Ravenclaw stands.

"Smash it out!"

"Woop woop!"

"C'moon you Eagles!"

"Go Potter!"

"And a relatively new side from Ravenclaw this year after the appointment of a new captain, Seeker Albus Potter," came the announcement over the loudspeaker. They had let Albus' cousin Louis do the commentary this year, which he couldn't argue with, the lad was the most well-spoken of his peers, even if he was only a fourth-year, and as Quidditch-mad as the rest even if he didn't play quite so much. He was a fastidious boy in many ways, and the mud and potential for injury that went with the game seemed to put him off flying competitively.

"Interesting choice from Potter, giving bats to a sixth year girl and a third year boy. Beaters have to work as a close team, so we'll see how that works out…"

*No need to go easy on me, cuz,* Albus thought as he shook hands with the seventh-year girl who was the captain of the Hufflepuff team.

"Potter and Reed shake hands and there's the whistle!"

Albus shot immediately as high as he could comfortably go to see the pitch. He needn't have worried. Rose scored three goals in the space of three minutes. Emerson scored the next one, but Rose the next two.

Al grinned and shook his head. Sometimes he forgot, when she was nagging him about practicing with non-verbal spells, how bloody good she was at Quidditch.

He was shaken out of this thought as a Bludger very nearly impacted with his head. He shot out of the way and darted away from the Hufflepuff Beater, who evidently was not as bad at his job as Albus had given him credit for.

"Potter moving like lightning there on the new *Phoenixer* - not yet available in stores! You'd have to be nuts to ride that broom, so it's a good thing Potter is!"

Albus rolled his eyes. He wasn't sure whether it was his mother or father's connections that had got them a prototype broom, and he hadn't asked. Still, it was a brilliant broom, and he wasn't going to just *not* use it.

He clung to the broom with his knees and flipped it, his heart jumping momentarily into his throat as it did a crazy little side-swipe and he ended up below and behind the pesky Hufflepuff Beater. There was a gasp of appreciation from the crowd.

"Potter dodges a second Bludger there with a fancy move - Hufflepuff with the Quaffle for the first time in the game! Reed heading towards goal - the Ravenclaw Keeper is distracted by a Bludger - Hufflepuff score!"

The yellow and black quarter of the crowd roared with appreciation. Unable to stop himself, Al
searched the stands quickly with his eyes to see Lizzie clapping politely next to Belinda. She had to sit in the Hufflepuff stands, of course, but he knew she was there for him.

"I'll wear blue underwear," she had said, making him blush. "Just don't get yourself killed. I'll allow some slight maiming…"

"How slight?" he had asked, making a face.

"Anything below the neck but above the waist," she had replied, making him blush even more. Luckily there was no one listening - as an inter-house couple they had taken to claiming common areas like the library to spend time together. Rose and Scorpius were doing homework on a nearby table, but they were too busy avoiding each other's eyes to listen to anyone else's conversation. Honestly, you could cut the sexual tension with a knife. If this madness went past Christmas, Albus had a good mind to just knock their heads together, lips first.

"So you'd be fine if I lost both my arms? How would I do this then?" He had reached over the table and pulled her gently towards him for a kiss. They only stopped when the old librarian coughed disapprovingly. Lizzie giggled.

He was brought back to the game as the crowd cheered again - this time for Ravenclaw, as Wendy had scored her first goal. Disappointed that he had missed it, but still not quite able to shake off the daydream, Al turned his broom upwards and returned to surveying the pitch for the Snitch. The Phoenixer zoomed upwards faster than he was expecting, and he almost went flying off the end of it.

"Behave," he muttered to it, as though it were a naughty puppy.

As he leant into the half-turn, a flash of gold caught his eye. It was hovering quite high up, not quite still but doing a little dance in the air. He hesitated. Catching it now must be some kind of record, they'd only been playing for about five minutes. And they would win the game, but they were doing so well that they might as well keep going and get a better score. So what, should he just ignore it? That seemed to go against all his instincts as a Seeker.

He could see the Hufflepuff Seeker, a girl called Quark, or Quirk, or something, on the other side of the pitch. The Snitch was behind her, but all she had to do was turn around and she would see it.

He patted his broom gingerly. "Please don't kill me," he said to it, and went into a dive. He hadn't planned on going very far, just far enough to distract Hufflepuff while the Snitch had time to get away. But the broom seemed to enjoying hurtling towards the ground at a hundred miles an hour. By the time he was able to pull up, he was dangerously close to the Ravenclaw goal posts, and the Phoenixer still refused to stop. He grit his teeth and grabbed the bottom of the far right hoop, hanging nearly horizontal in the air as the broom tried to fly off without him. Eventually it seemed to realise it was time to slow down, and he was able to grab the handle again.

"Penalty to Hufflepuff!" Louis shouted over the crowd's laughter. "Potter's touched the goal posts - to be fair, it probably just saved his life - someone better write to the makers of that broom and warn them of the incoming law suit!"

"Sorry!" Albus called to Benjy, who now had to defend against a clear shot from Hufflepuff.

"No problem!" the older boy called back, flexing his hands inside his gloves. "Just don't let that thing throw you off - we've only got one captain!"

Reed took her shot, but this time Benjy saved the goal, and the Ravenclaw stands went wild.

"Well it looks like Potter's stunt didn't lose Ravenclaw any points, and they still lead sixty-ten!
Ravenclaw still well in the lead, not bad for an almost totally new team, so perhaps Potter's not quite as mad as we gave him credit for…"

Albus made a mental note to pay his cousin back for all this not-so-subtle jibes, but there was no time to consider his revenge just now. He gripped his broom firmly and flew back up to his surveillance point. The Hufflepuff Seeker had narrowly missed the ground, having followed him almost through the whole dive. She glared at him as she passed and he waved an apology. He hadn't actually been trying to kill anyone.

The Snitch seemed to disappear permanently after that. Al had planned on letting the game go for at least an hour, provided Ravenclaw kept up their lead. By the time three and a half hours had passed, the score was 340 to 120. On the one hand, catching the Snitch now would give them over four hundred points, making it difficult for even Gryffindor to catch up, but on the other hand, it was starting to get dark. When Thom accidentally swung his bat at Wendy's head, thinking she was a Bludger, Al had had enough. "Time out!" he yelled to the referee, making a T motion with his hands.

"What on earth are you doing up there?" Rose demanded when they had all landed, breathing hard. "Just catch the damn thing already."

"Thank you, I hadn't considered that," Al sighed. "I'm looking for it, all right? It's buggered off somewhere. Quirk can't see it either."

"Even if she does, we'd still win," Thom yawned.

"Look, this is nothing," Al told them. "The longest Quidditch game ever went on for days, right?"

They all groaned.

"I'm not saying I want that to happen," he said, rolling his eyes.

"I'm starting to get blisters," Janey complained, rubbing her hands where the Beater's bat and her broom handle were pinching the skin through her gloves.

"I am not forfeiting," Al said sternly. "Not when we've got a two hundred and twenty point lead. Neither will Hufflepuff, I expect. Look, they're turning the lights on."

Big magical lamps were being lit around the pitch. It was hard to light a sports field that was so three-dimensional, without blinding the spectators, so it was a bit spotty, but at least there was light.

"Right. Beaters, try not to hit any of us, or each other, or any Hufflepuffs unless absolutely necessary," Al said quickly, seeing the referee waving them back onto their brooms. "Emmerson, Wendy, keep doing what you're doing. Rose, you're going to help me look for the Snitch."

"What?" She frowned at him.

"We've got enough points," Al told her. "I have to catch it, but there's no rule that says you can't help me look. Two sets of eyes are better than one. You want this to end, right?"

She still looked hesitant, but he knew her arms and legs were just as tired and achey as his were - more, because she had to cling to the broom with her knees when she had the Quaffle. "Oh fine," she said, mounting her broom. "But if the ref calls it, I'm blaming you."

The referee did not call it. There was no rule against other players joining the search for the Snitch. The Hufflepuff stands were not impressed, however, and a murmur of disapproval echoed towards
them as soon as it became clear what they were doing. A hasty discussion between the Hufflepuff captain and Seeker led to all three Chasers trying to play the Quaffle and look for the Snitch, with the result that Emmerson and Wendy scored another four points in a row between them with hardly any opposition, bringing the Ravenclaw lead to 250 points.

Albus and Rose were hardly paying any attention to this, however. They took opposite ends of the pitch and started a methodical sweep, flying in grids towards each other. They had almost met in the middle, and Al was starting to wonder if this plan had not been the best after all, when Rose, over by the spectator stands, whistled loudly and waved to him. Instantly he kicked the Phoenixer into full speed and followed her pointing finger to the very top of the Ravenclaw stands, where the Snitch hovered, tiny and golden, above the top row of seats. The Hufflepuff Seeker had seen it too, at Rose's whistle, but she was miles away.

It was so easy, Al thought, even as he plucked the tiny golden ball out of the air and landed with relief in the stands, the first years who had been sitting there scrambling to get out of his way.

"And that, ladies and gentlemen, is the end of the game, the score is five hundred to Ravenclaw, one twenty to Hufflepuff, and I think, correct me if I'm wrong, that has to be the most points scored by any team in a Hogwarts game! Five hundred points to Ravenclaw! Potter may use some strange tactics and fly a crazy broom, but he must be doing something right!"

Albus only just heard this over the roaring of the crowd around him. The Ravenclaws were cheering and jumping up and down, making the stands tremble. He grinned and kicked off the stands to fly back down to the pitch, where the rest of the team was waiting for him. They all descended on him as soon as he landed, pounding him on the back. Rose pushed through them to give her cousin a hug, and he laughed. "Couldn't have done that without you, you know," he said. "Maybe you should be Seeker from now on."

"No fear," she said, making a face. And then the team parted, and Lizzie was running towards him across the pitch. She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him enthusiastically.

"That was amazing," she said, ignoring the catcalls and whistles from those watching them, which was almost the entire school, though the stands were already emptying as people wanted their dinner. "Amazing."

"Oh get a room," he heard Rose sigh as Lizzie kissed him again.

Al could see the teachers start to emerge from their stand. Professor Longbottom was looking over at them with great interest. Luckily more Ravenclaws were beginning to surround them with congratulations and plans for the biggest celebratory party ever to be held in Ravenclaw tower, and they were quickly blocked from view.

~*-S*-~

~*-S*-~

When given the opportunity, Scorpius had learned, Ravenclaws could party with the best of them. He had done his bit by using his House Elf connections to supply them with more food than a herd of elephants could likely have eaten. And he had helped enchant the volume of the wizarding wireless in the corner to what some might have called a slightly ridiculous level, but people seemed to be enjoying it, anyway. Al, Rose and the other Ravenclaw players were the heroes of the hour, Al especially, for captaining the team to the greatest victory in Ravenclaw Quidditch history.

"That'll give Gryffindor something to think about," Scorpius said to his friend, when the crowd
around him had thinned out just enough for them to have a brief conversation. Albus grinned. Scorpius couldn't help but feel a little pang of jealousy as he was forced to the back of the crowd again. Al really did seem to have it all at the moment. Perfect family, Quidditch captain, hero of Ravenclaw, and a girlfriend. Lizzie hadn't let go of his hand the whole evening, or so it seemed. Belinda had also been invited to the party, despite being a Hufflepuff - and a Hufflepuff Prefect, to boot - and she seemed to be hitting it off with Peter, the Ravenclaw fifth year Prefect. They were certainly sitting very close together.

"Ew, gross." Scorpius turned to see the Scamander boys pointing at Al and Lizzie, who were snogging again.

"Isn't it about bedtime for you boys?" Scorpius said pointedly.

"We don't have a bedtime," Lorcan (or was it Lysander? Scorpius still couldn't tell them apart) said quickly. "You're not my dad."

"Thank Merlin," Scorpius muttered. "Go on, Lucy and all the other first years went up half an hour ago. You need your sleep if you're to continue terrorising the student body with your menagerie."

"We don't have a menagerie," said probably-Lysander.

"Yet," said probably-Lorcan, with a cheeky grin.

Scorpius sighed. Go to bed," he said firmly. "Before I find all your little pets and report them to Professor Flitwick, right?"

Lysander's eyes widened. "You wouldn't!"

"I might, so bugger off."

The dark-haired twins grumbled to one another before grudgingly making their way up the stairs towards their dormitory.

Rose appeared suddenly at his elbow. It was weird, he kept forgetting he was taller than her now.

"That was nicely done," she said after a moment. It was true that they almost had to shout to be heard over the music.

"I'm glad you approve."

"You'd have made a good Prefect, you know."

He snorted with laughter. "Uh-huh, that would gone well. Too much responsibility, if you ask me."

Rose gave him a look that suggested he could probably do with a little responsibility. "Noisy in here, isn't it," she said after a moment. It was true that they almost had to shout to be heard over the music. It was lucky that Ravenclaw tower was so far away from the rest of the castle, or they would almost certainly have been told to shut the party down, by now.

"Sorry," he said. "I might have overdone the volume charm. I'm used to doing them on myself, so…"

"I wasn't blaming you. Want to go outside for a bit?"

He raised his eyebrows at her. "After hours? Daring."

"We won't go far, just so I can hear myself think. Up on the roof, maybe. Coming?"
He shrugged. He didn't have any particular desire to continue watching Al and Lizzie's dance of the adolescent tongues, either.

They slipped out of the door, careful not to disturb the enchanted knocker, and went up to the roof. There was some fairly advanced magic on the trap door, to stop students going up there and falling off - or jumping off, it had to be said - but they had started doing advanced security spells in Charms, and Rose was able to unlock it fairly easily.

Ravenclaw tower was not as high as the Astronomy tower, but there was still a wonderful view of the stars from up here. Being November and almost midnight, it was very chilly out in the open air. Luckily Scorpius had brought his cloak, having not had a chance to change since the match, and he pulled it off and gave it to Rose to wear over her Quidditch robes.

"Are you sure?" she asked, giving him an odd look.

"What d'you mean?"

She didn't answer him, but took the cloak and wrapped it around her shoulders. She went to the parapet and folded her arms on it, leaning out to look over the grounds. It was a very clear night. Moonlight sparkled on the lake, and in the distance they could see a flicker of orange light from Hagrid's hut.

"It was a good game," Scorpius said, coming to lean on the merlon beside her. "You were great. Keep it up and you've basically got the cup in the bag."

"Mnhmm."

"People will be talking about that one for ages. Just so long as the next one doesn't go on quite so long - my backside was getting seriously numb from those seats."

"Scorp…" Rose pulled the cloak a little tighter around her. Her long red hair fell in tumbling waves over her face, still ruffled and frizzy from flying. "I don't want to talk about Quidditch right now."

"Oh." Scorpius shrugged. "What do you want to talk about, then?"

There was a long pause. "Al and Lizzie," she said eventually. "They're so… happy."

"I know, it's annoying, right?" Scorpius said with relief, glad he wasn't the only one.

"What? Well... yes, it is a bit, but that's not what I meant."

"Rosie," Scorpius sighed. "You know I love you, but you're not making a great deal of sense right now. Can't you just say what you mean?"

She looked up at him, with wide, surprised eyes. "What did you say?"

"I said you're not making sense," he said, very slowly in case she had missed it.

"No, before that."

He flushed. "I said - well, you know what I - I meant - as I friend, I just - sorry."

"Don't be sorry." She was still staring at him.

"I didn't mean - I'm not trying to - it just came out!" he said miserably. "I would never - "
"Why never?" she said quickly, challenging, turning away from the battlement to face him. "Why would you never? What's stopping you?"

He stared at her, flabbergasted. "Because… you're… my friend," he said lamely. "Al's cousin…"

"So? You're not my cousin."

"Yeah, but Al…"

"Oh, forget about Al for a minute! Do you love me or don't you?"

"Rosie!"

"What?"

Scorpius did not understand what was happening. The idea of being with her… like that… was a strange, foreign concept, only because since he was eleven she had been like his family. Better than his own family, certainly.

"Why are you doing this to me?" he asked eventually. He was starting to get a headache.

"Because, you git, because… because…” she seemed at a loss for words, all of a sudden. "Because you're the only one who doesn't seem to think… because Lizzie said you talk about me all the time, because… look, everyone thinks we're a couple! But you're the only one who doesn't seem to realise!"

"But we're not a couple!" he protested. He didn't think he deserved to be yelled at.

"But you treat me like your girlfriend!" she burst out. "You pull out chairs for me, you're always carrying my things, you gave me your cloak…” she stroked it for a moment before sticking her hands under her arms against the cold. "And you just said," she added triumphantly. "You love me."

"Yes, but…” Scorpius blinked. He did do all those things, it was true. But only because he was trying to be a gentleman. And maybe he had talked about her a lot over the summer, but only because he was excited to see her again. Only because. Or was it, only because? The more he looked at her, brown eyes shining in the moonlight, he wanted to say yes. Yes, I love you. I've loved you since you rescued me from rogue Gryffindors when I was eleven. Since you made friends with me when no one else would. And I know you talked Al into it, too, though he'd never admit it. Without you I wouldn't have had any fun. I wouldn't have the Longbottoms. I wouldn't have music.

"But Rose… we can't. I can't."

"Why?"

He flinched. "You know why."

Her expression hardened. "Scorp, I don't care about Uncle George. I don't care what people think about you."

"What about your father?" he shot back. "What about… Rose, what about my father? You don't know him, you don't know what he'd do…"

"I thought you didn't care about him either!" she flared. "You've lied about your NEWTs, about where you spent last summer, about wanting to play music when you leave Hogwarts, and this you don't want to lie to him about?"
"If he found out - and he would eventually - he'd disown me," Scorpius said flatly. "That would be it. No house, no money, no family, not even a last name..."

"Then let him!" Rose tossed her hair back over her shoulder. "You don't need him, Scorp!"

"You don't know what you're asking me!" Scorpius exclaimed. "How would you feel if I asked you to leave your family, to never see them again?"

"It's not the same -"

"Why not?" he demanded. "Because your family are good people? Because your father is better than mine? Do I not deserve to have a family?"

There were tears sparkling in her eyes now, tears of anger and disappointment. "You deserve to be happy," she said.

"I was," he snapped, and then instantly regretted it. She turned away from him, and he knew she was crying.

"I'm sorry," she said, low. "I won't bring it up again." She pulled off his cloak and tossed it back to him without looking, so that it fell unceremoniously on the stone floor of the tower. "You can have this back," she said, and went back to the trapdoor. She was through it, and down the ladder, before he could even think to call her back again.

Chapter End Notes

Please visit my fanfic blog: http://misssaigonfic.tumblr.com/
Ask me questions, get some insights!
Chapter Summary

"No that's the thing, I don't even care," he said. "I'm even sort of glad. His letters always remind me how much he couldn't give a crap, and now he won't even make that much effort. And I haven't even heard from my mother in years." He looked up into the night, the snowflakes swirling and sparkling under the street lamps as the sun went down, somewhere unseen beyond the city. "I'd give anything to be Al, sometimes," he said. "Or Lizzie. I'd do anything to be a Longbottom."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

~*-S-*~

~*-S-*~

Al did not sleep in the dormitory that night, so Scorpius did not have a chance to ask him what he wanted to ask. He was very slow to get up the next day, staring miserably at his own reflection in the mirror. He had hardly slept at all. He was torn between anger at Rose for what she had said, and anger at himself for not doing something about it earlier. He should have noticed how she felt, and now that he thought about it - and he found it very hard to think about anything else, now - certain things made a lot more sense. Why she had been so upset in their first Defence Against the Dark Arts class, for example. You didn't hex people you fancied, even if a teacher told you to.

Eventually he gave up looking in the mirror. It was not giving him any answers, and he had to find Albus. Luckily it was a Sunday, so he had plenty of time, but somehow he had to do it without running into Rose, either.

It wasn't hard. Al and Lizzie were still tangled up on the sofa in the common room - fully dressed, thankfully, though Al's glasses were folded on the coffee table - and he was stroking her hair. Suddenly Scorpius felt a maddening urge to slap both their silly lovesick faces.

"How many Prefects know that you two never went to bed last night?" he demanded.

Al groaned. "Oh shut up," he said. "Peter won't mind."

"What about the Hufflepuff Prefects? Liz, you were out of your House all night. What if your dad finds out?"

"You're very grumpy this morning," Lizzie said, unconcerned. She sat up and stretched, straightening her clothes - much to Albus' obvious disappointment. "Bel knows where I was, she'll cover for me. What's got your knickers in a twist?"

He glared at her, and she returned his look with an annoyingly calm expression. It was too calm for him to handle, so he turned on Albus instead. "Tell me something," he said shortly. "Did you think I was in love with Rose?"

"Yes," said Albus and Lizzie in unison.
"Seriously?" he said incredulously.

"Mate, everyone knows," Al said, shaking his head. "If you want to keep that stuff a secret, don't wear that puppy dog look on your face every time you look at her."

"I do not -" he began, then shook his head, as that was not the point. "What did you say to her?"

"What did you say to her?" Lizzie asked, frowning. "Did something happen?"

"Don't get me started on you," Scorpius said, rounding on her. "What do you mean by telling her I did nothing but talk about her all summer?"

She rolled her eyes. "Well, you did, you ass."

"Lizzie, what did you say to her?"

"I told her you were in love with her."

Scorpius clenched his fists, wondering vaguely if the ability to kill was genetic. If so, he might be really good at it. "Why?"

"Because you are, mate," Al said. "It's really painfully obvious, to everyone except you, apparently."

"She's in love with you too," Lizzie said helpfully.

"I know," Scorp said flatly. "She told me." Where had this word love come from anyway? No one accused Albus and Lizzie of being in love. They were just... going out. It all had to be so bloody complicated.

"You don't seem very pleased," Lizzie said.

"Because I'm not -" he hesitated.

"See," Lizzie said triumphantly. "You can't say you're not in love with her."

"That's not the point," Scorpius said angrily.

Lizzie sighed and folded her arms. "What did you do, then?" she asked.

"Told her it couldn't happen."

"What?" Albus sat up and jammed his glasses onto his nose. His hair looked really ridiculous after a night on the sofa, if Scorpius had been in the mood to laugh.

"Well it can't!" Scorp hissed. "It's not about how I feel, that doesn't matter, the point is... it just can't happen. It's all right for you two, no one cares who you... go out with, you can do whatever the hell you want -"

"So can you!" Albus protested. "You always have before!"

"With... within limits," Scorpius tried to explain. He had the feeling the argument was unravelling away from him.

Albus stood up, his face dark with anger. "What are you saying here?" he demanded. "She's not good enough for you?"
Scorpius stared at him. "No, no, of course not… I mean, of course she is - but my father - "

"Oh, your father wouldn't approve? Like he wouldn't approve of your doing Muggle Studies? You do that all right!"

"I know but - Al, listen - he would -"

"Because she's a half blood?"

"Yes - I mean, no! That's part of it, but - "

"I didn't think you cared about any of that."

"I don't! You know I don't!"

"Clearly you do, or we wouldn't be having this conversation."

Scorpius closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. It was too early and he had not slept well, his brain felt like it was wrapped in cotton wool.

"The two of you have been dancing around each other for months," Lizzie said. "She obviously has feelings for you, and she knows you do too."

"Only because you told her!" Scorpius snapped.

"All right fine, I'm sorry, but the point is, you shouldn't have just shot her down like that. Was she upset?"

"Well, yes…"

"Nice," Albus growled.

"Well, she started it - she as good as said I shouldn't bother trying to keep my family, that they weren't worth the trouble!"

"Rose cares about you way more than anyone in your family," Albus said viciously. "Your dad didn't seem to care at all about sending you to stay with your mad grandparents, and your mum - "

Scorpius had had just about enough. "You say one more single word about my mother, Potter," he growled. "And I will hex your knees off."

"Go for it, Malfoy," Al snapped back, and Scorpius flinched.

"Don't do that," he muttered.

"Oh, so now Malfoy is an insult? Make up your damn mind! It's us or them, Scorp, you've always known that, maybe it's time you picked a bloody side!"

"Al," Lizzie said warningly, perhaps sensing that somewhere a line had been crossed.

"Don't bother," Scorpius muttered. "I'm leaving." He turned his back on them and stalked out of the common room, slamming the door behind him.

~*-R-*~

~*-R-*~
Albus, Lizzie and Belinda found Rose in the Great Hall. She had got up early, showered and brushed her hair and put on clean robes. Right, she told herself firmly. You are not going to let it get to you. You are going about your day as normal. No one has to know what a complete idiot you made of yourself last night.

Not entirely true, she had to admit. One other person at least, would know.

It seemed that this was optimistic, however. From the sympathetic look on Lizzie's face as they sat down, and the sullen one on Albus', it was clear they already knew more than she would have liked.

"Hey Rosie…" Lizzie began.

"I don't want to talk about it," she said shortly.

"Look, Scorp told us what happened…"

"Oh, that was nice of him."

"But we just wanted to make sure you were all right."

"Why shouldn't I be all right?" Rose drew herself up. "I'm fine. I'm great. Now I can move on with my life instead of moping over a stupid schoolgirl crush."

Lizzie and Belinda looked at each other with knowing cynicism. "He was very upset about it," Lizzie said eventually. "Was he? That's a shame." Rose tossed her hair and stabbed a fork into her bacon and eggs.

"If it helps," Albus said with a dark edge to his voice. "I don't think he and I are speaking anymore, either."

She glanced at him in surprise. The boys were nearly always on each other's side. It softened her heart a little to think that Al would have stood up for her.

"You can have him now, if you want," she said offhandedly to Belinda.

Belinda laughed awkwardly. "Er… no thanks. If he doesn't want you I seriously doubt he'd go out with a Muggleborn."

"Bel," Lizzie said warningly.

"What? You said that was the reason."

"I think it's more than that, and anyway, he doesn't actually care…"

"Doesn't he though?" Albus cut in. "You know, maybe Uncle George is right. Maybe some things really are just built in."

~*-R-*~

~*-R-*~

At least, Rose thought, there was only a few weeks until the Christmas holidays. She could go home and not have to worry about avoiding Scorpius all the time. It was odd to sit on opposite sides of the classroom, and on other ends of the table in the Great Hall during meals. While she thought she might have forgiven him enough to sit with him, at least, clearly whatever had passed between him
and Albus was not going to be healed quite so easily.

She felt terrible now for what she had said about Scorpius' father. It wasn't fair of her to assume that he would just drop his family in her favour. She couldn't imagine doing anything like that to her mother and father, no matter how much she fancied a boy - any boy. On the other hand, she had really thought he might have taken the risk. He had, after all, done it before when it came to school subjects, or spending Christmases and his summer with the Longbottoms. He had dated Stacey without telling his father - but then, she added to herself in a treacherous inner voice, Stacey was a Pureblood, and her family was not, as far as she knew, a sworn enemy of the Malfoys.

She understood that he was conflicted. She understood it was hard for him, and she knew now that she shouldn't have, in a fit of loneliness, demanded to know the truth of the matter. She winced inwardly and felt a queasy roll in her stomach every time she recalled her own words: "do you love me or don't you?" If he had yelled that at her, five months ago before she had time to think through her own feelings, she might have slapped him.

She thought that he was not really angry with her. Occasionally she would catch from him a sad smile, but by the time she could return it he had turned away. She was angry with him, of course, at least she tried to convince herself that she was. Albus certainly helped in that regard. He was all too happy to list off the reasons why she shouldn't forgive him anything. He and Scorpius were not speaking at all. She dreaded to think what it must be like in the boys' dormitory. But Albus was spending more and more of his time with Lizzie or the Quidditch team, leaving Rose alone to ponder these unhappy thoughts.

To make matters even worse, a week later an owl arrived from her mother to say that both her parents would be working all through the Christmas holidays, and that it might be better if she and Hugo stayed at school until summer. Albus got a similar letter from his own mother saying that although she would like to see them, she would understand if he and Lily would rather stay and keep their cousins company. James was going home, but he planned on spending the main part of the holidays with Roxie and Fred at Uncle George's house.

Any other year it would have been fine. But now they faced a long Christmas in Ravenclaw tower, with Scorpius, who was also staying at Hogwarts, as usual. "You can go home," she said to Albus dully, but he shot down that idea.

"And leave you alone here? No way."

All this did was to remind Rose of how many times they had left Scorpius to himself over the Christmas holidays. She knew her parents and Al's father was busier than ever trying to catch the Shadow, and she knew it was important, but it still stung that they had no time for her or Hugo on Christmas. And Scorpius went through that every single year. No wonder he wanted to cling to whatever family connection he might have, as unrewarding as it was.

It became harder to ignore him once the majority of the student body had left the castle. Half a dozen times she came into the common room to find him reading, or playing his guitar, and felt the urge to sit with him. But Al always walked straight past him to the dormitory, where he spent his days composing owls to Lizzie in London.

One of Lizzie's return owls invited the Potters and Weasley children to spend Christmas with them at Diagon Alley. This would have been a great idea if it wasn't for Scorpius, who by now was practically a traditional Leaky Cauldron guest. "Do you think you can be civil, at least?" Rose asked Al, wearily. Al glowered at her, but she knew he wanted to see Lizzie badly. When he wasn't writing her letters he was looking at pictures of her and moping.
"Fine," he sighed. "I'll ask him to pass the potatoes nice as you like."

And so it was Rose who had to break the news, approaching the blond boy carefully in the Common Room. "Lizzie asked us to the Leaky for Christmas," she said quickly, so quickly she nearly tripped over her own words.

He looked up, surprised perhaps, but not at the news. "She might have mentioned it," he said. "Does Al want me to stay behind?"

"What, no!" she exclaimed. "He's not *that* angry…"

"Could have fooled me," he muttered, closing his book with a sigh. It was Charles Dickens, she noted. For a Pureblood who apparently wanted to stay a Pureblood, he had probably read more Muggle novels than her own Muggleborn mother.

"If you could just be polite to each other for one day, that would be great," Rose said stiffly. She had almost forgotten how infuriating he could be.

"What about you?" he asked, frowning slightly.

"What about me?"

"You don't mind me coming?"

"Of course not," she sighed. "As long as there's not a punch-up over the pudding."

He looked confused, but nodded and went back to his book as soon as she turned away. As she went up the stairs to her own dormitory she glanced back at him. He had the book open on his knees but wasn't looking at it. Instead he was staring at the wall opposite, as though in a dream.

~*-R-*~

~*-R-*~

They walked down to Professor Longbottom's office together, with Rose in-between the two boys as a kind of buffer. Someone had to do it, she decided. They were all in Muggle clothes, Albus in slightly-too-short trousers, Scorpius in the knit jumper Hannah had sent him for Christmas. It was Ravenclaw blue, and Rose had to admit it suited him a lot better than his usual mud-grey article, but she had no opportunity to tell him so, since she had the feeling it would set Al off in a major way.

Her cousin was clearly between emotions at the moment, torn between desire to see his girlfriend and annoyance at Scorpius' apparent lack of remorse. It was a long, awkward journey down from Ravenclaw tower, and it was with great relief that they met Lily and Hugo waiting for them outside the Herbology Professor's door.

Hugo was still short for fourteen, tending to take after their Uncle George in stature, and he was developing that same permanently-cheeky expression. The one regret Rose had about being a Ravenclaw was not getting to see her brother that often. He was a good kid, a bit immature perhaps but a good deal more fun to be around than Louis, who had a tendency to be finicky. Lily on the other hand bid fair to take after her mother, tall and willowy with a sheet of fine red hair down to her lower back that Rose couldn't help but envy.

"Do you think Mum and Dad'll come?" Hugo asked her as they waited. "They can't be actually working on Christmas day, can they?"

"The smugglers are probably working on Christmas Day," Lily pointed out. She was still dead set on
her ambition to become an Auror, as no one seemed to be able to talk her out of it so far. "They probably don't expect to be caught on Christmas. That seems like a perfect opportunity to catch them, to me."

Hugo rolled his eyes. Rose got the impression he had to listen to this sort of talk quite a lot. Potters could be very stubborn.

"I don't know if they'll come," Rose said, not wanting to get her brother's hopes up.

"They're busy, I know," Hugo sighed.

"Aw, d'you miss your mummy and daddy?" Lily teased, and Hugo made a face at her.

"Like you don't miss yours," he shot back. Rose noticed that Scorpius suddenly seemed very interested in a nearby tapestry.

"Please don't bicker, children," Albus sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "We get enough of that from the Scamanders."

"Children, are we?" Lily scoffed. "That's nice, just because you're seventeen, now - "

"I'm a man, I'll have you know," Al said, puffing himself up so that even Rose laughed. "I can Apparate and everything."

"No you can't," Lily shot back. "You don't have your test."

"Well at least I can take the test. Does that sound like someone's here?"

There was a rusting around inside the office and then finally the door opened. Neville, dressed very un-Professor-like in Muggle trousers and shirt, poked his head out and looked relieved to see them.

"Oh good," he said. "Sorry I'm late, everyone. It's been a bit hectic." He waved them all into the office and locked the door behind them before leading them to the Floo.

"Did something happen?" Scorpius asked, and out of the corner of her eye, Rose saw Albus flinch as if he'd forgotten he was even there.

"Oh no, lad, nothing for you to worry about. Come on then, you all know the drill." Rose watched her brother and Lily in turn take Floo Powder from the jar he held out for them and shout "Leaky Cauldron, Publican's Apartment!" into the flames. Then Neville offered her the jar. She hesitated, not wanting to leave the two boys without a Peacekeeper, but since she could hardly say so, she took her own pinch of powder and stepped into the green flames.

Lizzie was waiting on the other side, bouncing on the balls of her feet. She gave Rose a hug, but she was clearly waiting for someone else, and it wasn't Scorpius, who came through next. "Your dad had a look to him," Scorpius told her. "I think he wants to give Al a talk."

"Oh no!" Lizzie exclaimed. "I knew I should have gone with him!"

There was indeed a very long wait before Albus or Neville came through the Floo, during which Scorpius made his escape, going in search of Hannah and Alice. When Al finally did appear, his cheeks were flushing red beneath the rims of his glasses.

"Oh my god, oh my god," Lizzie said, seeing him. "I am so sorry!" She launched herself on him before he had a chance to reply, so that he staggered a little under her weight. Rose, watching, suddenly remembered with an uncomfortable feeling the time when they had come to get their school
things, when they had met Scorpius in the street, when she had run to him and he had lifted her and twirled her around and around…

Lily made a gagging sound and Lizzie loosened her hold of Al to smile impishly at her. Rose thought she was going to kiss him to make a point, but Neville came through the fireplace at that point, and Al shook off Lizzie's hold as though he'd been burned. Lizzie immediately began berating her father for whatever he might have said to her boyfriend, which was highly awkward for everyone involved, although Neville seemed to brush it off without much concern.

There were no extra guests, but it was still a bit of a squeeze at the table by the time Scorpius had come back with a giggling Alice in his arms, and Hannah not long after, dusting flour off her hands and taking off her apron.

Not for the first time, Rose wondered if there was something truly magical about the Leaky Cauldron. What it had done for Scorpius over the summer was remarkable, for a start. But now she got to see the magic at work as she saw her friend gradually drop his guarded, cynical attitude, and become once again the boy she had met anew in the last week of summer, so long ago it seemed now. He and Alice played games and chatted to each other as they ate, apparently as close as any brother and sister. The four year old was considerably more vocal than she had been six months ago, and though a lot of what she said made no sense at all that Rose could make out, he nodded and answered her as if he understood. He talked Dickens with Hannah and music with Neville and complained cheerfully that his food was getting cold while he talked. It was as if a mask had been lifted.

Even Al lost some of his grumpy demeanour, with Lizzie holding his hand under the table at intervals, or whatever else was going on down there that Rose didn't want to know about; he could scarcely keep up a grim face. The boys still didn't speak to each other, but there was a noticeable lack of enmity in the air. Rose felt more relaxed than she had in days, and they all joined in the laughter when Alice knocked over a decorative statue of Merlin that fell face first into Hugo's dinner. The Christmas pudding was brought out and Neville lit it with its wand, sending a up tall blue flame worthy of a loud cheer and round of applause.

The good feeling however, was doomed to be short-lived. Just as Hannah stood up to clear the dessert plates, there was a Floo call from the living room. Neville stood up to get it, looking worried.

"I'll do it," Scorpius said, quickly, grabbing his own plate and Alice's and starting to pile them.

"Thank you dear," said Hannah gratefully. "I'll be right back." She put down her armful and hurried after her husband.

"There was a call this morning," Lizzie said softly as soon as her mother was out of earshot. "I heard Mum and Dad talking. There was some kind of incident at the Ministry."

"What sort of incident?" Rose asked, frowning.

"I don't know, no one will say."

"And you didn't mention that before?" she demanded. "Our parents work at the Ministry, what if -"

"Shhh," Al hissed. "Listen."

Scorpius stopped piling plates, and they all listened intently to the murmur of voices from the living room. Rose didn't even feel guilty eavesdropping. She could hear Neville, Hannah, and a third voice.
A suspicion began to grow in Rose's mind as she listened, but Hugo beat her to the realisation. "That's Dad," he said, getting out of his seat and running for the door.

"Hugo!" Rose hissed, too late, he was already gone, leaving the door ajar. She hurried to get up and almost knocked her chair over going after him.

"Hugo," she heard her father say wearily. "Happy Christmas."

"What are you doing here Dad?" her brother asked as she entered the living room, Al and Lizzie not far behind her. "Are you staying?"

"Sorry mate, I just came to update Neville." Her dad looked up and saw her. He looked very tired but otherwise well. "Hello sweetheart."

"Hi Dad," she said, going up to him and wrapping her arms around his waist. He hugged her tight around the shoulders. "What is it?" she asked. "Is everyone okay? Mum?"

"Your mum's fine, love."

She looked up at him, sensing there was something he wasn't saying. "Dad, you're scaring me."

"It'll be in the Prophet tomorrow anyway," Neville said softly.

Ron sighed and nodded, turning to the children with a grim expression. "It's Kingsley."

"The Minister?"

"Yes, someone sent two dodgy packages disguised as Christmas presents. They got through all our security and one of them ended up in Minister Shacklebolt's office. He's in St Mungo's - he'll live, but we've just spent all day trying to figure out where our security protocols fell through."

"What happened to the other package?" Lily asked, sharp as a tack as usual.

Ron hesitated.

"What happened to the other package?" Albus repeated, low.

"Albus -"

"It went to Dad's office, didn't it." Al said flatly.

"Al, he's fine," Ron said quickly. "He got out before anything happened -"

"Someone tried to kill my dad and you're telling me he's fine?"

Ron sighed. "Believe it or not, Al, your dad is used to people trying to kill him by now. Trust me, he's fine."

Lily had gone very wide-eyed. "What kind of package was it?" she asked. "Was it cursed? Was it the Shadow?"

"Well - " Ron stopped short, looking over Rose's head to the dining room door. Rose turned to see Scorpius standing there, holding Alice by the hand. The little girl looked confused and frightened, and Rose realised they must have been able to hear every word from the next room.

"Sorry to interrupt," Scorp said. "One of us got a bit scared."
Alice looked up at him reproached fully. "I'm not scared," she insisted, but didn't let go of his hand.

"Oh really? Well good, because I was talking about me," he said to her in a stage whisper.

"I'm sorry darling," Hannah said, coming over to lift Alice onto her hip. "Bed for you, I think. Say bye bye."

The child waved tiredly to a chorus of "goodnight" from everyone. Hannah carried her up the stairs, leaving the room in a state of awkward silence.

"Uncle Ron?" Lily prompted. "Was it the Shadow?"

Rose's father looked over at her, but he clearly didn't want to say anything else in front of Scorpius. Neville noticed this too, and frowned. "Ron..." he began, in a would-be-patient sort of tone.

"Never mind," Scorpius said then, and Rose sensed a danger in his voice. "Don't mind me, I'll just..." he gestured vaguely and made his way to the pub stairs.

"Scorpius..." Neville tried to call him back but he was already gone.

"I'll go," Rose said when Neville would have gone after him.

"Rosie..." Al tried to protest, until she whirled on him and gave him a hard look worthy of her mother.

"I think you've done enough," she snapped at him, and went down the stairs.

The Leaky Cauldron was its usual mad self, post-Christmas-dinner revellers singing bawdy songs and dancing between - and on top of - the tables. Scorp was nowhere in sight, but she hadn't really expected him to stay in the middle of this crowd. She hesitated. He could have gone through the wizard's entrance to Diagon Alley, of course. Perhaps to visit his friend the old string-maker, though she doubted that as it was getting quite late. Something told her that he had gone the other way.

She ducked, squeezed and occasionally pushed her way through the throng until she could reach the entrance to Muggle London. As soon as she pulled the door ajar, an icy breeze rushed through, chilling her face and hands and making her gasp. There was a groan of annoyance from those in the path of the draft, but she ignored them, pulling the door wider so she could get through and closing it firmly behind her.

It was freezing on Charing Cross Road. Her breath misted in the air before her as she looked around, rubbing her arms with numb hands. It was snowing, a light fall that spotted the tarmac without building up except on the few areas of grass around lamp-posts and the windscreens of parked cars. There was very little activity, this late on Christmas day, but there was always something moving in Muggle London. A big car roared past suddenly, the brief stink of petrol making her wrinkle her nose. No wonder even her mother didn't venture into the Muggle world unless she had to.

She watched the car out of sight around the corner, and then she saw him. He was standing outside a bookshop, sheltering from the snow under the overhang. He had his arms crossed over his chest, the Ravenclaw-blue jumper and the pale gold of his hair standing out against the dark windows. She hurried over, eager to be out of the wind, and he looked up when he heard her footsteps. He didn't look surprised to see her, but he frowned when she came up onto the step, shivering.

"You're freezing," he said.

"Well spotted," she said, her teeth chattering. She was wearing long sleeves and jeans, but that was
her only protection against the cold. "Come back in so we can both be warm."

"You can go back in," he said, looking away. "I don't feel like being glared at for the rest of my Christmas."

"He wasn't…" Rose began to protest, but she could not truthfully defend her dad in this, she knew.

"It's fine," he muttered. "I get why I shouldn't be privy to top secret discussions like that. I'm probably the one who tried to kill the Minister."

"Scorp…"

"Runs in the family after all, right?"

"Scorp, you stop that right now."

He stopped, but he still wouldn't look at her.

She shivered and drew herself closer to the brickwork, trying to soak up whatever warmth the building might have to offer. "I'm sorry I said that stuff about your dad," she said after a moment. "Everyone deserves to have a family."

He shrugged. "Thanks."

"I'd apologise for Al as well, but frankly you've been as much of an ass as he has, lately."

To her surprised, he actually chuckled. "Yeah, probably."

She let out a breath and shook her head, turning to leave. "Well, if you're going to be like that -"

"Rosie, wait."

She turned to see him looking at her with some unnamable emotion in his expression. "I'm… sorry too," he said. "I shouldn't have… I just…"

"No, I get it," she sighed. "My father doesn't trust you. Your father probably would hate me…"

He sniffed as though to emphasise the understatement.

"I mean I understand why that would be too hard," she said, though it hurt to say it. "I'm sorry I put you on the spot like that. I don't want this to ruin everything. You're my best friend."

He bit his lip for a moment, considering, then burst out - "he didn't even send me anything."

"What?"

"My father… there's usually a letter, at least, and last year he sent a present, but this year… nothing."

"Oh." That was sad, but she wasn't sure what point he was trying to make. "Sorry."

"No that's the thing, I don't even care," he said. "I'm even sort of glad. His letters always remind me how much he couldn't give a crap, and now he won't even make that much effort. And I haven't even heard from my mother in years." He looked up into the night, the snowflakes swirling and sparkling under the street lamps as the sun went down, somewhere unseen beyond the city. "I'd give anything to be Al, sometimes," he said. "Or Lizzie. I'd do anything to be a Longbottom."
"Or a Weasley?" she asked, smiling tentatively.

He grinned. "Not sure red hair would suit me."

She laughed, rubbing her arms.

"You'll freeze in a minute," he said, opening his arms. "Come here."

She hesitated only a second before taking a step forward and allowing him to fold his arms around her, enveloping her in his deliciously warm body heat. "How come you're so hot?" she asked, her voice muffled slightly.

"I work out," he said, and she poked him hard in the stomach. "All right, fine," he chuckled. "Warming charm. I might be sulking pathetically, but I'm still a wizard."

"I should have thought of that," she sighed. Her wand was still in her bag back at the castle. She snuggled closer, burying her face and hands in his jumper.

"Rosie?"

"Hm?" She was so comfortable. She wanted to stay here in his warmth forever, to not worry about silly quarrels and family enmity. If things could just stay like this...

"I… need to tell you…"

"What?" He was going to complicate things again, she could just tell.

"I do, I mean… I do like you. It's hard to say…. love, because I don't know what that means, but…"

She didn't move. She kept her eyes closed and her face pressed against the warm blue wool. If she looked at him she knew she would cry.

"I've had time to think about it," he added, his hands shifting position slightly against her back. Was he trembling or was it just the cold? "I did think about you all summer. I liked being at the Leaky but I wanted to be with you, as well. I even thought about going to Italy, but I didn't know if I would find you, and… it's just I never thought… I always imagined my father was going to find some rich French woman for me to marry so I shouldn't even bother fancying anyone and I just never questioned it. I know, I know," he said before she could even interrupt, though her heart was beating too hard in her throat even if she had wanted to say anything. "I questioned everything else, I took the wrong subjects, made the wrong friends, got Sorted into the wrong house. I know I'm an idiot. I should have said right from the start, the very first time you saved me I should have said: I love that girl."

Rose swallowed hard and made herself pull back a little. She looked up at him with her hands still clasped between her body and his. "I saved you?" she repeated, her voice coming out very strange to her own ears.

"Of course you did." He seemed surprised that she hadn't realised. "Hundreds of times. Every time I thought I was worthless, or useless, or doomed to be just another Malfoy, forever." His grey eyes shone almost icy blue in the lamplight. "You always know how to make me feel… wanted."

"What are you saying?" she asked, what she should have asked months ago.

"I was wrong," he said. "I thought about it and I was wrong. And I… if you want… I mean, I understand if you won't, but if you give me a second chance…"
She decided she had had enough of his rambling around the issue. She leaned up and pressed her lips gently against his, silencing him quite effectively. The cars had all retreated into the city night and the only sound she could hear was the snow in the wind and her own pounding heartbeat.

It was several minutes before either of them spoke again, and when she broke apart to look at him there was something new and wonderful in his gaze. "How about we start with this," she said. "Just this. And we'll talk about love later."

"Sounds good to me," he said smiling, and leaned down to kiss her again.

Chapter End Notes

Please visit my blog at misssaisonfic.tumblr.com for more on this story.

This week I have posted some background information on James, Lily and the other Weasleys, what they are up to while all this is going on. Also I have a commentary meme happening where you can send me about 500 words of this (or another) story and I will write a DVD-style commentary (see the blog for more info). Comments and questions are always welcome as well. You don't have to be on tumblr, just click on 'ask me anything' to submit.

Oh, and special thanks to everyone who commented or left Kudos this week. It's all very much appreciated!
Scorpius gave up. The truth was, the issue of how they were going to broach the subject of the relationship to Rose's parents had not really come up in any serious way. He knew they'd have to address it eventually, but he was happy to put it off for as long as possible. Somehow he didn't think Rose's dad would be okay with his hands being anywhere on his daughter, waist-level or otherwise.

Chapter Notes

AN: MUSIC CHAPTER! It doesn't come up for a while because this is quite a long chapter, but when it comes up please visit http://misssaigonfic.tumblr.com/musicpost to listen when you see the lyrics in italics. And let me know if you enjoyed it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

2022-2023

~*-S-*~

~*-S-*~

By the time they got back to the Leaky Cauldron, Rose's dad had left. "He said he was sorry, sweetie," Hannah said. "But they're all in a shambles at the Ministry at the moment, from what it sounds like. He had to go back to help sort everything out."

"It's okay," Rose said, though he could tell she was disappointed. Personally Scorpius was glad. It had been a difficult few days and he honestly didn't think he was up to facing the man again. "At least I got to see him on Christmas."

Hannah nodded and patted her shoulder. She didn't say anything about how close they were standing, or even when Rose slid her chilly hand into his, though there was just the faintest hint of a knowing smile. But then, it wasn't Hannah's reaction he was worried about.

Al, Lizzie, Lily and Hugo were waiting for them in the living room. Scorp tried not to look straight at Albus while still watching him for signs of outburst. Al's eyes went from Rose's red face to Scorpius' pale one, to the interlocking hands. Then he sighed. "Bout bloody time," was all he said. Lizzie nudged him, and he rolled his eyes and nodded at them.

Scorpius wondered if he ought to attempt to apologise, for Rose's sake at least. "Al, I - " he began, but his friend waved it off.

"Never mind," he said flatly. "Just don't do it again."
Scorpius thought this was a bit unfair, but knew better than to say anything.

"Oh Scorpius, I almost forgot," Hannah said quickly as Neville was about to hand out the Floo powder. "An owl came for you."

"For me?" Scorpius frowned. Who on earth could be owling him via the Leaky Cauldron? Aside from the Longbottoms, everyone else he knew was at Hogwarts, or knew to reach him there. For a second he wondered if it might be the missing Christmas letter from his father, until the sensible part of his brain dismissed that as sheer folly.

"It came a few days ago," Hannah continued apologetically, moving aside a stack of letters on the mantelpiece until she found the unopened envelope. "I meant to send it on to the school but I kept forgetting, and since you were going to be here anyway…"

"It's fine," Scorpius said absently as he took the envelope from her hand.

"Come on you lot, before Professor McGonagall comes after me for kidnapping you," Neville said, waving the Floo pot vigorously in their direction. Albus was immediately distracted from his friends by Lizzie's goodbye kiss. Lily made an 'eeeew' noise and took the powder eagerly, but Hugo seemed distracted by the hand that was currently being held by his sister's. The younger boy frowned at Scorpius, but Scorp couldn't think of anything to do but shrug apologetically. If Hugo had a problem with it, Rose was the one who would have to deal.

"Bye," Lizzie said breathlessly as she and Albus broke apart. "See you when school starts again."

"Yeah," Al said quickly, avoiding Neville's eyes as he took his own pinch of Floo powder.

"Oh stop glaring, Hugo," Rose hissed as Al went through the fire. "Go on, shoo."

"Dad is going to spit fire," her brother muttered, but he went obediently enough, leaving Scorpius and Rose alone with the Longbottoms. Hannah gave Rose a hug before she went through, and finally turned to Scorpius with a sad smile.

"I'm sorry we didn't get to hear you play this year," she said.

"You didn't promise anyone, did you?" Scorpius said guiltily. He had been worried about that, but he just hadn't been able to bring himself to pick up the guitar case when the time came to go down to Neville's office. For the first time over the last few weeks, he hadn't felt the least bit like singing. Now though… now he could have sung all night long.

Hannah only smiled and hugged him. "Owl us if there are any problems, all right?" she said kindly.

"Even if the problem is Ron," Neville put in from behind him. "I mean it. You can -"

"Come see you anytime, I know, Professor," he said, rolling his eyes.

Neville grinned. "Well done, lad," he said, unexpectedly. "She'll be good for you."

~*-S-*~

Later, Scorpius couldn't have agreed with that sentiment more. He was lying back on one of the biggest, squishiest common room sofas, with Rose lying curled up against him. She was much warmer now than she'd been in the street, and her hair was like a soft cushion against his chest. The
only downside was that Midnight seemed to be taking offence at this new development and kept trying to squeeze in between them, but compared to how comfortable and happy he was, this was nothing more than a minor blip on the edges of his new wonderful and starry universe.

Al seemed to have forgiven him after all, though in his own, grumpy way that meant no actual words needed to be exchanged. To be fair he was clearly still brooding over the potentially deadly package someone had sent his father. He was trying to read a Quidditch book his grandparents had sent him for Christmas, pointedly staying out of the way. At least it was blissfully quiet with the Scamanders home for the holidays.

Rose shifted against him, and there was a crunch of parchment. "What's in your pocket?" she murmured sleepily.

"Oh dear god," Albus moaned to himself, letting the book fall onto his knees. "This is a public place…"

"It's just a letter, you arse," Scorp shot back, feeling around for it. "I totally forgot about it." He ripped open the envelope and unfolded a small sheet covered in cramped handwriting. He squinted at it.

"Who's it from?" Rose yawned after a minute.

"Er… someone called Cleo." He read the letter again, frowning. "She saw me play over the summer at the Leaky Cauldron. I guess that's why she sent the letter there."

"Hey, your first piece of fanmail," Al sniggered. "You should talk to Dad, he's got a guy for that."

"She says she has her own band and she wants to know if I would play with them some time," he said, passing the letter to Rose who peered at it intently.

"Sounds like a stalker," Al muttered.

"She sounds nice," Rose said. "She must be home schooled, or she'd be at Hogwarts, wouldn't she? Or maybe she goes to a foreign wizarding school."

"Or she's thirty," Al put in, cynically.

"Are you going to write back?" Rose asked, ignoring her cousin pointedly.

Scorpius shrugged. "I'll think about it. Oh hey, who wants presents? I got them over the summer." He flushed, remembering that in the middle of their argument, Al and Rose might have disdained from getting him anything. It had certainly been depressing to wake up that morning with only a card from Lizzie signed by her parents. "It's um… it's okay if you didn't…"

"Of course we did," Rose said, smiling as she reached up to tuck an errant lock of hair behind his ear.

"Did we?" Albus looked confused.

"Shut up, Al."

Scorpius went up to his dormitory, and Rose to hers, and they exchanged packages, rather shyly. Rose proclaimed that her present was from her and Albus both, and Scorpius decided to accept this obvious fakery as long as it improved relations between the two of them. Al, at least, looked sheepish when Scorpius handed him a big round parcel. "Thanks mate," he said, shaking it and holding it to
his ear.

"It's not much," Scorp said, shrugging. "I didn't have a lot of money left after my clothes and books and things…"

"This is great!" Al exclaimed, on ripping open the package to find a signed Quaffle. "You didn't tell us you met Thomas Wattigan!"

"Yeah, last summer. He was cool… but you could probably meet him any time, your mum being an ex player, and your dad…"

"It's great, Scorp, really," Al said, rolling his eyes and grinning. Scorpius grinned back, glad they were friends again. It had sucked not speaking to him even for a few weeks.

"Open yours," Rose insisted.

Scorpius looked down at the little package in his hands. It was weird, having to open it in front of them. He was used to carefully peeling apart the wrapping paper in the privacy of his own room, by himself on Christmas morning. Albus was not impressed with his unwrapping technique, however.

"Oh just rip it!" he exclaimed after a moment. "We'll be here all night!"

Scorpius rolled his eyes and ripped through the paper. The package contained six golden guitar strings, wound around each other and tied with a Ravenclaw-blue ribbon. They glowed faintly with magic. He swallowed.

"Not much of a surprise," Al grunted. "You said that was what you wanted."

"Yeah, but..." Scorpius shook his head. He knew how much those things cost. He'd spent almost every Knut of his Leaky Cauldron money on the damn things. He looked up at Rose, who was grinning knowingly at him. "Thank you," he said, and she laughed and kissed him.

Vaguely he was aware of Al making a disgusted noise and getting up. "I'll be off then, happy Christmas et cetera, don't stay up too late... blah blah blah, you're not listening, why do I even bother..."

"Ignore him," Rose whispered to him between kisses. He could happily have done so, all night if necessary, but all too quickly she pulled away and reached for her own present.

"Oh - Merlin, it's not special at all," he said quickly, flushing with shame. "I mean, it was so long ago, before all this, I should get you something else, something better. You don't have to open it," he added, but she was already sticking her fingers through the spellotape.

"I'm not expecting pearls or diamonds, Scorp," she said, rolling her eyes.

"Well good, 'cos you'd be seriously disappointed," he said, as she rolled the last of the paper. At least I didn't get her a book, he thought gratefully as she turned the velvet bag over and eagerly pulled at the drawstrings. He'd tossed up between a little volume on Ancient Runes and a first edition Wizarding Storm, a wizard novel that he wasn't sure she hadn't read already. In the end it had been Lizzie who had dragged him out of the bookshop and towards the knick knack shop. He made a mental note to send her an owl of thanks when Rose's eyes widened with pleasure as she drew out her gift.

It was a charm bracelet, quite small, but perfect for her slender wrist. He had only been able to afford three charms, a broomstick, a rabbit, and a specially-sculpted Ravenclaw eagle. The shop had had
ones for each House, and some other ones which were apparently Beauxbatons mascots, a wolf, a cat and a dove, but he hadn't thought those made any sense.

"I love it!" Rose exclaimed, putting it on immediately.

"I thought… um… you could add to it each year, or… or something," he said, flushing red again at the utter lameness of his gift.

"I will! Then you don't have to worry about different presents every Christmas." She grinned at him, though he didn't think she was entirely serious. She held the bracelet up and inspected the charms more closely. "What's the rabbit for?" she asked, the question he'd been dreading.

"Er… I don't really remember," he said, pushing his hair back awkwardly.

"Yes you do," she said, shaking her head impatiently. "Go on, tell me."

"It's… really stupid."

"Tell me! Please?"

He grimaced, but he couldn't resist that face. "Well… it was the closest thing to a weasel that they had…"

She pursed her lips for a moment, and for a second of panic he thought she was going to be horribly offended, but then she burst out laughing, and there couldn't have been a better end to his Christmas if he'd paid a thousand galleons.

~*-S-*-~

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The news about the Minster being in St Mungo's was in the Daily Prophet the next morning. Professor McGonagall assured everyone who asked that Shacklebolt was still alive, and gave all indications that he intended on continuing to be so. But it had been a close thing. The article didn't go into much more detail than Mr Weasley had, only saying that the Minister had been attacked by a mysterious package, probably smuggled in by the Shadow. The rest of the paper was overflowing with stuff about the smugglers. Apparently the Ministry's best kept secret was a secret no longer. But there was no mention at all of the second package.

"Dad's good at hushing stuff like that up," Albus said dismissively. An owl from his parents had reassured both him and Lily that everything was fine. "I just hope they're being extra careful now. He can't just keep going around chasing the Shadow now he knows they're after him."

"He probably will," Rose said, ruefully.

"I know," Al sighed. "But I can dream."

New Year came and went, with a firework display let off from Gryffindor Tower. It made for a lovely view from Ravenclaw Tower, as they all crowded up the trapdoor to lean out over the parapet. Scorpius draped the edge of his cloak over Rose, and she put an arm around his waist, and Al managed not to moan about his girlfriend being miles away in London until long after the magical midnight moment was over. Scorpius thought he was getting good at kissing, now. Or he was still rubbish and Rose was just bloody brilliant at it.

"So long as it stays at kissing," Al said, in a burst of uncharacteristic big-brotherly-ness, the night
before the rest of the students were due to return to school.

"What do you care?" Scorp asked, frowning. "I thought she made you agree to stay out of it."

"She made me agree not to hound you," Al said pointedly. "This is not hounding. This is warning. Hands strictly at waist-level, Malfoy."

"Oh come on, like you and Lizzie haven't -"

"Me and Lizzie have nothing to do with the illicit relations between you and my cousin," Al said firmly, putting the final touches to his Transfiguration essay with a flourish. "Want me to tell Uncle Ron?"

Scorpius gave up. The truth was, the issue of how they were going to broach the subject of the relationship to Rose's parents had not really come up in any serious way. He knew they'd have to address it eventually, but he was happy to put it off for as long as possible. Somehow he didn't think Rose's dad would be okay with his hands being anywhere on his daughter, waist-level or otherwise.

Unfortunately once school started again, time seemed to be counting down aggressively towards the memorial service on the second of May. Since he'd sat with the Weasleys last year, he could hardly back out of it this time around. "Just be yourself," was all Rose would say when he tentatively brought it up. "You'll be fine."

Scorpius was not so sure. At least the Weasley and Potter Gryffindors, with the possible exception of Hugo, seemed to approve. "As long as you keep an eye on him," he heard James telling Al, and wondered what that meant, but at least he was safe for the time being.

Meanwhile, however, lessons came crashing down on them once again, with even more nasty surprises from the teachers. Professor Davies announced that they would now be starting Human Transfiguration, which made Rose sit up straight in her seat with excitement.

"This is one of the most difficult branches of the subject there is, with the possible exception of full Animagery, which is still Human Transfiguration, but considered a class of its own, and don't any of you go getting any ideas about trying it when my back's turned!" The man's smile set several of the Gryffindor girls to swooning. Scorpius caught Al rolling his eyes at him and grinned. "Get stuck in an animal form, even half an animal, and it's incredibly difficult to be changed back, especially if you're too far gone to be able to perform the spells yourself. Partner up and start trying to change the colours of each other's eyebrows. Try not to burn them off, please, the stink of burning hair makes me dizzy."

"Wuss," Al muttered as he and Scorp partnered up. Rose partnered with Lizzie. After the unfortunate hexing incident in Defence Against the Dark Arts, it had been decided that girlfriends should definitely not partner boyfriends in class when there was a possibility of accidentally hurting, maiming, or causing highly amusing facial disfigurement to the other. "My grand-dad was an Animagus. Bet I'd be really good at it."

"Go on then," Scorp teased. "Change into an eagle, I dare you. A blue-banded eagle."

"I don't think there's any such thing."

"Make it up then, if you're so clever."

"Oh shut up."

~*-A-*~
The weather went from snow, which at least was fun to play with and pretty to look at, to wet and windy. Almost all of January was miserable. The only thing that excited anyone was the prospect of Apparition lessons, which began on the second Saturday after school started again. "I'm going to splinch myself," Belinda muttered as they all walked down to the Great Hall together. Belinda had broken it off with Peter over Christmas, but was disinclined to talk about her reasons with anyone. "I just know it."

"I heard splinching hurts a lot," Lizzie said, biting her lip and tightening her grip on Al's arm.

"Probably depends which bit of you you splinch," Scorpius said darkly.

"No one's going to splinch themselves," Al told them, with more confidence than he felt. "I asked Dad, no one ever Apparates in the first lesson."

"Does splinching count as Apparating?"

It turned out Al was right, however. They stood in rows in the great hall for what seemed like hours, trying to focus their Determination, Destination and Deliberation until Al thought his head would explode from concentration.

"It makes no sense!" Lizzie complained afterwards. "I'm as determined as I possibly can be and nothing happens. There's got to be a better way of teaching Apparition than this."

"If there was, you'd hope they'd have figured it out by now," Rose sighed. "At least I don't feel as annoyed about not being able to take the test, anymore."

"The test's not till April," Al pointed out, when Lizzie's face fell even further. "We've got plenty of time to practice. And Rose can take it in June and then we'll all Apparate to each other's houses and scare the crap out of James like he did to me last year."

"It'll be nice to be able to use magic on the holidays," Belinda said cheerfully. Her failure at Apparition didn't seem to bother her as it did the others, perhaps because she was so relieved that she hadn't lost any important body parts. "My mum and dad are always saying they'd like to see more magic. It's embarrassing not being able to show them. Sometimes I swear they think I'm making it all up."

"Let's go find somewhere warm," Lizzie said, shivering. "And you guys can help us with Human Transfiguration. I still haven't got eyebrows right."

Of course, there was always Quidditch, though practices in January and February were not nearly as much fun as they were in summer. Albus and Rose came back to the common room after every session covered from head to toe in mud and shivering, to the point where Scorpius wondered aloud how they managed it.

"I mean it's not like you're running in the mud," he said, watching Al strip off his Quidditch robes from his position of smugness on his warm, dry bed. "Wet I can understand, when you're flying in the rain, but where does all the mud come from?"

"Come out with us next time and I'll show you," Al threatened, without much conviction. He was too tired to argue. Between homework, studying for exams, Apparition and Quidditch, there simply were not enough hours in the day. He fell into bed every night and was asleep almost before his head hit the pillow.
Unfortunately this meant that it was harder to spend time with Lizzie, though she was almost just as busy as he was, with lessons, and her Hufflepuff study group. Where he had Quidditch, she had chess club, though she began to complain that Quidditch went on for a lot longer, taking up almost the entire Saturday. The only time he really got to see her was during Apparition lessons, and then he was supposed to be concentrating on the three D's. After the first three lessons, out of the three of them, only Rose had managed to Apparate successfully, which seemed to cancel out her disappointment at Scorpius’ skills with non-verbal spells. It helped that they were all getting better at those now, after months of practice.

Ravenclaw beat Slytherin easily in the next game, halfway through February. Everyone was glad it had been a short game. There had been some concern that it might go on as long as the last one, but this time Albus needed no one's help catching the Snitch. He was too wet and cold and miserable to worry too much about getting too far ahead in terms of points, with the result that the final score was 220-40. The next day was a Hogsmeade trip, which only Scorpius was really keen to go on.

"I'm meeting Cleo at the Three Broomsticks," he explained, and Albus caught the flash of a frown on Rose's face before she smiled sweetly.

"Oh really? You never said."

"We only just organised it. Come on, you guys have to come. I can't meet this girl on my own; what if she's a total nutter?"

"Stalker," Albus coughed, not very subtly.

"I don't know," Rose yawned. "I thought I might stay here and do homework."

"Please?" Scorpius begged her, and Albus thought that was smart. He's learning. "I'll buy you a Butterbeer with the two Sickles I have left in all the world." He pulled a face so pathetic that Rose laughed and pushed him away.

"All right, Mr Starving Artist," she chuckled. Still, Albus got the impression that she was going along mainly just to keep an eye on him. Albus didn't really blame her. Scorpius was his best mate, but it still stung that he would ever pass her over in favour of Daddy's approval. Still, it was obvious he fancied her like mad. The two of them were in full new-relationship mode, where every time you walked in on them alone there was a nine out of ten chance they would be snogging and, despite Albus' protests, occasionally hands would be in very inappropriate places. When Al complained about this, Rose told him to stuff it. "It's none of your business what I do," she said firmly, and when he threatened to tell her parents, she threatened to hex him. He backed off at that point. Rose's hexes could be pretty nasty, for a girl.

The three Ravenclaws went down to Hogsmeade early, to avoid the crush of over-enthusiastic third years, wearing the hoods of their cloaks up against the drizzle. Albus wanted to go to Weasley's Wizard's Wheezes, but Scorp was having none of it. "You promised to come with me," he said, though in reality Albus was sure he had done no such thing. So they all went into the Three Broomsticks to meet Scorpius' number one fan, with Rose hanging possessively off Scorp's arm.

When Al saw her, he felt a funny sort of fluttering in his stomach. Stop it, he thought to himself firmly, but his body was not in the habit of listening to his brain. He hung back and did his best not to stare as she hurried forward to shake Scorp's hand. She was quite tall, with long, slender legs that were all too visible under a skirt whose shortness might have given Professor McGonagall a heart attack. She wore a tight-fitting black top covered in a kind of silvery mesh that left very little to the imagination. She had unnaturally pitch black hair streaked in places with purple, large dark eyes under eyeshadow of a similar purple, dark crimson lips and she wore nail polish so dark red it was
almost black. There was a dragon tattoo on her upper arm. As Scorpius introduced Rose to her as 'my girlfriend,' he thought he saw a slight crinkle between her eyebrows - disappointment, maybe? - but she smiled and shook his cousin's hand quite politely. And then she was turning to him - oh gods, oh Merlin - what do I say? what do I do? help me someone -

"This is Albus Potter," Scorpius was saying, from somewhere far away.

"Really?" Even her voice was captivating, Albus thought as he stood frozen to the spot. She was smiling at him. "Like Harry Potter?"

"Yeah," Al blurted out. "He's my son - I mean, I'm his dad - I mean, he's my dad, I'm his son, and he's - yeah, my dad."

She laughed, a rich, throaty laugh that made his stomach flip-flop. Lizzie, he thought firmly as she shook his hand. Her fingers were calloused at the tips like Scorpius' were. You have a girlfriend, her name is Lizzie, you really like her. Snap out of it. But it was hard. By the time he managed to tear his gaze away from Cleo, Rose was glaring at him. She looked disgusted.

"You have to meet my friends," Cleo was saying, dragging Scorpius over to where some other people were gathered around a booth. "This is Trevor, he's on keyboards, he goes to Madam Hatchett's with me." The guy she pointed too was even taller and skinnier than her. He wore his hair charmed into short spikes and a sour expression. "And this is Dave." The other boy was short, baby-faced, he looked about thirteen. "Our drummer. He's a Muggle."

"Are you really?" Scorpius asked, instantly fascinated.

"Technically I'm a squib," Dave said, in a voice much deeper than his boyish face would have led anyone to imagine. "My mum's a witch, so's my brother. I always get the short end of the bargain." He shot Cleo a cold look. "Stop telling people. It's racist. It's like saying, oh here's my friend, by the way he's half Indian on his mum's side…"

"Oh give it a rest, Dave," Trevor sighed, dramatically. "No one cares what you can do with a wand. This is a band meeting."

"Dave's brother Elliot was our guitarist," Cleo said, beaming at Scorpius as they all squeezed into the little booth. "But he moved to Bath with his girlfriend, that's why we owled all saw you play last summer. We think you'd fit in with us just great. And I love the stuff you do with your strings," she said, waving her hands enthusiastically. "I was hoping you could show me how - I play bass, but you already know that, it was in my owl -"

Albus felt a sharp pain in his ankle and grimaced. He turned to glare at Rose. "What?" he hissed. Had he been staring? He'd been trying not to stare.

Scorpius was looking oddly bashful. Trevor got up and went to the bar while Cleo continued to go on about Scorpius' musical talent.

"It's just a bit tricky," Scorpius said once he had a chance to get a word in. "What with me being at school here, and during summer I live in France. Probably," he added, in that gloomy tone of voice he used now whenever he spoke about the townhouse. So far he hadn't heard anything from his father regarding his summer plans, and he was preparing himself to go back there with a considerable lack of enthusiasm.

"We'll work around it," she said, shrugging. "I spoke to the landlord, he said we can rent a room here for practices on the weekends."
"He can't just come down here every weekend," Rose said, a little too quickly.

Cleo looked surprised. "I didn't realise your school was so strict."

"Clearly stricter than yours," Rose muttered under her breath, but Al heard. Trevor came back with a tray full of Butterbeers at this point though, and Cleo didn't seem to have noticed this blatant rudeness.

"I could ask Professor Flitwick, I suppose," Scorpius said. "It can't be a big deal for me to come down for a few hours while you guys are at Quidditch."

"Oh, you play Quidditch?" Cleo beamed, turning to look at Albus again and making his foot tremble against the floor. "That's the only thing I don't like about Madam Hatchett's, we're way too small to have more than one team."

"That's, um, your school?" Albus asked, feeling his face flush for reasons of its own.

"Oh yeah!" she laughed again, tossing a lock of purple hair over her shoulder. "Well, it's not really a school, we all bunch up in Madam's living room. There's about twenty of us at the moment but people go in and out, you know."

Albus didn't know, but he nodded anyway. "So are you… doing NEWTs?" he asked, a subtle way of figuring out her age. A casual glance might have put her in her early twenties, but her speech pattern and her laugh made her seem much younger.

To his surprise, she shrugged and waved a hand. "I dunno, maybe," she said, turning to the boys in the band. "Do you guys think you'll do NEWTs?"

Dave made a face. Trevor rolled his eyes.

"Wait, you might not do them at all?" Rose interrupted, horrified. "Why wouldn't you?"

"You don't need NEWTs for everything," Trevor said, sourly. "Especially if you want a job in the Muggle world."

"But why would you want -" Rose began, but stopped and flushed at the look this earned her from all three bandmates. "Sorry, I didn't mean..."

"It's okay," Cleo said, though she didn't smile quite as widely as before. "We find most Hogwarts students are pretty narrow-minded. No offence."

"None taken," Rose replied, grinding her teeth.

"I think it's cool that you get a choice," Al said quickly, earning him a grin from Cleo that was worth more than all his NEWTs put together. He hid his face in his Butterbeer to prevent her seeing his blush.

"Anyway," Cleo said, back to business as she turned to Scorpius again. "We could use on guitar and vocals, and God knows we need new material. Did you bring it?"

Scorpius grimaced and put a hand tentatively into his bag. "I told you, most of it's just rubbish…"

"Don't be silly!" Cleo exclaimed. "Hand it over."

Scorpius hesitated, holding his notebook tightly. Al stared at him. He never let anyone read his notebook. Surely he wouldn't…
But he did. Albus could see Rose seething as Scorp passed the dogeared exercise book to Cleo. She began turning pages eagerly. "The later ones are better," Scorpius protested, when she spent a little too long on one of the first pages. Dave was reading over her shoulder and Trevor was looking on with a kind of dry amusement. "Let me show you -"

He reached forward for the book, but Cleo pulled it out of his reach, laughing, and waved him off. "Modest," she said, pushing the book closer to Dave so that they could both read. They reached a page with lots of scribbles and crossings out, and Cleo made a soft, pleased sound under her breath. "This one's really good," she said, not looking up from Scorp's narrow, delicate handwriting. "What's it about?"

Scorpius leaned forward over the table, and Albus saw a subtle flicker of some strange emotion cross his face. "My mother," he said, after a moment's hesitation.

Cleo's face fell. "Oh. Well, it's great, anyway, we can definitely work with this."

She continued to flick through the book as the pub became gradually livelier with Hogwarts students. "Oooh," she said, at one of the later pages. She gave Rose a knowing look. "You guys are so cute."

Scorpius went bright red and tried to snatch the book back, to no avail.

"Is it about me?" Rose asked, suddenly very interested and turning her head to read.

"Rosie," Scorp protested. "Come on, this isn't fair, that one's really just scribbles - don't read it!"

"You gave me the book, boyo," Cleo pointed out.

"Yeah, I'm starting to regret that now," Scorpius growled. Rose was looking up at him with wide eyes.

"Is it really about me?"

"I should hope so," Cleo said, giggling and offering the page to Rose. "You wouldn't want it to be about anyone else, would you?"

Scorpius was looking like he wanted the earth to swallow him up. "Rosie, don't, please. I swear I'll play it for you when it's done, okay? But it's not finished yet. Please?"

She put a hand over his and smiled at him. "I won't," she said. "I promise."

Albus thought he might be sick from the cloyingness that was his two friends.

"This is all really great," Cleo said, pulling out her wand and some paper and casting a scribing charm on Scorpius' book. Its contents started to write themselves afresh on the paper - clean, white paper, Al noticed, not parchment. "You'll have to play us some for our first practice and we'll do some arrangements."

"Um," Scorpius said, looking uncomfortable. "I've never actually done that before. You know, it's always just been me, I wouldn't have a clue how to write for piano, or drums, or anything."

All the bandmates laughed, though not unkindly. "Don't you worry," Cleo said. "We'll show you how it's done." She turned to Rose and Albus. "Maybe you two could come too, sometimes? Always good to have a bit of an audience." Maybe it was his imagination, but Albus felt that the offer was extended more towards him than Rose.
"We have Quidditch," Rose said shortly, perhaps noticing the same thing.

"Right, of course, but when you don't." She smiled at Albus. "It'll be fun, I promise."

Albus was about to reply that yes, that would be fun, when a familiar voice spoke beside him. "Hey guys." It was Lizzie, wearing a damp cloak over her uniform. "I was looking for you," she said to him, somewhat reproachfully.

"We can't be that hard to miss," Al said, which didn't seem to impress her further.

"This is Lizzie Longbottom," Rose said to the band. "Al's girlfriend," she added, with considerable stress.

"Nice to meet you," Cleo said, without a trace of disappointment. Why did I think she'd be disappointed? Al thought, hating his brain.

"Nice to meet you too," Lizzie said. "Al, you said you'd take me to meet your Uncle George."

"Right, yeah," Al said quickly, standing up and nearly tipping his Butterbeer. "Let's go then. Nice to meet you all!"

Lizzie practically dragged him out of the pub into the miserable chill outside. He shivered and pulled his hood up. "She's very pretty," Lizzie said after they had walked a little way.

"Mmm. What? Who?"

She rolled her eyes. "The purple hair girl."

"Cleo? Yeah, I guess, if you like that sort of thing." Nice save, Potter, he thought.

"Tops with boobs falling out of them? Don't all boys like that sort of thing?"

"Is this a test?"

"Maybe."

He frowned at her. "That doesn't seem fair. I never test you."

"I wasn't the one drooling over Miss Lacy Bra in there."

"I was not! Anyway you couldn't see her bra, how do you know it was -"

"So you were looking."

Al gave up.

He wasn't sure if Uncle George noticed how cold things were between them when he introduced Lizzie, but he certainly felt it as they left the joke shop with their pockets full of free samples. When they got back to the castle, she refused his offer of an escort back to Hufflepuff and left him feeling guilty despite the fact he hadn't actually done anything.

~*-A-*~

~*-A-*~

True to his word, Scorpius asked Professor Flitwick if he could meet with the band in Hogsmeade on
weekends. Flitwick umm'd and ah'd over it for a few days, conferred with Professor McGonagall, and finally came back with the verdict that he could go once he came of age.

"At least that's only a few weeks," Rose said comfortingly, when Scorpius looked disappointed. He nodded and went back to scribbling in his notebook. He'd been at it almost every minute he wasn't in class since the meeting.

"You seriously don't have a problem with it?" Albus asked Rose when they were alone.

Rose shrugged. "I can't tell him not to go, can I? Nothing could make me look more like a crazy jealous person."

"Are you jealous?"

She sighed. "Maybe a little. But we have Quidditch, right? And you're always saying we need to make new friends. It'll do him good to spend some time with people who aren't us or the Longbottoms."

He had said that, Albus realised. Well, that held true for him as well, didn't it? There was no reason he couldn't be friends with the band (their original name had been Elliot and the Dragons, but they were currently in concept development for a new one as Scorpius had flatly turned down the idea of Scorpius and the Dragons, and Albus thought he could understand why) as well.

"You should be spending time with your girlfriend," Rose said, when he tentatively pointed this out.

"I'm trying, but she's hardly ever around," Al sighed. "Or I'm not around when she is. I don't know. Maybe it's... not working out so great."

Rose gave him a withering look. "Keep that girl hanging and Neville will have your head," she warned him.

Albus did not need reminding. He still had flashbacks to the most awkward conversation he'd ever had with his Professor regarding his intentions with his daughter. Thinking about it was enough to make him wonder if Neville might not be pleased if he broke up with her.

In the end, Lizzie spared him the trouble. The day before Scorpius' seventeenth birthday, she caught up to him outside Charms and told him it was over.

"Are you sure?" he asked, feeling his heart sink sadly at the same time that something like relief started to creep over him.

"Yeah," she sighed. She wasn't crying, and he wasn't sure if that was a good or a bad thing. "I've been thinking about it. It's not really working, is it?"

"I guess not," he said, privately thinking that the girl was ten times braver than him for saying what he had wanted to but couldn't have if put under torture. "It was nice though," he added. "While it lasted."

"Yeah, it was." She smiled weakly.

Scorpius and Rose were unsurprised when Albus broke the news. "Well, this leaves you free to go out with Cleo," Scorpius said, grinning. "I reckon she fancies you a bit."

"She does not," Albus sighed, though at the back of his mind he was a little bit hopeful.
"She's always mentioning you in her owls."

"Really? What does she say?"

"Boys," Rose muttered. "You've been broken up less than a day and you're already chasing other girls?"

"To be fair," Albus protested. "Girl, not girls. And I'm not chasing her. Okay, I'll admit if she wanted to go grab a bite, I wouldn't say no…"

"You're gross."

"You're just annoyed I'm going to be around a lot more to interrupt your snogging sessions."

~*-S-*~

~*-S-*~

Scorpius woke up on his birthday, which happened to fall on a Saturday, feeling that everything was right with the world. There were even more presents than usual, though not nearly as many as had been heaped at the foot of Albus' bed when he turned seventeen, but Scorpius was used to that.

Lizzie and Belinda had got him a new iPod. The old one was starting to cut out every now and then, and the plastic around the wires of the headphones was worn down to almost nothing. Still, it would be like throwing away an old friend to get rid of it, so he decided to keep them both. Anyway the new one didn't have the special anti-magic spells that would help it to work inside Hogwarts. When he turned it on, the screen fizzed alarmingly. Al laughed when he saw the look of panic on Scorp's face.

"Don't worry," he said as he got dressed. "I'll get mum to teach me what spell she used and fix it for you over summer."

"Good idea," Scorpius said gratefully, putting the gift back in the box and carefully to one side.

Cleo had sent him a card, also signed by Trevor and Dave, and a portable wizarding wireless. We need to get you up to date on wizard music; she had written in the card.

Neville sent him a proper wizards shaving kit, Hannah a new jumper, some gloves and a warm, fleecy hat with ear flaps. He felt his stomach twist slightly as he read the card.

Scorpius,

Congratulations on coming of age.

Enjoy the good years while they last!

Neville, Hannah, Anthony & Alice

And all your friends here at TLC.

He wondered if he would get to see them at all over summer. He still held out some hope that he might get another last minute owl from his father saying that he was once again too busy to have him home for the holidays. Though that would hurt a little, it would mean another fabulous summer at the Leaky Cauldron, since he had no intention of returning to his Grandfather's house.

The last present was from Al and Rose, of course. It was very small, a square box with a little ribbon
around it. "Not another musical instrument, then?" Scorpius joked, shaking it.

"You better wait for Rose before you open that," Al warned him. "She'll want to see your face."

"Oh fine," he sighed.

They went down to Common Room where Rose was waiting for them. "Finally," she said, hurrying over to give him a tight hug. "You take forever to get up!"

"It's Saturday," Al growled.

"Happy birthday," she said, ignoring her cousin to give Scorpius a soft kiss on the lips. Her charm bracelet jangled on her wrist as usual. He didn't think she had taken it off since Christmas.

"Thanks," he said, smiling. "I didn't open your present yet. Al said not to."

"Oh." She flushed a little. "Well, go on then."

He perched on the edge of an armchair and undid the ribbon so that the box fell open. It was a watch. A proper wizarding one with little spinning discs, and tiny buttons that brought up a compass, the date, the weather and suggestions for what to have for breakfast, lunch and dinner as well as the time.

"Do you like it?" Rose asked, when he had stared at it for what seemed like a long time. "It's traditional, you know, for wizarding men… Al got one on his birthday, and so did James and Fred, and my Dad, and Al's Dad… anyway we thought your father probably wouldn't… did he?" she added, tentatively.

He shook his head. "No. Not even a card." He couldn't quite bring himself to look at her. He knew about wizarding traditions, and this one… well, it was as good as saying he was family. "Guys, you really didn't have to…"

"Course we did." Albus shrugged. "Someone has to give you a watch, or you're not really of age, right? Flitwick might have stopped you going to Hogsmeade. Now you can just flash him the watch and be like, harhar, seventeen now, just try and stop me!"

"Oh hell, the band practice," Scorpius said, staring at the time at the watching and realising he was meant to be in Hogsmeade in twenty minutes.

He looked up at Rose, who smiled encouragingly at him. "Go on," she said. "We can hang out when you get back."

He grinned at her and pulled her into a hug. "Thank you thank you thank you," he said. "Both of you," he added, beaming at Albus, who held up both hands defensively.

"No hugging!" he insisted. "Get out of here, go on. We have Quidditch practice."

"Right!" He put the watch on, left the box on the chair and ran out of the Common Room and down the stairs of the tower.

He had more fun that day, and all the Saturdays following for the next two months, to last him a lifetime. Trevor became a lot more talkative when discussing music, and even Dave made his strangely deep voice heard as they worked out the arrangements for the first three songs. Great Escape, the song about Scorpius' mother that Cleo liked so much, was the first that they decided was completely finished, half way through April. Scorpius brought Albus and Rose straight after
Apparition lessons to hear them play it.

It was a bit cramped in the back room of the Three Broomsticks, but they had done a lot of spellwork to make sure it was soundproof. Dave set up his drums on a little platform while Scorpius, Cleo and Trevor squeezed in in front of him, nodding to each other as Scorpius played the first few notes before the others jumped in with a crash of sound.

*You promised me you'd always be around
To pick me up when I'm run down
To help me when my day is busted
But there's no one now who can be trusted
Are you ever coming back, or is nothing built to last
Isn't it something how you vanished in the haze
Isn't it something how you left me in your wake
When you made your great escape
I always thought you'd always be around
But I'm the fool who thought you'd never let me down
Were you trapped inside a cage, planning your getaway
Isn't it something how you vanished in the haze
Isn't it something how you left me in your wake
When you made your great escape.*

His friends applauded dutifully, and Albus had a lot of praise for the song, though it was clear this was directed more towards Cleo's bass-playing skills than anything else. The two of them had a long, meaningful-looking conversation while Dave made faces and Trevor rolled his eyes, as usual.

Rose didn't say much until they were back at the castle, sitting together in one of the bigger armchairs. "You miss her, don't you," she said, fiddling with the charms on her bracelet.

"Hm?" Scorpius had been quite somewhere else, thinking about the magical recording techniques Cleo had been explaining to him. For some reason it made a lot more sense when she showed him than reading the theory out of books. He'd never managed a decent recording but Cleo and the band assured him they could start doing demos after a couple more practices.

"Your mum. Do you think about her a lot?"

Scorpius hesitated. "Sometimes. Wouldn't you?"

She looked at him with pity in her eyes that made him extremely uncomfortable. "Do you think you'll ever see her again?"

Scorpius swallowed. "Maybe," he said. "In a year or so… when things with me and my father are sorted out." He didn't say, when he disowns me, because there was always a chance that wouldn't
happen. A slim possibility, but it was one he had to cling to when this sort of conversation came up. "I have her address. I could just go visit her."

"She might not recognise you."

He snorted. "I don't look that different." This wasn't quite true, he had to admit. His hair was almost shoulder-length now, to the point where he was considering tying it back. Continuous daily charms had darkened it to the point where it was a sort of dark sand colour. And he was a lot taller than he had been when he had last seen her.

"I just meant... it's been a long time."

"Yeah."

It still stung to think he had a three-year-old half-brother he had never met. The more he thought about it, the sadder it made him, which was why he tried not to think about it. Finishing the song with the band, and playing it, it had been easy to forget the reason he'd written it in the first place. He probably should have realised it would invite this sort of question.

Rose hugged him and rested her head on his shoulder. "I'm sorry," she said softly.

"Eh, who needs her," Scorpius said, with false bravado. "I've got you."

"I have no intention of trying to be your mother, Scorp."

"Could have fooled me."

She punched playfully him in the stomach, and once he got his breath back, he had to laugh.

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The Apparition test was at the end of April. Scorpius went nervously, knowing that he had missed a few lessons because of band practice, but he thought he had the hang of it now. You really just had to believe you could do it. Once you'd done it a few times it was just about making sure you knew where you were going. Both he and Albus passed, which made Rose sigh and wish she could turn seventeen earlier.

"You're coming to my birthday party, right?" she asked him. "I know you don't really know your summer plans yet..."

"I'll come," he said. "Even if it means sneaking out of the house and taking an International Floo. Promise."

She grinned.

"You should probably warn Mum and Dad before he shows up on the doorstep," he heard Al telling Rose later, but she brushed that right off.

"We're going to tell them at the memorial anyway," she said. This was news to Scorpius, but it was her family, after all. She had a right to tell them if she wanted to.

Still, this did not stop his stomach from twisting nastily when he tried to sleep the night of May the first. Every time he closed his eyes he saw Mr Weasley's angry reddened face, ordering him to stay away from his daughter, and Mrs Weasley's look of disappointment. Knowing that Rose, Al, James,
the twins and the Longbottoms were all on his side did not help in the slightest. In the end, when his coming-of-age watch woke him at quarter past five on the morning of the memorial, he felt as though he hadn't slept at all.

He dressed drowsily, but made sure to wake himself up enough to make himself presentable. He didn't want to exacerbate the Weasleys' objections by looking like a tramp.

"Stop prettifying yourself and hurry up," Al yawned, glancing out the tower window. "People are here already."

"So... early," Gaius moaned, causing Peter to shoot him a disapproving look.

"You lot go down," he said stiffly. "I've got to bully the first years out of bed."

They met Rose and the other girls, sleepy-eyed and yawning in the Common Room, and Scorpius slipped his hand into Rose's. She smiled up at him, and he felt his heart lift a little. She liked him, and that was all that really mattered. Right?

It was cold at five thirty in the morning, and they had all bundled on jumpers and extra layers under their robes. Scorpius had put on the hat Hannah had given him for Christmas, and he was glad of it when she beamed at him as they came up with Lizzie. She didn't say anything - it was generally accepted that no one spoke until the address had been given at the end of the procession. She was holding Alice, who had clearly decided it was time to go back to sleep. The girl had turned five since Christmas and looked heavy. Scorpius made an offering motion with his hand and Hannah, signing gratefully back, handed the child over. Scorpius staggered momentarily under her weight, but her arms curled sleepily around his neck and he decided he could live with the ache in his back for a while.

Rose pulled on Scorpius' sleeve. He turned with a sense of dread to see the procession approaching, Harry and Ginny Potter very visibly near the front, carrying a candle each. Teddy was only a few places behind them, holding two candles. Another glance took in the rest of the Weasleys, including Rose's grandparents and her uncle George. The students joined the end of the procession as it passed. Alice woke up and allowed Scorpius to put her down, provided he held her hand, and Lizzie took her other hand, whispering 'shhh' every time she tried to ask what was going on.

As Professor McGonagall got up to give the address, Scorpius couldn't help noticing how very ancient she looked. Everyone kept saying she must be retiring soon, but she just kept on going. Neville hurried forward to help her up the step to the platform, and she turned to face the crowd, hundreds of faces lit by the orange glow of their candles.

"Today," she began, as she always did, her voice high but steady through the chill. "We remember those who died here, twenty-seven years ago. We remember those who died in and around Hogwarts. We remember the students who were killed before their time. We remember those brave wizards and witches who came to Hogwarts' defence. And we remember, as always, all those who perished under the reign of Lord Voldemort during the year of terror. Those who were cut down as they tried to protect their families. Those who were killed when they tried to fight back. And those who were killed, simply because they were Muggleborn, Half-blood, or even Muggle-raised. Those who stood for light, against the darkness. We will remember them."

"We will remember them," Scorpius joined in the soft chorus of the crowd as the sun began to peek over the horizon.

The candles went out as Neville helped McGonagall back down from the platform. Alice shivered and Hannah came over to tap her on the head with a warming charm. Rose took the opportunity to
take Scorpius' newly unoccupied hand in hers as the Weasley family began to accumulate around them. Scorpius took a deep breath. This was it.

"Dad!" Albus exclaimed as Mr and Mrs Potter came into view. He let his father pull him into a hug, and didn't even protest when he ruffled his hair. "How are you? How's the Minister? The Prophet only ever says he's still recovering in St. Mungo's."

"Almost back on his feet, I think," Harry said. He looked tired, Scorpius thought, and he remembered that the man had been helping to run the Ministry of Magic since the attacks on Christmas day. "We keep having to convince him that he can't run the country from a hospital bed. Ah... all right, Rosie?" His gaze had caught the intertwined hands. Ginny had a look on her face as though she was politely trying not to notice.

"Yes, Uncle," Rose said cheerfully.

"Your mum and dad are just leaving Fred's sweets and things," Ginny said, giving her husband a meaningful nudge in the ribs as Lily and James came over for their hugs as well. "Al, I'm sorry about you and Lizzie, dear..."

Albus flushed bright red. "Oh... you heard about that."

"We also heard about this new girl," Ginny said, her tone changing from sympathy to something very like disapproval. "Claire?"

"It's Cleo, Mum, and we're not together, where do you even hear this stuff?"

"Friends in low places," Harry muttered, earning him a glare from his wife.

"Cleo's in Scorp's band," Rose explained, helpfully, ignoring Al's whispered shutupshutupshutup. "You would just love her sense of style, Ginny."

"How is the band?" Hannah asked, enthusiastically. She had already informed Scorpius by owl that the group had an open invitation to play at the Leaky Cauldron whenever they would like.

"Great, thanks," Scorpius said with relief, glad to talk about something easy. "We've been working on some recordings and things, wizard and Muggle ones, getting a feel for our sound. Still working on the name, though."

"Rose?"

Scorpius felt his heart sink into his stomach as Rose's parents and a bunch of other redheaded people came into view. Most of them split off into other groups - Bill and Fleur to talk to Louis, Percy and Andrea to find Lucy - but Teddy, Hermione and Ron remained.

"Hi Dad," Rose piped up, into the awkward silence. Her hand tightened its grip on Scorpius' fingers, as though afraid he might try and let go. Fat chance of that, he thought darkly. Your hand is the only thing keeping me from being burnt to a crisp by your dad's death glare.

"Well..." Hermione said, with a stiff sort of politeness. "This is... ah... are you two...?"

"Yes, we're together," Rose said firmly. Scorpius had to admire her bravery, but then, they were her parents.

"See, mum," said Albus, triumphantly. "You lot don't know everything."
Hermione's expression went through a brief uncertainty, before she looked over at Scorpius' face and settled on a smile. "Oh you poor thing," she said, almost laughing. "You look terrified!"

"Well, you lot scare him," Rose said, giving her father a meaningful look. Ron's face flickered between anger and disbelief.

"I'm not surprised," Hermione sighed, patting Scorpius sympathetically on the shoulder. "Ron, say something nice so the poor boy isn't scarred for life."

Scorpius watched Rose's father with trepidation. Clearly he was torn between acting on his true feelings and obeying his wife's orders. He looked up, past Scorpius, as if trying to think of anything he could say that would not be an insult, but then the indecision vanished all at once and his expression twisted into one of pure fury. Scorpius almost took a step back. "That bastard," Ron hissed.

"Ron!" Hermione gasped. Scorpius was sure there was going to be a blazing row, but then he realised Mr Potter was looking angry, too, and neither of them were looking at him.

"Er…. Scorp…" Al said, also staring over Scorpius' shoulder into the crowd.

"What?" Scorp asked, completely non-plussed. "What is it?" He turned around, looking wildly for whatever had everyone so upset. And then he saw.

On the far side of the grounds, the unmistakable figure of Draco Malfoy was coming through the Hogwarts gates, and onto the grounds towards them.

Chapter End Notes

Please visit my fanfic blog: http://misssaigonfic.tumblr.com/
Ask me questions, get some insights!

This chapter's song was brought to you by Teddy Geiger
Chapter Summary

He paused for a moment in the Entrance Hall, letting the warmth of the great fire and the sounds of hundreds of people laughing and talking over their breakfast wash over him. I used to belong there. I would have been there, with Rose and her family, trying to get them to like me. Well, there was no chance of that now.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Scorpius turned back hurriedly, his heart pounding, the image of the man strolling with purpose across the grounds burned into his brain. "No," he muttered frantically to himself. "No, no, no, no…"

"Did you know he was coming?" Hannah asked, pulling Alice a little closer to her. That shamed him, that she would be so afraid for her child.

"Of course not!" he exclaimed, still trying to think. The shock made it difficult to do so with any great efficiency. "Two years… two bloody years without hardly so much as an owl, and now this…"

Rose squeezed his hand tightly. He knew he ought to let go, but for some reason he couldn't quite manage it.

"You think he's here to see you?" Al said, still staring over Scorpius' shoulder. "He looks pissed. Maybe it's something else." Scorpius didn't dare look round. He didn't think his father had recognised him through the crowd, and once he did the game was well and truly up.

"Of course it's me," Scorpius growled. "He hates this place, he'd never come here otherwise. Has he seen me?"

"Nah, he's going the other way," Al replied.

"Yeah, away from us, the great coward," Ron muttered. "Looks like he's heading to McGonagall."

Scorpius felt his heart sink, if it was possible, even lower into his stomach. "Oh no," he moaned. "I can't let him talk to her, he'll say something horrible to her and she'll kick me out, I just know it." He shook off Rose's hand with a great deal of regret, but there was nothing for it. He turned to her, eyes wide in his suddenly pale face. "Whatever you hear…" he began.

"I know," she said, and he could have kissed her right then, just for that. "It's all right, we won't stay. We'll wait for you inside."
He nodded, stiffly, wanting to hug her but his emotions were too damn scrambled to figure out if it was worth the risk. "Yeah. I... see you."

He tore himself away before he could change his mind, ducking past the Weasleys and around the thickest part of the crowd to where Neville had leant the Headmistress his arm for the long walk up to the castle. The look on Neville's face when Draco stepped into their path would have made Scorpius laugh, any other time. "McGonagall," he could hear his father sneering. "I am here for -"

"Father!" Scorpius called, before any serious damage could be done. He had never known anyone so skilled at insults - by omitting the Professor, he'd no doubt already put himself on the wrong side of McGonagall's temper.

Draco turned. The look of fury on his face was almost enough to make Scorpius turn and run back the other way, but he didn't. He skidded towards them through the mud churned up by hundreds of people walking through the soft grass, staining his shoes and the bottom of his school robe. "What," his father hissed at him as he slid to a halt. "Is that?" He gestured sharply to Scorpius head.

Scorpius raised a hand and realised his father was talking about Hannah's birthday present. "It's a hat, Father," he said shortly, pulling the flaps down with a sudden flush of defiance. "It keeps my ears warm. You should try it." The man was wearing a thick cloak, a good make, Scorpi noticed, but his ears and cheeks were bright pink in the cold. His few remaining strands of hair fluttered in the chill breeze, but he did not shiver. He was far too stubborn to be affected by any such thing as weather. With a jolt, Scorpius realised that the reason he could see his father's head so easily was that they were now of a height. If anything Scorpius thought he might be a little taller.

"What are you doing here, Mr Malfoy?" Neville broke in, before Draco could launch into a rant about inappropriate wizarding clothing.

Draco's lips curled into a sneer. "My reasons for being here are of no concern to you whatsoever, Longbottom."

"Professor Longbottom," Neville said calmly. "And as a teacher at this school, I am well within my rights to ask. This is a day of peace..."

"I have no intention of interrupting your... festivities," Draco interrupted, with so much contempt that Scorpius half hoped Neville would punch him in the mouth. It certainly looked like he wanted to. "I have attempted to do this through the proper channels, but the Headmistress has refused my every request to so much as enter the castle."

Scorpius turned to stare at McGonagall. Her expression was unreadable, except for a slight curl to the edge of her lip. "Your intentions were unclear," she said, as cool as steel. "You'll forgive my caution considering your history of compromising Hogwarts security."

Draco's cheeks went even redder, and Scorpius winced inwardly. "Be that as it may," he hissed. "I am here now, since your gates were standing wide open. -"

"You knew they would be," Neville said, darkly.

"Of course, Longbottom, I am not a fool. Be assured I am not here to threaten your security in any way, however. My son and I will be leaving before the sun is fully up, and you can return to your mediocre teachings in peace."

"Wait - what?" Scorpius broke in, his brain catching up with the conversation suddenly. "I'm - going with you?"
"You are going to Durmstrang," his father snapped, without even looking at him. "Where I should have sent you from the very beginning."

"No!" Scorpius exclaimed, unable to help himself. "You can't!"

"Be quiet," Draco snarled, rounding on him. "Or do we need to have another talk about lies, Scorpius? I warned you this would happen."

He knows, Scorpius thought, his pulse thrumming in his throat. He knows, he knows… how could he know? None of the Weasleys heard… But his father was drawing a parchment out of his pocket and shaking it in Scorpius' face. With confusion he recognised his OWL results.

"Another mistake, I suppose?" Draco sneered. "I must say it's strange how your mail keeps arriving with such errors -"

"Wait… this… this is about Muggle Studies?" Scorpius exclaimed. He could have laughed from the sheer stupidity of it all. Suddenly he felt brave. He drew himself up. "Oh for Merlin's - yes, all right, I'm sorry I lied to you, but I've been doing Muggle Studies since third year. I like it, and I'm good at it. You'll notice I got an O," he added, pointing at the crumpled parchment. "You should be proud. I'm actually learning something useful, not just bullying people into getting what I want. -"

"That is enough," Draco hissed. "You shame me, Scorpius. You are going to Durmstrang, and that is final. The Headmaster already knows that you are coming."

"I'm of age!" Scorpius almost shouted. "I assume you forgot my birthday, again, it's not like you've got loads of kids to keep track of…" He knew he was making things worse, that his father was just getting angrier and angrier, but he couldn't help it. He was angry too, angrier than he could ever remember. Maybe some things were just built in. "And I'm on a scholarship, it's not like you're paying my way here, you can't just drag me -"

"You are registered with the Ministère de la magie français," his father said, low, and Scorpius stopped dead, his blood running suddenly cold. "The legal age in France is eighteen, in case you had forgotten. I am still your guardian."

"Mr Malfoy!" McGonagall said sharply. "I must advice against this most strongly. Do you realise the impact - changing schools in the middle of NEWTs - I'm sure you would want Scorpius to do as well as possible."

Scorpius could hardly believe it. He had always thought McGonagall hated his guts, and now she was fighting to keep him. She tried to stop him, he realised with sudden awe. He said she stopped him coming to the castle. She knew he was coming for me, and she wouldn't let him. He only wished she had warned him this was coming.

Draco turned his furious gaze on McGonagall, his expression twisting strangely. "What I do regarding my own son's schooling is none of your concern," he said darkly.

"Malfoy," Neville said, dropping the 'Mr' as easily as Draco dropped the 'Professor'. "Just think about this. His life is here, his friends are here. Just slow down, for a minute."

"Scorpius," Draco said, ignoring Neville entirely. "Go and pack your things immediately. I will meet you outside the gates in fifteen minutes, since I am clearly not welcome here."

"Father -" Scorpius tried, one last desperate attempt.

Draco grabbed his arm and pulled him momentarily out of the hearing of Neville and McGonagall.
"Scorpius, do not -"

"Father please," he begged. If reason would not work, he was willing to beg. For a second he thought he saw something quite like compassion in the man's eyes, and he pushed on. "I can't leave. I have… people… friends… I just can't."

For a moment he thought he might have done it, that his father was about to nod, but in the same moment the strange expression on the man's face had twisted into an angry frown. Draco pulled him closer. "Do not think I am not above resorting to force," his said in a hissing whisper. "You had best remember, I know where your mother is."

The words echoed in his head, and Scorpius felt his heart turn to stone even while his skin crawled under all his layers. "Fine," he snarled, pulling his arm out of his father's long-fingered grip. "Fine. I'll come."

Draco's lips curled into a triumphant smile, and he turned, his heavy cloak swirling over his heels as he walked away towards the gates.

"Scorpius," Neville said, when the man was out of earshot. "You don't have to do this. Let me tell the Ministry about your grandfather. It might be enough…"

Scorpius shook his head. His grandfather was not the one dragging him away from everything and everyone he loved. "No. Thanks." He turned to McGonagall, meeting her steely grey eyes for what seemed like the first time since that dreadful meeting four years ago when she had told him she didn't want him at Hogwarts. "You too, Professor. Thanks for trying to help."

McGonagall nodded. "I hope it is still not too late," she said. "If you are able to change his mind, there will always be a place for you here."

Any other time, Scorpius would have been overjoyed to hear her say that. Now it only served to make him feel even more miserable. "I… have to go pack," he said, turning and running back to the castle. The mud was already hardening in the morning sun, helped along by the stiff chill in the air, but it still splattered his robes as he ran. He was beyond caring, however.

He paused for a moment in the Entrance Hall, letting the warmth of the great fire and the sounds of hundreds of people laughing and talking over their breakfast wash over him. I used to belong there. I would have been there, with Rose and her family, trying to get them to like me. Well, there was no chance of that now.

He shut out the sound and forced himself to go up the marble staircase. It seemed to take an age to reach Ravenclaw tower, and when he got there, the Common Room was blissfully empty, and so was the dormitory, small blessing as that was. He pulled up the lid on his trunk and looked around at his things.

His guitar would have to stay behind. He knew it, even though it tugged painfully at his heart. His iPods, new and old, he lay beside it on the bed. His Muggle Studies textbook and the novels, he also left behind; Tolkien, Dickens, Shakespeare and the rest. His bands T-shirt would have to stay, and his Muggle jeans. He took Neville's shaving kit and Hannah's jumpers. After a moment's hesitation he took off the hat and shook his hair out. There was always the possibility his father might burn it, he thought, putting it with the other forbidden things. He also left behind his music books, but he stuffed his exercise book full of notes and song lyrics under his clothes in the trunk. Even Draco couldn't argue with doodles, surely. He shoved in the rest of his clothes and schoolbooks and closed the lid of the trunk. He looked around in case he had forgotten anything, and he felt his watch shift slightly on his wrist. He looked down at it, hesitating.
No. He would not leave it behind. Let his father ask who had given it to him, Scorpius didn't care. Just in case, though, he took it off and stuffed it deep into his cloak pocket.

By the time he got back down to the Common Room, dragging his trunk behind him, Rose, Al and everyone else was coming through the door. Neville must have already told them, because Al looked grim as death and Rose had tears in her eyes. She ran to him and threw her arms around his neck. "You can't," she sobbed, her fingers curling tightly around his collar. "You can't leave."

He could not answer her. He held her as long as he dared, breathing in the clean, earthy smell of her hair and trying to memorise everything about the way her body pressed against him. Behind her he was vaguely aware of her parents and Al's, and Teddy as well as the four Longbottoms, standing awkwardly at the Ravenclaw entrance.

"He can't do this!" Albus was protesting.

"Apparently he can," Neville said darkly. "According to his Ministry, Scorpius isn't of age. He has every right to decide where Scorpius goes to school."

"But - Durmstrang," someone else cut in, and he realised with dull surprise that it was Rose's mother. "I mean, they don't even teach all the same subjects. How's he going to catch up?"

"Mum!" Rose cried, releasing her hold on Scorpius to turn and glare at her mother. "How can you think about NEWTs right now?"

"Actually it's not a bad point," Scorpius said, his voice coming out hoarse and strange. "If I fail everything maybe they'll expel me and I'll have to come back."

"Don't joke," Rose said, wiping her face furiously. "Don't you dare -"

"I wasn't." He put a hand on her shoulder but she pulled away. "Rosie, this is not over. As soon as I turn eighteen, he can't control me anymore. Unless he hurts my mother. I'll come back."

"That's a whole year," she said, tears streaming down her face despite her constant efforts to wipe them. "Nearly a whole year, Scorp…"

"I know." He felt sick to his stomach, but he dare not succumb to his feelings right now. "This is all my fault, if only I'd never done Muggle Studies…"

"No," she said, shaking her head. "Don't say that. That was a brave thing to do."

"Or a really stupid thing to do," he sighed. There was no point in brooding over mistakes made by his thirteen-year-old self. He turned to look at Albus. "I… had to leave some stuff," he said.

Al nodded stiffly. "I figured. I'll take care of it."

"Thanks. And you better tell Cleo and the guys I'm sorry, if I can't owl her."

"Okay." Al shifted uncomfortably, pushing his hair out from under his glasses. "Are you sure about this?"

"I don't have much of a choice." He forced himself not to meet Neville's eyes. "Look, Al… thanks. For everything."

"Shut up." Al stepped forward and gave him an awkward man-hug. "You come back, yeah? Or I'll have to chase you down and kill you for breaking my cousin's heart."
"Deal," Scorpius said, managing a weak smile. "You make sure you smash Gryffindor in the final. We all know they deserve it. Go you eagles!"

Ali's smile did not quite reach his eyes, either.

"Goodbye cuz," Teddy said, his hair gone a depressing shade of brown. "Owl me, if…"

"I will," Scorpius promised.

Hannah came forward then, with Lizzie, and Scorpius could hardly speak. Hannah's hug seemed to last a whole five minutes, and she had tears in her eyes. "You're a good lad," she told him firmly. "Don't let anyone ever tell you otherwise. You just be you. And if you ever find yourself without a place…"

"First point of call, Leaky Cauldron," Scorpius said, nodding, a strange tightness in his throat. "I know." He knelt and put his arms around Alice. "And you, don't grow up too fast, okay?" he told her. She put her thumb in her mouth and stared at him wide-eyed. She was still half-asleep, perhaps, not understanding anything that was happening. He was glad. He could not have borne it if she had cried the way she had at the train station. That day seemed years ago now.

He stood up and looked around, taking a deep breath. "Right. Bye then."

He was almost to the door when Rose caught up with him, spun him around and kissed him hard on the mouth. He almost pulled away - her parents were right there! - but then he realised it might be the last time he got to kiss her. He lifted his hands into her hair and lost himself for as long as he dared.

For a moment, there was no one else, nothing else, but Rose, and her lips on his and her cool hands on his neck and the dampness of her tears against his cheek.

And then, as though it had never happened at all, it was over. "Time's up," he whispered, resting his forehead against hers as she held both his hands.

"I can't believe you're leaving."

"I know."

"I hate you for leaving."

He swallowed. "Yeah, I know. I'm sorry."

She sniffed and stepped back off her tiptoes to look up at him with an intensely furious expression. "I love you."

He swallowed and forced back a wave of emotion. He had to stay strong, just for now, just until he was alone. If he lost it now it would only hurt her more. "I…love you too, Rosie. You know that, right?"

"I know. Just don't let them… don't let them change you. Please."

Rose's mother came over and put a hand around her shoulders, and very, very reluctantly, he forced himself to let go of her hands.

"Time to go, if you're going," Neville said from beside him. "It's already been twenty minutes."

Scorpius grimaced and turned away. "Being late isn't really at the top of my list of problems, Professor." But he let Neville help him haul his trunk through the entrance to the Common Room.
He knew the sound of the door closing behind him was going to haunt his dreams for days.

They walked down to the Entrance Hall together, down seven flights of stairs, and Scorpius was reminded of a similar walk they had taken together, after Jian had almost suffocated him in second year. Neville had explained why he pitied Scorpius' father, rather than hating him.

"I suppose because he was born into and brought up in a word that didn't give him a choice, or a chance, to change. His parents, his family and all his friends were Voldemort supporters, and they all expected him to be the same. It would have taken more courage than he ever had to break out of it, if he even wanted to."

As they descended the marble staircase, Scorpius glanced searchingly at Neville. He looked sad, perhaps even a bit angry. "Professor… do you think I'm a coward?"

Neville stopped and turned to him. "No," he said after a moment. "I don't."

"But you are disappointed in me, aren't you. You thought I'd be brave enough to break away from my family."

Neville sighed. "I understand why you would want to cling to whatever family you have left. But I think you know that one day it will be harder than simply choosing between Hogwarts and Durmstrang. They will make you choose between who you really are, and who they want you to be."

Scorpius swallowed. "Yeah, I know."

"If I were you, I'd start thinking now about your choice. There are a lot of people here who will miss you." He shrunk Scorpius' trunk so it could fit under his arm, and handed it to him.

That was what he had said, Scorpius remembered. All that time ago. You always have a choice, Scorpius.

Not this time, he thought. Not really.

"Thanks, Professor," he said, suddenly feeling drained.

"Scorpius," and this time Neville's tone was very serious. "If anything happens… like it did this summer… run. You run, you hear me? Don't be a hero."

"Me?" from somewhere he managed to conjure up a grin as he shouldered his trunk. "I'm the least heroic person ever."

"I don't know about that," Neville said ruefully. "I happen to know a few heroes."

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His father was waiting for him outside the gates, the cloak of his hood up. "I said fifteen minutes," he said sharply, when Scorpius came up to him.

"It's seven flights of stairs to Ravenclaw Tower. Both ways."

Draco turned away without saying anything and began to walk back down the path towards Hogsmeade. Scorpius took one last glance over his shoulder at the castle he had called home for six years, and turned to follow him.
"Your hair looks ridiculous," his father said after a few minutes of silent walking. "We'll have to cut it before you get to Durmstrang."

Scorpius could not bring himself to answer.

"It makes a very poor statement. To people who understand these things, you might be trying to style yourself the head of the family."

Scorpius crossed his arms over his chest and followed in silence. Does it hurt your feelings, father? he wanted to ask.

The criticism did not stop there. Over the next hour, as they walked to Hogsmeade station and boarded the next train to London, Scorpius endured remarks about his failures from his bearing to his clothes. He made cutting retorts in his head and tried to find his inner calm. It wasn't easy. Two more years of easy living had apparently not improved his father's interminable black mood. Outside Hogwarts, however, he at least seemed to calm down a little. Hardly surprising, since any mention of the school or the people in it were usually liable to set him off into a rage. And here was me, thinking you were always just bitter about being poor, he thought to himself.

The first thing Draco did once they boarded the train was search Scorpius' trunk. He had been expecting that, but it still made his stomach churn to see the man going through his things.

"I am disappointed as you are that this is necessary," his father said when he saw Scorpius' expression, but Scorpius refused to rise to the bait.

I left all the important stuff behind, he told himself firmly. And as he had hoped, the book full of scribbles went unnoticed, hidden by an unfolded pile of clothing. The shaving kit attracted more than a moment's notice. Is he wondering where I got it? Scorpius wondered, or is he just surprised I'm old enough to shave, now? But in any case his father eventually decided it presented no threat, and put it back with everything else.

Then came the haircut, which was so scorchingly short that it left his scalp tingling. His father charmed the hair to fly out of the train window, but one piece got stuck in the outer frame, fluttering long and sandy yellow with the train's movement.

His father read the Prophet in silence as the green lowlands rolled past the train window. Scorpius squeezed himself into the corner of the booth, rubbed his sore head, watched his lock of hair be torn apart by the drag, and tried to wish himself back in Ravenclaw Tower. It was a long, long train ride.

At some point he must have fallen asleep, because he was jolted awake by the train coming to a halt. His face was wet. What had he been dreaming about?

Luckily his father had not noticed. "Quickly," he said shortly, standing gracefully and descending the steps to the platform and Scorpius scrambled after him. They came through the gateway and a tall dark man came up to them. With surprise Scorpius recognised Jean, the footman from the townhouse. He handed Draco a ragged looking book that looked suspiciously like a Portkey.

"You know, I can Apparate," Scorpius muttered.

Draco turned to him with a distinctly unimpressed expression. "Can you Apparate to Norway?"

Scorpius blinked and stared at the book. "No way that thing takes us all the way to Norway."

They had done Portkeys earlier that year in Charms. The creation of them was strictly regimented by the Ministry, and they were difficult to make. One-off ones for short distances were the most
common, but there were re-usable ones, and only rarely could they take you any great distance, which was why most people used International Floo to go abroad. A Portkey that could go that far must have been made by a seriously powerful wizard. It looked old, too. If it was true, he hated to think how much it must have cost.

His father was starting to get that dangerous look on his face again. "Just touch it, Scorpius."

Scorpius schooled his face into one of utter non-concern, and, with only the slightest moment’s hesitation, put his hand on the book. Seeing his hand next to Draco’s, he was taken aback by how alike they were, pale skin and slender fingers. The only difference aside from the signs of age were the callouses on Scorpius' fingertips. He curled his fingers slightly and hoped his father wouldn't notice.

The older man was more concerned with giving instructions to the footman, however. Scorpius jolted back to reality just in time to hear, in French - "back before the four o'clock shipment comes in. Wait for me."

"Oui, Monsieur Malfoy," Jean replied obediently, with a bow of his head, as the Portkey activated.

The Portkey tugged at his navel and twisted him around. He almost lost his grip on the damn book, but he held on tight. It might have been the perfect opportunity to get accidentally left behind, but he had no desire to get stuck with half his body in limbo. The book they had studied in Charms had had some fairly gruesome illustrations.

When they landed, however, he instantly wished he had tried limbo. The cold hit him like a hammer and bit relentlessly through his clothes to his skin, which raised instantly to goosebumps. He stuck his free hand under his arm, fervently wishing he had brought the hat after all as an icy breeze froze his ears and nose and stung his almost bare head. He thought for sure they must be outside, but when he opened his eyes he found himself in a small chamber, perhaps an entrance hall. The walls were very bare stone, the floor smooth marble. The cold seemed to reflect off it through his shoes; he could already feel his toes stiffening.

Teeth chattering, he looked around to see a young woman in a fur cloak and hat coming towards them. Her nose was slightly pink, but otherwise she showed no sign of discomfort. "Welcome to Durmstrang," she said in slightly accented English. "The Headmaster is expecting you." She turned and walked towards an open doorway. Draco went after her immediately, and Scorpius decided he may as well go along with it. She might lead them somewhere warm.

His father still was not shivering. He had probably known how cold it was going to be and cast a warming charm. Scorpius almost hit himself in the forehead but he was too cold. He fumbled with the hand that wasn’t holding his trunk in his pocket for his wand and cast the strongest warming charm he knew. It helped a little. Thanks for warning me, Dad, he thought bitterly as the girl led them up a couple flights of stairs to a wooden door. She knocked and opened the door for them. A burst of warmth came from it, and Scorpius went through eagerly.

It was an office, not quite as elaborate or as large as McGonagall’s, but the rake-thin man in the seat behind the desk was clearly the headmaster. He wore a fur hat and cloak also, and sported a grey beard that went halfway down his chest. This did not interest Scorpius quite as much as the roaring fire in the grate, however. He inched towards it as the old man got up to greet his father with enthusiasm. "Mr Malfy, Monsieur, so good to finally meet you in person," he said, in French. "So good. I trust you journey'd well?"

"Well enough," his father replied in the same language. "Scorpius, come here."
Reluctantly, Scorpius left the blissful warmth of the fire to join them.

"Ah, this must be young Scorpius," the old man said, with a kind of cheerfulness that did not quite ring true. His smile did not reach his eyes, either. "I am Ivan Reznicek, the Headmaster. Welcome to Durmstrang."

Scorpius had no intention of accepting any such welcome, but his father put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed a little too tightly, and he grit his teeth and said, "thank you, sir," in English.

The fake smile faded a little. Scorpius wondered if the man spoke any English at all. "You will find our school quite different to what you are used to, I imagine," Reznicek said, in French. "Here at Durmstrang our aim is to prepare you for everything the world may throw at you."

Scorpius looked out the window. Thankfully there was glass in it - he could see snow swirling around outside, for all it was already May. "Like snowstorms?" he suggested, also in French. The hand tightened even more on his shoulder. He ignored it.

"Aha," the old Headmaster said, with no trace of humour whatsoever. "I see that Hogwarts has bred some unfortunate… ah… yes."

"I hope you can reverse the damage, Monsieur," Draco said, causing Scorpius to look over at him sharply. Monsieur, indeed. He hadn't even called McGonagall by her proper title.

"We will certainly do our best," Reznicek replied, and there was not even a hint of a smile on his face now. "I'm sure you would like a moment to say your goodbyes, then Bena will show Scorpius to his room." He went to mutter something to the girl who had been their guide, and Draco drew Scorpius aside.

Scorpius broke in before Draco could say anything, going back to English so that Reznicek wouldn't understand him. "I can't believe you're doing this to me," he snarled. "I will never, ever forgive you for this."

Draco looked - Scorpius blinked - for a moment he had looked sad. "I am perhaps partially to blame for this streak of insolence," the older man admitted bitterly. "I should have sent you here as soon as you were old enough. They teach discipline here, something you have been sadly lacking in of late."

Scorpius glared at him. "You know, I liked you better when you just ignored me."

Draco slapped him. It was not a real blow, but it took him by surprise, and his still-cold cheek stung painfully. Reznicek must have heard, but he didn't even turn around. Somehow that was more chilling than the cold. "That is enough," his father hissed. "You will spend the rest of the school year here, learning some manners, and when you come home we will discuss further punishment."

"Further punishment?" Scorpius exclaimed. His father could get as angry as he wanted, he'd be damned if he was taking this lying down. "Sending me to this frozen wasteland isn't enough?"

"You lied to me," his father growled. "And you did what I expressly forbid you not to do. Do you remember the little talk we had about Muggles?"

"Vividly," Scorpius admitted, resisting the urge to rub his cheek. "But you don't understand -"

"I understand perfectly," Draco hissed, so low that surely only Scorpius could hear. "I understand that that school is an unsavoury influence. I should have known better than to let her convince me to send you to school with such people."
"Such -"

"Do you think I don't know who else is in Ravenclaw House?" His father's eyes narrowed, as if to judge his reaction; Scorpius did his best to keep his face still. "Potter's brathas corrupted you, I have no doubt…"

"I'm not corrupted!" Scorpius snapped.

His father's lips curled, as though he doubted that very much. "We will discuss it," he said firmly, in a tone that suggested a lecture rather than a discussion, "when you return home for the summer holiday. I very much hope you will have lost this obstinate attitude by then. And if you try to leave…" he left it hanging, with an ugly sort of finality that made Scorpius want to hit him right back.

"I understand, sir," he muttered.

"Good."

Draco went to shake Reznicek's hand, then left the same way they had come. Scorpius wondered how he was going to get back, if the Portkey was reversible. It must be, if he was going to get back before the four o'clock shipment… whatever that meant.

The girl beckoned to him, and he went over to her, avoiding the old Headmaster as he went back to his desk and sat down with a sound like old wood creaking. "My name is Masha Bena. I will show you your room," she said, smiling. He felt a little breath of relief at her smile. At least everyone here wasn't intent on making his life a misery.

"Thanks," he said, following her out of the office. He regretted it immediately as the cold hit him again, attacking him from every possible angle. He forced his jaws together to stop his teeth from chattering, and gripped his shrunken trunk fiercely. The girl seemed amused by his reaction.

"I will find you a uniform," she said. "Then you will not be so cold."

"Yes please,' he breathed. He reached for his wand to recast the warming charm, but she shook her head.

"Don't do that. To warm yourself with magic is not permitted."

He flinched. "I wasn't," he lied.

She only smiled back. "If I know, you think the Professors will not know?"

He made a face and hurried after her as she led him down yet another bare corridor. They all looked the same to him, no tapestries or suits of armour or anything. How on earth did she know where she was going? "You speak good English," he said, after struggling for something to say. He may as well try and make a friend.

"Thank you."

"Where are you from?"

"Germany. On my mother's side." She smiled at him again. It was starting to get slightly creepy. "There are people here from all over."

"Do you like it here?"
She gave him a slightly pitying look, and did not answer him.

He followed her down what seemed like an endless maze of corridors. Finally they reached one where there were a long row of wooden doors along both sides. There were little chalkboards nailed to the doors with names on them. The sight of them made Scorpius feel slightly ill, especially when Masha led him right down to the last door on the right, where the board was blank. She opened the door and stood aside to let him in.

The room could not have been more different to the boys' dormitory in Ravenclaw Tower. It was tiny, big enough only to fit one bed and a space for his trunk. The bed was narrow and bare, with plain grey sheets and a brown blanket folded with military precision on the pillow. There was a small window for light, and a small shelf opposite the bed, but that was all.

"Normally you would have an upstairs room by now," Masha said. "This is a first year room. At Durmstrang the rooms are assigned based on academic achievement."

"Do the upstairs rooms have fires?" Scorpius asked, shivering.

"At Durmstrang," Masha said, as though she were reciting from the handbook. "Fires are lit only for magical purposes."

"You're kidding me."

"I… beg your pardon?"

Scorpius shook his head. He dumped his trunk on the bed. "Never mind."

She nodded. "Wait here. I will get your uniform." She left, closing the door behind her.

Scorpius sat on the bed. There wasn't really any other option. The place was a prison. Spartan living arrangements and Siberia-like conditions aside, he was stuck here now until June. One month he could probably handle, but then a whole year after that… no. He wasn't going to start thinking that way.

He lifted the trunk off the bed onto the floor, drew his wand and de-shrank it. First he pulled out all his clothes and put on all the extra layers he could find, shrugging his cloak back on afterwards. He took out his books and put them on the shelf. Then he changed his mind, dumped them back in the trunk and pulled out the wireless instead. He put that on the shelf and switched it on, turning the knobs back and forth hopefully. After ten minutes the best he could find was a crackling voice in a language he didn't even recognise. He gave up and switched it off. He got out his shaving kit and put that on the shelf, then dug around for a Ravenclaw tie and hung it off the headboard. It was a bit pathetic in terms of decoration, but it would have to do for now.

When Masha came back he was re-folding all the clothes that he hadn't been able to put on, since he hadn't done a very careful job of packing. She handed him two red robes, a fur cloak and a fur hat almost identical to the one she wore. For the first time he noticed that her hat had a little badge on it in the shape of a crown. Probably the equivalent of Head Girl, he realised. "Sometimes people leave them behind when they leave," she explained, as Scorpius examined his own, slightly threadbare robes. "I hope they fit you."

Scorpius couldn't really care less whether they fit or not. "Thanks," he said, dully.

"Classes finish at five. Dinner is at six. Just ask anyone where it is. Most people will have good enough English. We have Potions in English."
Scorpius grimaced. "Fine."

"Bathrooms are up the hall to the left. The girls rooms are to the right. It is not permitted for boys to enter the girls corridor, and vice versa."

"Right."

"There is a common space between here and the upstairs room. You can do your homework -" she pronounced that word slightly oddly, making Scorpius take a minute to figure out what she said and causing him to momentarily lose track of the conversation - "there or in the library. Someone will find you tomorrow to show you to classes. Lights out is at sunset." She smiled that smile again. "That's a joke."

"Because there's no lamps, right. Funny."

She seemed a little put out by his lack of humour, but he was in no mood to laugh. "Well. Welcome to Durmstrang, Malfoy."

"It's Scorpius," he said quickly. "Or Scorp." But she had already turned to go back down the corridor. He took a deep breath, resisting the urge to slam the door after her, and closed it carefully.

He lay down on the bed. The layers of clothes helped a little, but he pulled the fur cloak over himself to block out the rest of the chill. He must have lain there for a long time, because eventually he heard a chatter of boys in a whole mess of languages in the corridor outside. He guessed it must be time for dinner, but he wasn't at all hungry. The noise died down after a few minutes. He closed his eyes.

Rose's face filled the space behind his eyelids. She smiled sadly at him as though she had been waiting, as though she had known that he had been pushing her to the very back of his mind so as to stay sane, but she couldn't wait any longer. *I'm so sorry*, he told her. *I'm sorry. I don't know how to get back. I can't come back.*

*He'll hurt my mother.*

Her sad face told him that surely he wouldn't. Surely he was not *quite* that far gone. And even if he would, did he really know where she was? And if he did, wouldn't her new husband protect her? And he thought, *what about the child?* And head-Rose had no answer to that. He reached under the fur cloak for the pocket of his Hogwarts one, and pulled out the watch. He watched the hands move around the face, listening to the barely-perceptible tick they made with each movement.

*I'll freeze to death here before he lets me go back,* he realised with a stab to his heart that had nothing to do with cold. *He's always hated Hogwarts. The only reason he let me go was because mother wanted it. Thank Merlin, or I would have grown up here.*

The thought was a frightening prospect. He imagined himself at the age of eleven, small even for his age, pale, wide-eyed, ignorant of nearly everything in the world outside his parents' house. He remembered his first day of classes at Hogwarts, where a bunch of older Gryffindors had ganged up on him. Chances are that would have happened here too, if not because he was a Malfoy then because he was small and weak and easy prey. And there would have been no Rose to stick up for him. No Albus to speak for him. It would have been a misery. *Like it's going to be now.*

Eventually he heard the rush of noise again as the Durmstrang boys came back from their dinner. Someone knocked on the door, making him jump, but he made no reply. He realised with a trace of dread that there was no lock on the door, and waited, tensed, for someone to barge in. But no one did, and finally that noise even died away, as people returned to their rooms or the common area.
Masha had mentioned. The sun was going down, and he felt the darkness come over him like a poisonous shadow. Soon he was left in the pitch black room, fully clothed under the fur cloak, still shivering slightly. The reality of what had happened since that morning - it seemed like years ago, but it had only been hours, only a few hours ago he had been standing with Rose and Albus and Lizzie and Hannah behind the memorial procession, only a few hours ago he had kissed Rose for the last time - began to weigh on him until he could no longer stand it. Tears came unbidden to his eyes and stung his cold cheeks. He thought of the tears on Rose's face, the tears sparkling at the corners of Hannah's eyes as she had said goodbye.

It was over. He had had six years of reprieve, but this was the life he was meant to have had, all along.

Chapter End Notes

And on that really depressing note, this story is going on hiatus for a couple of weeks while I catch up on my writing. Thank you everyone for all the great reviews over the last two weeks, especially the guests and anyone else I haven't been able to personally reply to. I hope I don't get too much stuff virtually thrown at me after this chapter…

Check out my blog at misssaisonfic.tumblr.com for insights and this week a summary of my research on Durmstrang that influenced this chapter.
Sixth Year Part 7: Durmstrang

Chapter Summary

Scorpius found himself remembering the eerie way the old Headmaster had not even looked around when Draco had hit Scorpius in the face, yesterday. The man was no McGonagall, that was for sure. "What can he do to me?" he said boldly. "Seriously? I'm stuck here, miles away from my friends, my teachers, any chance of passing my NEWTs, my band... there is literally nothing else he can take away. Tell him to go stuff it."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

2023

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"Wake up English!"

Scorpius woke to the sound of someone shouting and banging on his door. For a moment he thought the Scamander twins must have set loose another animal in the Common Room, and now they needed help to catch it again, but then he remembered where he was. He sat up in the tiny room on his hard bed, his four-poster with its velvety blue coverlet miles and miles away.

So that wasn't just a terrible dream I had. I'm really here... at Durmstrang.

"Wake up English! You miss breakfast, harhar!"

With great reluctance, Scorpius burrowed out of the wonderfully warm nest he'd made for himself and clambered out of bed. On the outside the chill was bone-numbing. He was glad he hadn't taken off his shoes or any of his clothes the night before, even if his body felt stiff as a plank of wood. He yanked the door open. "What?"

"Aha, English is here! Thought you run away, harhahar!"

There was a man outside in the corridor. He had to be described as a man, no boy could be quite so huge. Scorpius was no longer short, but this fellow towered above him to an almost Hagrid-like extreme. He was wearing the Durmstrang uniform, which must have been significantly altered to fit him, and a huge grin. "You dress English! Good! Come, food!" He made eating motions with his hand, as though Scorpius were an imbecilic child.

"I'm not hungry," Scorpius said, but then his stomach rumbled and gave him the lie. He hadn't eaten anything since the day before yesterday, he realised dully. No wonder he felt sick and dizzy all of a sudden. The huge boy didn't seem to have understood his protests, however. He pointed at the blank slate on Scorpius' door. "You write name!" he ordered jovially. "Or not find you!" He handed
Scorpius a thin stick of white chalk.

Scorpius did not particularly want to write his name on the slate. That would make him part of this place. "What if I don't want people to find me?" he asked, but the boy just pointed and mimed writing. Scorpius sighed. He closed the door behind him and wrote **Scorpius** in easy-to-read letters. He pointed to it. "Okay?"

The boy frowned at the name. "Scopus?"

Scorpius rubbed his eyes. He was not quite awake enough for this. "Scorpius."

"Scop..ass?"

Scorpius reached up and rubbed off the last three letters with his sleeve.

"Scop?"

Scorpius rolled his eyes. "Close enough."

The boy laughed and pointed to himself. "Arkady!"

*Looks like I made a friend*, Scorpius thought. "Pleased to meet you, Arkady."

The boy laughed at his pronunciation but did not try to correct it. "Come on, English! Food! Bena send me, bring you."

"It's still dark!"

"No sun, still morning, English! You want breakfast, yes?"

Scorpius was about to refuse again, but he really *was* pretty hungry. He set his shoulders and followed the boy down the corridor. There were a few other boys in fur cloaks moving back and forth, and they all stared at him curiously. Most were very young, looking quite drowned in their cloaks and hats. It looked like Masha hadn't been lying about this end of the corridor being the rooms for first years.

 Arkady led him through the maze, for which he was quite grateful; he knew he would never have found his way otherwise. They came out in a large room with benches crammed together, full of students eating through bowls of hot porridge. There didn't seem to be any kind of system as to where they sat, the only colour being the crimson red of the robes they all wore. Arkady led him to a bench and shoved a bowl in front of him. The benches were hard, and the porridge unremarkable by Hogwarts standards, but Scorpius was suddenly so hungry that he ate it anyway.

The students around them seemed to be Arkady's friends. They chattered to each other in what seemed to be Russian for a few minutes while Scorpius laded the food into his mouth. It didn't taste of much, but it warmed him deliciously from the inside.

"English," one of Arkady's friends said eventually, and Scorpius glanced up to see they were all looking at him. The other boys were all normal sized compared to Arkady, but they were all tall and beefy-looking. Scorp wondered if he'd accidentally been inducted into a gang. "We don't get any English here."

Scorpius swallowed his porridge. "Not any?"

"English go to Hogwarts," said another boy. "Speak you Norwegian, English?"
Scorpius shook his head, and they all laughed. "I speak French," he said, defensively.

"You do good charming then," the same boy sniggered.

"You mean Charms?"

"Yes yes, charming." He switched to French, which was only a little better than his English. "We have Charms in French. Potions in English. Everything else you going to fail, English boy."

"Thanks," Scorpius said dryly.

Unfortunately, however, it turned out that Arkady and his friends had good reason to laugh.

They had just enough time after breakfast for Arkady to show him the bathroom and then show him back to his room so he could change into his Durmstrang uniform. He explained the rules about the uniform, an explanation of which Scorpius understood about one word in three, but the gist of it seemed to be that they had to wear the uniform all the time, hats and all, except when they were in the common area or their own rooms. Scorpius thought he could probably deal with that. The fur hat was the only thing stopping his ears from freezing solid, after all.

There didn't seem to be individual timetables for anyone. The classes were Potions, Charms, Transfiguration, History of Magic, Astronomy, Herbology and Dark Arts. Scorpius hoped against hope that the 'Defence' being left out was a mistake in translation. "Seven NEWTs?" he asked, grimacing.

Arkady laughed. "Too much for you, English?" They had resorted to speaking in French, since Arkady's English was just a tad above incomprehensible.

"At Hogwarts we only do four or five."

Arkady shrugged. "Have to learn seven. Hardly ever pass seven. Maybe pass four or five. At the end, same thing."

Scorpius found himself imagining the look on Rose's face if she was told she was expected to fail at least two NEWTs. Then he mentally slapped himself. You can't think about Rose. Not now.

The first class was Charms, which was indeed, in French. However it turned out that Scorpius was not quite as practiced with that language as he thought he was, after two years of not speaking it at all, and it might have been in gibberish for all he understood of it. He stumbled through the answers to the questions put to him by the dour French Professor, who at about six and a half feet tall could not have been less Flitwick-like if he had tried, and ended up with a pile of homework to determine his level of Charms 'efficiency'.

If he thought that was bad, it was nothing to what the rest of the day had to offer. The rest of the classes were in Norwegian or Russian. They gave him a translation spell, a crystal ball-sized half-sphere that deciphered and displayed the Professors' words as they spoke them, but it was not very accurate. And he couldn't read that and copy from the board at the same time, as he was meant to be doing. And the writing on the board was barely recognisable as language to him, anyway.

Rose's mum was right, he thought dourly as they made their way to Potions, the last class of the day, just as the sun was finally starting to come out from behind the mountain. I'm screwed.

The Potions teacher was a middle-aged woman called Professor Eggletine. Arkady pronounced her name Eggeltin, but she smiled widely when Scorpius was introduced and shook his hand. "Very pleased to meet you, Mr Malfoy," she said, in English so obviously her first language that Scorpius
could have kissed her in relief. "I hope you will enjoy my class."

"I haven't done Potions in nearly a year," Scorpius explained. "I was doing Mu - something else, instead." At the last moment he remembered that Durmstrang did not even admit Muggleborn students. He didn't want to make an enemy of the only possible tie to home he had found.

"Ah, well," the woman said, pleasantly. "I'm sure you'll catch up. I shall give you some extra reading."

"Joy," Scorpius muttered to himself. By the end of the day he had a pile of homework so high he could scarcely carry it all, and one subject out of seven in English. As soon as he got back to his room he was on the verge of throwing the books across it in a fit of rage and frustration. Instead he dumped it all on the floor and collapsed hard on the bed, ignoring all Arkady's attempts to get him to come to the common area. He was stuck here all right, but he didn't have to like it. He'd just stay here, in his little prison room. There was no point in going to classes he could never hope to understand.

After dinner, which Scorpius refused to attend even though his stomach was sending him serious warning signals, Masha came to fetch him. When he ignored her knocks, she opened the door anyway. "Professor Reznicek wants to see you," she said.

"Well I don't much fancy seeing him," Scorpius told her. "I'm sick of this place already, and any conversation with him is unlikely to improve my mood."

The ever-present smile faded completely off Masha's face. "You do not want to make Professor Reznicek angry," she said seriously.

Scorpius found himself remembering the eerie way the old Headmaster had not even looked around when Draco had hit Scorpius in the face, yesterday. The man was no McGonagall, that was for sure. "What can he do to me?" he said boldly. "Seriously? I'm stuck here, miles away from my friends, my teachers, any chance of passing my NEWTs, my music, my band… there is literally nothing else he can take away. Tell him to go stuff it."

Masha frowned. "I will tell him, but you will not like the answer."

"Colour me terrified," Scorpius said, and turned his back to her.

He must have fallen asleep, because the next thing he knew there were hands dragging him out of bed. He reached for his wand, missed, tried to yell and found a hand over his mouth and a wand to his throat. There were two of them, boys almost as big as Arkady, and together they dragged him out of the room and up the corridor past the rows of sleeping students. He tried kicking out at them but they took the kicks and paid no mind. One of them made a loud grunting noise, but the other whispered at him in an unrecognisable language and after that they walked in silence. At least Scorpius had been sleeping in his uniform, fur cloak and all. That was one blessing he counted himself.

They half-carried him into Reznicek's office and dumped him unceremoniously in the chair opposite the desk. Reznicek leaned forward and steepled his fingers, looking curiously at Scorpius as though he hadn't had to be bodily dragged there. "What is this I hear," Reznicek said, in cold French. "You refuse to come when I ask for you?"

Scorpius shrugged. "I didn't much see the -"

"Did I say you could speak?" Reznicek almost shouted it, but Scorpius kept his face schooled still.
"Your Professors assure me you are incapable. This will not do. I do not know what soft life you are used to at Hogwarts, but at Durmstrang we prepare you. We strive towards excellence in all things. This is including discipline."

"How am I supposed to be excellent when I don't understand anything they say?" Scorpius demanded. That was not quite right, he knew, but his French was rusty. "The translation spell is terrible -" 

"Five," the old man hissed threateningly. Scorpius had no idea what he meant, so he wasn't sure how he should react. "If you had started here as a boy you would have learned what language you needed to know. Since you chose to come here late you must work all the harder to -"

"I didn't CHOOSE TO COME HERE!" Scorpius yelled, half getting out of his chair, but one of the goons standing behind him grabbed his shoulder and forced him back into it.

"That's fifteen," the man said bitingly. "Don't make me add more."

Fifteen what? Scorpius wondered, but sat still and sullen. This man had nothing on McGonagall's beady-eyed glare. It was going to take more than an ugly look to scare Scorpius Malfoy.

"You will learn respect," Reznicek told him, leaning forward for emphasis. "The next time I ask for you, you shall come immediately, is that clear?"

Scorpius remained silent for a minute until he realised he was meant to answer. "Yes, sir."

"You will do better in your classes, or you shall be punished."

"But I -"

"Twenty," the man growled. "You will learn not to interrupt me or talk back. Hold out your hand."

Scorpius frowned, confused, but held his right hand out after only a moment's hesitation. He realised he probably should have known better as soon as the Headmaster drew his wand and flicked it, whip-like, across Scorpius' palm. He felt a sharp, stinging pain and drew his hand back with a gasp. There was a thick red line across his palm, already fading but still stinging. He bit his lip and shook his hand out, resisting the urge to ask what the hell he thought he was doing. It was quite clear that he knew what he was doing, and was all too used to doing it.

"Your hand," the man demanded. Scorpius took a long step back, and found himself almost colliding with the red-robed goons who had dragged him up here. "You earned twenty," Reznicek reminded him, turning his wand around in his fingers. "Shall I add five more? I can have Polikov and Karenin here hold your hand for you, if you insist."

Scorpius realised he had no choice. Hating and cursing the man with every thought in his mind, he held out his hand again. This time he did not pull back at the pain, but swallowed it with as much courage as he could manage. At twelve strokes, the curse broke the skin, and after that every stroke was like a knife digging in. He could not hold back a groan of pain for the last three, by which point his hand was dripping blood onto the carpet.

"You may return to your room," Reznicek said when it was finally over, and Scorpius cradled his bleeding hand with the other. "I hope you will think on what I have said."

Scorpius could not have been more pleased to leave. He expected the goons to take him back to his room, but they wandered off, no doubt to their own beds, without even a word to him. Scorpius walked in the opposite direction, but it became very clear very soon that he would not be able to find
his way back. He stopped and leaned against a wall, muttering swear words under his breath as his hand screamed pain at him. He had to get back to his wand so he could do a healing spell, though how he was going to manage that with his left hand was beyond him at the moment.

Once he caught his breath he set off again. He took a familiar-looking turn to find himself in a corridor with names on the doors, but it was not his corridor. The doors were much better spaced. He realised he must be in the upstairs rooms where the older students lived. He did the only thing he could think to do and started searching the slates for Arkady's name.

It seemed to take an age. Durmstrang had at least as many students as Hogwarts, and that was a lot of rooms to search. In the end he almost went past it, until a noise from upstairs made him jump, and by chance as he turned back his gaze caught the right door. He knocked with his left hand, wincing. He heard a grunting sound from within, and a deep voice muttering something in Russian. Probably asking who the hell was knocking on his door in the middle of the night, Scorpius thought. "Arkady, it's me," he said in French.

The door opened, and Arkady stared down at him. The boy was wearing thick woollen pyjamas and socks. When Scorpius held out his bleeding hand, he did not look at all shocked, or even surprised. He only nodded, and stood aside to let him in.

Arkady's room was huge compared with his own. There was a desk, a wardrobe, even a bedside table. The bed was, while not a four poster, much longer and wider than the one in Scorpius' room and there was a thick red blanket on it. There was even a rug on the cold stone floor. Arkady sat him in the desk chair, shaking his head, and grabbed a potion off the shelf. "What's that do?" Scorpius asked nervously.

"Will help with pain," Arkady said. He uncorked the vial and let a single drop fall onto Scorpius' palm. His hand went quite numb almost instantly. "You need that to sleep," Arkady said knowingly. "Do not heal. He will know, will only happen again."

"But I can't even hold a wand," Scorpius protested.

"Stupid English give him wand hand," Arkady sighed. "Next time give left."

Scorpius stared up at his new friend, who towered above him even sitting on the bed. "Next time?"

"You going to be good now?" Arkady asked, raising an imperious eyebrow. "Be the good boy, do everything right?"

Scorpius couldn't help but go slightly red at that. "Er… I wasn't exactly planning on it, but… anyway he wants me to be magically fluent in Russian, and I can't."

"Then yes, next time."

"Arkady…" Scorpius almost didn't want to ask, but part of him deep down was just longing to know, "you don't… seem very surprised…"

The huge boy held up his left hand. There was a barely imperceptible scar there, across his palm. "Happen to everyone. Well… more boys. Girls much gooder, not get hit so much. One of Headmaster favourite punishment. You don't want to know the others."

No, Scorpius thought. I really, really don't.

~*-S-*~
Dear R & A

I'm going to start writing a letter even though I can't figure out a way to send one yet. There's no owlery here, and everyone who has an owl refuses to lend me one to go all the way to England. I guess some of them must get lost or die of cold up here.

I still haven't seen Durmstrang from the outside yet. It's cold enough inside, you'd have to be bonkers to just wander on outside for a stroll. We even have Herbology inside, in a special heated room. Best room in the whole bloody place, if you ask me. Herbology is fast becoming my favourite subject, but you never thought you'd hear me say that. Anyway I'm told it's a castle, there aren't as many floors as Hogwarts but there are enough corridors to make you dizzy. Remember how long it took us to get the hang of all Hogwarts' disappearing staircases and hidden passageways and so on? I don't think I'll ever know my way around here. There's no decoration, so one corridor looks pretty much the same as the other. I never thought I'd miss the talking portraits. I think there are more students here than there are at Hogwarts. They seem to come from all over, even if there aren't any Muggleborns.

You'll be glad to know I'm not completely friendless. My mate Arkady keeps me sane even though his English isn't great. His friends think he's mad, but I guess the Head Girl told him to look after me on the first day and he just kept doing it. It's been a week and a half now and he hasn't got sick of me so I guess that's a good sign.

I miss you both, and everyone. I hope C and the others weren't too angry. Please tell them I am still writing and I'm listening to the wireless when I can get something to play on it. The mountain plays havoc with the signal. It also plays havoc with the sun. It's dark from evening till afternoon, here, I'm still not used to it. Imagine having to eat lunch in candlelight!

R's mum was right, by the way. I am almost certainly going to fail all my exams at the end of this year. I don't even want to think about NEWTs. The translation spell they've given me is terrible. I found a decent one in the library that is rewriting my new textbooks as we speak, and that helps a little. I tune out entirely through most of the lessons, then after dinner I stay up late and read from the books. I'm doing all right at Charms and Transfiguration, because Charms is in French and at least the spells are still all the same, and I think Professor Davies was a bit ahead of the curriculum. They've only just started Human Transfiguration here so I'm okay. But I have to do History of Magic, and I have never failed so badly at anything ever in my life as I did in the surprise test they gave us yesterday. I think I got a zero but I still have no idea what the Professor said, honestly.

R. I miss you. I'm sorry for all this. I promise that one day in the future I will make it up to you.

Loving you, always,

S.

Someone knocked on the door, loudly. He jerked awake and realised that he had fallen asleep over his books. Somehow the ink pot had knocked over and spilled all over the bed and the floor. He swore and pushed away the pile of clothes he used to keep him warm at night. "Coming!"

It was Arkady. "You miss Herbology," he said, his expression serious.

Scorpius swore again. "I must have forgot my alarm spell. Let me guess, Reznicek wants to see me?"
"I said you were sick."

"Oh. Thanks."

"You come to lunch now?"

Scorpius rubbed his eyes. "Damnit. Okay. Just let me charm the ink out of my robes."

He almost fell asleep over his potato dumplings. Arkady kept having to nudge him in the ribs.

"English, you don't look so good," the large boy told him.

"Thanks," Scorpius muttered. He was aware he did not look good. The last time he had bothered to look in a mirror he had been paler than he might have thought physically possible, his hair was lank and dull and he had dark circles under his eyes. 'Staying up late' was an understatement. He hardly slept at all these days. The translation spell he had found was working away at the books, but he had to catch up on nearly a year's worth of Herbology, Astronomy, Potions and History of Magic. The class they called Dark Arts… well he was doing his best, but it wasn't much like Defence Against the Dark Arts at all. Professor Tufty had always concentrated on the theory behind defensive spells, shields, countercurses. Here they learned in-depth theory behind the curses themselves. They made out that it was for self-defence, but Scorp honestly didn't see in what circumstances he would ever have to use a blasting curse on another human being. Professor Tufty probably would have had him expelled if he'd ever tried that one, in class or out of it.

It had been a week or so since he had written the letter, and still hadn't found a way to send it. Arkady had said most people kept in contact with home by making Floo calls from the Headmaster's office, on a schedule. But to get on the schedule, you had to be in the Headmaster's good books. Not to mention any conversation he might have over Floo might just be reported to his father.

Scorpius was definitely not in the Headmaster's good books. He had been called to the office four more times since that night, and had thirty more strokes to his hand. He had taken Arkady's advice and offered the left one, this time, so that for two days he had had two almost-useless hands, and had accidentally turned a classmate's head temporarily into a pumpkin in Transfiguration. Luckily that little incident hadn't reached Reznicek yet. The right hand had healed over now though, though the scab itched annoyingly when he used a quill or a wand. That part he had quite deliberately not included in the letter. He didn't want anyone, Rose especially, to have to worry.

After breakfast, Arkady and his mates dragged Scorp to History of Magic, where he took in absolutely nothing even with the assistance of the translated textbook. As the class ended and they spilled out into the corridor, he was only vaguely aware of some people around them chattering excitedly. Arkady's friend Euan went to find out what was going on, but Scorpius didn't pay much notice. He was thinking about how much reading he still had to do. Perhaps he could take one night off. It might be worth the pain in his hand just to get some proper sleep.

The excitement around them grew as they went down to dinner, as outside the windows the sun finally came out from behind the mountain. Euan came back and gave the boys an enthusiastic speech of which Scorpius understood not a single word. He sat down and ladled potatoes onto his plate as people around him stood up to see over the tables, as if looking for someone.

Suddenly the main door opened and Reznicek came in, leading a stocky middle-aged man with a large curved nose, a neat black goatee and thick dark eyebrows. Nearly everyone seemed quite excited by his arrival. Some people even cheered. The man smiled and waved them down, chatting amiably with Reznicek as they came to sit down. The teachers at Durmstrang hardly ever ate with the students, unlike Hogwarts, and Scorpius had never seen Reznicek even in the dining hall. The Headmaster was clearly trying to make a good impression. "All right, I give up," Scorpius sighed as
Arkady and Euan punched each other excitedly on the shoulder and whispered excitedly. "Who is it?"

"You don't know, English?" Euan demanded, taken aback. "Is Krum."

"Who?"

"Viktor Krum." Arkady clarified, leaving Scorp none the wiser. "Is big Quidditch star. Used to play for Bulgaria, now coach Russian team. You not know?"

Scorpius frowned. The name did ring a bell, but Albus went on about a lot of Quidditch players. "What's he here for?"

"He was student here," Euan explained. "Maybe looking for new players!"

Scorp knew that Durmstrang had four Quidditch teams, but since there were no Houses the players could and did move between teams. Arkady himself had played for three teams, having been bribed by each team after showing his prowess on the pitch. Scorpius hadn't even seen the pitch yet, since he refused to go outside. How they played in such conditions he had no idea - though the snow had largely melted over the last week, the cold was still penetrating.

"Better get over there then," he said encouragingly, before going back to his dinner.

People crowded around the newcomer for the better part of an hour. Their conversation was loud, it rang in his ears and made his head spin. He forced himself to eat, hating every mouthful.

He just wanted…

What. His old life back? Obviously. But if he couldn't have that, he wanted something more. He wanted more than trying to pass classes he had never thought to take again. He wanted more than sleepless nights and food that turned to sawdust in his mouth. He wanted to sleep without dreaming of what he had lost. He wanted for one moment to have some peace, to be warm, to sit with the sun on his face and hear some damn birds sing. Or better yet, to have his guitar in his hands, to feel the strings under his fingers, to feel the music thrum through his wrist and up his arm. He wanted that feeling back. The feeling he was worth something. That he could make something worthwhile. This, this wasn't life, as much as it might look it from the outside. Durmstrang was wearing him down. If it was a game, the score would be 200 to Durmstrang, Scorpius Malfoy, zero.

He wanted his friends back. He wanted to jam with the band and argue about names with Cleo. Trevor had been teaching him the keyboard. He even wanted to see Dave, weird little squib that he was. He wanted to talk Quidditch with Albus, and to annoy him by chattering on about a new Muggle song. He wanted to give Alice a cuddle and play for a crowd at the Leaky Cauldron, and he wanted a hug from Hannah. He wanted Neville to be proud of him. And more than anything he wanted to see Rose, to know she was okay, to hold her in his arms and feel that she was real, to smell her hair and kiss her lips and —

Someone scraped back the bench he was sitting on, jolting him out of his daydream. He grit his teeth and pushed his plate away. He had promised himself he wouldn't think about her like that - it was too painful - but somehow he just kept on doing it. He shook his head and got up, planning on going back to his room. At least now he knew his way around most of the castle. It was easier now that you could actually see things out of the window, and he had most of the turns from the dining hall and his classes memorised.

"English!" Arkady was running up to him.
Scorpius sighed. "Mate, I'm tired, I think I'll just -"

"Krum!" Arkady hissed. "He wants to talk to you."

Scorpius blinked. "Huh?" He looked over to where Krum was chatting to a group of fifth year girls. The man didn't even look in their direction. "Er… you sure?"

"Oh yes. He ask me to bring you - we go now to the pit, yes?"

"Pitch," Scorpius corrected. "Wait, why does he want to see me? How does he even know who I am? And why out there?" He shuddered at the thought of leaving the castle, and Arkady rolled his eyes.

"Just come."

Reluctantly, Scorpius followed Arkady out of the castle and onto the Quidditch pitch, where a few hopefuls were already readying their brooms. The cold was not quite as bad as Scorp had expected; perhaps he was acclimatising at last, or perhaps summer was finally starting to get an edge on what passed for spring here. Still he put his hands deep inside his fur cloak and pulled his hat down low over his ears as Arkady ran for his broomstick. After a while a larger group came out of the castle with Krum himself. Reznicek, Scorp noticed, had elected to stay inside. Suddenly he wondered if that was why Krum wanted to speak to him out here.

Krum waved the hopefuls into the air and barked a few instructions at them. They started flying laps. Some of the onlookers who had come out with Krum sat below them at the low end of the stands, chattering excitedly. Krum went to sit as well, a little way apart from his groupies. Scorpius, not knowing what else to do, went up to him. "Bonjour," he tried, guessing at French for their common language. "Arkady said you wanted to speak to me? Sir," he added, not sure of the correct form of address for an ex-Durmstrang Quidditch coach. Reznicek was very keen on that sort of thing, and he didn't want Krum reporting him for insolence.

Krum smiled crookedly at him and returned his gaze to the fliers. "Scorpius Malfoy?" he asked, without looking at him.

"Yes sir."

"Sit down." He said it in English, heavily accented but still. Scorpius sat beside him, surprised. "In my day we had a Headmaster who was not such a…" he frowned as if searching for the right words, his eyes constantly following the red-robed figures on their brooms.

"Git?" Scorpius suggested. It was a risk, but he had a feeling Krum didn't mean him any harm.

Krum laughed. It was a deep, barking sort of laugh. "Karkaroff was a…. you would say, bully… but this man…"

Something clicked in Scorpius' brain. "I do know you!" he said, suddenly feeling more awake than he had in days. "You were the Durmstrang champion during the Triwizard Tournament at Hogwarts! It was in our Recent Wizarding History Class, about the Tournament, and how You-Know-Who rigged it so Harry Potter would win and that was the night he came back -"

"Not a good night for anyone," Krum agreed, suddenly looking very grim indeed. "A long time ago now, though." He gestured into the air. "Your friend flies well."

"Yeah," Scorpius agreed. He could see Arkady easily amongst the fliers, a figure twice the size of the others. "He's a Keeper. Are you really here recruiting?" It was probably impolite, but Arkady
would want him to ask. *What is it with me and aspiring Quidditch stars?* he wondered. *If Al was here he'd had been up there before you could say jump.* Then again, maybe he wouldn't have - Scorp doubted Al would settle for the Russian side when he could play for England. Before he had left there had been a recruiter at one of the Gryffindor/Hufflepuff games, reportedly watching James, and Scorpius had no doubt Al would be next.

Krum was silent for a while, watching as the fliers fell into a three dimensional figure eight. Then he said, "that is one reason."

"And the other one?"

"A friend asked me to make sure you were well."

Scorpius blinked and turned to stare at him. "A… friend?" For one brief, heart-stopping moment he wondered if the man meant his father. But that was stupid. His father no doubt got regular reports from Reznicek, if he even cared to read them.

"Hermione Weasley. I met her at Hogwarts. We keep in touch." *Rose's mum.* Scorpius could have sung. "She asked me to be discreet."

"Oh." He looked back up at Arkady's circling form, feeling guilty.

"It is not entirely a cover story," Krum chuckled. It had the same strange barking quality as his laugh. "We do need new blood in the reserves."

"Oh. Good." Scorpius wasn't sure how he felt about getting Arkady and the others' hopes up for his sake.

"At least I see you are alive. But you look ill."

"It's hard to sleep here," Scorp said shortly. "Too cold."

"Ha. I hear that. If it helps I think it was a very bad winter." Another one of those thoughtful pauses. "Hermione said you might not be able to write to your friends."

Scorpius flushed, pulling his hat down further against a vicious breeze that blew across the back of his neck. "It's… complicated. I have a letter, but…” he looked up at Krum, eyes wide as an idea gave his heart a tiny boost of hope. "Could you take it?" he asked breathlessly.

"Of course. I will send it with my reply. Make sure it puts minds to rest. I don't much like coming here. There are bad memories for me."

*And I hear* that, Scorpius thought, as he ran back to the castle for the letter. He wondered if coming to Hogwarts had been as confusing and miserable for Krum as coming to Durmstrang had been for him. But then, Krum hadn't been alone, and Krum had known he would come back. At least the man spoke English, though he supposed as coach of an International team, he would have to.

He kept the letter in the magical sealed box his father had sent him for Christmas a few years ago. He had never needed a use for it until now. He almost regretted not bringing anything from Hogwarts in it, since his father would not have been able to look inside without Scorpius' wand. But at the time it had seemed too risky. What was to stop Draco taking Scorpius' wand, or forcing Scorpius to open the box himself?

For now, however, the letter was the only thing he really didn't want anyone to find. Back in his room, he pulled the box off the shelf and fit his wand into the round keyhole. It clicked, and he
pulled up the lid and grabbed the letter. He shut the box and then, as an afterthought, grabbed a pair of gloves from his trunk. As he came back onto the pitch, the players were just landing to pick up some Quaffles, and Scorpius handed the gloves to Arkady. "What for?" the huge boy asked him, eyebrows knitting together in a confused frown since the gloves were easily three sizes too small for him.

"Just take them," Scorpius said, "I'll explain later." And if Reznick asks, that was my reason for going and coming back, he thought triumphantly as he sat back down next to Krum and passed him the letter where it couldn't be seen from the castle windows. Then he sat down to watch the rest of the flying, and for the first time, he didn't even feel the cold.

*Take that, Durmstrang. Scorpius Malfoy finally scores a point.*

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for your patience everyone! Hope you enjoyed the last couple of Scorpius-centric chapters. Next chapter we will return to England to see what's going on in everyone else's lives.

Thanks to everyone who has commented here or on my blog since the last chapter. Don't forget you can check out misssaigonfic.tumblr.com for insights, updates and questions about my stories.
The Last Summer Part 1: Breaking

Chapter Summary

Rose felt a crack appearing in the corner of her inner wall. She remembered his face when he begged her not to read the words. She had been feeling, as much as she didn't like to admit it, pretty jealous up until that point, as she told herself she had every right to be, when her boyfriend made plans to meet another girl in Hogsmeade. But when he looked at her like that, she could feel that she, Rose, was the only girl he cared about.

Chapter Notes

This chapter has music in it! Visit http://misssaigonfic.tumblr.com/musicpost for this song and all the music featured in this story so far.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

2023

~*-R-*~

~*-R-*~

"Rose! Wake up sweetheart!"

Rose groaned and pulled the covers over her head. They were pulled back again before she could protest. "Happy birthday!" her mother announced cheerfully, pulling back the curtains and letting painfully bright light spill into the room.

"Mu-um!"

"Rose, it's nearly ten. You've had a nice sleep, but I need you to help me with the food for the party."

Rose, reluctantly, made herself sit up, her hair springing maddeningly over her face. She pushed it back, glad there was no one else there to see. She was not one of those girls who could wake up looking presentable. "Mum, I still don't know if I really want…"

"Don't be silly, dear. Everyone's coming at one o'clock, do you want to me to have to owl them all and tell them you've changed your mind? Come on, up you get."

Rose sighed. Today she turned seventeen. She came of age in the wizarding world. It was supposed to be an exciting day, a day to celebrate with family and friends, and she knew she was extra lucky that her birthday fell during the summer holidays, so she could share it with her parents and the rest of her family. She had been looking forward to this for months. But if she was truly honest with herself, the last thing she wanted was a birthday party now.

The last few weeks of school had been utterly miserable. Word of Scorpius’ sudden disappearance had spread around Hogwarts like Fiendfyre, and she was forced to endure either sympathetic words
that she didn't want to hear, or people whispering behind her back. She could barely concentrate through all her exams. When she slept she had nightmares of terrible things happening to him, of him being cornered and cursed down by faceless figures in black.

"He's just changed schools," Albus said reasonably when she brought this up with him. "It's not like he's been inducted into a cult, or anything. I'm sure he's fine." Rose was less than satisfied with that answer. She knew her cousin was only trying to make her feel better, but she wished he wouldn't. What she really needed was to talk to Scorpius, to know, for sure, that he was still out there somewhere, and that he was okay.

Her mother at least, having seen how upset she was on memorial day, had made an effort. About two weeks before school ended, a letter had arrived, enclosed with one from her mother which read,

*I have had my friend Viktor check on Scorpius, and he assures me that he is doing quite well.*

And the letter, Scorpius' letter, helped a little.

"See," Al said, when he had read it. "Told you he was fine."

Rose wasn't so sure, however. She didn't like the way he talked about his classes, about staying up late just so he could catch up on them. It wasn't as though he was at all *stupid*. He was one of the smartest people in their year. And he hadn't written any names, only initials, so maybe, and it seemed likely, he was being watched. And there was the fact that the letter itself was dated nearly two weeks old, so who knows what might have happened since then?

There was something odd about his handwriting as well; where it was usually so neat and flowing it was somehow stiff. Ever since she could remember, since the first day of school when she had sat next to him in Transfiguration, he had had perfect handwriting. It worried her. Still, she kept the letter with her all the time, just so that whenever she wanted she could read the words at the end, the ones he had written just for her.

*R. I miss you. I'm sorry for all this. I promise that one day in the future I will make it up to you. Loving you, always.*

S.

The day that letter had come she had cast a strong silencing charm on her four-poster bed and cried herself to sleep. After that she no longer felt like welling up every time she saw or heard something that reminded her of him. There were no tears left to come.

She pushed back the covers with great reluctance and crawled out of bed. She had a new dress for the party, bought by owl order in March. She had been excited about it at the time, but now it seemed ridiculously frivolous. She pulled it on and looked at herself in the mirror. The dress was dark blue with a slight sparkle around the hem. It was beautiful, but she still looked a wreck. She did some quick charms on her face to hide the dark circles under her eyes and add some colour to her pallid skin. Then she spent twenty minutes combing and charming the tangles out of her hair and pinning it neatly back. After that she felt almost ready to face the world, but she still had to take a couple of deep breaths before finally leaving her room.

"There's the birthday girl!" her father exclaimed when she came down the stairs. He gave her a hug and a kiss. She hugged him back, gratefully. She loved her dad, even if he could be very stubborn and unreasonable about some things. He had been very quiet on memorial day after Scorpius had left, hanging back and letting her mother comfort her. Since they had come home for the summer
holidays, he had not said a single word about Scorpius, and she wondered if he was pretending the whole thing had never happened. Still, at least he hadn't tried to talk her out of it, like Uncle George had before they were even together. She still remembered that particular conversation with a twinge of anger.

"I know he might seem harmless now," her uncle had said. "But you need to understand the sort of people he comes from."

"Scorp isn't like that," she had said, shocked.

"Some things are built into people," George had said, seriously. He ran a hand through his hair and she had seen, for a second, the scar on the side of his head where his ear used to be. He wore his hair long to cover it, so that you could almost forget it was even there. "I just worry about you, especially now you're all a little older…"

"We're not seeing each other," she had snapped. "And if we were, I wouldn't care about that."

*But Scorp cares,* she thought, for the hundredth time as she poured jelly mixture into moulds in the shape of broomsticks and Snitches. *He cares, or he wouldn't have left.*

*But he had to leave,* said the other voice, the one that always seemed to pop up every time she had this one-sided argument with herself. *His father's his guardian.*

*He could have said no,* said the first voice. *He could have refused.* Neville and McGonagall would have backed him up. *It might have taken months for the French Ministry to do anything about it,* and *maybe if Scorp talked to them and told them why he didn't want to go, they wouldn't have made him.* *But he went,* anyway.

She was so caught up in her internal monologue that she almost spilled the jelly over the edge of the mould. "Careful," her mother said, flicking the overflow back into the jug with her wand. "Why are you so clumsy lately?" She said it kindly, but Rose felt guilty anyway. It was true that she hadn't been much help since school ended. She spent most of her time in her room, supposedly doing her homework. She found she spent more time daydreaming than actually working. When she did try to help with dusting or washing up, she tended to space out and drop things.

"You can use your wand, if you like," her father reminded her. "You are seventeen now, after all."

"Thanks Dad, I hadn't realised that yet," she said, smiling weakly at him.

"Why don't you go outside and help your brother with the tables," her mother suggested. "The Potters will be here any minute; Ginny can help me with the dessert.

Go on."

Rose sighed and went outside. It was a nice day for it. The sun was shining and the earth was firm underfoot, even in a garden where a slight shower could turn the downward slope into a mudslide. The slope was what was causing Hugo so much trouble putting the tables up. Rose set her shoulders, put Scorpius out of her mind as best she could, drew her wand, and went to help.

~*-R-*~

~*-R-*~

The Potters came early, at about eleven, and Weasleys started filtering in not long after. Teddy and Victoire came with Bill, Fleur and Louis - Dominique hadn't been able to get time off work. George
and Angelina came with Roxie and Fred, who like James were still waiting on their NEWT results. Neither James nor Fred were too worried, however, as they had both been approached by a recruiter for the Chudley Cannons after the Gryffindor vs Ravenclaw final.

*That* game was still being talked about. The Gryffindor Beaters, Fred especially, had been on their best form ever, taking out both Benjy, the Ravenclaw Keeper and Janey, their best Beater, in the first ten minutes, leaving Ravenclaw with two reserves and two hundred points down. There had been three near-misses with the Snitch, two of which had been heart-stopping chases between Albus and James; Al on the *Phoenixer* which once nearly threw him clean off with its enthusiasm. At least that was how Al had described it afterwards. "It's a broom with personality," he had said, as Ravenclaw nursed their bruises. Gryffindor had won in the end, James performing a death-defying dive that set the crowd to roaring, and far too far away for Albus to catch him in time. Still, everyone agreed it had been a fantastic game. Roxie had scored two hundred out of Gryffindor's four hundred and fifty points by herself. She was not waiting for an offer from the Cannons, though. She intended on trying out for the Holyhead Harpies, Ginny's old team, in the autumn.

Fred was trying out dreadlocks. They suited him, though the way he kept tossing them back over his shoulder set Rose's teeth on edge. The littlest things were liable to irritate her lately. She sat between Hugo and Albus and tried to enjoy herself as guests continued to arrive. Molly and Lucy arrived with their parents, Percy looking as though he hadn't slept much recently. As Deputy Minister he had taken on a lot of Shacklebolt's duties as well as his own, and Shacklebolt still wasn't fully recovered, despite everyone's best hopes. Rose saw Percy exchange a serious-looking conversation with her dad before Hermione forced them to put work aside and join in the festivities.

Neville, Hannah and Lizzie arrived, bringing Belinda with them, and to everyone's surprise, Lizzie's brother Tony. Everyone immediately wanted to know what it was like being a Cursebreaker in Africa, and even Rose cheered up for a while, listening to Tony's stories - which were, everyone agreed, thrilling - and watching Molly drool over him. He was very good looking, Rose thought, having grown entirely out of the moody phase he had gone through as a teenager. He had been in the year above Molly, and she had never mentioned fancying him before now, but Rose could hardly blame her. The guy was fit. *Not that I was looking*, she said to herself, feeling oddly guilty.

Uncle Bill, a retired Cursebreaker, pummelled the poor young man with questions, but he didn't seem to mind, grinning occasionally in a way that was so like Neville's it was almost unnerving. Hannah kept touching him as if to reassure herself that he was still there. "I panic every month I don't get an owl," she said, patting his hair like a child. "He promises to write more from now, don't you Anthony?"

"Yes mum," Tony said meekly.

"So grown up," Victoire teased him. "I remember when you were a teensy little first year. Don't you, Teddy?"

"I remember him being a pain," Teddy nodded.

"Oi," Tony muttered. "You're not my Head Boy anymore, Lupin. Bet I could take you."

"Don't count on it," Bill said, cheerfully. "Our Teddy's got moves."

*Our Teddy*, Rose thought. No one had complained when Teddy and Victoire started going out. He had been around so long that it was almost a kind of natural progression. No one, not even Uncle Bill, ever told Teddy he wasn't good enough for his daughter. And Teddy and Scorpius were related. It just wasn't fair.
She wasn't being much fun, plagued by all these gloomy thoughts, but luckily at that point her grandparents arrived. They were her dad's parents, of course. Her Muggle grandparents were rarely seen at family events, finding the onslaught of Weasleys and magical conversation too overwhelming, but Molly and Arthur never missed one. Her Gran gave her a cuddle and a pile of presents, and Grandpa Arthur got all choked up, patting her with a hand that shook slightly, saying he couldn't believe how grown up she was. On top of that, they brought her Uncle Charlie with them, whom she hadn't even seen since his last visit three years ago. By the time dinner was served, with her Gran's help - despite Hermione's protests that she and Ginny could manage - Rose was actually feeling quite cheerful, and thinking that perhaps the party hadn't been such a bad idea after all.

And then Al's new girlfriend showed up. Rose could see Lizzie very carefully averting her eyes as her cousin got up to let Cleo through the gate and kiss her (politely) in greeting. She had to be introduced to everyone, of course, and the girl didn't seem at all phased by the extended family.

Rose knew she didn't have any right to be annoyed. Al had asked her - very carefully - if Cleo could come, and she had said yes, of course. After all, she had nothing against Cleo. As such, Al had started dating her not long after breaking the news that the band's guitarist had been shipped off to Durmstrang against his will.

Cleo had changed the purple stripes in her hair to blue since the last time Rose had seen her, and was wearing an even shorter skirt. Trust her to be fashionably late, Rose thought as she forced a smile onto her face and accepted Cleo's hug. She wasn't sure what it was that bugged her so much about the girl. She was perfectly nice, in a devil-may-care sort of way. Maybe it was just that she felt bad for Lizzie. She certainly wasn't jealous of all the time Scorpius had spent with her on the last few weekends after his seventeenth birthday. Certainly not.

"Dad," Albus said, waving his father over. "This is Cleo."

"Harry Potter," Cleo exclaimed, shaking her head in disbelief as Al's dad held out a welcoming hand. "I never thought I would get to meet you. You are like… my total hero."

Rose saw her uncle smile, but it was that forced kind of smile he got when people said that sort of thing to him. "This is my mum," Albus continued, and Cleo shook Ginny's hand with somewhat less enthusiasm. "Do you… live nearby?" Ginny asked.

"Oh, not really, but I can Apparate," Cleo said, shrugging.

Rose thought she heard her aunt muttering "of course you can."

Cleo and Lily, on the other hand, got on like a house on fire, which Rose could tell was slightly worrying to her aunt Ginny. Her aunt was usually very open minded about most things, but it was pretty clear that she was wary of Cleo's wild girl influence on her children. Hugo didn't help. Rose had to kick him twice under the table when he started staring at the girl's skin-tight top.

"Is that it?" Hermione asked breathlessly, poking her head out of the door. "Is everyone here?"

Rose found herself looking up the road. A small part of her, a part she hadn't dared speak aloud or even think to herself, still hoped.

"You okay?" Al asked quietly, so that only she could hear.

She turned back to the table and nodded. "Fine."

He frowned. "Look, I know he said he was going to come…"
"He promised he was going to come," Rose said. "But that was before." She forced a smile onto her face and helped her mother lower a tray of burgers onto the table.

Hermione was from the Molly Weasley school of cooking, which meant the food was good and there was plenty to go around. There were burgers and chips, chicken skewers and two big salad bowls. Dessert was jelly and ice cream and a two-tiered birthday cake baked by Rose's Gran herself. It was layered chocolate and vanilla with white icing, decorated with little roses around the base of both tiers, and seventeen candles. "It's beautiful, Gran," Rose said after she had blown them out to a chorus of the traditionally out-of-tune rendition of *Happy Birthday*.

"Tish tosh dear," Molly said happily. "With all of you away at school all year I hardly ever get to bake a special cake anymore."

After cake came presents. There were a great deal of books. There was Quidditch gear, including a new broom from the Potters, an antique chess set, some clothes, and a white-gold necklace from her parents. There were so many that by the time Rose had got through most of them, it was getting dark. They moved inside, those who could stay, the Potters, the Longbottoms, her Grandparents and Cleo, squishing into the living room, the younger ones sitting on the floor. Ron poured wine for the adults, Rose and Albus now considered among them. Rose sipped from her glass. Half of her was glad to have her family and friends around her, to finally have a distraction. The other half just wanted it to be over so she could go to bed.

There were a few more presents, in between the chatter and a hastily-put-together Exploding Snap tournament. Hugo gave her a box full of Honeyduke's sweets. Al gave her a book on spells that used familiars. She wasn't sure Midnight would sit still enough for her to try any of them but it looked interesting, all the same.

She sat back, ready to relax a bit between snap rounds. She watched Tony casually toss down an ace, blowing up a small pile of cards and nearly setting James' hair on fire.

Then Cleo came and sat beside her, and Rose prepared herself to have to exchange pleasantries. But the girl was holding out a small, square package. "This is for you," she said quietly. On the other side of the room Lily was laughing herself silly as James felt his hair all over for evidence of scorching.

"Oh," Rose said, surprised. She hadn't been expecting anything from Cleo at all. "You didn't have to."

"Well, it's not just from me," the girl admitted, pushing back a lock of blue hair as Rose pulled back the plain wrapping paper to reveal an unmarked CD in a slim plastic case. "It's the last recording we did before he left. He promised to play it for you when it was finished, remember?"

Rose's breath caught in her throat. She turned the disc over. "Yeah. I remember."

"I think he'd want you to hear it. Especially now."

Rose felt a crack appearing in the corner of her inner wall. She remembered his face when he begged her not to read the words. She had been feeling, as much as she didn't like to admit it, pretty jealous up until that point, as she told herself she had every right to be, when her boyfriend made plans to meet another girl in Hogsmeade. But when he looked at her like that, she could feel that she, Rose, was the only girl he cared about.

She opened the case, turning the slim disc over in her fingers. CDs were practically ancient technology now, but perhaps Cleo had guessed that they wouldn't have any way to play any of the new high-tech music chips they used for recording nowadays. "You don't have to play it now," Cleo
said quickly.

"I know. I want to." She got up and walked past the card table and all the party guests to the old stereo in the corner. Her mother used it sometimes to listen to Muggle music. She switched it on, aware of a growing silence behind her as people became aware of what she was doing. She ignored it, slotting the disc into the machine and, with a deep breath and a silent promise to herself, pushed the play button.

The upbeat rhythm took her by surprise. The way he hadn't wanted her to read it, she had been expecting something slower, more romantic, perhaps even gushy. Still, all doubts she might have had evaporated as soon as Scorp's voice filled her living room.

I woke up in the middle of the night
Out of luck with this girl on my mind
She got away now, I'm trying to explain how
I fell in love, that's what I like to call it
But not enough, it's like I never saw it
Drifting away I am finding words to say
But it all goes whoa, whoa, whoa,

The promise had been not to cry, but somehow, unbelievably, she felt herself smiling. You never saw it all right, you arse, she thought to herself, leaning back against the wall beside the stereo. I practically had to beat you over the head with it. It was like he was calling to her across the miles, the best way to apologise for being an idiot that he knew. She wondered when he had written those words. He had never actually said 'I love you' until the day he left.

What does it take to get you
If I never met you
I wouldn't have ran across the country like
I'm out of my mind
What does it take to hold you
When I'm here without you
I don't know where to start
I've gotta find you and your heart
Before it falls apart

The smile faded. Everyone was watching her but she could hardly recognise their presence, she was so deep into the music. It was like he had known. Of course it was probably just typical artistic exaggeration; he joked about missing her just for the few hours they were apart every Saturday. But the words still pulled at her heart. Suddenly he seemed even further away from before, as though he were living in another dimension she could never hope to reach.
I stayed up in the dead of the night
I made plans if they turn out right
You'll close your eyes and
Think about the times when
We fell in love but didn't try to say it
Knew what it was the moment that we played it
We all lose sometimes, I can't get her off my mind

She found she could hardly breathe. Despite all her resolve and promises, there were tears running down her cheeks, tears of loss and anger and hopelessness. She wanted to reach out and stop the music but she couldn't move, Scorpius' ghost had nailed her to the spot and she was forced to stand there, clinging to the wall as though it was all holding her up, wanting to find him and slap him right in the face for making her feel this way.

What does it take to make it real
The world still spins and I'm still feeling
Your head right next to mine
I'll play it back a thousand times
I wish I took a photograph
For every moment that we laughed
Oh no we can't relax
Cos she's so far away....

Rose couldn't take it anymore. She focused on the party long enough to see that Hannah and Lizzie were crying, her dad had a face like thunder and Al had his head in his hands, and she knew she couldn't face what would happen when the song ended. She pushed herself away from the wall, stumbling a little, and ran out of the living room and up the stairs. The dam was already breaking, but she made it to her room, slammed the door behind her and fell onto the bed, her hair coming loose from its pins as she pulled a pillow towards her and buried her face in it, before the tears came, and came.

Downstairs she could hear people muttering, doors opening and closing, movement in the hall. She had almost done it, almost convinced them all that she was fine, that she could keep a brave face and make it through the year as though nothing had happened. Why hadn't she waited until she was alone to play that song? She would have been just as upset but at least most of her family wouldn't have been subjected to her emotional breakdown.

She pulled another pillow over her head, trying to block out the sounds of the front door opening and closing as people left. She kicked off her shoes and curled herself into a safe little ball, not caring that her party dress was getting rumpled. The music was still ringing around in her head, all the harder for the carefree, optimistic way he sang, as though nothing could hurt them, nothing could ever come between them. She remembered feeling like that too. They had both been idiots.
We knew it would be hard, she argued with herself. We knew, we just… didn't think anything like this would happen. We thought we would at least be together. It didn't matter what happened as long as we were together.

Ten minutes or so later, there was a soft knock on the door. She ignored it, but the door opened anyway, there was a pressure on the bed as someone sat beside her, and then a hand was stroking her hair. "Oh sweetheart," said her mother's voice, bringing on another flood of tears. "I hate seeing you like this."

"I'm sorry," Rose sobbed, loosening her death grip on the pillows and putting her hands over her eyes to hide her face. "I ruined everything... I'm sorry."

"It's all right," her mother said, pulling her close like a little child and laying her head in her lap. "Everyone's gone home now. They all understand why you're upset. Albus said to tell you he'll come over in the morning when you're feeling better."

Rose swallowed between sobs, feeling a stab of guilt on top of everything else. Scorp was Al's best friend too. Her cousin, for all his glib assurances that Scorp was fine, worried almost as much as she did, she could tell. By acting like this, she was only making things worse.

"I m-miss him, Mum," she managed through the tears, breathing in her mother's comforting scent, the same perfume she always wore. "I just miss him so much."

"I know," her Mum said, pulling her tangled mess of hair back from her sticky cheeks. "I know."

"It hurts so much. He didn't have to go! I know he c-cared about me, but he left, and I know he had to, but… I just…"

"I know."

"No, you d-don't know, you, you always had Dad, he never - "

"Always? Far from it," her mum smiled. "I was madly in love with your father months before he even knew. Before I even knew. I only knew it hurt to watch him drool over other girls. And then, when I was about your age, he left for a while."

"He left?" Rose was so amazed that she even stopped crying. "But, when you were my age…"

"We were on the run, yes. The three of us, living in a tent, constantly running for our lives and trying to save the world at the same time. There was a lot of tension, not to mention we were carrying a dark object around with us. Dad just got to the point where he couldn't take it anymore. I think that was when I realised how I really felt about him, aside from being furious. I cried myself to sleep every night, but the rest of the time I had to be strong for your uncle, since I was all he had left."

Rose stared. She had heard the story plenty of times, but this part must have been left out. Of course, her dad was usually the one telling the story, so he had the opportunity to do some delicate editing. "But… he came back?"

Her mother smiled and nodded. "Yes, he came back. He risked his life to come back to us, because he cared a lot about me and Uncle Harry. Scorpius cares about you just as much. Maybe more. Your dad certainly never risked so much by being with me."

Rose sat up and wiped her eyes. "It's not fair."

"No."
"Mum?"

"Yes, sweetheart?"

"What do you think of him? I mean really."

"Truthfully? I haven't seen enough of him to form an opinion."

"Mu-um!"

"But… Neville and Hannah both care about him a lot. And I know Neville would never let him near Alice if he didn't trust him."

Rose smiled through her tears. "Yeah, he loves her. He's really good with her."

Her mum conjured her a handkerchief and passed it to her. "And just from listening to that song, I can tell he cares about you."

"It's just a song." She took the hanky and blew her nose.

"Perhaps. I'd like to get to know him better."

Rose stared down at her knees, tangling her fingers in the sparkly blue hem of her dress. "Dad doesn't like him."

Hermione chuckled. "Your dad is a believe-it-when-he-sees-it sort of person. He'll come around."

She wiped a hand over her eyes furiously. "How's that going to happen when he's not even here? Scorp, I mean, not Dad."

Hermione nodded. "It seems like that now, but you're only seventeen. There's still time. You just have to be patient. Now take off that dress and get into bed. You'll feel better in the morning."

~*-A-*~

~*-A-*~

Al woke up to someone knocking on the door. "G'way, Mum," he muttered sleepily. "It's a holiday."

He was just drifting off to sleep again when the knock came again, and there was a strange rattling echo to it. He realised with a jolt that it was not the door, but the window. He sat up.

Rose was hovering outside his window, dressed in a travelling cloak over a short black jacket and dark jeans, her hair braided tightly back in a business-like fashion. She was sitting on her Lightning broom, her birthday present from his parents, custom made for Chasers, dark red wood and beautifully trimmed twigs. She had one ankle propped up on the broom's shaft, like some absurd pixie. She waved enthusiastically at him.

Wondering if this wasn't all just a bizarre dream, he threw the covers aside and went to open the window. It was just big enough for a person to fit through - or at least, it had been when he was twelve. His mum had caught him at it the only time he'd tried, and the resulting telling-off had been so traumatic he had never tried it again. "Rose," he hissed as she swung her leg all the way over to land with a light thump on his windowsill. "What the hell are you doing? I was going to come over, today…"

"I know," she said, tossing her braid over her shoulder. "I didn't want to wait. I'm tired of being
patient. I've waited long enough."

"So?" Albus was getting more and more concerned over where this was going. He glanced over his shoulder to check the door was closed, and only then noticed the time. Seven thirty; his parents would be at work and James and Lily wouldn't rise for another three hours at least. "What's going on?" he asked, but he already knew the answer before she had even said it.

"I'm going to France." Her voice was breathy and excited, her eyes bright - not with tears for once, but with eager determination. "I'm going to find him. Are you coming?"

Chapter End Notes

*This chapter's song was brought to you by Dave Days.

Thanks everyone for your support! I read and cherish every single comment I receive and I do answer questions either here or on my blog if I think others may be interested in the answer. I'm hoping I can get another chapter up next Sunday… and let's just say we're getting to the point where some serious shit is gonna go down.
Chapter Summary

Draco's hand slammed down onto the antique desk, making Scorpius jump. "I want you to think, boy. You are my only son and heir. You will be the one to continue my legacy. I want you to agree with me because I am right, not because you think it is what I want to hear."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

2023

~*-S-*~

Two weeks earlier

~*-S-*~

Scorpius had never thought he would be glad to be going back to the townhouse. The relief at leaving Durmstrang was such that he did not even sulk when his classmates began talking excitedly of returning home to their families. While the cold around the castle had eased slightly towards the beginning of summer, Scorpius’ problems had not. He had taken his exams in a kind of half-stupor, answering the questions he understood and making his best guess at the rest. There was a competitive vibe amongst the Durmstrang students at this time of year, as higher marks would lead to better rooms and more privileges, but Scorpius did not join in. He aimed to pass, and he wasn't even sure of that much. He would probably still be stuck in the same tiny prison room when he returned. If he returned. Part of him still hoped he could talk his father around over the summer. There was a ship moored on the bank of a frozen lake, and they, the whole school, piled into it with their belongings. Scorp shrunk his trunk again and held onto it in case it got swept away from him in the crowd. With all the red-robed students crowding around him, he couldn't help but feel like a child lost in a supermarket, despite the fact that he was taller and older than most of them. The ship made a violent dipping motion, throwing Scorpius and the younger students, who didn't know any better, against those who had been smart enough to hold on. "Thanks Arkady," Scorp breathed as his friend set him upright again.

"Very easy to catch you," Arkady replied in French, shaking his head. "When you get home, eat more, yes?"

Scorpius nodded, but he knew he couldn't promise anything. His appetite still had not returned, and he doubted the townhouse cuisine would be the thing to bring it back. At least he might be able to get some proper sleep for once.

"I hope you do not come back," Arkady continued, as the ship dipped and swerved and made Scorpius' stomach churn unpleasantly. "You are sad here. Is not good for you, English boy."

Scorp smiled wryly. While Arkady and his friends had none of them bothered to learn his name, they
had at least made his life at Durmstrang passingly bearable. "Thanks, Arkady. I hope so too. If I don't come back, good luck getting in with Krum."

Arkady beamed.

They disembarked at some kind of port on the border. From there, several of the students headed for the International Floo. Many of the younger ones had their mothers or fathers to greet them. Scorpius looked around with some trepidation and saw Jean the footman - or was he the butler? Scorpius wasn't even sure - coming towards him. Of course, he thought bitterly. He waved a final goodbye to Arkady, Euan and the others as the man approached, and turned to go with him. "Another Portkey?" he said when Jean pulled out a battered old satchel. "Father is spoiling me."

The man did not even crack a smile, but held out the satchel and stared at his watch. Scorpius was wearing his own watch, as well, hidden under several layers and his fur cloak. He dared not check it, but then, the time was not so important. He put a hand on the satchel.

Seconds later he was standing in the hall at the townhouse. At least, he thought it was the townhouse. "What... the... where did it all come from?" he breathed, pulling off his fur hat as it was suddenly sweltering hot in all his layers, and staring around.

"Your father has made some very sound investments," Jean said, in his puffed-up servant voice. "He is waiting for you. If you would like to change, I shall tell him you have arrived."

Scorpius nodded, dumbly, still staring. Where before the hall had been void of decoration, it was now rich with colour. True, it was mostly green, but still. There was a thick embroidered rug on the floor, a long narrow tapestry on the wall. There was a portrait of some old woman Scorpius didn't recognise, and in the centre an intricately carved statue of a rearing unicorn. This last sent a shiver up his spine. It was beautiful, but the eyes were flat, colourless, and somehow dead, even though he knew it was just a statue.

His own room, thankfully, had not changed quite so much. He dumped his trunk at the foot of the bed and stripped off the fur cloak and then the rest of the layers. It was deliciously warm in here. He couldn't remember the last time he had been properly warm all the way through. He felt a strange urge to strip to his underwear and crawl into bed, never to emerge, but resisted it knowing his father was waiting to see him.

He had decided on his tactics before he had even left Durmstrang. Discipline was what his father wanted, and respect, well, he would get it. Anything if it convinced him that Scorpius was ready to go back to Hogwarts. He was willing to get down on his knees and beg, if that was what was necessary.

He put back on his blood-red Durmstrang robes, with considerably less on underneath, and combed his hair back. It had only just got long enough for a comb to go through it, and he patted it down in the hope that he wouldn't be forced to cut it again.

The young man reflected in his mirror had certainly changed since the last time he had been here. Arkady was right to worry about him. He was looking dangerously thin, with very little colour to his skin and dark circles under his eyes. His paleness was made even worse by the bright red of his school robes. His lips were dry and cracked, and there was a hard scab at the corner of his mouth where the lower one had split. He hardly recognised the person he had been two months ago.

He looked down at his left hand. His palm criss-crossed with new and old lacerations, the most recent curling uncomfortably around the base of his thumb. His only solace was that at least Reznicek would not be around when his exam results were sent by the school. The man had been
unimpressed with all Scorpius' efforts to improve, even when he explained that he had fixed the translation spell by himself after three sleepless nights in the library. He closed his hand into a fist. It stung, but that was all right. He had it to prove he had discipline now. Whatever that meant.

He took a deep breath, and hurried down to the study.

Jean opened the door for him when he knocked. He had also changed out of his warm coat into his usual dark blue robe. He closed the door, but stayed inside. Scorpius wished he wouldn't. He had a feeling the conversation would be humiliating enough without an audience. On the bright side, at least it might be nice to have a whole conversation in English that wasn't about Potions.

His father was sitting behind the desk. He too was pale, but he wore it well, appearing more elegant than sickly. That was annoying. Scorpius wondered if anyone had ever told his father to go out and get some sun. He doubted it.

"Father?" he prompted, after a good minute and a half had gone by without the man so much as looking up from his paperwork. The grey eyes lifted to meet his, just for a moment, then the man jerked his head towards a chair. Scorpius sat.

Draco was frowning. "Your mouth is bleeding."

Scorpius touched his lip with the tip of a finger, but the scab was whole. "It's fine."

"Hm." His father sat back in his chair and regarding his son critically. "That uniform is an eyesore."

Well, Scorpius thought, at least we agree on something. "Yes father."

"I imagine it's the best thing you have at the moment," the man said thoughtfully. "You have grown since the last time we bought you new robes."

You noticed. "Yes father."

"In the meantime you may wear your Hogwarts robes. At least your hair no longer resembles that of an adolescent Muggle."

Scorpius forced himself to sit straight and still, to let no unsavoury emotion cross his face. "Yes, father."

Draco gave him a searching look. Then he sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Is this new affectation a product of what you have learned from Durmstrang?" he asked quizzically.

Scorpius blinked. "Sir? What affectation?"

"Agreeing with me about everything."

He swallowed. "I… thought that was what you wanted."

Draco's hand slammed down onto the antique desk, making Scorpius jump. "I want you to think, boy. You are my only son and heir. You will be the one to continue my legacy. I want you to agree with me because I am right, not because you think it is what I want to hear."

"And if I don't think you're right?" the words were out of his mouth before they had quite bypassed his brain. He prepared himself for an outburst.

"Then I shall have to be the one to convince you otherwise," his father said instead. "I should have taken a hand in your education much earlier, but…" he waved a hand noncommittally. Scorpius knew
that to finish that sentence would be breaking his own rule about never mentioning Astoria except when making thinly-veiled threats. "Tell me," his father went on, in a tone that suggested he was picking up an entirely new train of thought. "Have you given any thought to your future? To what you will do after your NEWTs?"

Scorpius swallowed. He had been waiting for the subject of NEWTs to come up. He had decided it was the best segway into his argument, but he hadn't expected it to come quite so soon. He wasn't sure he was ready. "Father… I honestly don't think I can even pass my NEWTs. Not at Durmstrang - please listen," he said quickly when his father's eyes narrowed considerably. "I did my best, I swear, but they expect me to do all seven subjects. I'm so far behind in most of them I don't think I'll ever catch up, especially when they don't even teach them in English." The lack of any immediate argument spurred him on. "Father, if you let me go back to Hogwarts I swear I'll drop Muggle Studies. I'll do Potions instead, I think I could manage that, and I'll come top of the year in everything else. I can do it. Please, father."

There was silence for a while. Scorpius counted it a miracle that his request hadn't been shot down immediately. Then his father said, "you didn't answer my question."

"Sir?"

"What you're going to do after NEWTs."

Scorpius stared. Somehow he didn't think the truth would go down well. I want to be a musician, father. I want to be in the first wizarding band to be famous in both the Muggle world and the wizarding world. I want to start a music revolution. I want to change the meaning of the name Malfoy. I want to go to Teddy's wedding. I want to impress Rose's family enough that we could get married ourselves one day. I want to be free."

No. It was a test. He had to be careful. "No sir," he said eventually. "I assumed I would be doing whatever you do, now."

A pleased smile crept across his father's face and he knew he had given the right answer. "Very well," Draco said, nodding. "This summer you will assist me in my work. If you do well, and there are no mistakes - none, mind - I will allow you to return to Hogwarts in September."

Scorpius became aware that his mouth was hanging wide open and shut it quickly. That was it? A little admin work for his father's business and the nightmare was over? "…really, father?" he asked, his mind racing, looking for loopholes. "You promise?"

"Don't be such a child," his father snapped, the smile dissipating as quickly as it had come. "I'm not going to give you an Unbreakable Vow. We start tomorrow morning."

Scorpius leapt out of his chair, deciding to make good his escape before the man could change his mind. "Yes sir," he said, breathless with joy. "Thank you sir!"

He fled the study and hurried out into the hall, slowing as he reached the stairs. Jean had followed him out. "Is everything all right, sir?" he asked, in French, peering over as Scorpius leant on the bannister.

"I… I just don't get it," Scorpius thought out loud. He was too surprised to be careful about what he said in front of his father's servant. "A month ago he was ready to pack me off to that Siberian prison forever. Now it's all forgiven?"

Jean smiled, the first smile Scorpius thought he had ever seen on that thin face. It did not quite reach
the eyes. "Your deception angered him considerably. I have since convinced him that crippling you academically might not be in his best interests."

Scorpius blinked. "You convinced him?" There was no answer, only another humourless smile. "Er… thank you."

"It was not for you I did this thing. He is a man who has suffered much. Betrayed, abandoned by people he trusted."

He shifted uncomfortably. "To be fair," he protested, "he tends to bring that out in people."

Jean cocked his head to one side and gave him a mocking little half-bow.

Still, Scorpius thought as he fell back onto his green-coverleted bed and stared up at the disturbingly high ceiling. It was something to think about.

~*-S-*~

Present day

~*-S-*~

He had never thought much about his father's business, beyond wondering how it could make so much money in so short a time. He soon found out that at least part of the reason was the sheer cost of the products they delivered.

"Four thousand Galleons?" he said, holding up a roll of parchment to the light as though the answer might be written there in invisible ink. "For a necklace?"

"A very old necklace," his father said shortly. "These are artefacts, son, not frivolities."

"No kidding," Scorpius muttered, though not so loudly that his father could hear. For two weeks he had been helping with the paperwork, and it was easily the most time he had spent with his father since he had gone to Hogwarts, and maybe even before. He had been surprised to discover that his father wanted him to work in the study, but the more he thought about it the more he realised the sense behind that decision. It was hard work, and he needed training. It was several days before Scorpius really felt like he knew what he was doing, and didn't have to ask a question every few minutes.

Aside from his questions, they mostly sat in silence, but for the occasional rustle of parchment or the opening and shutting of drawers. Goyle occasionally came by with more orders, or to drop off large bags of Galleons. These went, to Scorpius' surprise, in a safe that was magically secreted away behind the desk. He didn't dare ask to learn the spell that opened it, but it was a fascinating bit of magic. The charm was a complicated incantation coupled with a very specific wand movement, and he thought his father might be the only one to be able to open it, as well. He thought it might be some kind of blood spell. They were very traditional for hiding valuables among Pureblood families.

Jean was always in and out. Evidently at some point over the last two years he had been elevated to a sort of personal assistant. There were less maids than before, and none of them were the same ones. Apparently it was either too hard to hold on to a job in the Malfoy household, or no sane person would want to. Scorpius tended to lean towards the latter. The food was terrible, though his father never seemed to notice. The man barely left the study but worked continuously from sunrise to sunset. Scorpius himself slept better than he had at Durmstrang, but not a lot better. The maids more than once told him he needed to grow more flesh on his bones.
He always wore the watch. Warm weather aside, he made sure to wear long sleeves, but wearing it at least gave him some sense of self, reminded him that he did have friends, somewhere out there. People who cared enough about him to give him a watch, even if his own family didn't think it important.

Whenever he could, he went outside. It was so good to feel fresh, warm air on his face that he went out even when it was pouring, and breathed in the clean smell of the rain. There was no time to do homework. He ignored his Durmstrang books in any case, promising himself that he would be back to Hogwarts in a few weeks and would have no need of badly translated copies of *Dark Arts for Advanced Wizardry*. On the nights he couldn't sleep, he read his old Potions books to prepare for his new NEWT. When even that failed to send him off, he thought about Rose, and of how happy she would be when he boarded the Hogwarts Express with everyone else.

The rest of the time he was stuck in the study with his father. It wasn't as bad as he might have imagined. That much time in close quarters had taught him the do's and don'ts of family interaction that he probably should have learned a long time ago. Most of all he had worked out how much he could get away with, which was a surprising amount. As long he stayed away from certain triggering subjects, his father could even take a joke every now and then.

"Well, this one's dated April," he said now, rolling his eyes. "You should have got me to help with this ages ago."

"Filing is not one of Goyle's strong points," his father admitted. "Speaking of, he should have been here by now."

"I can survive without his presence," Scorp said, pulling the next pile of parchment towards him.

"Most people can." Draco stretched, went to the tall window and peered through the blinds. "But I've known Goyle for a long time. He's a loyal… friend." The word 'friend' sounded strange and forced in his mouth.

Scorp shrugged. Friend he might be, but he had never liked Goyle. His mother hadn't either, especially when Scorpius was younger. Vaguely, he remembered there being some scandal with a young boy. He hadn't understood it when he was little, but now it certainly made him wary, especially remembering the way his mother had tried never to leave him alone with the older man, and the creepy way Goyle had always looked at him when he stayed at the townhouse.

"Hm." Draco let the shutters close and stepped out of the light.

"What?" Scorpius looked up from his pile of parchment. "Is something wrong?"

"Perhaps. I thought I saw…" Draco shook his head. "Never mind. Jean!"

"Yes sir?" the butler put his head around the study door. He always seemed to be just around the corner.

"Try and find out where the hell Goyle's got to, will you?"

"Yes sir."

Scorpius went back to his papers, watching out of the corner of his eye as his father closed the curtains over the blinds. "Is there something out there?" he asked eventually, unable to contain his curiosity.

Before his father could answer, Jean returned, leading a breathless Goyle. By the soot on his robes
he had come through the kitchen Floo, the only fireplace in the house that was connected to the public network. The one in the study and the other, in the little-used living room, were on some sort of private line you could only get to from special access points like the one Jean had taken Scorpius through, the summer after fourth year. "What are you doing?" Draco hissed, and Goyle gave Scorpius a look that suggested he shouldn't be privy to the answer.

Draco led Goyle out of the study into the hallway and closed the door. Dropping all pretence of disinterest, Scorpius got out of his chair and made an attempt to eavesdrop. The door, however, had heavy soundproofing charms on it, and he couldn't hear anything at all through it. Disappointed, he went to the curtains instead and made a chink, pushing the shutters apart at eye level with his forefinger and thumb.

The street outside was often busy, leading into the Rue Chouette as it did. There were a few people now going to or from Wizarding Paris, some of them families with young children. It took him a moment to spot what must have worried his father so. There were two people dressed in black standing on the other side of the street. Unlike everyone else, they were not moving, not headed toward either direction. They were looking at the house. Weird.

Suddenly he remembered something he hadn't thought about in a long time. That summer when Draco had taken him shopping for school things, the summer after second year when he had been worried about how to buy his Muggle Studies books, a man had stopped them in the street. Scorpius remembered him being toad-like in stature, wearing expensive robes. He had insisted on a private conversation with his father. Scorpius wondered what had made him remember that. He didn't see how it could have anything to do with the people out there now...

As he watched, one of them made a shrugging motion, and the hood of their cloak fell back to reveal a braid of long, red hair.

The door latch clicked, and he tugged the curtains closed again, heart pounding, and hurtled back to his seat before the door could open. Swearing fervently in his head, he forced himself to breathe lightly, trying to look for all the world as though he hadn't moved. It was Rose. And someone with her… Al, maybe? Or Teddy… who else would know where he lived? Had he ever given them an address? More importantly, what on earth were they doing here?

"Scorpius."

He looked up, not having to fake the surprise on his face. "Yes father?"

"I have a job for you."

"Sir, this is not a -" Goyle interrupted. He looked harried, and his hair was sticking up above his ears, making him look like an absurd bulldog.

"Shut up, Goyle," Draco snapped. "My son is more than capable."

Scorpius stood up and tried to look keen. More than anything he needed an excuse to get out of the house. He had to talk to them, had to find out… but he had no idea how to do it without his father cottoning on to what he was doing.

"One of our couriers has become indisposed," his father said, ignoring Goyle's piteous expression. "I need you to deliver a package to London."

Scorpius blinked. "London?"

"That is what I just said. You will need to take the Floo to a designated access point from which you
will walk the rest of the way. Jean will give you details."

"Why doesn't Goyle just..." Scorpius started to say. He couldn't go to London now!

"I need Gregory here," his father insisted. "Go. Do not disappoint me."

Scorpius nodded, since that seemed to be what was expected. "Yes, father."

He followed Jean out of the study. Before the door closed he heard Goyle make a muttered protest, and his father say "Never mind that now, we've got other problems to deal with..."

*Get out, Rosie*, he thought desperately as Jean went to the kitchen and retrieved a small package small enough to fit in Scorpius' pocket. *He knows you're there. Get out you idiots, before he finds you.* He wasn't actually sure what would happen, but he didn't want to find out.

Jean brought him to attention and gave him Floo directions. He repeated the five Floo points three times to make sure Scorpius remembered.

"Can't you just write it down?" Scorpius sighed.

Jean shook his head. "To do so would be a security risk. We don't want our trade route to become public knowledge."

Scorpius frowned. "Why not?"

Jean merely repeated the Floo points again and made Scorpius repeat them. Only then did he hand over the package. "The last point opens on Charing Cross Road. You know how to get to Knockturn Alley?"

Immediately Scorpius felt a sense of foreboding, though he couldn't have said where exactly it came from. "Yes, but -"

"The shop you will deliver to is called Borgin & Burkes. The contact is Ezekius. Got that?"

Something rang like a bell in Scorpius' brain. Ezekius. He knew that name from somewhere. "Yeah, I have it."

"Repeat it."

Scorpius sighed and repeated all the information again. Jean nodded at the package. "Keep that out of sight until you enter the shop. Do not, under any circumstances, open it. Come back the same way and don't stop for anything. You don't need to collect payment, but you must give the package to Ezekius in person."

Scorpius didn't even have a chance to argue this time before he was ushered to the fireplace in the living room. Jean offered him Floo powder. Scorpius took a pinch, threw it into the fire, and called out: *"catre-cinq la cours!"*

He came out in an empty room. Literally empty. There was nothing in it except another fireplace, on the other side of the room from where he had come out. The walls and floor were dark floorboard, and there were no windows or doors at all. Scorpius took a step into the room and took a breath.

He was on his way to London. Rose and probably Albus were at the townhouse.

Bugger.
He bit his lip. He wondered how long it would take to reach Knockturn Alley. Would Jean know exactly how long? Would his father? Did he have time to stop at the Leaky Cauldron, to give Neville or Hannah a message to send to Rose? Would a message even reach her in time? For a brief, crazy moment he considered doubling back, ducking out of the house and yelling at them to get away. He really hoped they wouldn't do anything stupid.

He pulled the package out of his pocket. Jean had been very keen on his not opening it. Some precious old piece of junk, probably. Who would pay for some of the stuff they carted around he had no idea. And hand-couriered! What was wrong with good old-fashioned owl post, he would like to know.

And yet, there was something sinister about the whole thing. Something about the way Goyle had acted when Draco suggested Scorpius take the package. Something about the man called Ezekius, something to do with the toad man from Rue Chouette.

The package was giving him a strange, sick feeling. He stuffed it back in his pocket. He couldn't do anything about Rose now. He had to deliver the damn thing so his father would keep his promise and send him back to Hogwarts.

He walked over to the other fireplace, grabbed Floo powder from the pot on the mantelpiece, and yelled out the next address. The second room was much like the first, another French address. The third address was across the channel in Cornwall, the fourth in Birmingham. By the time he came out on the Charing Cross Road exit, he was starting to feel nauseous from all the spinning. He made a mental note to suggest to his father that they shorten the damn trade route.

It had only taken ten minutes, but the street seemed oddly dark when he stepped out of the nondescript little building into Muggle London. It was about three doors down from the little bookshop where he and Rose had had their first kiss on Christmas day. He tried not to look at it, but went the other direction towards the Leaky Cauldron and the entrance to Diagon Alley.

If he had seen Hannah or anyone immediately, he might have stopped, but the barman was unfamiliar and the only waitress he could see was an older woman with a reputation for gossip. He ducked his head and strolled with the tide through the pub, deciding that he could look for someone on the way back. Something, a strange feeling that had been itching at him since Goyle's appearance, told him it was probably best not to have to explain the package in the pocket of his robes.

He came out through the back door, tapped the requisite bricks with his wand and walked through into Wizarding London.

He knew the way to Knockturn Alley, though he had never been down there. No one had ever forbidden it, specifically, he just hadn't even felt the need to explore. Besides there was usually an old hag or part-troll standing outside the entrance, selling wizened fingers, bits of dried scalp or other such nasty wares, and he usually gave them a wide berth. Today he forced himself to walk past into the dim light of the shadowed street beyond.

From here he wasn't sure which way to look. All the buildings looked the same, grimy stone with dark windows. Asking someone was probably out of the question. He stopped for a moment, looking to either side for a shop sign. "Six sickles for a bezoar, dearie," cackled one of the aforesaid hags, appearing at his side as if out of nowhere.

"No thank you," he said quickly. He seriously doubted the wizened old things on the tray were real bezoars, especially for six sickles. He hurried off in the other direction.

In the end he almost went past the shop. The window was half boarded up, the words Borgin & Bu
in faded and peeling gold letters on the door. He paused. The place didn't look at all open. Jean hadn't said what he should do if there was no one in. Gingerly he pushed at the door. A bell rang, making him jump, but no one appeared behind the dark, grimy-looking counter.

He let the door shut behind him. There was one dim lamp at the back of the shop, and the boarded-up window hardly provided much more light. He could just about make out some bottles and what looked disturbingly like a human skull on a shelf. As he came further in he saw a low table that on closer inspection seemed to be some kind of tiny piano. Experimentally he reached out and touched one of the keys. The sound was jangled and tuneless, and he pulled his hand back quickly.

"Ah, the harmonium." He whirled round to see a short, rattish-looking man coming out from behind the counter, where moments before there had been an empty space. "An antique. I can give you a good price."

"Er… no thanks," Scorpius said quickly. "I'm not buying, I'm delivering. I need to see Ezekius."

The man's sickly-sweet manner evaporated, and he sneered as he looked Scorpius up and down. "Oh you do, do you?"

"Yes, I do." Scorpius pulled the package from his pocket. "I'm meant to give him this."

The man looked at the package eagerly. "I'll take that."

"Are you Ezekius?"

"Ezekius isn't here."

Scorpius sighed. He had half a mind to just toss the shopkeeper the damn package and have done, but somehow he just knew his father would find out if he made the delivery to the wrong person. And his return to Hogwarts was hanging in the balance. "Look, I really need to give this to Ezekius. You better fetch him or I'll have to go all the way back again."

The man hesitated. "Well," he said after a moment. "Let me see what I can do."

He turned away, and suddenly the air was filled with a shrill shrieking sound, so loud that Scorpius found himself bent double with his hands pressed over his ears. He looked up to see the shopkeeper hurrying back towards the counter, but before he could yell a demand to find out what the hell was going on, heavy, gloved hands grabbed him from behind.

The shrieking intensified as he let go his ears to hit out at whoever was trying to grab him, only to find a sharp wand-point pressed against his throat as even more hands forced him to his knees, his arms were dragged behind his back and magical ropes twisted around his wrists. The package was ripped from his hands, but that was the last thing he was worried about now.

There seemed to be dozens of people in the tiny shop now, all dressed in black, and for a bizarre moment Scorpius wondered if he was being kidnapped. Then he saw the shopkeeper being dragged back by even more black-robed figures, his fingers dusted with green Floo powder. Clearly he had been trying to get away. Then one of the men holding Scorpius forced his head down with one hand so that all he could see was the filthy floor and about a hundred pairs of dark boots moving about.

"Department of Magical Law Enforcement!" he heard one of the men yell. "This is a raid! Resist and you will be stunned! Will someone please get that damned alarm turned off!"

"Yessir!" someone shouted from far back in the crowd of intruders, and the shrieking sound suddenly and blissfully stopped.
"Is this everyone?" asked a calmer voice from somewhere above him, and Scorpius' heart sank like a stone. He knew that voice. This isn't happening, he thought desperately. Please let this not be happening.

"All clear back here," said another voice. "Boxes of stuff though; I think we've hit a fair-sized jackpot."

"Ooh, what have we here?" Scorpius heard the sound of tearing paper, and he guessed one of them was opening the damn package. "This is a nasty looking thing. What do you think it does?"

"Knowing the Shadow, probably makes you vomit your kidneys out your mouth. Don't touch it. Get all the stuff back to the Ministry and escort Mr Borgin to a holding cell. I want to talk to him later."

Scorpius could hear the shopkeeper cursing and whimpering as he was dragged out. He tried to look up, fighting against the pressure that was keeping his head down. "Hold still, Shadow Junior," growled one of the men holding him. "Sir, this one's hardly more than a kid."

"Let's have a look at him, then," sighed the authoritative voice. "Who does Shadow send to Knockturn Alley to do his dirty work?"

The man holding his head released the pressure, and in the same movement grasped his hair, pulling his face up. Scorpius found himself looking up into the astonished face of Harry Potter, and, wearing an expression that could only be described as furious, that of Ron Weasley.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! I've been waiting to drop that one on you for weeks. Muahaha.

I can't promise you a chapter next week, so we'll see. Maybe it'll depend on your lovely comments!

Don't forget my blog, misssaisonfic.tumblr.com, I would love people to ask questions, send me pictures, music suggestions, fic recs, anything.
Sitting alone in the holding cell some hours later, Scorpius wondered how on earth he could have been such a bloody idiot.

He'd had suspicions, of course. He'd been sorting the papers and counting the Galleons. You couldn't spend two weeks going through all that paperwork without having some doubts about the legitimacy of the business. But he had been thinking more along the lines of... well, fraudulent antique jewellery, and suchlike. Not hurting anyone except the poor buggers dumb enough to pay four thousand Galleons for a necklace worn by Helga Hufflepuff, or a fragment of Merlin's staff, or whatever. Not this.

There hadn't been a lot of time to make sense of it during the raid. Mr Potter and Mr Weasley had stared at him for a long time. Then a slow realisation seemed to come over them both as they turned to look at each other.

"Malfoy," Mr Weasley had said, in a tone that suggested both wonder and satisfaction. "Harry -"

Mr Potter held up a hand. "Scorpius," he had said, not unkindly. "What are you doing here?"

Scorpius had found himself unable to speak. As much as he wanted to explain, to tell them it wasn't his fault, and, if necessary, to beg for mercy, the words got lost somewhere between his brain and his mouth.

One the men holding him shook him roughly by the shoulder. "The Head Auror just asked you a question, boy."

"Harry -" Ron urged, getting more and more excited by the moment.

"Not now, Ron," Mr Potter said, low. He shook his head at the Auror who was shaking Scorpius. "Enough. We'll deal with him later."

A couple of Aurors had dragged him away, and stuck him in this place. The shopkeeper was no doubt somewhere nearby, but the holding cell was concrete on all four sides, giving very little indication as to what lay beyond. He hadn't seen much of the journey, and what he had seen he could barely remember. He had been too shocked, too terrified to do anything but let them toss him into the tiny room and slam the door. There wasn't even anywhere to sit. After a few minutes of frantic pacing, he curled up into a corner and tried to put his mess of thoughts and emotions into some kind of order.

His brain was still boiling with them even now; it seemed like hours later though it might have been less, it was hard to tell. His father was involved with the Shadow, that much was clear. He probably had been for years. That meant Goyle was also in on it, and Jean too, even if only in a servile capacity. He wondered if his mother had known where all the newfound wealth had come from.
Was he ever going to tell me? he wondered, thinking about the way his father had smiled happily when Scorpius had announced he wanted to follow in his footsteps. Or was he going to wait until I was in too deep to do anything about it? Inwardly he was leaning towards the latter. Perhaps it had been a test, or a game, to see how long it would be before he figured it all out.

No wonder Goyle hadn't wanted Scorpius, a known Muggle sympathiser, to act as courier. Most of the Shadow's more dangerous products were designed only to harm Muggles, at least if you believed everything you read in the papers. Not all of them though. Scorpius felt bile rise in his throat as he remembered. The Shadow, or someone buying from the Shadow, tried to kill Harry Potter. And nearly succeeded.

He remembered the look on Ron Weasley's face when he had seen him in Borgin and Burkes. *I'm a criminal. A bloody criminal. Whatever was in that package could have killed someone. They have every right to send me to prison.* He doubted Mr Weasley would ever come around to Scorpius dating his daughter now, even if he somehow managed to avoid Azkaban after this.

And Rose was still at the townhouse. He hadn't even had a chance to tell anyone.

He stared down at his hand, tracing the healing curse lines across his palm with his fingertips. The Aurors had taken everything from him that could be used as a weapon, which meant his wand, his shoelaces, whatever good those might have done him, and his precious coming-of-age watch. His only comfort was that he was, for all legal intents and purposes, still a minor. This was less of a comfort when he remembered that he was seventeen, and, by the British Ministry's standards, *not* a minor. He could only hope that the same technicality that had allowed his father to take him out of Hogwarts would be enough to get him off for a first offence.

He jumped as someone, somewhere, screamed. It wasn't a scream of pain, perhaps of anger or frustration, but it sent a shudder down his spine. *I don't belong here. I don't belong here I don't belong here…* He swallowed as his stomach turned over and his throat burned with bile. He would not throw up. He didn't need anything so pathetic to add to the current situation.

He remembered how Albus and Lily had worried in the days after Christmas when they weren't sure if there would be another attack on their father. He wondered if Albus would blame him for not knowing. He wondered what Rose would say. That he was an idiot probably, but he knew that already. The image of her face floating in his minds eye sparked a series of imagined scenarios, each worse than the last, ranging from her bursting into tears and hugging him and defending him to all and sundry to her pulling out her wand and telling him never to come anywhere near her again and that they were through. After the day he had had, both seemed equally likely.

He felt sicker and sicker as he imagined the looks on everyone's faces. The people closest to him, who trusted him, had believed in him. Neville and Hannah especially, he knew would be disappointed. And then he would have to face Lizzie, and Teddy, and Gaius and Peter, and the rest of the people in their year, and… but that was assuming he ever even got back to school. He kept forgetting that he was probably going to prison, and even if he didn't, would McGonagall even take him back now? He wasted what felt like another half an hour imagining all the horrible ways that conversation might go.

And what if he did go to Azkaban? If no one stood up for him? Would he go mad like his grandfather had? People said that didn't happen anymore since they had gotten rid of the Dementors, but after a month at Durmstrang Scorp knew he would go mad, locked up on an island in the middle of nowhere. Maybe they'd give him the same cell as his father. Maybe the other inmates would gang up on him just like people had done his whole life, first the older Gryffindors, then the Slytherins, then the Gryffindors in his year, then Reznicek and his toadies, except this time it wouldn't be just a
bloody nose or a medieval punishment curse. They might actually kill him in there, if he didn't go mad first.

He wondered if Rose or Albus would visit him.

He wondered what would happen with Cleo and the band.

He wondered how the Longbottoms would explain things to little Alice.

He wondered if he would ever see his mother again.

After what seemed like a lifetime of waiting, something clicked. It couldn't have been a key, because the impenetrable door didn't seem to have any lock, but it opened in any case, smoothly and without a hint of a creak. That seemed even creepier, somehow. "Come on you," said a stern-looking wizard in Auror's robes. When Scorp failed immediately to move, the man made a sharp gesture with his wand. "I said come on, unless you want me to drag you."

Scorpius got up, with some difficulty. His legs felt like jelly, and he was cold all over. Not a physical cold but a strange sort of numbness that left him feeling dizzy and stupid. He swallowed hard and tried to concentrate. *Just do as the nice man says,* he thought to himself in a weird fit of inner hysteria.

"Hold out your hands," the Auror demanded.

Scorpius was used to this request. He half expected the man to lash him across the palm with his wand. But this was not Professor Reznicek, and he was no longer at Durmstrang. Instead, when he obediently offered his hands, the Auror snapped bright red handcuffs around his wrists, one at a time. Enchanted cuffs.

"There goes my escape plan," he said with a dull, nervous chuckle. The man was unamused by this lame attempt at humour.

"Move," he snapped instead, gesturing Scorpius forward with his wand. Very few other options were open to him at this point, so he obeyed.

Outside the cell was a round room not dissimilar to the cell itself, except that there were four doors. Scorpius only vaguely remembered coming through it. He supposed that two of the doors must lead to other cells, and the fourth, which the Auror was now opening, must be the exit. Opening the door took some time - it involved a complicated-looking rune drawn in the air with his wand, followed by a whispered incantation and another wand movement. It seemed like a lot of security. Scorpius wondered who was in the other cells, if anyone.

When the door was finally open, the man motioned for him to go through it. There was a long stone corridor, then some stairs, then another corridor followed by more stairs. It reminded Scorpius of Durmstrang; all it needed were slates on the doors with names written in chalk. For a moment, he had a dreadful sickening feeling that he might be in Azkaban already, but that theory was quickly and blissfully disproven as they came out through another door into an open office space. Men and women in Auror robes populated the desks. Here and there were a couple of obvious civilians in chairs, being questioned. A wizard in eye-watering orange robes was on the far side of the room, waving his arms angrily as he made his complaint to a harried-looking Auror.

Several of the people around them turned to stare at him as his Auror guard steered him through the room by means of a firm hand on his shoulder. As soon as he had taken a few steps past them, some of them turned to each other and began muttering darkly. He caught one of them say, " Bloody
"Keep moving," his guide said sharply when he might have stopped to see who had spoken.

"Interview room six, Ian," said a man with a pinched face and glasses as he passed carrying a stack of paperwork. "They're not here yet, but I've got Badger in there."

"Isn't that a conflict of interest, or something?" the man called Ian asked, frowning. "I thought they were related."

"He assures me it's not. Don't argue, man, I need you to meet with the task force. They're straight through to France in an hour."

"Yes sir." Ian began walking again, tugging Scorpius along

The man made a sharp turn, causing Scorpius to almost stumble as they went around a corner and down to a door marked six. Ian knocked on it, and it opened.

"Thank you Ian. I can take it from here until Mr Potter arrives."

It was Teddy.

Scorpius almost fell down in relief as his cousin stood aside to let him in before closing the door to Ian's retreating back. "Well," the older man said, giving him an incongruous look. He had dark hair today, almost pitch black over bright blue eyes, and was wearing dark jeans and maroon T-shirt. "You're in a spot of bother, aren't you?"

"Teddy!" Scorpius gasped. "Am I glad to see you."

"Bad day?" Teddy smiled grimly as he lifted his wand. The handcuffs fell off Scorpius' wrists, leaving a faint tingle of magic where they had been.

"You have no idea. What's going on? Where am I? Am I going to prison?"

"Whoa, slow down." Teddy pushed him gently into into a chair and perched on the edge of the large metal table before it. Only then did Scorpius notice the grimness of the room he had walked into. If he had ever seen a Cold War film featuring an interrogation, he might have found it comparable. The walls were painted a depressing shade of grey. The table and three chairs were the only furniture, and there was a large mirror covering one wall. "One thing at a time," Teddy said calmly. "You're in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

"In the Ministry?"

"Yeah. We didn't bring you in through the front entrance, of course. They don't like us bringing criminals in by the front door."

Scorpius' heart sank. "I'm not -"

"Yeah, I know you're not. Calm down. They're not going to throw you in Azkaban for one delivery, as long as you cooperate."

Scorpius took a deep breath. Relief started to pour off him in waves. "I'll cooperate my arse off, believe me. Teddy, I swear… I had… no idea, I -"

He stopped. He wasn't sure why. Somehow he wasn't quite sure what he had been about to say. Instead he rubbed his wrists and stared down at the cold metal table. "What's going to happen?" he
asked, in a low voice.

"Harry's going to come talk to you, soon as he's back from evidence. They're cataloguing all the stuff they found at Borgin and Burkes now. They've been planning this raid for months. I don't think anyone expected you to be the courier."

*Neither did I*, Scorpius thought darkly.

There was a loud knock on the door and the man with the glasses poked his head in. "All right in here, Badger?" he asked, without even looking at Scorpius.

"Fine," Teddy said shortly.

"Good, good. They'll be here in a minute, then I need you to come see me for an assignment."

Teddy waved assent and the door closed again. Scorpius smiled despite himself. "Badger?"

Teddy grimaced. "School nicknames never go away, do they? There was an incident in Transfiguration where I tried to show why Metamorphmagery can't be extended to full Animagery - anyway these things seem to stick."

Somehow the mention of Transfiguration had jolted something in Scorpius' memory. "Teddy, I have to tell you - someone - I have to tell someone - I know I should have told Mr Weasley but it was all so -"

Teddy held up a hand. "Scorpius, it's okay. You don't have to say anything yet. Just answer all the questions truthfully, and -"

"No, this is something else." Scorpius reached up to run a hand through his hair, remembered it was all gone now, and dropped it again. "It's Rose. She's in France."

Teddy stood up quickly, staring at him. "What?"

"Before I left - she - I saw her - at the house. Someone was with her, it could have been Al…"

Teddy swore. "Are you sure?"

He hesitated. "Well, I didn't get a good look… I guess I could be wrong. Feel free to tell me there's no possible way they could be there."

Teddy swore again, even worse. "Okay. I'll find out. Whatever you do, do not tell Ron. I'll sort it out."

"But she -" Scorpius swallowed. He *wanted* to say that she was in danger, that she was quite literally walking into a smuggler's den, but somehow the words just wouldn't come out.

"I'll take care of it," Teddy said firmly.

"Take care of what?" Behind them the door had opened and both Harry Potter and Ron Weasley were standing there. *This is like a nightmare, Scorpius thought. Except that even my imagination could never have dreamed up anything as bad as this.*

Teddy didn't even blink at the question. Scorpius was starting to see how he could make a good spy. "He hasn't eaten anything," his cousin said calmly. This was true, though Scorpius felt privately that he might never need to eat ever again. "I was going to organise some food."
"He can eat after we talk," Ron said darkly, and Scorpius thought he had never heard anyone speak with so much venom in their voice.

His cousin patted him on the shoulder and left the room. Scorpius wondered, in the back of his mind as the two Aurors came around to sit in the chairs on the other side of the forbidding metal table, if Teddy would be able to go straight to Paris or if he would have to do his 'assignment' first. He hoped he got there quickly. He was having a bad enough time worrying about himself, let alone the others.

"Recordus," Mr Weasley muttered, and balanced his wand upright on the table, where it stood, quivering slightly.

They had changed out of the black robes they had worn for the raid. Mr Weasley wore dark blue robes, and Mr Potter had a black cloak on over a grey jumper. There was a gold, seven-pointed star pinned to his cloak, that marked him as the Head of Magical Law Enforcement. These changes didn't make them any less intimidating, however. Scorpius started to feel sick again, especially when neither of them said anything but began to flick through papers with very serious expressions. He sat very still, resisting the urge to scratch the itchy hair at the back of his neck.

When Mr Potter finally spoke, it made him jump. "State your full name for the record please."


"Age?"

"Seventeen."

"Occupation?"

Scorpius looked with confusion from one to the other. "I… I'm still at school, you know that -"

"For the record, Mr Malfoy." Mr Potter's face was impassive.

*Albus' dad. He's Albus' dad, Scorpius repeated to himself. Albus talks about his dad all the time. He's a good guy. A hero. No one to be afraid of."

"Student, then," he said, forcing himself to meet the man's eerily green eyes. "I mean, I've been a waiter, I've helped…"

Unless you're a criminal, said another, treacherous voice that sounded suspiciously like his own father. *Potter's put away more Dark Wizards than any of his predecessors, and he's not even fifty. He wouldn't blink at putting away a no-good Smuggler who deals in dark objects.*

"Would you care to explain what you were doing in Borgin and Burkes this afternoon?" Mr Weasley asked, before Scorpius could even get his head all the way around the last question.

"I…" What had he been doing there? Suddenly he wasn't so sure.  

"Mr Malfoy?" Potter prompted after about a minute. "Just answer the question."

"I… I'm not… I was…"

Mr Weasley leaned over the table, putting his face close to Scorp's in a way that made him want to shrink back. "Let me explain today's interrogation strategy," he said, in a tone like ice. "Usually, Harry's the bad cop. See, most people are afraid of him. Big damn hero and all that. He stands here..."
Rosie. Suddenly she was all Scorpius could think about. Her dad had the power to keep them apart, maybe forever. Of course there may have been a slight underlying threat of physical violence as well, but Scorpius could only focus on one thing at a time at the moment.

The only problem was, he wanted to tell the truth, wanted to help, but every time he tried to speak, the details of what he wanted to say seemed to slip away from him.

"We know you're working for the Shadow," Mr Weasley continued, "and let me tell you that's the biggest clue in this case so far, and we've got a fairly good idea now who's pulling all the strings. So if you don't want to go down with the boss, you'll tell us now... who gave you the package?"

What package? He remembered, he did, but as soon as he opened his mouth it was though his brain drew a complete blank. "I don't... I'm not sure."

"Who is the Shadow?" Weasley demanded.

"I don't know!" he shouted in frustration.

Mr Weasley slammed his fist down on the table. "You don't want to lie to me right now, Malfoy, you really, really don't."

"Ron," Mr Potter said, an edge of warning in his voice.

"Who gave you the package?" Mr Weasley demanded, ignoring his partner. "We just need a name. Who are you protecting?"

"I'm not," Scorpius insisted. He could feel tears of frustration welling up in the corners of his eyes. "I swear, I - I can't..."

"Ron," Mr Potter repeated. Weasley turned to look at him, and something passed between them. They stood up and moved to a corner of the room while Scorpius tried to pull himself together. He caught words, snatches of their conversation that only confused him more.

"... too late..."

"... no way, his own son though?"

"... just like the others..."

"How late though? Could we...?"

"... if he agrees, and even then..."

"... seventeen, not like he's a kid..."

"... age he is, the risk..."

"... not the point, Harry! If he was any other..."

Scorpius looked up at the ceiling and tried to block it out. He honestly didn't have a clue what was happening to him. He sincerely hoped he wasn't having some kind of mental breakdown. When he closed his eyes, he could almost pretend that all this was a dream, that it wasn't really happening. But
that was foolish, he realised, opening his eyes again and staring down at the ugly grey table. It was happening, it wasn't a dream, and why couldn't he talk about it?

Finally the Aurors turned back to the table. Mr Potter had the same would-be-calm expression on his face as before, while Mr Weasley looked strangely triumphant. "Scorpius," Mr Potter said, calmly. Scorp looked up at him helplessly. "I think you're trying to tell us something, but perhaps you can't," the man continued, keeping his green eyes locked onto Scorp's grey ones. "Would that be right?

Scorpius managed something halfway between a shrug and a nod.

"You may have been cursed," Mr Potter explained, nodding. "Some of the people we've questioned have been under Unbreakable Vows. Others have been cursed so that they can't tell us anything, even if they want to. But sometimes, depending on how long they've been under the curse, Veritaserum can help." He crouched a little so that he was almost at Scorpius' eye level. Those eyes were so much like Albus', it was somehow comforting. "It's a bit of a grey area because of your age and your registration with the French Ministry, but if you agreed to let us give you Veritaserum…"

"O…okay," Scorpius managed to choke out. "I'll do it… I…" He didn't remember being cursed. Would he remember it? Maybe they'd modified his memory. He had a sickening vision of his father sitting him down and pelting him with memory charms, over and over, each time he had questioned what was going on, and felt his skin turn clammy and a strange stiffness in his throat. He turned his head just in time to avoid his clothes as he vomited onto the floor.

When he looked up, Mr Weasley had gone. Mr Potter was frowning. "Well someone's done a number on you," he sighed, passing Scorpius a glass of water that appeared from nowhere and vanishing the sick with his wand. "If this works, I'll owl Neville to come pick you up. He tried to warn me something like this would happen." The shock must have shown on Scorp's face, because Mr Potter shook his head. "Not exactly like this, obviously," he said darkly. "Unless he knows something I don't know about all this…"

"No!" Scorpius said quickly. The thought that he might put Neville under suspicion was too much to bear. "He just… he knew that…" He took a gulp of water. It eased the acid taste in his mouth a little, but didn't do much to steady his nerves. "He knows that… my grandfather…" This time it wasn't any spell that made him hesitate. He just didn't want to say it, even to Mr Potter. Especially to Mr Potter. "He… attacked me," he managed to say, eventually. Humiliation would have made his cheeks burn if he had any colour left in them. "Last summer. Neville helped, after I ran away. I… I asked him not to tell anyone." He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and stared down at the tabletop.

Mr Potter muttered something under his breath, a swearword maybe. Scorpius didn't dare look up at him. He heard the man's finger's tapping on the tabletop. "I'm sorry," he heard after a while.

"What?" he glanced up, unable to help himself, and found his eyes fixed once again by that emerald gaze.

The door opened and Mr Weasley came back in holding parchment and a vial filled with opaque liquid. He looked even more irritable than before, if that was at all possible. "Red tape?" Mr Potter asked him dryly.

"Something like that," the redhead man replied, tossing his partner the paperwork. Mr Potter signed the form, turned it around and passed Scorpius the quill.

Scorpius read the words. He understood the words, but the meaning of what he had read seemed to wash over him and fade away like a fog. He signed the thing anyway, with a hand that shook. The faster they got this over with the sooner he could go back to the Leaky Cauldron. What would
Neville say? Scorpius was sure he would be disappointed, but he wouldn't say anything. It would be that same awkward, silent disappointment he had felt when he had left Hogwarts, but worse. A lot worse. At least he didn't have to go to Azkaban. The Leaky Cauldron was the closest thing to home he could think of. A decent sleep wouldn't go amiss. He was sure he would feel better, one he had had a really good sleep.

Mr Potter had taken the glass of water back. Scorpius, through a haze of exhaustion, saw him pour two drops from the vial into the glass. At a nudge from his partner, the man sighed and added another before pushing the glass back across the table.

Scorpius drank. It was a relief, in a way. No one could say he betrayed his family if he was under the influence of a truth potion. No one could accuse him of lying, or say he had done more than he did. The more he drank the more relaxed he became, the stress and tension easing from his body, and the terrifying mess of emotions that fogged his brain drifting away until he was floating happily on a pink cloud of contentedness.

"Scorpius," he heard Mr Potter calling as though from far away. Or was it Albus? It sounded more like Albus. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes," he said, closing his eyes. "Yeah Al, I hear you."

"Scorpius?"

The cloud he was lying on seemed to be getting softer and softer. He was slowly sinking, sinking into it, and someone was calling his name, but that didn't matter. He was comfortable. He was safe. He was falling, falling, at first gently but then faster, as though down a long, dark tunnel. It was peaceful.

Then, as his breathing slowed even more, he realised the cloud was starting to cover his face. He twitched, trying to dislodge it, feeling his chest start to tighten. The thing - the cloud - whatever it was - it clogged his nostrils and snaked fluffy tendrils into his mouth, choking him. Suddenly it wasn't a pink cloud anymore but black, black and thick and wet like tar. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't move. His chest was getting tighter and tighter and he thought his body might be falling, but he didn't seem to be attached to his body anymore; he was high, high above it and everything was very far, far away.

His last thought before everything went completely black was: *Oh, shit. Moonsilver.*

Chapter End Notes

Thanks everyone for your patience! If you read my blog you know that I just didn't feel this chapter was ready last week, but I did some work on it and here it is. This week I also posted some hints on how to use proper nouns and names in the Harry Potter universe, for those of you who have asked me for help with your writing. My blog: misssaisonfic. tumblr. com (remove spaces).

Thanks for everyone's comments this week, some in particular were very moving! My challenge to my loyal readers this week is to share this story with someone, on your preferred method of social media or by sending a direct link. Spread the love!
Chapter Summary

"It'll be somewhere down the other end," Rose said confidently, pointing. Ahead of them was a street filled with witches and wizards, some of them clearly Beauxbatons students doing their summer shopping. One of them, a tall girl with dark nut-brown hair, did a double-take on seeing Albus, and turned to stare after they had passed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

2023

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Rose was all for going right up to the door and knocking, but Albus had other ideas.

"You don't think he'll know who we are? Come on. He must read the papers, right? They printed our family photo from Italy, last year, and James' last birthday. And everyone says how much I look like my dad at his age. He'll know me straight off, even if it takes him a few minutes to cotton on to you."

"His dad won't open the door," Rose argued. "They have servants and things."

"You gonna risk this whole mad caper on that chance?" Al sighed. He would have been the first to admit that he was grouchy, after being woken first thing in the morning for a mad flight over the channel to France. Why they couldn't have taken the Floo was somewhat beyond him, though Rose insisted that using the Ministry-regulated Floo was a bad idea.

"You want our dads catching up to us before we even get there?" she had questioned him when he brought it up once again after they landed on the beach in Normandy for a rest. The sand was wet and the wind was up, and Al was hoping it wouldn't be too long a rest. He could feel salt water staining his socks through his shoes. He hadn't exactly dressed for the beach.

"I bet they haven't even noticed we're gone," he shot back. "They're so busy with this Shadow thing, and Mum will just assume I'm with Cleo."

"Right." The tone in that one word spoke volumes.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"You don't like Cleo, do you? You never have."

"Shut up, of course I like her. She's… fine."

Albus shook his head, scattering drops of seaspray from the ends of his hair onto his glasses. He took
them off and cast a cleaning spell. "You aren't angry with her for giving you that stupid CD, are you? She was just being nice."

"I know. I said thank you."

"Yeah, right before you stormed out on everyone and embarrassed yourself."

Rose's cheeks went red, and she dropped the argument, but Albus felt a little guilty about it. Rose had no reason to be jealous of Cleo now, when she was Albus' girlfriend and had no designs on her boyfriend at all. At least he hoped she didn't have designs. With Cleo it was sometimes a little hard to tell.

Being with Cleo was different to being with Lizzie. Cleo was wild, unpredictable, sometimes a little terrifying and always a little confusing. Albus had to admit that the main reason he had agreed to this mad venture was that he needed someone to talk to about her, and without Scorpius his options were limited to Rose, his parents or his brother, none of which were particularly appealing choices. Of course, he was concerned for his friend as well. It didn't bode well that they had just had that one letter, sent via Krum to Rose's mother before it even reached them. Not hearing from Scorpius on the holidays was hardly unusual, however, and it seemed to him that Rose was either worrying overmuch, or perhaps she knew something that warranted concern. If so, he was a little miffed that he wasn't in on the secret.

They mounted up again after a brief rest. It was drizzling on the beach anyway, despite the height of summer, and they took off from the wet sand with relief. Rose re-cast the disillusionment spell before they left, so that all he could make out of her beside him was a slight shimmer in the air. "Next stop Paris!" he heard her call excitedly. Below them, a group of Muggles sheltering under a picnic blanket looked up at the sound of her voice in confusion.

Albus was used to flying in the rain - and snow, and sleet, and fog - but flying cross-country lacked whatever it was about Quidditch that made it bearable. It was at least fast - he could see cars and even trains below them as they overtook all the traffic, fading into the distance. The *Phoenixer* didn't even try to do any crazy moves. He was glad Rose seemed to know where they were going. At one point he heard her mutter a charm, a direction spell maybe. He should have known she wouldn't just up and leave without planning it out first.

"You know, we're both seventeen now," he pointed out when she finally called to him to touch down. They came down on the corner of a quiet street, and they pressed against a wall as she removed the disillusionment charm. "We could have just Apparated."

"Apparating over water is dangerous," she said, almost absent-mindedly as she looked around.

"Once we got across the Channel then," he sighed.

"We can Apparate to Normandy on the way back," she explained, pulling a Paris guide out of her pocket. Albus didn't bother wondering where she had got it. "I didn't want to risk us Splinching because we don't know the area. Anyway I still haven't got my test."

"That'll be the least of your worries when your parents find out," Al muttered.

She turned and glared at him. Behind her, a Muggle child shrieked as its mother dragged it away from a sweet shop. "Will you stop complaining?" she hissed. "Do you want to find Scorp or not?"

He shrugged. "Of course I do. You know that. But listen - how are we going to explain him just showing up? They'll know he didn't come on his own. And where's he going to stay - with you?
Your dad'll love that. And since he's not of age yet - technically - isn't this kidnapping? My dad would have to send him home, he can't be accused of kidnapping! So would Neville, unless he wants to lose his job - "

She looked at him helplessly. "Al, I… I just can't leave him there. I can't, okay? I just need to know he's… he's…"

He sighed and nodded. "Yeah. I know." He wanted to say he was sure Scorp was fine, but he wasn't sure. He had noticed the shaky handwriting, too.

Rose led them out of the street and round the corner. "The house has to be around here somewhere. Scorp said it's at the end of Rue Chouette, that's Wizarding Paris."

"I know," Albus said defensively. "You're not the only one who knows stuff."

"All right, all right."

Al looked around. The whole place looked pretty Muggle to him. "Er… do you know how to get to Wizarding Paris?"

Rose made a face. "Not exactly. Maybe we could ask someone?"

"Right, we'll just ask one of these nice people how to get to a street in a magical sub-dimension that they can't see. That'll work."

"Oh shut up." She looked around, as if hoping to see someone in a cloak or a pointy hat to interrogate. "Haven't you been here before?" she asked him, an edge of exasperation in her voice.

"I was ten!" he protested. "Anyway I couldn't even do magic, Mum and Dad did all the opening and closing of things."

Rose pulled out the book again and started flipping through the pages. "I think it's a brick thing," she muttered. "Like Diagon Alley."

"Well it's not going to be in there," Albus told her. "That's a Muggle book."

Rose ignored him. She continued to flip until she found the page she was looking for, pulled out her wand, and said, "Reveale."

At first nothing happened, and Albus was on the verge of expressing a desire to turn around and go back, but then she let out a squeak of excitement, and she showed him the page. The text, a printed paragraph about the zoo, had faded, and over the top of it was appearing hand-written instructions on how to enter Rue Chouette.

"Sometimes you're so clever you make me sick," Al sighed. "How did you know it was that page?"

She moved her hand and showed him the opposite page. Just to the left of the passage about the zoo was a picture of an owl. "Rue Chouette." She grinned. "Owl street. Ta-da!"

He shook his head. "All right, fine. What does it say?"

She bent her head over the book and started walking down the street, muttering as she read to herself, and he followed her. They attracted a few strange looks, dressed as they were in travelling cloaks and carrying broomsticks, but his cousin didn't seem to notice. Eventually they reached a brick wall, but Al knew better than to complain it was a dead end. "Cover me," Rose whispered, and
he stood in front of her trying to look inconspicuous while she counted bricks with her wand. "One… two… three… one two three four… two taps…"

There was a grinding sound, and he turned to see an opening in the wall where before there had been solid brick. He ducked through it after Rose and looked back to see an archway through which Muggle Paris was hazy, but visible. "Cool," he said, shrugging. Now that they were out of sight of any Muggles, they shrunk their brooms and tucked them inside their cloaks. Al felt a little blasphemous doing that to his beloved *Phoenixer*, but he could hardly carry it around with him all day. "Now what?"

"It'll be somewhere down the other end," Rose said confidently, pointing. Ahead of them was a street filled with witches and wizards, some of them clearly Beauxbatons students doing their summer shopping. One of them, a tall girl with dark nut-brown hair, did a double-take on seeing Albus, and turned to stare after they had passed.

"Bugger," Albus muttered, pulling up the hood of his cloak.

"Oh yeah, that's great," Rose said, rolling her eyes. "You're invisible now."

"You're the one who wanted to keep a low profile," he pointed out. He was imagining his mother's reaction when she found out he had run off to France without telling anyone, seventeen or not. "Let's find this place quick."

They hurried through *Rue Chouette*, past the many rows of shops, including a bookshop to rival Flourish and Blotts, a robes shop, and of course an Owl Emporium, from which could be heard a low sleepy hooting. A family crossed their path with a girl who looked like she might be a first year, clutching a kitten that kept trying to escape her grasp. "Oh look," Rose said suddenly, pointing out a low building with a windmill painted on the sign and the words *Le Moulin* in flowery script. "That's Scorp's restaurant."

"Hm?"

"Where he used to work. Do you think maybe…?"

He shrugged. "Worth a try."

They went up to the building and peered through the window. It was darker inside than it was outside on the bright street, and it took a minute or so for their eyes to adjust. There were lamps lit inside, and people moving around. Albus hadn't been keeping track of the time, but the rumble in his stomach hinted that lunch was long over. "Waiters must be setting up for dinner," he muttered.

Rose had her nose right up against the glass. "I don't see him," she whispered.

"I don't see much of anything."

There was a shout from behind them, and suddenly a lanky black-haired wizard was bearing down on them, shouting angrily in French.

"Er… sorry?" Albus attempted, suddenly wishing he had paid more attention when Vic and Dom had tried to teach him when he was little. "We're looking for -"  

"We are closed, come back later!" the man insisted in accented English, apparently labelling them as over-inquisitive tourists.

"Come on," Rose said quickly, and they made a break for it.
"Well, I wouldn't want to work for him," Al muttered grudgingly when they stopped round the corner for breath. "We only wanted to look."

Rose was looking around at their surroundings. The rows of shops had given way to large, impressive-looking houses with fancy lacework on the black iron gates and flowers growing over the walls. "Isn't it beautiful," she breathed.

"Yeah, just great," Al groaned. "Is this it? How do we know which one it is?"

"I'm sure we'll know it when we see it," Rose said, not quite so confidently as she might have been.

"Does it have a big skull painted on the door?"

"Shut up, Al."

They walked the street, looking both sides at the houses for some clue. "I wish I still had the letter," Rose sighed. "The one he sent to ask if Teddy could find his mum. That had the address on it, but I can't remember the number. Twenty something? Twenty eight? Twenty six?"

"That's twenty-six," Albus said. They stopped on the other side of the street from the house. There was something strangely forbidding about it, but then people felt that way about Al's house as well. His dad said it had something to do with all the protective wards and things that protected it, all necessary after the number of assassination attempts against his family over the years. They gave people the feeling that they didn't want to go in. It usually wore off after a few visits. "What do you think?" he asked, staring up at it. Most of the windows were shuttered. It wasn't immediately apparent that anyone even lived there at all.

"Maybe," Rose said. "Should we knock?"

And that was when the 'to knock or not to knock' argument began. The result was, after several minutes, that they would wait and see if anyone came in or out until dark, at which point they would fly up and peer through some of the windows. "Easier to get away if we're on brooms," Al said sensibly.

Rose shook her head, causing her hood to fall off and her red braid to fall out. "I don't like waiting so long."

"He's been in there two weeks, if he's in there," Al pointed out. "He can wait a little longer."

"Wait," Rose said, gripping his arm. "Did you see that?"

"See what?" Al turned back to face the house, but it was just as still as before.

"The shutters moved. I swear they moved."

"Great, so someone's in there. I guess it's good to know we're not staking out an empty house."

"Do you think they saw us?"

"How should I know?" Al pulled the hood of his cloak down lower. They waited for several minutes. For a while it seemed as though nothing would happen.

"What do we do now?" Rose asked, and Al was just about to answer that he had no more idea than he had five minutes ago, when a flash of red light shot out of the darkness, narrowly missing his ear. He swore and grabbed Rose's arm. "Come on!"
Together they ran back up the street towards Rue Chouette. The street was quieter now, but there were still enough people around that no one would dare curse them in broad daylight. They came to a staggering halt, doing their best to look as though they were just out for a jog and not running for their lives.

"What the hell?" Al gasped, leaning against the side of a building as he tried to catch his breath. He was really more of a broom sport person. He wondered why anyone would want to run just for the fun of it.

"I knew it," Rose said, her cheeks flushed from running, or perhaps anger. "Mr Malfoy is keeping him a prisoner in there! He's trying to scare us off. We have to go back and get Scorp out."

"Back there?" Albus exclaimed. "Now?"

"No, later," Rose said firmly. "When he isn't expecting us."

Al gaped at her. "Great," he sighed eventually, when he had decided she probably wasn't joking after all. "What do you suggest we do until then? What if he comes after us?"

Rose looked around. "This way," she said, with a lot more confidence than Albus currently felt, so he followed her. She led him into the nearby bookshop. "Just... look around for a bit," she said out of the corner of her mouth. He nodded and moved a little way away from her. Separately, he decided, they might attract less attention. Just to be sure, though, he drew his hood even further down over his eyes and took off his glasses. They tended to make him extra recognisable, especially when people were used to seeing his father wearing similar ones. It did make looking around the bookshop a lot less fun, however, since he could barely read the book titles, let alone the small print.

They pretended to browse for about two hours, until it closed. When they came out again, it was dark. Rose pulled up the hood on her cloak again, and cast the disillusionment charm on both of them. Albus didn't bother to protest that he could do his own one. She had that over-determined look that suggested she would not brook any interruptions. "So, what's your plan here?" he whispered, putting his glasses back on as they walked back up to the row of houses.

"Fly up and peek through the windows till we find Scorp's bedroom," she whispered back.

"What if he's not in bed yet? It's not even eight."

"We'll wait in his room till he comes up."

"What? Are you mad? Wait inside Draco Malfoy's house?"

"You have a better idea?"

Albus groaned. "We are definitely going to die."

"He won't kill us," she said, and he saw the shimmer in the air that might have been her tossing her hair back.

"Right, that shot earlier was just to maim us a little."

"Al, he's just a man. He's not evil."

"Tell that to his Dark Mark."

"Shhhh," she hissed as they neared the house. Albus doubted anyone inside would be able to hear
them whispering from way out here, but he shut up anyway. It was easier than arguing. "Do you hear that?" Rose whispered, so quietly he barely heard her. He stopped and put all his attention into listening.

Someone was shouting. Inside the house, there was an argument going on.

"Is it Scorp?" he whispered back after a moment.

"Don't think so," Rose said, low. "Let's go and -"

Suddenly a hand landed on Albus' shoulder, sending an electric current of terror through his body. From Rose's shriek, he wasn't the only one. He twisted and ducked, ripping instinctively at the catch on his cloak. He left the attacker with a handful of loose material and span away. Rose - or the occasional shimmer in the air that was Rose under the disillusionment charm - was being held by a blonde man wearing sunglasses. "Let go of her!" he shouted, running back towards the man, but the stranger was already doubling up in pain, putting one hand to his leg where Rose had kicked him.

"Let's go!" Rose yelled to Albus, and he felt her hand fumbling for his. He grabbed it and they ran as fast as they could. Since the man was blocking the way back to the main street, they had to go the other way, into unknown territory. Al's heart was beating hard in his chest, and not just from running. He could hear the footsteps of the man behind them, slightly out of synch where he was limping on his injured leg.

"Come on," Rose was saying in between gasps of air. "Come on come on come on!"

Al looked desperately from side to side, searching for a hiding place, a weapon, a portal to an alternate dimension, anything. Was no one looking out of their windows in this town? Had no one heard Rose scream? Apparently not, he thought grimly as they ran on. What they really needed was somewhere they could stop long enough to get out their brooms, undo the shrinking charms and take off…

"Here," he hissed suddenly. He had spotted a low wall separating someone's garden. He dragged Rose towards it and they scrambled over. Rose let out a little gasp of pain when the brick scraped her elbow. "Get the brooms," Albus said, and then he realised. He used a word that his mother would never have tolerated.

"What now?" He couldn't see Rose, the dark and the disillusionment charm hid them both entirely.

"That bastard has my cloak," he said, low. There were no more footsteps, but he wasn't naive enough to think that meant that they were safe now. "My Phoenixer was in the pocket. Damn and blast and Merlin's bloody -"

"Shhhh," she hissed. He stopped, and they both sat as still as stone.

He was breathing too loud. He knew it, but he had just run what felt like a hundred miles and his chest was bursting for air. He forced his mouth shut and tried to suck in as much as he could through his nose, but the breathwhine it made sounded like a tornado in the silence. He closed his eyes and prayed that the disillusionment charm would hold, and if they just stayed quiet enough maybe he could get on Rose's Lightning and they could get as far as the edge of the city.

Then something grabbed him by the collar. He yelped and punched upwards, impacting with a soft *thud* of flesh on flesh. It felt and sounded like he had hit whatever it was in the chest.

"Ow!" the attacker shouted. It was enough to make Al hesitate for a second. What kind of scary-arse Dark Wizard said 'ow'?
"That bloody hurt. Stop it, right now, the two of you." The man dragged them both upright from the other side of the wall, and then released his hold.

Al whirled round. The man was tall and blond and unfamiliar, and he was wearing sunglasses. At night-time. Al drew his wand. He still had that, at least. "What do you want?" he demanded.

"To take you home, you idiot." The man flipped up his sunglasses, and his features shifted under the skin, shortening the nose and lowering the cheekbones until he was recognisable.

"Teddy?" Rose gasped, about half a second before Albus caught up. "What are you doing here?"

"I just said, didn't I?" Teddy was frowning. It was an unusual expression to see on his face. He was always a serious sort of person but in a pleasant, friendly way. Now his look was almost Ginny-esque in its furocity.

"You bastard," Al breathed. "We thought you were Malfoy!"

Teddy frowned, cross-eyed, at a lock of blonde hair that had fallen over his eyes. "Bad choice of disguise perhaps," he admitted, flipping the sunglasses back down. "I didn't have a lot of time to change. You're bleeding," he said to Rose. He pointed his wand at where Al supposed Rose must be and said "Episky."

How can you see us?" Albus demanded.

Teddy pointed impatiently at the sunglasses. "One of Uncle George's gadgets. Sees through most amateur concealment spells. Good night vision, too. *Finite Incantatem!*"

Albus felt a cold trickle down his back as the charm was removed. He suddenly felt very naked standing visible in the middle of the street.

"Now I'm going to ask what you are doing here," Teddy said darkly.

"We came for Scorp," Rose said, without hesitation.

"I figured," Teddy said. "That doesn't explain why you came here, by yourselves, without even telling anyone -"

"Hey, we're of age," Albus cut in. "We don't need permission to go to France if we want to."

"Good luck using that argument on your mother," Teddy snapped, making Albus' stomach churn. "You shouldn't be here. It's dangerous, much more than you know."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Rose asked.

Teddy hesitated. "Later," he said, low. "We're going back, right now."

"Not without Scorpius," Rose insisted. "We came all this way, and I am not leaving without him. Who knows what they've -"

"Rose, listen -"

"- done to him! He never wanted to come here, you know that, anything could have -"

"Rose!"

Rose stopped and glared at him. "What?"
Teddy sighed. "You're too late," he said. "Scorpius is already in London."

Albus stared at him. What the hell was going on?

Chapter End Notes

My fanfiction blog: http://misssaigonfic.tumblr.com
"It's a joke," Rose said, smiling weakly. "Right?" There was a moment's silence. "Right?" she repeated, feeling her heart start to pound desperately in her chest.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Teddy did not offer any further explanation, no matter how much Rose asked. "I'll explain when we get there," he kept saying, even while he led them up the street to what seemed to be a bar. "Or someone will."

Rose did not understand how Scorpius could suddenly be in London. Had he escaped on his own? That did sound like something he might do, if things got desperate enough. Trust him to do it on the very day they came to rescue him!

The bar had a Floo point. The barman seemed to know Teddy, because he handed over the Floo powder and went back to his patrons without a single word being exchanged. "Department of Magical Law Enforcement," Teddy instructed Rose, offering her the pot.

"Aw, Teddy," Albus moaned. "Can't we just go home? Dad's going to kill me."

"Shut up," Teddy said shortly. "Just do it, Rose."

"Will this work internationally?" Rose asked, looking doubtfully at the fireplace. She didn't want to get trapped in someone's chimney forever. Gran had told enough horror stories when she was little to discourage any of the children from messing with the Floo.

"Trust me," Teddy said.

She hesitated a second before taking a pinch of powder. She tossed it into the fire and stepped into the flames, feeling their warmth tickle her chin and the ends of her fingers. "British Ministry for Magic," she announced, as clearly as she could. "Department of Magical Law Enforcement." The flames whipped up around her and she felt herself spun around like a top for several seconds.

She stepped out on the other side feeling queasy. She really preferred broomsticks to the Floo, even if it did take longer.

"Rose! Rosie!" She had just enough time to make out her mother's face amid a mass of bushy hair before she was being enveloped in a tight hug. "We've been worried sick," Hermione cried. "I came home and you weren't there, Hugo said you had gone to Harry's, and I Floo'd Ginny, and she said she thought Albus was with you - "

"Yes, I am," Teddy said, still smiling as he led Rose through the door. "I'm coming with you, Albus."

Hermione smiled and hugged him as well. "Good," she said. "I'm glad you're here."
Albus was coming through the Floo now, and Rose could just make out Ginny descending on him in a similar fashion.

"Oh Teddy," Hermione breathed with relief as the final member of their party came through the fireplace. "Thank goodness. Where were they?"

"In Paris," Teddy said shortly. "Looking for you-know-who."

"Albus!" Ginny gasped.

"Sorry mum." Al looked sheepish. Apparently he wasn't even going to attempt his 'but I'm of age' argument.

"Oh sweetheart," Hermione said, looking down at Rose with a kind of pity that made her want to scream. "That's what I came home to tell you. Scorpius is… well…"

"What?" Rose demanded. "He's what?"

Hermione looked from Rose, to Ginny, to Teddy and back. "Well…"

"They arrested him," Teddy sighed.


"Smuggling," Ginny said.

Rose laughed. She couldn't help it.

"Rosie?" her mum was wide-eyed with concern.

"It's a joke," Rose said, smiling weakly. "Right?" There was a moment's silence. "Right?" she repeated, feeling her heart start to pound desperately in her chest. They all looked very, very serious. Perhaps it wasn't a joke. "Where is he?" she asked after what seemed like a lifetime of waiting for them to laugh. "I want to see him."

"Hey, Ian," Teddy called over to a man who seemed to be on his way out. "The kid they picked up at the raid, he still in interrogation?"

The man nodded. "I reckon so. Ron came through just now for Veritaserum. Guess he wasn't feeling too chatty."

Rose was still trying to process the concept of Scorpius has been arrested. It was Albus who rounded on Teddy. "You gave him Veritaserum?"

Teddy shrugged, looking disappointed. "They have to do that sometimes Al, if they can tell someone's lying. I told him to answer -"

"You can't give him Veritaserum!" Albus shouted, almost manic.

"Albus, calm down," his mother said, trying to pull him back, but he shook her off.

"Teddy, Scorp's allergic to Moonsilver!" Albus said desperately.

Rose started. "What?" she said, shaking her head. "He is?" Suddenly she remembered the incident in fourth year. She hadn't been there, of course, but Al and the other boys had told her. It hadn't seemed like a big deal at the time, and she had completely forgotten.
"It took us hours to wake him up after just touching it," Al said, waving his hands as if this would make someone do something, anything faster. "Veritaserum's got pure liquid Moonsilver in it, they could kill him!"

"Oh shit," Teddy said, eyes widening as he caught on at last. He turned and started to run, down a corridor flanked on either side by Aurors.

Rose looked at Albus. His face was full of fear, the kind of fear she had been feeling all day but hadn't let herself show, magnified a hundred times. By unspoken agreement, they ran after Teddy. The Aurors, surprised, tried to stop them, but Al grabbed Rose's arm and pulled her past before they could even draw their wands. Behind her she could hear her mum shouting something. She hoped she was telling them to stand aside, not to go after them, but she couldn't be sure.

It wasn't hard to figure out which way they had to go. They just followed the shouting, taking a right, then a left turn before finding an open door that seemed to be the source of all the commotion. When they drew up to the doorway, panting, Rose saw Teddy arguing with her father. She only glanced at them for a second before she looked around to see her uncle Harry, wand out, muttering as he cast some kind of spell over Scorpius' prone body. "Scorp!" she screamed, lunging forward. Albus caught her around the waist and dragged her back. "Let me go!" she yelled at him, but he held firm.

"Rose, you can't help him," he said, holding her with a grip so strong she wouldn't have thought him capable of it. "Let them -"

"Rose?" her father looked shocked and confused. "What are you doing here?"

"What did you do to him?" she screamed, her hair twisting free from its plait and springing around her face as she struggled. "What did you do?"

"Harry?" Hermione had appeared, miraculously, behind them. She pushed past Albus and Rose and, drawing her wand, went to kneel beside the body. No, Rose told herself, trying desperately to think through the panic. Not the body. It's not a body. It's Scorpius.

"Oh thank Merlin," Harry sighed. Rose stopped struggling long enough to see that her uncle was sweating and pale. His dark hair hung limply over the rims of his glasses. "He's not breathing, Hermione. I've done everything I can but something's shut down his respiratory system completely. It's all I can do to keep his airways open."

"Moonsilver," Albus said, relaxing his hold slightly but not letting go.

"I'm fine," Rose said, slapping at her cousins's hands. "I'm fine." He let go, and she stood helplessly, watching.

"How long?" her mum asked as she knelt and took over the spell.

"Maybe two minutes," Harry replied, wiping his forehead with his sleeve. "Ron was going to go for help when Teddy came."

"Ron, go to St Mungos," Hermione ordered, without looking up.

"But -"

"Right now, Ron. Tell them we have a severe Moonsilver reaction, get someone from Potion and Plant Poisoning here as soon as you can and tell them to bring a return Portkey. Go!"

"Mum," Rose said quietly after her father had Apparated away. Scorpius' face was white, except for
the dark circles under his eyes. He wasn’t moving. She didn’t want to interrupt, she didn’t want to make it worse, but she had to know. "Mum… is he okay? Is he…"

"Teddy, get them out of here," Harry said, glancing up for a second.

"Dad!" Albus protested.

"Al, if you want what's best for your friend, take Rose out of here and wait for us at the hospital, understand? Apparate straight there. Go!"

Albus’ expression twisted with indecision. Teddy came over and practically shoved them out of the room. "Come on," he said, and Disapparated. Rose closed her eyes, did a half turn, and followed him, ignoring the fact that she still wasn’t legally permitted to Apparate. She opened her eyes in St Mungo's waiting room, and there was the crack behind her of Albus following. Teddy led her to a chair, and she sat in it.

She felt numb. The sight of Scorpius lying limp and lifeless on the ground kept playing over and over in her head. Her breathing would only come in short gasps. She couldn't speak.

"I don't get it," Al said, running a hand through his hair so that it stuck up ridiculously at the back. "They can't just give him Veritaserum. There are laws, and rules and things… how could this happen?"

"Ron said he agreed to it," Teddy said. His hair had gone a depressing shade of greyish brown, and he was very pale. "I was trying to tell him about the Moonsilver, and he said Scorpius signed the forms. Why would he do that if he knew…"

"…it could kill him?" Albus finished.

There was a horrible silence for a moment while the implications of that sank in. Rose stared down at her hands. She needed to do something but there was nothing to do.

"I better go and see what's happening," Teddy said after a while. "You two stay here."

Rose listened to him go without looking up. Albus sat beside her and didn't say anything else.

A few minutes later, Teddy came back with her parents and Uncle Harry, all looking grim. Albus stood up. Rose didn't think she could move at all.

"He's going to be fine," Hermione said gently. "It might take a few days, perhaps a week. The Healers are doing all they can."

Rose heard Albus let out a deep breath. She wasn't sure what she should be feeling. Relief? It seemed too late for relief. Her stomach was all twisted up in knots that felt like they would never come apart again.

"How did you two get in, anyway?" Harry said sternly, switching to angry dad mode now that the immediate danger was over.

"That was my fault," Teddy admitted. "I went to find them, and it just seemed like the right thing to do to bring them back to the office. Sorry, Harry."

"Went to find them where?" Ron demanded suddenly.

"Ron," Hermione warned. "Don't."
Albus crossed his arms defiantly over his chest. "We went to Paris," he said.

"What?" Harry looked appalled.

Ginny put a hand on Harry's arm. "It's all right dear. They're fine. Teddy found them."

"Ted, you knew about this?" Harry asked sternly. Teddy looked sheepish.

"No, he didn't." Albus frowned. "We never told him. How did you know where to find us, Teddy?"

All eyes seemed to turn on Teddy. He sighed. "Scorpius told me, all right? He said he saw Rose outside the house."

"You went to Paris?" Ron demanded suddenly, rounding on Rose. "To that man's house? Do you have any idea how dangerous -"

"Ron!"

"Don't 'Ron' me, Hermione, they have no idea what they were walking into!"

"Ron, you're scaring her!"

Rose was only hearing the shouting as though from far away. She still felt numb all over, as though she were dreaming, except she couldn't remember ever feeling this physically sick in a dream. She heard her parents muttering together for a moment, and then her father came over, gingerly as though afraid she might explode.

"Rosie?" he said gently. He put a hand on her shoulder but she pulled away. "Are you all right? Do you need anything?"

With that the world seemed to come flooding back, and with it all the anger that had been held back by her fears for Scorpius. She wiped her eyes and glared at her father. "Yes, Dad!" she exclaimed, slapping her palm against the arm of the chair. "I want to know why my boyfriend was arrested. I want to know what he did that was so terrible that you poisoned him!"

"It was an accident, sweetheart," her mum said, as though that would make her feel any better.

"Oh I bet," she said, feeling tears come to her eyes but too angry to let them fall. "Dad hates Scorpius, he's always hated him!" She put her head in her hands.

At this point the group, which happened to include the Harry Potter, had attracted a significant amount of attention from the other people in the waiting room. Ron started to say something, an explanation that Rose didn't want to hear, but Harry interrupted.

"Ron," he said. "We can't talk about it here."

Rose closed her eyes and tried to shut them all out. If she wished hard enough, really hard enough, would she be able to wake up? Could she start this day all over again? Would that even help?

"I better get out of here," her uncle was saying, muffled but still audible. "I'll go update the Department and check in with inventory and the task force. At least the whole day wasn't a complete disaster. Ron, go check security on the ward. No, that's an order. Ted, with me. Someone has to help me break the news to Kingsley. Gin, Hermione…"

"We'll stay," Ginny said. "We left Hugo at our house. James can look after him and Lily."
"He'll love that," Albus muttered. He sat down again, next to Rose. She peeked at him through her fingers, unable to help herself, and saw that his hands were shaking slightly.

The men left, Ron with a regretful backwards look. Hermione put an arm around Rose's shoulders. "Don't blame them, love," she said softly. "They didn't know."

"Scorp knew," Albus said darkly. "He knew. Teddy said he signed papers... he let them give him that potion."

"I don't believe that," Rose said, the words coming through thick and heavy in her mouth. "I don't believe he would do that. They must have made him sign... threatened him somehow..."

"Rose Charlotte Weasley." She looked up to see her mother, red-faced, looking at her extremely sternly. "Don't you dare accuse your father or uncle like that," she snapped. "Especially not in public, you silly girl." There was slightly less attention now there were four rather than seven people, but Harry's exit in full view of the crowd meant that eyes and ears were still on them. "Do you want that to be the headline of tomorrow's Prophet? Do you want to ruin your father's career? Not to mention you should never even think such things. Your father is a good and honourable man, and so is your uncle, and well you know it."

Rose felt her anger crumple like parchment in the face of her mum's glare. "I'm sorry," she said, unable to stop her voice breaking in her throat. "I'm sorry, it's just... I don't understand... I don't see why any of this is happening. Why did they arrest him? He's not a dark wizard. He wouldn't... he couldn't hurt anyone, not ever. Mum, I know him."

"I know dear," her mum said, softening in the face of her daughter's tears.

Ginny pulled out her wand and incanted, "Muffliato".

"Ginny," Hermione sighed.

"What? It's not illegal, as much as you'd like it to be," Albus' mum sat down opposite them. "I'm afraid we really don't know much," she said, low, under the muffling charm. "Harry and Ron went out on a raid this afternoon. They had intelligence that a Shadow delivery was going to be made to a shop in Wizarding London. They never expected Scorpius would be the one doing the delivery."

Rose felt her heart sink, even as a few things that had been nagging at the back of her mind started to fall into place. "Scorp... working for the Shadow?"

Albus made a weird sort of choking noise. Rose ignored him. "But he wouldn't," she said, wiping her eyes angrily. "I mean... he just wouldn't. How would he even know the... Shadow..."

Ginny and Hermione looked at each other.

"Oh my god," Rose said, tears forgotten in the midst of the cold possibility that suddenly filled her, like ice water. "The Shadow, it's -"

"Albus?" Ginny asked suddenly. "Are you all right? You've gone pale."

Rose looked at her cousin. He certainly was pale, and his eyes were looking somewhat panicked behind his glasses. "I... not sure," he said, swallowing. "Something's weird... I..."

"What on earth is it now?" Hermione muttered, pulling out her wand while Ginny held the back of her hand to her son's forehead.
"It's like… I can't think," Al said, as though he were forcing out the words. "I'm trying…"

"Well, we're in the right place for it," Hermione said sensibly. "Tell me if you're going to vomit, won't you?"

"I'm not going to vomit!" he exclaimed. "At least I hope not."

"I'll get a Healer," Ginny said quickly.

"I'm not sick, Mum," Al protested. "It's just…" He seemed to struggle for a moment before giving up and sitting back in his chair.

"I'm getting a Healer," Ginny repeated, firmly, and hurried away.

"This is very odd," Hermione said, waving her wand in front of Albus' eyes. "Has anyone done any spells on you lately?"

"Not that I know of," Al growled. "Except Rose's disillusionment charms."

"It's deep, whatever it is." She frowned and pulled some parchment from her pocket, conjuring a self-inking quill and scribbling madly.

"Whatever what is?" Rose demanded, looking with concern between her mum and her cousin.

"What's wrong with him?"

"I don't know, dear."

Rose blinked and sat back. She couldn't remember the last time her mum hadn't known the answer to anything. But how could anything be wrong with Albus? He hadn't drunk any dangerous potions.

Ginny came back with a women in lime green Healer's robes, who poked at Al with her wand for a minute and examined Hermione's meticulous notes. At first she tried to get them to wait, saying it was only a minor case, but Hermione flashed an important-looking piece of Ministry parchment at her and she balked. "Right away Ms Weasley," she said. "Do follow me."

She took them up to the fourth floor, Spell Damage, passing Potion and Plant Poisoning along the way. Rose looked down the corridor, in the vague hope of seeing some sign of Scorpius, but saw nothing but Healers. They found Al a bed in a ward full of people with weird maladies, including a man with what looked like a pumpkin for a head, and another with bat ears - a botched attempt at Animagery, perhaps. The Healer hurried off, promising to send in an expert. A man came in a few minutes later, did the same diagnostic spells, and frowned. He said very little, but promised to return after doing some research.

"Well this is just great," Albus sighed, falling back onto his pillows.

"Mum," Rose said when she thought they were finally out of earshot of anyone who might care. "When we were at the house… Scorp's house, in Paris… um, someone tried to curse us." Albus gave her an amazed look, as though unable to believe she would bring this up considering the trouble they were already in. "What I mean is," she added quickly, before anyone could interrupt. "Maybe it hit him. Maybe that's what this is."

"It didn't hit me," Albus said with confidence. "I felt it go past."

"All right, but what else could it be?" she asked.
"I know it wasn't that, because whoever was trying to get rid of us would have used something stronger than a weird icky feeling that only hits you three hours later," Al said, rolling his eyes. "Anyway I feel fine now."

"He does look better," Ginny admitted. "Perhaps he's just getting the flu, or something."

"Perhaps," Hermione agreed, though she didn't look at all convinced. "Rose, will you be all right here for a bit?"

"Yeah of course," she said, turning back from inspecting Al's face, which did look a better colour. "Where are you going?"

"I left work rather suddenly," her mum replied. "I had better go and sort some things out. I won't be long." She didn't quite meet Rose's eyes when she said this, and Rose got the feeling that she wasn't been told the whole story, or the right story at all. Any other time she might have argued, pointed out that she was not a child and didn't need to be protected from the truth. But she was tired. So tired. It was only getting on eight o'clock, but she'd been up since four, not to mention all the stress of the last few hours. To the sound of Al insisting to his mother that he was fine, she curled up in the uncomfortable hospital chair and rested her eyes.

She didn't think she would sleep - how could she sleep, with all this going on? - but when she opened her eyes again, the clock on the wall said eleven thirty. Al had nodded off into his pillows.

She sat up, wincing at the ache in her back from the awkward position. What had woken her, she realised, was the conversation now taking place opposite the bed. A conversation or an argument, she wasn't sure. Her mother was back, and her father and uncle as well. They seemed to be arguing about what was wrong with Albus. She shook him awake and they both listened.

"You said," her mum was saying. "That some of the people you bring in aren't able to talk about the Shadow. That even if they want to, there's some kind of spell that makes them forget."

"Forget, confused, dumb, we're not really sure," Ron replied. "That's what we think happened to the Malfoy boy."

"It makes sense," Harry agreed. "If what we think is right. You couldn't live in the same house with the man and not notice something was going on."

"But Harry, that's what I'm telling you," Hermione said. "Albus started feeling strange as soon as we started talking about the Shadow. He couldn't even express what was really wrong with him, and now he seems to have forgotten all about it -"

"Wait," Rose's uncle said, his tone dangerous, "Hermione, are you telling me that my own son is involved with the Shadow?" Albus made an odd jerking motion beside Rose, but she shook her head at him. She wanted to hear.

"No of course I'm not!" Hermione waved her hands in exasperation.

"But if he doesn't know anything, why would he be cursed?" Ginny said softly. She seemed to be the only one who wasn't confused in a violently explosive way. "How would he be cursed? It doesn't make sense."

"The Shadow is a smuggler," Hermione explained, slowly as if talking to children. "He deals in cursed objects. I doubt the curse is as simple as your standard wand-to-brain. It's subtle, deep, very intricate magic. Diagnostic spells reveal only the slightest trace of anything wrong, that you might not even notice if you weren't looking for it specifically. I expect it was something they were both"
"In the dormitory," Rose said suddenly. She didn't even realise that she had said it aloud until she looked up and they were all staring at her. "The boys' dormitory," she repeated. "In Ravenclaw Tower. Probably one of Scorpius' things from home."

"Fan-bloody-tastic," Albus muttered. "I've been bespelled by an evil belt buckle, or something."

Harry and Ron looked at each other doubtfully. "That's going to be hard to prove without the object itself," Harry sighed. "And you can bet Malfoy will destroy whatever it is if he knows we've got his son."

"You'll need the object to reverse the spell as well," Rose pointed out. They all looked at her again. "Well, won't you?"

"She's right," Hermione said, with a touch of pride as well as concern.

"You know," Harry said frowning. "I'm still not sure about the whole Malfoy-is-the-Shadow theory."

"Harry," Ron sighed, as though they had already had this argument. "Come on mate. His own son as a courier. What more proof do you need?"

"All right, but there's still a problem. The Shadow really started up in central Europe about twelve years ago, right?"

Rose got there first. "But that's not right," she said quickly. "Scorpius' family were poor before he came to Hogwarts. He couldn't even afford new books and things."

"According to our most reliable sources, Malfoy only started making money five or six years ago," Harry agreed. "Decent money, maybe four years."

"So the title gets passed around," Ron said, looking angry. "We knew that was a possibility. Honestly I can remember a time you tried to pin everything on Malfoy."

"Because he actually did it, you two just wouldn't listen."

"Well, listen to me now, mate. I know its him. Kingsley agrees, Percy agrees. The case is blown wide open, and now it turns out he's done some kind of ancient Dark Magic on your son. What are you going to do about it? Sir," he added, with just a hint of sarcasm.

Harry did not seem convinced. "Fine," he said. "But we still have to catch him before we can charge him."

Rose interpreted the pained look on Albus' face for him. "Why don't you just… go to his house?" she suggested. She thought she would feel guilty about saying it. It was her boyfriend's father, after all. But she found she didn't care at all.

"We sent a task force already," Harry explained. "Nothing there. He must have cleaned out. Don't look at me like that, Ron. She deserves to know. They both do. Anyway it won't be a secret when the Prophet hears about it - no offence, Gin. What a disaster."

~*-R-*~

~*-R-*~
The disaster, however, did not truly become apparent until the next day. They left the hospital at midnight, after confirming that the curse on Albus, or Scorpius for that matter, could not be reversed without the enchanted object that had cursed them in the first place. Rose wanted to stay, but Hermione convinced her there was nothing she could do. Scorpius was stable, they were told, but the danger of a Moonsilver reaction was that the deep sleep it put you in was near impossible to woken from. It would be hours, if not days, before any progress was made. So, reluctantly, she allowed herself to be taken home, and went to bed without argument.

She did not sleep well. She kept waking suddenly, the image of Scorpius lying on the floor of the interrogation room, pale and lifeless, burned into the back of her eyelids.

First thing in the morning she wanted to go back to the hospital, but her mum wouldn't go until they had all had breakfast, and Hugo had to be dropped off at Ginny's where she was writing from home. Albus insisted he was fine and said he was coming too. And he was fine, Rose realised, unless he tried to talk about the Shadow. She could tell it was confusing for him, especially since the subject kept coming up so often. But Ginny was hesitant to let him go for that same reason.

"Mum, I'm seventeen," he had to say eventually. "You can't stop me going."

"Oh, bad choice of words," said James as he was walking past.

"You are staying here if I have to tie you to your bed," Ginny snapped. "And that is final."

So Rose and Hermione went to the hospital alone. "Mum, what's Aunt Ginny so worried about?" Rose asked when they were safely through the Floo - yesterday's illegal Apparating incident had apparently been overlooked, but Rose doubted she would get the chance to repeat it. "So he can't talk about the Shadow, what's the big deal?"

"You had better ask your dad about that," Hermione said sombrely. Neither Ron nor Harry had come home the previous night.

"Poor Alby," Rose sighed. "Do you think it's affected Peter and Gaius as well?"

"Quite possibly, though there's not much we can do about it if it has," Hermione replied. She showed her piece of paper to the Welcome Witch, who directed them straight up to the third floor.

"Risky curse," Rose said, chattering to distract herself from the insistent pounding of her heart. "Depending on the thaumic radial parameters, it might have affected the whole of Ravenclaw Tower. Though I guess we know it didn't reach the girls' dormitories, because I don't have any problem talking about -"

"Hush dear,' her mother said, not unkindly. "It's a public place."

"But it's not a secret, is it?" Rose said, lowering her voice just in case as they came out onto the Poisons floor. "I mean that he's here? Scorp?"

"We managed to keep it out of the Prophet for now," her mother said. "The details, at least. There was a piece this morning about the raid, and that two men were taken into custody, but we kept his name out of it, with Ginny's help. It won't last," she added, seeing the hopeful expression on Rose's face. "People will know what he did, whether or not he's found to be innocent."

"He is innocent," Rose insisted. "At least… maybe he did it, but I know he must have had a good reason. He wouldn't ever hurt anyone, Mum, not on purpose."

There was an Auror standing outside the room where Scorpius was. He was wearing a tweed jacket
and pretending to read a newspaper, but it wasn't very convincing, particularly when he saw
Hermione and stood to attention. "How are we doing, Thomson?" Hermione asked. Rose glanced at
her in surprise. Sometimes she forgot that her mother had such a high position in the Department of
Magical Law Enforcement. She tended to imagine her mum sitting behind a desk most of the time,
not ordering Aurors about or aiding interrogations.

"Stable," the Auror said, folding up his newspaper. "Still hasn't woken up, but he's breathing on his
own now."

"Moonsilver poisoning weakens a wizard's power," Hermione explained to Rose. "It makes it harder
for him to heal himself."

Rose swallowed. "Is he in pain?"

Hermione paused for a moment. "I don't think so. From what I know the worst symptom is the deep
sleep. Some people have reported having nightmares, vivid dreams, even visions." She made a
cynical face, as if she doubted that last one.

"They thought I was allergic to Moonsilver when I was a kid," Thomson said jovially. "Turned out it
was actually shellfish."

"Can't they do anything?" Rose asked. "Give him a potion or something, to help?"

"More potions might make him worse," Hermione said gently. "He has to do this on his own."

Rose swallowed. "Can I see him?"

"Sorry Miss." Thomson shook his head. "My orders are not to open this door to anyone but Mr
Potter or the Minister himself. Except for the Healers, of course."

"I'm here."

Rose looked around to see her uncle, closely followed by her dad.

"Harry," Hermione scolded. "You look like you haven't slept a wink."

"Very observant of you," Harry muttered.

"And Ron, you're not much better. Did you at least achieve anything whilst purposely ignoring your
body's natural rhythm?"

"Unlikely." Ron shook his head. "The task force has been all over the house. Malfoy's cleaned out.
We've probably got enough evidence to prove he was involved, but hardly enough to show he's the
mastermind behind the whole operation. It doesn't help when five different Ministries are fighting for
the rights to investigate. The French Ministry is all up in arms, putting up flooblocks all over the
place. Metaphorically," he added, on seeing her expression.

"What about Scorp's things?" Rose asked. "To reverse the spell?"

"They found some stuff under a loose floorboard in his wardrobe," Harry said, looking pained. "And
some clothes and books. They're testing it all now but I honestly don't hold out much hope.
Something that dark, Malfoy would have made sure to take it with him."

"We'll find it," Hermione said soothingly, but Rose wasn't much in the mood to be soothed.

"Can I see him now?" she asked, not bothering to hide her impatience.
Harry and Ron looked at each other. "Rosie," her father said, in a tone that suggested this was the last thing he wanted. "He's not… not in great shape. Maybe you should wait, until -"

"No." Rose drew herself up. "I'm an adult, Dad, and even prisoners get visitation rights."

"Patient in custody," Harry corrected quickly.

"Whatever. Let me see him right now, or I'll… I'll report you!" She didn't have the faintest idea how to do this or who to, except the Minister for Magic, but she'd be damned if she was stuck with that memory of him lying on the ground for another day.

Her dad sighed. "All right, all right. I wasn't going to stop you."

"Open up, Thomson," Harry said, nodding.

Thomson drew his wand. "Right away sir. Better let me go first, Miss, just in case."

Rose rolled her eyes, but stood back and let the three Aurors enter the room ahead of her. She closed her eyes for a moment, preparing herself, swearing to be strong whatever it was she was about to see. She felt her mother's hand at her back, and she opened her eyes again.

Immediately she could sense that something was wrong. The three men were all tensed, and as she watched they all drew their wands.

"You've got to be kidding me," Harry snapped. "Thomson, who's been in here since you last looked in?"

Thomson's eyes were wide, his wand hand white around the shaft. "I… sir, I… no one, sir, just a Healer or two… he was here an hour ago sir, I swear -"

Rose turned her head, feeling her heart sink lower even than it had in the last two days. There was a hospital bed, and a little table, and a couple of little plastic chairs. But that was all. The bed was empty. Scorpius was gone.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys, thanks for reading. I hope you enjoyed that slightly longer chapter because it may be the last one for a while, depending on how much I get done this week and whether I get a chance to update before I go away on holiday. Please keep your amazing comments coming as they really encourage and inspire me to write more! And don't forget you can always ask questions on my blog for a detailed and in-depth answer. I welcome any ideas you may have for other stories or spin offs in this universe - some are already planned but its nice to see what or who you guys like to read about. Link to my blog as always is misssaigonfic.tumblr.com
In the dream, he was in a forest. That much he could tell, from all the trees and suchlike. Normally he would have been annoyed by this, as no one could ever have accused him of being, well, woodsy, but it was very quiet under the canopy of branches. It was soothing. Peaceful, somehow. He sat at the base of an enormous tree and looked up at the gap in the canopy at the night sky. Somewhere far out there, the stars twinkled down at him. He wasn't sure how he had got here, but since it was a dream, he supposed he didn't have to know. He would just wait here until it was time to wake up again.

"You're lost," said a voice from somewhere, cutting through the peace of the forest.

He looked around, surprised. On the edge of the clearing there was a little boy, maybe ten or eleven, brown-haired and round-faced. He was dressed in Hogwarts robes that were slightly too big for him, including a Gryffindor tie knotted carelessly around his neck.

"Am I?" he asked the boy.

"You shouldn't be here. That's why they call it Forbidden." There was something oddly familiar about this boy, but he was a Gryffindor, and Scorpius didn't know many Gryffindors who weren't Weasleys. And he was almost definitely a first year in any case, and he really didn't know any first years. Had school started again without him?

"You're here though," he pointed out. He was so comfortable under the tree. He didn't see why he should have to move.

"I'm meant to be here," the boy explained. "So are they." He pointed away into the forest.

Scorpius turned again. Walking through the trees in the other direction were two small figures. From here, all he could see was that one of them had pale blonde hair.

Curiosity peaked, he got up and went to get a proper look. The boys didn't notice him as he drew closer, but since it was a dream he supposed that made sense. "What are they doing?" he asked aloud. "Why are they here?"

The boy, the one who knew he was there, came up beside him. "The dragon brought them," he said, sombre.

The boys were moving fast, stamping and crashing their way untidily through the undergrowth. One was blond and very pale, the other dark-haired and bespectacled. There was a dog too, Scorpius saw, skulking along beside them. Before them, on the forest floor, something shone, silvery and bright.
"That one's Albus," Scorpius said, pointing to the boy with glasses. The trees and brush didn't give him as much trouble as it gave the two boys. He seemed to be able to walk right past it all, as though it wasn't really real. "And the other... is it... me?"

"Do you remember being here?" the boy scoffed. "Look harder."

Scorpius wasn't sure he wanted to look harder, but he had walked ahead, now, and the boys were coming towards him instead of away.

"This is ridiculous," the blond one was saying. "When my father hears about this -"

"Just shut up and keep walking, Malfoy," said the other one, the one Scorpius had thought was Albus. But it wasn't Albus, he saw quite clearly now. This boy was smaller, skinnier than Albus had been at eleven. His glasses were held together with spellotape, and just visible under his fringe was the end of a lightning-shaped scar. And he was a Gryffindor, and the blond one was a Slytherin.

"Don't tell me to shut up, Potter," the blonde one muttered.

Scorpius wondered what they were doing here, together, especially if they were who he thought they were.

"The sooner we find the unicorn, the sooner we can go back," the one with glasses said, in a would-be-calm voice. "Come, Fang." The dog whined.

"I thought you said it was a dragon," Scorpius said, turning to look at the round-faced boy, but he was gone. In his place was a young man, maybe his own age. He had dark, overgrown hair and his robes were torn, and he was even more familiar than he had been before. Scorpius blinked at him. "Profe - I mean - Neville?"

The boy smiled. "Don't miss it. This is my favourite part."

Scorpius turned back. The boys had stopped walking. The one who had to be Harry Potter had his arm out to stop the other one from moving forward. The expression on the blond boy's face was one of utter terror. His mouth was half-open, his eyes wide and his bottom lip trembling. "Father?"

Scorpius breathed.

There was something there, something they were looking at, but Scorpius couldn't see it. As he watched, the boy that was his father let out a blood-curdling scream and fled, crashing off through the brush.

"Told you," Neville said.

"What did he see?" Scorpius asked. "What's he so afraid of?"

"You know what he's afraid of," As Scorpius watched, gouge marks appeared on Neville's face, and one of his eyes became swollen and bruised black.

"What's happening to you?"

Neville didn't answer, but pointed out towards the trees.

Scorpius turned again, with a sense of awful foreboding, dreading what he might be about to see. The clearing was suddenly full of figures, dark and shadowy, not quite visible to him except for a few. His grandfather was there, looking younger but no less pathetic than when Scorpius had last seen him, and his grandmother, standing still and expressionless. And behind them…
If it had not been a dream, Scorpius was sure he would have screamed. He might have screamed anyway, but if he did it was lost in the depths of the forest. Standing in the centre was a tall, hideous figure, white-skinned and bald with catlike red eyes. It had no lips, and its hands had unnaturally long fingers.

"I thought he would come," it said, and its voice was high and clear and terrible. "I expected him to come."

"I know right?" said Neville, behind him, but Scorpius could not take his eyes off the creature. "Look at him. Any sane person would run a mile."

"I was, it seems… mistaken," the creature muttered.

"You weren't." The voice came from the edge of the clearing, loud and forceful and familiar. Scorpius tore his eyes away to see Albus - no, not Albus, it was so easy to confuse them - and there was a great roaring around him like the outcry of a hundred angry trolls.

"Any sane person," Neville sighed. "I happen to know a few heroes."

The scene changed. The world around them blurred, and suddenly the forest was gone, replaced by stone walls and mirrors. "Wait!" Scorpius shouted. "Where - what happened?"

"Any sane person," Neville's face was almost unrecognisable now with bruises, and his robes were in worse shape than ever.

Scorpius glared at him. "I wish you'd stop doing that."

"There's more you need to see. Here."

Scorpius looked up. "Er… a bathroom? A… Hogwarts bathroom?" Another, more detailed glance around took in certain other aspects he hadn't noticed before. "A girl's bathroom?"

"Probably the most important room in the place, when you think about it. Historically, anyway."

There was a puddle of water on the floor, near the corner, and there, and also at the same time, not there, was a girl's body, prone and lifeless. Scorpius took half a step towards her before hesitating.

"What… what's wrong with her?"

"She's dead. It happens. And she made history. People forget that." The water spread until it covered the whole floor.

Scorpius swallowed. He had never seen a dead person before, that he could remember. "Can't we do anything?"

"Not unless you have a time turner and an unhealthy disregard for ineffability."

As Scorpius watched, the body faded away, and then there were three people, sitting around a cauldron. It was hard to see their faces, but Scorpius could hear them speak. Their voices echoed around the tiled walls like shadows.

"I'd say it'd be ready in about a month, if we can get all the ingredients," said one, a girl.

"A month?" demanded a young boy's voice. "Malfoy could have attacked half the Muggle-borns in the school by then!" Scorpius flinched and stared at the speaker. He was very young, twelve or so, and he had red hair. "The sooner we get a confession out of Malfoy, the better."
And then the cauldron was gone, and in its place was a blond boy about Scorpius' own age. He was leaning over one of the sinks, and breathing heavily as though he might be sick. Scorpius came up behind him and looked at the reflection in the mirror.

"Uncanny," said Neville. "No wonder people assume you're just like him."

"He is my father," Scorpius said, watching Draco's face. He had never seen his father cry. Never even seen him vulnerable, except perhaps when he was at his most angry. That was his way of dealing with vulnerability, Scorpius could see now. "He's so sad," he said, as the boy began to sob.

"You noticed."

"Don't." There was another voice, and Scorpius jumped and looked around. A dead girl was standing behind them, but she wasn't reflected in the mirror. Nothing to reflect, Scorpius realised, in the part of his mind that wasn't watching every tear that fell from his father's eyes, every shake of his shoulders. "Don't..." the girl continued, crooning cattishly in a way that was somehow unseemly. "Tell me what's wrong... I can help you..."

"No one can help me," Draco said hoarsely through his tears. "I can't do it.. I can't... it won't work... and unless I do it soon..."

Scorpius was so intent on watching, on comprehending that at some point his father had had emotions other than anger, that he only noticed the third person in the mirror at the same time as his father did. They both span round, Draco drawing his wand. Scorpius reached for his, instinctively, but of course he was only dreaming, and in any case it wasn't there.

A lamp exploded - a stray curse.

"No! No! Stop it!" the ghost was screaming. "STOP!"

Curses were flying everywhere and Scorpius could barely see what was happening, he kept trying to duck the curses before remembering that they couldn't harm him. A bin exploded, then a cistern, water started to pour everywhere, and then Draco opened his mouth and Scorpius knew, knew what he was going to do, knew with a dreadful kind of sick certainty. "Don't!" he shouted, as if it could do any good.

"Cruc -"

"SECTUMSEMPRA!" shouted the attacker. Dark hair and glasses.

Scorpius watched in horror as blood poured from Draco's face and chest, staining through his chest as though he had been stabbed all over. He fell, and Scorpius ran to him, kneeling in the puddle of water and blood as he tried to stop the bleeding with hands that would not, could not, make contact. He looked up to see the attacker also fall to his knees, water splashing up and fogging his glasses, his uniform accented with Gryffindor colours and his wet fringe parting in the centre to reveal the lightning scar. Harry Potter. Of course it was.

"Stop!" Scorpius shouted, looking up at Neville where he stood silently, watching. "Stop this! He's dying!"

"He won't die," Neville said calmly, even while the ghost girl was screaming "MURDER! MURDER IN THE BATHROOM!" and the water around Scorpius' knees turned redder and redder. "Would you even care if he did?"

"Of course I care!" Scorpius yelled at him. "He's my -"
"Are you sure?" Neville asked, and the scene blurred around them again. The young Harry Potter disappeared, and with it, the bloody water. Scorpius was left kneeling on the cold, cold floor.

Draco was there. Not hurt, but standing, leaning against the door. He was very pale and thin-looking, with dark circles under his eyes that looked almost like bruising. He was looking repulsed. It was an expression Scorpius recognised. On the other side, two hulking boys were washing their hands. The water coming off their fingers was as bloody as that Scorp had just been kneeling in.

"That was fun," one of the boys sniggered. Scorpius didn't know him, but he made a guess at Vincent Crabbe, one of his father’s school friends. The other one was certainly Goyle, with the same small dull eyes and long, bulging gorilla arms. "I liked that moaning sound he made."

"Yeah, too bad Longbottom butted in just when it was getting interesting," Goyle growled. "We should arrange for him to have an accident sometime soon."

"I'd rather just try out one of my new curses on him," said Crabbe.

"Yes, that'll be really good for your reputation when he tosses you on your behind, Vincent," Draco sighed. "Longbottom's too good a dueller these days."

"Now isn't that interesting," Neville said, grinning. When Scorpius looked at him, there was blood dripping off his chin. There was a deep gouge in his face from just under his eye to the bottom of his chin. He recognised it as the scar his Neville still wore. He wondered why on earth the boy was still grinning with blood dripping off him like that.

"Anyway he's got a new hidey hole, according to Umbridge," Draco continued. "If you two are too lazy to walk to the boy's bathroom, no way you'll ever find him."

"Then we'll find that first year again and finish him," Crabbe snickered. "He can't hide behind Longbottom's skirts all the time, 'specially now that Weasley girl's gone, and good riddance."

"I want the first year," Goyle protested, in a way that made Scorpius instantly sick to his stomach.

"Don't you two think about anything else?" Draco asked in a bored tone.

"Sorry, Draco," Goyle muttered.

"Aw, he's just griping 'cos he's not top in Dark Arts anymore," Crabbe laughed, play-punching Draco in the arm as he walked past.

The blond boy hissed and grabbed at his forearm as if he'd been burned. "Watch it, lunkhead!" Draco hissed, cradling the arm against his chest.

Crabbe seemed unconcerned, though Goyle looked slightly perplexed. "Come on Greg," Crabbe said. "Let Draco sulk. I bet Professor Carrow will let us stay up and play." He grinned nastily and shoved past into the hallway.

"Oh, just go," Draco snapped, when Goyle looked torn. "Go beat up some defenceless Hufflepuffs, if that's all you're good at."

"He never did much like getting his hands dirty," Neville said darkly.

"I don't want to see any more of this," Scorpius replied. The back of his neck felt very hot, and his stomach was churning. Considering it was a dream, he felt very ill all of a sudden.
And then Draco was alone again, in the bathroom. Scorpius felt his heart sink, thinking he would have to witness Potter's attack again, but his father's clothes were slightly different, he realised. A different day. But it was the same pose, the same helplessness. The boy wasn't speaking, but Scorpius could hear his voice, desperate and high, from somewhere very high up and very far away. "I haven't got any options! He'll kill me!" he could hear him cry. "He'll kill my whole family!"

Scorpius put out a hand to touch his father's shoulder, but his hand, or perhaps the shoulder, was too insubstantial. He felt only the air where a shoulder should be.

"He's always been sad," he said, heavy with realisation.

Neville came to stand beside him, so that Scorpius could see all three boys in the mirror. Two with pale hair and grey eyes, and one dark-haired and bloody. "There was one day he wasn't."

Scorpius turned away from the mirror. "Tell me its somewhere far away from this godforsaken bathroom."

Neville nodded. He was no longer smiling.

"Show me," Scorpius said, low.

The bathroom was gone, and in its place was a room Scorpius vaguely recognised as a sitting room at Malfoy Manor. It was night, or he guessed it was, from the heavy velvet curtains that covered the tall windows. The only light came from a dim gas lamp on the table, making the place even gloomier than he remembered. What little other furniture there was left in the room was covered in pale grey dust sheets. Draco, now in his twenties, was standing stiffly by the mantelpiece of an unlit fire.

And somewhere nearby, someone was screaming. A woman. It was a harsh, guttural sound, full of pain. It filled the very walls around them, sharp with anguish.

"This?" Scorpius demanded, but Neville was gone, too. It was just him and his father, alone but for the screams. "This is your happy day?" he said, whirling on Draco. The man stared straight through him, his face blank, unreadable. "Someone's in pain! Don't just stand there being useless, do something!"

The man just stood there, staring into the opposite wall. Scorpius tried kicking him, but he should have known that wouldn't work. "You're a coward," Scorpius spat. "A damn coward. You won't even -"

There was one last, terrible scream, and Scorpius put his hands to his ears, unable to bear the sound any longer. When he dared lower them, the screaming had stopped. But then another sound began, a high-pitched, hearty wail. As Scorpius watched, a smile spread over his father's face.

A door opened, and Narcissa Malfoy came through it, looking saner and more well-kempt than the last time Scorp had seen her in real life. "You have a son," she said, simply, closing the door behind her.

"I know." Draco's hand slipped off the mantle and he turned to face his mother. "I heard him."

Scorpius looked from one to the other, only just now comprehending. "Me?" he said softly. Neither of them heard him.

Narcissa came forward and touched her fingertips to Draco's cheek. "A son," she said. "I am so proud of you. Your father is, as well."
"Of course." Draco took his mother's hand gently and lowered it. "That's why he locked himself in the study this morning and hasn't come out."

Narcissa sighed. "He remembers your own birth. Astoria's labour seems momentary compared to the two days he spent at my bedside back then. He will want to celebrate with you tomorrow, I'm sure -"

Draco turned away. "What are we doing here, mother? I mean really. There's nothing left of this house. It isn't good for him. For any of us."

"Draco, this house has been in your father's family - your family - for generations. He will never leave. You know that."

"He clings to what no longer exists." Draco ran a hand through his hair, already starting to recede a little at the temple, though he wasn't even thirty.

"Your father is ill, Draco."

"I know that, mother. He would do better in St Mungos than here."

Narcissa drew herself up, her face a mask of fury. "How dare you! Your father -"

"Because I don't want to see him rot here like the pathetic shade he's becoming! He's falling apart in this place, mother, and so are you. So am I. And if you think I'm about to subject my son to that…"

Narcissa's regality faded away as quickly as it had come. She stared at her son, her hands trembling slightly as she clasped them together. "What are you saying?"

Draco looked away. "We're leaving. Astoria and I, and the child. As soon as she is well enough."

"But…" Narcissa looked horrified. "But… where on earth will you go?"

"Far. Far away from this place. From Potter and his hero-worshipping Ministry. Paris, perhaps, or Brussels. We both speak the language."

"But Draco…"

"I need a new start, mother. I can't stay here, not with the damn Aurors constantly down my neck and Father looking at me like I killed You-Know-Who with my own bare hands, for Merlin's sake. I did what you wanted, I agreed to marry Astoria. And now I have an heir there's really no reason to stay, anymore."

"Draco, Astoria will need help," Narcissa insisted, trying a change of tactic. "She is a well-bred girl, she will need a wet-nurse and a nanny, and a governess."

"Were you planning on being all those things, mother?" Draco asked, raising an eyebrow. "Or did you plan on hiring them? With what, may I ask? You know full well we can't afford to even keep the damn fires lit anymore." He waved a hand dismissively. "Daphne will come with us for a few months to help with the child. It's all arranged. Astoria doesn't want to stay here any more than I do. I'm sorry mother. I would ask you to come with us but I know you'll insist on staying here with him until you both turn to dust. Now if you don't mind, I should like to see my son." He didn't push past, but stepped carefully around his mother and strode towards the door.

Scorpius stared after him, eyes wide and his mouth slightly open.

"Does that surprise you?" Scorpius looked round to see a little girl suddenly standing beside him. It
was Alice, but somehow not Alice. She was looking at him in a way the real Alice never would.
"That your birth prompted him to change his life?"

Scorpius shivered. The words coming out of her mouth were not those of a five year old, and they
sounded terribly off in her girlish little voice. The whole thing was highly disturbing. "It might have
been better if he hadn't," he replied.

"Really?" Alice laughed. "You would have liked to grow up in this place? With a grandfather who
tried to kill you? Twice?"

Scorpius shook his head. "Can we just… get out of here?" he asked. "I'd really sort of like to go
home, now."

"Of course." Alice held out a hand. Somewhat against his better judgement, Scorpius took it.

When the blurry uncertainty stopped, he was somewhere else. It took him a moment to realise it
was the Leaky Cauldron, or at least, the apartment above it where the Longbottoms lived. They
stood by the fireplace in the living room, behind which were stuck three of Alice's scribble-drawings.
One of them was recognisably an owl, the others could have been anything. Just over to the left was
Tony's room, where Scorpius had slept for a few days after his grandfather's curse had weakened
him. To the right was Lizzie's room, down the end of the corridor the master bedroom. Scorpius
wasn't sure where Alice was sleeping these days. But it was all as he remembered it. It seemed like a
long, long time since he had been here.

He looked down at Alice. "This is your home," he told her. "Not mine."

Alice beamed at him innocently. "Where is your home then?"

Scorpius opened his mouth to answer, but found himself unable to. Where was his home?

Three men came into the room, but just like before, none of them noticed him or his creepy little-girl
guide. One of them was Neville, now the right age and with no bleeding wounds. The furious
expression on his face was offset only by the badger on his T-shirt sitting astride the slogan "Huffles
Puff It Up". Scorp wondered if he'd lost some sort of bet with Hannah.

The others were Ron Weasley and Harry Potter, looking much as Scorpius had seen them last,
except that they were both without any Auror robes or insignia. Scorp supposed that must be their
idea of incognito. Neither looked particularly happy to be here in the face of Neville's anger.

Neville drew his wand and flicked it towards the walls with a motion Scorpius recognised as a
silencing spell. "Now you better tell me what the hell is going on," he demanded.

"We've been searching all day," Harry said, low. "Still nothing."

"How can there be nothing?" Neville hissed. "He was in your custody for a day and a half! No one
thought to put a tracking charm on him?"

"Course we did," Ron protested. "It's been disabled, hasn't it? Malfoy's an idiot, but he's not stupid,
you know. We've got people working on locator spells, but that takes time."

"We need your help, Nev," Harry said. "We need to know everything you know about Malfoy.
Anywhere he might have gone, anything the boy might have told you…"

"Scorpius doesn't talk about his family," Neville said, in a low tone that was almost a growl. "And I
can tell you for sure, he damn well didn't know his father was… that he was the Shadow."
"How do you know?" Ron asked, disbelieving.

Neville glared at him. "I know, Ron. I just know."

"Nev, we want to find him just as much as you do -" Harry started.

"I really doubt that," Neville muttered. "How did Malfoy get through your people, anyway? Tell me you had guards and all kind of security charms on the boy."

"All of the above," Harry assured him. "We're still working on how he got in, but the main thing now is finding him."

"I told you," Neville snapped. "Scorpius doesn't talk about -"

"He told me what you did," Harry interrupted him.

"What?"

"He said you helped him. After his grandfather - "

"He told you about that?" The expression of disbelief on Neville's face was almost comical. "Was this before or after the dose of Veritaserum that put him in a coma?"

Harry winced. "Er, before. I made the suggestion that you might know something, and it all came out. I think he thought I was going to arrest you."

Neville raised an eyebrow. "I'd like to see you try."

"They're looking for me," Scorpius said, frowning. "What happened to me? Where did I go?"

Alice only smiled. It was an adult's smile, a knowing smile, and it looked all wrong on her face.

"You should have told us," Harry was saying.

"He wouldn't let me." Neville pinched the bridge of his nose. "He fell out of the fireplace, shaking and in pain. I've been through that enough times to know what it was. Not to mention nursing Michael and the others back to health, during the war."

"Cruciatus?" Ron looked shocked.

"The worst I've ever seen, and that's saying something. He was in bed three days."

"Bloody hell." Harry shook his head. "And you didn't report it?"

"I told you, he refused to testify. He said…" he paused, looking suddenly guilty.

"What?" Ron asked quickly.

Neville sighed. "He said he didn't want to be responsible for… for sending his family to prison, again."

Harry and Ron looked at each other.

"No!" Scorpius shouted, realising how that could sound given the current situation. "That was then! That was different!"

"Lends precedence to the theory he took that Veritaserum on purpose, doesn't it," Ron said.
"I did not!" Scorp yelled.

"Look," Neville said, ever the voice of reason in an unreasonable world. "Scorpius has some... some somewhat fatuous ideas, sometimes..."

"Hey," Scorp protested.

"But I don't believe he would willingly sacrifice his life for his father, Shadow or no. Not like that, not knowing that... he just wouldn't." He shook his head. "Rose might know better than me where he is. Have you asked her?"

"We aren't exactly on speaking terms right now," Ron muttered.

"We asked her," Harry interrupted. "And Albus. No leads so far. I'd like to speak to Lizzie too, though."

"Of course," Neville nodded. "In the meantime, there might be... someone I could ask."

"Yeah?"

"A Seer. She specialises in finding... lost things."

"She?" Ron raised his eyebrows. "Do we know this woman? Does Hannah?"

"Shut it Ron." Neville glared. "I'm not in the mood for games. You just better find him, all right? That boy is... well, at times he's been like a nephew to me. I shall be very upset if you let anything happen to him."

Scorpius felt his stomach clench a little.

"You along with the rest of the world," Ron sighed. "If I'd have known people would worry so much I might have just chained him to the bed."

Scorpius flinched, despite himself. Even Harry looked a little shocked at this statement.

"You know what Ron?" Neville said, in tones as icy cold as Scorpius had ever heard him. "You could learn a lot from Scorpius Malfoy."

"Oh, that's nice," Alice giggled from beside him. "Don't you think that's nice?"

"Fantastic," Scorpius sighed. "Is this show over? I'd like to go back to sleep."

"You are asleep," Alice laughed. "Isn't this more fun than sleeping?"

"Then I need to wake up," he said. On a whim he tried pinching himself. It didn't hurt, and he didn't wake up, but it did get very dark all of a sudden. "Wake up," he told himself firmly. "Wake up so you can find out where you are and how to get home. Well, or the closest thing, then. Wake up." He closed his eyes tight and wished himself awake. When he opened his eyes, he was alone, and it was pitch black. So much for that idea.

"HELLO?" he shouted, taking a tentative step forward. The darkness was unnerving, even in a dream. There was no texture to the ground under his feet, no smell or temperature to the air around him. "Hellooo?"

"Hi."

"You along with the rest of the world," Ron sighed. "If I'd have known people would worry so much I might have just chained him to the bed."

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"HELLO?" he shouted, taking a tentative step forward. The darkness was unnerving, even in a dream. There was no texture to the ground under his feet, no smell or temperature to the air around him. "Hellooo?"
Scorpius blinked. Suddenly, standing in front of him was a young man. He had dark hair, a long, straight nose and narrow, handsome features. He looked to be about fifteen - he had that slight gangliness that indicated a boy on the brink of manhood. But so far, all the people he had seen had been people he knew, or had at least heard about. This boy was a stranger.

"Let me guess." Scorp said tentatively, looking his new companion up and down. "You're… the ghost of Christmas future?"

The young man frowned. "Sorry, what?"

Scorp sighed. "Am I seriously the only one who reads Dickens? I've seen the past and the present, so you must be here to show me the future. If this dream makes any sense at all."

A smile this time. "Dreams don't usually do that." The boy turned and beckoned over his shoulder. "Come on."

Since there didn't seem to be any alternative, Scorpius followed him. They walked through the empty darkness for a few minutes. Scorpius had the odd feeling that, while he felt peaceful now, when he woke up all this would be a lot more traumatising. If he did wake up. That particularly ugly thought gave him a chill. "So…" he said, trying to sound as nonchalant as possible. "Am I dying?"

The boy grinned at him. Scorpius wasn't sure if that was a good sign. "Not yet."

"Oh. Good." He decided to ignore the evidence of foreboding behind that remark. After all, everyone died eventually. "So I guess we're going to do the whole gravestone bit," he said, with an attempt at joviality. "I hope my funeral isn't completely unattended. After all its not like I was ever miserly. Didn't have any money to be miserly with."

"If we were playing out that story, I'd be dressed up as a Dementor right now," the boy said.

"Ha," Scorpius said triumphantly. "So you have read it."

"I'm a part of you, just like the others. I've read everything you've read. You're right about one thing," he went on, stopping in the middle of a new patch of darkness that looked just the same as the one they had started in. "Your journey is a warning, just like it was in the story. But it's not about you. You don't need any protection from yourself. Not just at the moment, anyway."

Scorpius blinked. That was just a little too cryptic for his current state of mind to handle, even in a dream. "Do I know you?" he asked instead.

The boy smiled again. "No. But you will."

"Right. Christmas future and all that. So if you aren't trying to get me to change my ways, what are you trying to warn me about?"

The boy made no answer, but gestured ahead. In the distance there was a tiny speck of light, and as they watched, it seemed to be getting gradually bigger.

"Moment of truth," Scorpius muttered, starting to feel anxious. Two years of Divination and he had never once seen even the slightest hint of the future. One time his tea leaves had predicted an incident where he spilled nearly a whole jug of milk, but that was probably a coincidence. He had thought the leaves looked more like an elephant than a jug, anyway. No wonder he had failed his OWL.

The feeling of foreboding worsened as the light split and began to surround them, becoming walls
that then became solid, and there was good hard ground beneath his feet… well, some sort of carpet, anyway. He looked around, blinking, letting his eyes adjust to the new scene. It was someone's house. There were pictures on the mantelpiece on the wall opposite that strongly suggested that much. But there was no furniture, at least, not for being used. A few small tables had been pushed against one wall, and these were covered in flowers. It was cold. Not as cold as Durmstrang, but a thick, cloudy sort of cold that suggested a chilling charm. To keep the flowers fresh, maybe. There was a window that looked out over a green summer garden. It was very quiet.

Scorpius turned around and felt his heart stick in his throat. There was a coffin. It was raised up on a bench, and draped in white fabric. Scorpius stared at it.

"I thought you said… how old was I?" he asked after a moment, not daring to look any closer.

The dark-haired boy, standing beside him, shot him a sympathetic look.

"When is this?" Scorp demanded, looking around for some clue, but before he could find one, the door opened, and Albus came in. This time it was definitely Albus, from the formal dress robes with a Ravenclaw tie to the way he pushed the bridge of his glasses up his nose. But he wasn't any older than when Scorpius had last seen him. Not in age, anyway. Emotionally he might have aged a hundred years. His brow was heavily furrowed and his lips were pressed tight together. "Al," Scorp breathed. "Al, what happened? Did something happen to me?" But it was still a dream, and Albus could not hear him. Bleakly he felt a terrible certainty that he had never woken up from the damn Moonsilver coma, if that's what it was.

"What's the point of all this then?" he demanded of the future ghost. "What's the point of this whole bloody mind trip if I'm just going to die?"

"Hush," the boy said, pointing at the coffin. "Watch."

As Scorpius watched, Albus pulled out the Ravenclaw flag that Scorp used to use for cheering at Quidditch matches, and laid it lengthways over the coffin. Then he spoke, his voice low and hoarse. "He's sorry he couldn't be here," he said, pushing back his fringe with hands that shook. "Your dad wouldn't let him anywhere near the house. But he wanted to be here. I tried, I promise, but…" he shook his head, and there were tears streaming from his eyes behind his glasses.

"He's not talking to me," Scorpius said, with a realisation that felt like a kick in the stomach. "He's talking… about me."

"Stupid," Albus was saying through his tears. "Why'd we have to be so stupid?"

"No," Scorpius said, the sickening stab of true realisation plunging into his heart like a knife. "No. This isn't… this can't be…"

He turned and saw again the pictures on the mantelpiece, and this time he saw them properly. He knew the people in them. A mother and father, a son and daughter. A girl with bushy red hair and kind, brown eyes. Shaking he took a step towards the coffin, and then another. The shroud covering her was very thin, and through it he could just make out her face. Rose's dead face.

"This isn't real," he said, looking up at the future ghost. "Tell me this isn't real - tell me it doesn't happen!"

"It happens." There was nothing boyish about the ghost now. His tone was hard, his expression emotionless. "At this time. On this day."

"But why?" Scorpius could feel his own tears coming. If it hadn't been a dream he was sure he
would have thrown up right there and then. She couldn't be dead. She just couldn't be. "What happened to her?"

"You know," the ghost replied.

"Don't give me that - don't tell me that! How could I possibly know?"

"You know because of what you have seen." The ghost tilted its head and smiled coldly. "What do you think your dreams have been about?"

Scorpius felt the cold sink deep into his dream self as though he had been dunked in ice. "My… my father." He turned and stared at the coffin with its white shroud, and Albus weeping over his cousin's body. "He did this to her?"

The ghost tilted its head back the other way. "Not yet."

Scorpius looked up, his eyes blazing fire. "Then I can change it," he said, as sure as he knew how. "If it hasn't happened yet… it doesn't have to happen. I can change this."

The ghost smirked. "If you say so."

"I won't let her die!" Scorpius shouted. "I won't! Tell me how to change it!" He reached out to grab the ghost boy by the front of his shirt, but his hands closed on empty air. The boy was gone, and so was the room, and so was Albus. Only the coffin remained, and even that was fading away.

"I'll save her!" he yelled into the dark as the night returned, swallowing him up as it so often did in dreams. "You hear me? I CAN SAVE HER!"

And then there was blackness, and pain, and more blackness, and then, the dream was over.
Chapter Summary

A week ago Scorpius might not have recognised fear in his father's face, but the Moonsilver had changed that. In the dream, he had seen his father afraid, seen him in terror for his life and his family's lives. And this, right now, was exactly the same.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

2023

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When he finally woke again, it took him a while to realise it was happening. Strange, alien feelings came over him, one at a time - a dry, dusty texture to his mouth, a disconcerting heaviness in his limbs, a fuzzy, fluffy feeling to his head and a weight over his eyes as if someone had pinned them shut. He had the sensation of having woken several times already, but he had drifted off into the darkness again, unable to rouse himself.

Stay awake, he told himself firmly. Stay… awake…

It was difficult. Something powerful was pulling at him, urging him back into the endless slumber where he was warm, and safe. As he lay there, fighting against it as much as he could, the dream became less a true memory and more a scattering of images and feelings, the way dreams tend to do. But the last image stayed with him, biting at him, forcing him away from the sweet release of sleep and bringing him back to life.

Rose. I have to save Rose. The coffin covered in white and surrounded by flowers. He had to stop it. That was all he knew.

With a great effort and a gigantic force of will, he opened his eyes.

It was dark. He was lying on his back, and the ceiling was very, very far away, and quite unfamiliar. When he turned his head it became clear that he was lying on the floor. As the feeling began to return to his back and legs, he realised it was not a comfortable floor at all, and there was only a thin pallet between him and it, and his back was one big ache.

Groaning, he forced himself up onto one elbow. The hard wood of the floor banged against the bone as he lifted his head up. It hurt, but he felt a little less fuzzy afterward. Catching on, he found his other hand and pinched himself on the crook of the arm. That gave him enough brain power to try and work out what in Merlin's name was going on.

Someone had covered him with a cloak. That was the first thing he noticed. The second was that he stank, as if he hadn't washed in days. Further exploration of his own body revealed that there was dried urine on his trousers. Nice. They were the same clothes he had been wearing on the day of his arrest, minus the robes. Something told him that that day was long gone. When he touched his face,
the skin over his jaw was rough with stubble.

His head started to droop over his chest, and he shook it thoroughly and pinched himself again. His mouth and throat were dry as a bone. He needed water badly, and some food wouldn't hurt, either. His head was pounding.

It would be a while before he was able to stand. His legs would barely move, and he knew they wouldn't support his weight just yet. Instead he pressed his fingertips to his forehead and tried to focus on the room.

It was small, and dark. It was empty except for him and, quite nearby, a pile of bags next to another pallet. Clearly someone else was also sleeping here. There was one window, too high to see out of, and that let in what little light there was to see by. Scorpius guessed by the colour that it might be late afternoon, though he had to admit that any such observation was little more than his imagination. The place was clearly very run down. The wallpaper, whatever colour it was, was cracked and peeling. The floor gave the impression of being slightly unstable.

How had he got here? He thought hard, brushing away the fragments of confused memory and concentrating on the whole ones. He remembered delivering the package. The raid. The long, horrible wait in the dark holding cell. Then Teddy had been there… and Rose's father. There was a man he wasn't likely to forget in a hurry. But then what had happened? He didn't remember going to sleep. Why was he here? What was here?

Merlin's beard, he was thirsty.

He sat up a bit more, trying to see if there was anything resembling water in any of the bags. He reached out, but they were too far away.

Suddenly there was a noise from somewhere. It sounded like it came from below, and Scorpius felt a strange moment of dizziness as he realised he might be on a top floor. "H…Hello?" he tried to call out, but all that issued from his mouth was a low, croaking sound.

Footsteps. Footsteps on a staircase, a very old, creaky staircase. Suddenly Scorpius wasn't so sure he wanted to know his new roommate's identity. In a fit of sudden panic he threw off the cloak and tried to stand, forced himself forward onto his knees and scrabbling for a purchase on the wooden floorboards. He only succeeded in balancing on his heels for a second before he fell sideways, his body making a loud thud as it hit the floor.

The door flew open and someone came hurriedly over to him, kneeling on the floor and lifting his head up. "Scorpius," said a familiar, impossible voice. "Are you all right? Don't try to move – you are ill –"

"Father?" Scorpius croaked, in stunned disbelief. He struggled for a moment in the man's grip, trying to sit up again.

"Hush, boy. Be still."

For once Scorpius didn't try to argue. Even that small effort had left him exhausted. "Water," he croaked instead.

He couldn't see it, but his father must have summoned a water flask because it was suddenly being pressed to his lips. Scorpius took a deep draught that made him cough and splutter for a minute, and then a second sip to ease the dryness in his mouth. It tasted weirdly lemony, but he didn't care. It could have tasted like sewage and he wouldn't have minded. As the water worked its magic on his
stiff tongue, he looked up in awe and not a little trepidation at his father.

The man looked considerably less well-groomed than he had the last time Scorpius had seen him. He was clean-shaven, but there was dust in his hair and on his robes, and there were no rings on his fingers. He was kneeling unceremoniously on the floor with Scorpius' head in his lap, and he was being almost… gentle. It was weird. Scorpius couldn't even remember the last time the man had touched him. "Father," he said, when his throat seemed like it might actually work again. "What… where are we? What happened?"

His father looked away. He lowered Scorpius back onto the cloak. "You were poisoned," he said, in a very dark tone that sent a chill down Scorpius' spine. "That bastard, Potter… as if taking my fortune, my home, my very future away from me, as if that wasn't enough… he tried to take my son."

Scorpius swallowed, a memory surfacing slowly, like oil to the surface of the ocean. "Moonsilver," he said, groaning. "Veritaserum." He cursed himself for ten times an idiot. He knew he was allergic to Veritaserum. He had completely forgotten in all the chaos and confusion and fear. What's more, he realised as the memory played out like a horror film - he had signed the damn paperwork. He had agreed to take it. People would think he was completely mental.

"But…" he said, bringing himself back to the current dilemma. "That doesn't explain… how am I here?" A suspicion began to grow in his mind. "I was arrested. How did you…"

"I came for you," his father said, shortly. "I still have connections… important connections. I have more power than Potter thinks."

"You kidnapped me," he said flatly. "You broke into a Ministry building, and you –"

"I saved you!" Draco growled, getting to his feet. "They would have let you die."

"I wouldn't have been there at all if it wasn't for you!" Scorpius was wide awake now, more awake than he could remember ever being in his life. "You gave me that stupid package – and you – you're – you're the Shadow, aren't you?"

Draco's expression twisted. "Don't talk about things you cannot hope to understand," he said, low.

Scorpius sat up. His father still towered over him, but it was better than lying down helplessly. "But I do understand," he protested. "When I was asleep, I saw… I dreamed that you… I do understand." He didn't remember all of the dream, but somehow he knew that what he had seen was real. What he had felt was real. "But what you're doing now… the stuff you're selling to people, it's dangerous! People have been killed, Father!"

"What people do with what I sell is their own affair," Draco said shortly.

"What was in that package?" Scorp demanded. "What did I take? Could it have hurt someone?"

"Scorpius, that is enough – "

"You shouldn't have come for me," he said, not listening. "They'll know it was you, the Ministry. They know who you are." He realised, with a jab to the stomach of something that was part self-loathing and part relief, that he still didn't want his father to go to prison. The man loved him, in his own, twisted sort of way. Scorpius' birth had given him the courage to leave the home and the family that was rotting apart. He had wanted Scorpius to work with him, to be part of what he was building, illegal and sickening as that was. And he had come for him. Through an army of Aurors and
Ministry people who wanted him dead, across international borders and at great risk. He had come for his son. What else could it be, but love?

"I know." Draco shook his head. "Sending you was a mistake, I see that now. In truth, it was not my idea."

"Whose idea was it then?"

Draco did not answer.

"Father?"

The man was staring down at the bags on the floor next to the second pallet. It occurred to Scorpius that his father had been sleeping on the floor beside him. This was more unbelievable to him than anything else that had happened so far. He wondered why Draco hadn't just conjured beds. Then he wondered if maybe the floor couldn't take the weight. Then he wished he hadn't thought that.

"The townhouse is crawling with Aurors," Draco said suddenly. "We cannot go back there. We will wait here a while until the circus has died down and you are well enough before we move on."

"Where is here?" Scorpius asked. "And who's we? Is Goyle here too?"

Draco shook his head. "Just you and I. The others refused to come with me to England. They… I left them behind." He knelt on one knee and began rummaging through one of the bags.

Something about the way he said it made Scorpius pause. Had he been about to say that they left him behind? But surely Goyle wouldn't. The man could barely get up in the morning without being ordered to.

And then he realised what was the strangest thing of all. His father wasn't angry. Scorpius being caught had ruined it all for him, exposed him, torn down his whole operation, his business, what he had been working on for years. He had lost it all, all over again, his house, his friend, his servants… he ought to be furious. But he wasn't. He was frightened.

A week ago Scorpius might not have recognised fear in his father's face, but the Moonsilver had changed that. In the dream, he had seen his father afraid, seen him in terror for his life and his family's lives. And this, right now, was exactly the same.

"How long was I out?" Scorpius asked, carefully.

"Four days," his father muttered.

Scorpius decided to accept that. There was nothing he could do about it now, after all, but no wonder he was so hungry. "No one followed you? How did you get out? Or in, for that matter?"

"I used one of the Ancient Keys."

Scorpius blinked. That one was a bit lost on him… or was it though? "Those.. extra powerful Portkeys?" he guessed. "Like the one we took to Durmstrang?"

"Very rare objects," his father said, an edge of pride in his voice despite the state of his robes and he fact he was sleeping on the ground. "There are less than ten left in the world, and I have - had - three of them. Now there is only one, of course," he added bitterly. "I expect Saint Potter will have the others by now."
"Are they valuable?" Scorpius asked, knowing the answer.

"Priceless. They can travel further than a Ministry-Regulated Portkey, are more accurate than Apparition and can bypass most secure spells and wards, like those that were around you at the hospital."

Scorpius stared. Not only did they sound very, very valuable but also extremely illegal. He supposed he should have expected that, however.

"Why are you telling me this now?" he asked. "I worked for you... with you... for weeks, and you never said anything. If I'd have known, I might have... run away, he thought. Reported it, probably. I was angry enough. But he couldn't say that. Instead he said, "I might have known to run when those Ministry guys came in. I could have Apparated away, or... or... "

"No," his father said darkly. "Oh, you couldn't have run, they would have set anti-Apparition wards. No, they had been getting close to us for months. The Aurors would have taken someone that day whether you were there or not. That it was you was just..."

"A coincidence?" Scorpius said, feeling sick. He was started to feel dizzy and tired again. He rubbed his forehead with the back of his hand.

"No," his father said, unexpectedly. "No, I don't think it was that." He seemed to have found what he was looking for in the bags. He uncorked a slim vial and tipped a few drops into the water flask. "Drink this," he instructed.

Scorpius took the flask, but hesitated. "What... what is it?" he asked, resisting the urge to sniff at it suspiciously.

"What I have been giving you the last few days, to counteract the effects of the Moonsilver," his father replied. "May I assume I no longer have to force-feed you?"

Scorpius shook his head. His father was a lot of things, but he was also good at Potions, this he knew. He swallowed the water, which now tasted even more like lemons. He did feel a little more alert, afterwards. "Would... would they not have given me that at the hospital?" he asked, tentatively, not wanting to poke the dragon.

"I think not." Draco got to his feet and dusted off his robes, for what good it did. "It is more or less pure adrenaline and will not serve as a long-term solution. It would have been better to wait for you to recover on your own, but alas we do not have the luxury of time, thanks to Potter and his blasted Ministry." He met Scorpius' eyes for a minute, and Scorpius thought he saw something other than fear, something worse. But then it was gone, and his father turned away. "Rest," he said shortly. "I must attend to our wards. They are all that is keeping us safe, at the moment."

~*-A-*~

Albus was feeling extremely on edge, and not just because of the new round of tests the Aurors had just put him through. They were testing his reaction to different objects sequestered from the Malfoy house, to see if any of those might be the cursed object that prevented him from talking about what he knew about the Shadow. He was tired of being poked at with wands. Far apart from being annoying and occasionally even painful, it seemed incredibly pointless when his best friend had been abducted and was out there, somewhere, probably still in a coma and unable to defend himself.

All in all it had not been a great week.
His mother made him sit on the sofa when he got back from the hospital and drink tea. He didn’t want to drink tea. He wanted to be out there with his father, looking for Scorpius. He wanted to be doing something useful. He knew Rose was feeling the same way, but at least she was being allowed to help. She had helped Neville and the Aurors put together a map of likely locations. She was up there at the Ministry every day doing whatever little she could to speed things along. No one would even consider letting Albus help. Never mind that it was his best friend that was in trouble, never mind that it was Al himself who had been cursed with a secrecy spell.

If they had bothered to ask his opinion, he would have told them that it was just as pointless looking in the ‘likely’ places. Malfoy was a smuggler, therefore he probably knew a dozen unlikely places, spread all over Europe and probably all warded from detection, perhaps even unplottable, so their stupid map was a waste of time, wasn’t it? Everyone seemed to be pinning their hopes on this Seer woman Neville said he knew, but she was proving to be a difficult Seer to find. And if she couldn’t See that they needed her… well that seemed like a dead end, too. At least Aunt Hermione seemed to agree with him on that score.

The doorbell rang. Al ignored it. He was not supposed to leave the sofa, and if that meant not moving in order to perform basic household niceties like answering the door, well, so be it. The bell rang again. "LILY!" Al yelled, careful not to spill his tea. "GET THE DOOR!"

"WE'RE DOING OUR POTIONS HOMEWORK!" she yelled from the kitchen where she and Hugo had been studying on and off while all their parents were out. James was supposed to be supervising but he spent most of his time either up in his room or practicing flying out in the garden. Al would have given quite a lot to go out with him, if only to distract him from all the mess for a few minutes, but his mother flat out refused to hear of it. It didn't matter how much Al complained that the stupid secrecy spell was not likely to cause him to fall off a broom while fifty feet up in the air, she insisted he needed peace and quiet. It was infuriating. "JAMES!" he heard Lily yell now. "GET THE DOOR!"

"Bloody hell," said a disgruntled voice from the top of the stairs. "This house could really do with some kind of bloody intercom system. Or a zookeeper." James' footsteps came thumping down the stairs and the door was finally opened, after the bell had rung for a third time. "Oh, hi," he heard James say. "Come in then."

"Thanks," said a familiar voice, and Albus almost groaned. "How's the patient?"

"Sulking," James said cheerfully. "Just through here."

Seconds later his brother appeared in the doorway to the living room with Albus' girlfriend by his side. "Here you go," James announced. "Cheer him up, will you?" he waggled his eyebrows suggestively as he stood back to let her pass.

"Bugger off, James," Al muttered. "Hi, Cleo."

"Hey baby," Cleo said, smiling sympathetically at him. Al tried to smile back, but sympathy was the last thing he wanted right now. She came over and sat on the sofa, close beside him. "You okay?"

"Just peachy," Al muttered. "James, will you go away?"

His brother sniggered as he walked off in the direction of the kitchen, no doubt planning on talking and laughing behind their backs. "Har har bloody har," Al sighed, running a hand through his hair. Cleo giggled. "That… really did not help," she said. She reached up and smoothed his hair back with careful, dainty fingers. Somehow she managed to be dainty and tough at the same time. That was
part of what made her so attractive, really. She still had blue hair, locks of it poking out of a hasty-
looking style that no doubt carried the just-rolled-out-of-bed look she was going for. She'd somehow
managed to find time to do her makeup, though. However, perhaps in concession to the seriousness
of the situation, she had dressed a little less daringly today in a jeans and a loose, slightly opaque
cardigan. "Seriously," she said, when his hair was adjusted to her satisfaction. "Are you okay?"

He shrugged. "I dunno. I hate just sitting here."

She scooted along the sofa so that she could curl up beside him, laying one arm across his chest. "I
know. I'm worried about him, too. But I worry about you more."

"There's nothing wrong with me!" he protested, putting his teacup down hard on the coffee table. "I
should be up there, helping."

"We should do something to take your mind off it," Cleo said. "Want to watch some TV?"

"Not really."

"Play cards?"

"No."

"Want to make out?"

Al looked down at her with raised eyebrows. She grinned back. "What? That would take your mind
off things."

Albus sighed. "I dunno. I'm not really in the mood."

Cleo made an amused face and sat up slightly so she could look him in the eyes. "Okay, look at it
this way. If you sit here worrying and moping, it's not going to do you or Scorpius any good. If we
make out for a bit, it still won't help Scorpius any, but you might feel better for a little while." She
reached up and lifted his glasses gently off his nose and back onto his head. "And it'll make me feel
less useless."

Albus gave up. "Well, if it makes you feel better," he said.

~*~A~*~

About half an hour later, Al became aware that something was going on the kitchen. There was a
man's voice, deeper than James', and Lily's high-pitched giggle.

"What is it?" Cleo asked, noticing his distraction.

"Something's up," he said, pushing his glasses back down. He was about to start straightening his
clothes when Teddy stuck his head around the door.

"Oi, lovebirds," he said, rolling his eyes. "Look sharp, here comes the boss man."

Cleo sat up - a little too eagerly, Albus thought - and pulled her cardigan back into place. Al
hurriedly followed her example just as his dad came into the living room. Harry paused for a second
as if gauging the temperature of the room before deciding to ignore whatever he had sensed and
move on.
"What is it?" Al asked quickly. "Did you find him?"

"Not yet," Harry said. Albus hadn't seen his dad in at least two days. He looked exhausted, with dark circles under his eyes and his hair sticking up all over the place. "But we think we might have made some progress. We just heard from Neville. It looks like he's tracked down this Seer at last."

"A real one?" Cleo said, eyes wide. "Cool."

"He's bringing her here," Harry explained, as Teddy performed some kind of charm on the windows. "Using divination for Department purposes is sort of… unconventional."

"Is that a new word for 'against regulations'?" Teddy said cheerfully. "Illegal? Underground?"

"Badger, kindly shut up and get on with the warding spells."

"Yessir."

"So I get to help?" Al said, his heart lifting with excitement. His dad gave him a warning look. "Or… I could just sit here and watch," he said, letting himself fall back onto the sofa.

"Al, maybe it's best if…"

"Come on Dad, please don't make me leave! I'll be still and quiet, I swear you won't even know I'm here."

Harry frowned, but apparently the effort of making an argument would be too much. "Fine. You might be able to give this woman whatever details she needs, anyway. Cleo, I'm sorry, but -" 

"Oh, say no more," Cleo said. She kissed Albus on the cheek. "Family only, I get it. Let me know how it goes?"

"Yeah, sure," Albus said, feeling oddly guilty all of a sudden though he had no idea why. Lizzie wouldn't have left, said a traitorous voice in the back of his mind. She would've kicked and screamed and insisted on staying. Does Cleo even care what happens?

No, he realised, that was unfair. Cleo hadn't known Scorpius for that long. She probably didn't realise just how serious the situation was. No one had told her about the Shadow yet, since it was technically classified information. She knew he had been kidnapped though, and that sounded pretty serious no matter what the circumstances, right? He shook his head and decided to worry about that later.

Almost as soon as Cleo had left, there was the sound of the Floo, and seconds later Lily was leading Neville and a woman in a floor-length dress into the living room. Albus forced himself to sit still while Harry shook hands respectfully with the woman. "Emmeline, this is Harry Potter," Neville introduced them. "Harry, this is Emmeline."

"We used to go out," Emmeline said, in a strange, emotionless tone. Neville flushed. The Seer woman was Albus' parents age, he guessed, though there was a queer kind of agelessness to her face. Her eyes were a dusky shade of blue, and she had long, dark hair and skin so pale it was almost white. Her dress matched her eyes. It was made of a light, floaty material and was so long it brushed the floor as she walked. All in all she was a lot more convincing than Professor Trelawny.

"Neville told you our… situation?" Harry said. "We heard your speciality is finding things that are lost, and we need this boy to help us find a dangerous criminal. We've tried all the usual locator spells…"

"I can find your lost boy," the woman said confidently. She sat in the chair Harry offered her and
took a deep breath. "I shall need something of his," she said. "Something close to him."

Harry grimaced. "I should have thought of that. His wand is back in the Department with his other effects."

"A wand has magic of its own, and is merely a tool. I need something treasured."

"Well, I guess I could go back and - "

Al forgot his promise to be quiet. "No, Dad," he said excitedly. "He only took the stuff that didn't really matter, that his dad wouldn't make him get rid of. I've got all the important stuff. Be right back!" He hurtled out of the living room and up to his bedroom. There was a pile in the corner that made up the things Scorpius had asked him to look after while he was at Durmstrang. Books and clothes were piled on top of the guitar case which lay flat under the window. Albus rummaged in the things until he found what he was looking for before hurrying back down the stairs again.

"Try this," he said, breathlessly, handing the object to Emmeline. "He had it in his pocket for about six years. That'll work, right?" The Seer turned the small metal object over in her hands.

"Yes," she said softly. "Yes, this is very much a part of your friend. He trusted you to keep it safe."

She looked up at Al with a piercing blue stare.

"Er, yeah," Al said, thinking that might be the creepiest thing he had ever heard. "It doesn't really work anymore, though. I've got the new one, too, if you want."

"This will do well." Emmeline motioned to Neville, who handed her a roll of parchment. When she spread it open on the coffee table, Al saw it was a world atlas. It was a very old map, drawn by hand with fine black ink lines. The parchment was yellowed and ragged around the edges, like a pirate map. Emmeline picked up some coasters from the table and used them to pin it down. Somehow that seemed a bit disrespectful to something so obviously antique.

Emmeline put one pale, dainty-fingered hand over the map, moving her fingers slowly as though stroking an invisible cat. The room became very quiet, the three men standing back as the Seer did her work. Her other hand closed tightly over Scorpius' old iPod, caressing it with her palm as though she could feel its essence, or whatever. Albus watched eagerly as the woman closed her eyes, waving her hand almost teasingly over the map. Then the hand came down, and she began drawing a slow circle around Europe, the circle getting smaller until it enclosed only Great Britain. "He has not crossed the water," she said, her eyelids twitching as her eyes moved beneath them.

"Er.. great," said Teddy, sounding sceptical. "So they're still within Apparition distance. We're going to need something a bit more specif -"

Harry held up a hand, silencing his godson. As Emmeline's fingers circled the isle, the map began to change. Great Britain became larger and larger until it filled the entire parchment.

"Cool," Teddy said, staring at it.

Emmeline lifted her hand again, searching for the more exact location. "He is awake," she said, tilting her head to one side as if listening to something. "There are wards… good ones. Ancient magic."

"I'm getting sick of all this 'ancient magic'," Harry muttered. "What's Malfoy up to now?"

"Is Scorp hurt?" Albus asked, unable to help himself. "Is he okay?"

"His body is whole." Emmeline's hand began to circle again, concentrating on an area of the map that drew itself as it became larger, black spidery lines curling themselves in and out as it grew. The word 'Manchester' wrote itself out in barely-readable script. "But he sickens. Some poison?"

"Yeah… that was us," Teddy said. "Our bad." He leaned over the map. "This is good. Harry, should we tell -"

The map changed again, this time focussing in on a town called Oldham. Emmeline was breathing heavily, her hand shaking slightly as it circled.

"Emmy," Neville said gently, putting a hand on the arm holding the iPod. "Are you all right?"

"Dark Magics," the Seer gasped, her shoulders twisting strangely as she fought against some unseen force. "Strong magic."

"Can you be any more specific?" Harry asked, his eyes fixed on the map as it began to draw streets and buildings. The constant, ever-changing nature of the thing was starting to make Al feel queasy. "Anything at all."

"A building," Emmeline said, her voice trembling almost as much as her hand. "Very old. Almost part of the earth… like an ancient tree. But dead, dying. Empty."

"Old building," Teddy repeated. "In Oldham. Yeah, that narrows it -"

The woman hissed and pulled her hand away. The map had stopped moving at last, leaving the image of a detailed area about a mile wide. "I'm sorry," she said. "That is as far as I can go. There are strong wards against finding magic, but the place should be visible."

"That's great," Harry assured her, giving Teddy a warning look. "It's brilliant, in fact. Ted, go get the team ready. Then I want you to go to Oldham - scout out some possible locations. If you get a sighting do not engage, clear? Come back and report."

"No fear, sir," Teddy said, grinning. "I'm a spy, not one of your hotheaded Aurors."

"True enough," Harry replied. "Get gone then."

Teddy hurried off to the kitchen to use the Floo.

"When are you going?" Albus asked eagerly.

"Tonight, perhaps, depending on what Teddy finds."

Emmeline was already rolling up her magical map. She handed the iPod back to Albus, and their eyes met. Al found himself unable to look away as she gazed intensely at him. Her expression seemed to change all at once from indifference to sorrow, and she looked away. "I am sorry," she said, softly. The way she said it gave Al a chill down his spine.

"Er… no, that was great," he said, confused. "Really helpful. Thank you."

"Your thanks is not needed," she replied. Neville offered her his hand and she took it, letting him help her out of the chair.

"You should rest," he told her.
She smiled faintly at him and stroked his cheek with her fingertips. Then, without warning, she Apparated away with a loud crack! that made everyone jump.

"Bloody hell," Neville muttered.

"That's some woman," Harry said, grinning. "When did you go out with her, anyway?"

"Just for a few weeks after Luna dumped me," Neville sighed. "It was years and years ago."

"Wait - that was the mysterious rebound girl? You said she was a librarian!"

"I lied. Didn't matter anyway, she upped and left town one day out of the blue - kind of like she just did then. She's like that." He shook his head slightly as if trying to clear it. "Right. Do we have a plan?"

Harry gave him a hard look. "There is no 'we', Nev. I'm sorry. You're not an Auror anymore."

"Dad," Al began, but Harry cut him off.

"No, Albus. Absolutely not. You are staying here."

"But Dad -"

"No, lad." His father turned to face him and gave him a look that broached no argument. "I'm sorry, but no. Don't worry. If he's out there, we'll find him and we'll bring him back. I promise you. Maybe we'll even get Malfoy Senior into the bargain."

Al glared. It seemed pretty clear to him that 'getting' Scorpius' dad was what the Aurors really wanted. Capturing the Shadow was their number one priority, from what he could tell. It was all about getting the 'dangerous criminal'. But Scorpius was innocent. Albus couldn't help but wonder what would happen if Scorp got in the way of the Ministry catching their man.

Neville and Harry went back to the Ministry, not long after. Harry gave James strict instructions, none of which Albus heard but he was sure they included the words 'don't let your brother leave'. That wasn't anything much to worry about, however. Half an hour later, James was in the garden on his broom, flying low under the anti-Muggle spells, practicing his turns. The second he knew the coast was clear, Al hurried up to his room and grabbed his Phoenixer. Then he made a side-trip into his dad's private study and used his best unlocking spell to break into the chest where he kept certain valuable objects.

He would leave in the opposite direction and go to Rose's house, a five-minute flight, and they could Apparate from there. He only hoped they could get there before their parents did.

~*-S-*~

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It was several hours before Scorpius thought he was ready to leave. That he had to leave wasn't really a question, though it did nag at him a little, no matter how much he wished it wouldn't. He had to go back. He had been arrested, and now he was a fugitive, and if there was any hope of any kind of normal life after this… well. The only way was to hand himself in and hope to Merlin for some kind of reduced sentence.

He considered, very briefly, just leaving with his father. The man obviously cared about him, in a way Scorpius might not have thought possible before. And leaving without him meant that he might
never see him again. But that thought, as legitimate an alternative as it was, only lasted an instant. He had to go back. His father might care for him, but so did a lot of other people. Rose. Albus. The Longbottoms. Cleo, Dave and Trevor. As much as it pained him to admit it, they were more important. Hogwarts was more important. The future he dreamed about, which did not involve running from the law for the rest of his life, was more important.

He had no thoughts of convincing his father to go back with him, to hand himself in. He knew it would never happen. Draco had escaped Azkaban once, but not this time. If they caught him it was all over, and any moral argument would most likely end in the man tying Scorpius down and Portkeying them both to Tahiti.

No, he had to go, and he had to go alone.

It was hard. He had to force himself every second to stay awake. He kept pinching himself every few seconds and sipping from the water flask until he thought he could stand. Then he walked a few paces, wincing every time the floorboards creaked. The effort of walking even that short distance had him breathing hard. He wouldn't be able to walk out of here for days yet, let alone run anywhere. He had to get there by magic. But he didn't dare Apparate. Far apart from the fact that his exhaustion would inevitably result in a Splinching, he didn't know enough about his father's wards to risk it. If they were similar to the ones used at Hogwarts, he wouldn't even be able to Apparate, and he didn't want to know what might happen if he tried. The only option was the find the 'Ancient Key' that had transported his father in and out of St. Mungos, and figure out how to use it to get him to London.

He knelt by the bags of belongings his father had packed and began searching through them. One was just clothes, parchment and bags of gold. It looked like it had been thrown together in a hurry. The other was clearly some kind of emergency kit. Looking through it, Scorpius started to feel again the sick anger that had come on him when had found out about the Shadow. He had an escape plan. He had this ready in case they ever came for him. There were delicately carved charms and pendants, and vials of potions wrapped carefully to stop them breaking against each other. There was a book so old Scorpius couldn't even read the words. For a moment he thought that might be the Key, but it wasn't the same book they had used to get to Durmstrang. Anyway it looked more like a resource book. Perhaps it had the instructions for the wards. Deeper in the pack he found water and emergency rations, some of which he removed and ate right there on the spot to ease his aching hunger. For Merlin's sake, he sighed, tying the thing back up again in disgust. He can go on and on about how Potter stole his fortune, but he can't pretend he didn't know how wrong this was. When your job requires you to have an emergency ration kit in case you're pursued by the law, what you're doing is not above board.

Jumbled between the two bags were a few loose belongings, the oddest of which was a box just like the one Draco had given Scorpius for Christmas. He thought it might even be the same one, but why would his father bring that? He'd only ever used it to hide his letter to Rose and Albus from Durmstrang. When he shook it, it seemed empty, and there would be no opening it without the wand that locked it. That was weird, but there was no time to dwell on the reason for it now. Maybe his father just thought it would come in useful.

In any case, the Key did not seem to be in the room. He took another gulp of the lemony water to shake up his wits, dreading the next part. Then he turned resolutely and went to the door. Listening at it, there didn't seem to be any movement immediately outside. There was no handle, only a hole where one might have been, once upon a time. Carefully he put his fingers through the hole and pulled gently. The whole thing creaked horribly, and he froze. When there was no more sound from anywhere, he pulled again, gingerly, inch by inch until he had a gap big enough for him to squeeze through.
The space beyond was a lot bigger than he had imagined. The room he found himself in was even more filthy and run down than the other, and on a much larger scale. Scorpius guessed it might have been a factory of some kind. It was the size of a ballroom, with gigantic concrete pillars holding up the derelict ceiling. It was clear that the building had been abandoned a long time ago. Light fixtures dangled haphazardly from the ceiling, the floor was littered with rubbish and dirt and bits of broken glass. The room he had slept in was probably a storeroom, or an office, or something, once upon a time.

There was no sign of his father. He made his way gingerly over to the big windows that lined one wall. In a few places he saw old needles and grubby rags. He wondered who had been living here before his father came and drove them out, or perhaps they had already moved on.

The windows were dusty and grimy and it was getting dark, but when he rubbed a circle of glass clean with his sleeve, he could see grey gravel, smudges of green that might be grass, and in the distance, a road. If he listened hard he could hear the *whoosh* of tyres on tarmac, the occasional honk of a horn.

The road, he decided, was plan B. Provided he could get out of the building without his father knowing, he might be able to make it that far. Then he just had to hope that some very understanding Muggles were willing to let him hitch a ride.

**Stairs.** He needed stairs. There was an open doorway at the end of the room, and he made for that. He had to stop several times to catch his breath, and when he finally got there, he had to put his arm over his mouth as a waft of some dreadful stench hit him. In here there were no windows. The walls were cracked plaster, and when he put his hand on one to guide his way, the feel of it made his skin crawl. He was sure he was crushing a hundred tiny insects with every step he took, though it could have just been the garbage that seemed to be littered everywhere. He made his way at a painstaking pace to the top of a flight of stairs. The light issuing from the doorway behind him was only enough to show the first few steps. He swallowed. What he wouldn't give for his wand, right now.

He took a deep breath, and instantly regretted it as he inhaled what felt like a bag full of dust. He grabbed the bannister, which creaked dangerously, and coughed until he was gasping for breath and his legs were shaking with the effort of holding him up. *Keep going,* he told himself sternly. *Just move. Keep going.*

He forced his legs to move, gripping the bannister and feeling his arms start to tremble as he let them hold his weight briefly. He made it down one step, then another, then the next, each level darker than the one before. He fumbled with his foot for each step, reaching out blindly in the darkness until he hit something solid, then levering himself down onto it. It seemed to take an age, and before long he was utterly blind. Then, just when he thought he might be getting near the bottom, he put down his foot and nothing came into contact. His stomach rolled as he lurched forward into nothingness, his aching arms no longer able to hold him up, his hands slipped from the railings and he fell several feet onto his back with a *crash.*

He bit back a groan, staying as still as he could with every part of his body protesting. His shoulder stung. For a moment he thought he had gotten away with it, but then, somewhere in the distance, there were hurrying footsteps. His father was coming. There was no time to rest. He rolled over onto his hands and knees and crawled forward, trying to break free of the pile of rubbish that had broken his fall, but it seemed to be everywhere in here over a layer of mud and something else that smelled so bad he didn't even want to think about what it was. There was light down here, not much but just enough to see by. When he looked back, he saw that the last few steps of the staircase had rotted completely away. Thinking about the height of the fall made him feel ill, and his back hurt when he twisted it, but there wasn't time to worry about that now. He moved forward, his feet dragging,
panting with the effort, making his way out of the room and into an open corridor lined by doors to other derelict rooms. The footsteps were getting nearer. He tried to move faster, but his legs felt like jelly and his heart was about to burst. Then he saw a stronger light at the end of the corridor, and with a final burst of adrenaline he ran towards it. He heard a shout, and the next thing he knew he had collided with something invisible and solid, and it sent him sprawling across the floor.

~*•-R-•*~

"That has to be it!" Rose exclaimed, pointing. After Apparating in with their brooms, they had already flown their way over nearly all of the mile-wide stretch of Oldham that Emmeline had shown on her map. What wasn't residential housing was old textile mills. Some were still in use in some fashion or another, others were in ruins. These seemed to fit Emmeline's description, but they had already checked two of them. Rose had almost broken an ankle in the last one. Still, there was no way she was giving up. Scorpius was here, somewhere. She could feel it.

"Great," Albus called back. "Another old death trap." They were wearing their disillusionment charms again. Flying around in broad daylight - well, evening - probably wasn't strictly allowed even with the charms, but there was little other choice. Walking would take too long, and her uncle's Invisibility Cloak wouldn't go over the two of them in the air. Plus, Teddy was out here somewhere, and neither of them wanted to be caught by him twice in one week.

"I still can't believe you stole the cloak," she said, as they landed, shrunk the brooms, and Albus threw the silvery fabric over them. "What's your dad going to say?"

"It'll have to wait until he stops yelling at me for disobeying his strict orders not to come at all," Al muttered. "Never mind that I'm an adult and not one of his Aurors, so I don't actually have to obey his orders."

They picked their way over a generation of rubbish that had piled up in the courtyard until they found an entrance. Albus made a disgusted sound as they awkwardly used a wooden plank to bypass what seemed to be a puddle full of sewage. "This is worse than the last one," he whispered. "Who in their right mind would want to hide here?"

"Someone who really doesn't want to be found," Rose suggested. She shifted the position of her hand on her cousin's back. They had to stand very close together to stay hidden under the cloak. "Come on."

They ducked under a half-fallen beam and found themselves in an open space. There was rubbish piled up in the corners and an old air-conditioning unit lying on its side. They made their way through to the next doorway and tip-toed down a dark corridor. "It's quiet," Al muttered as they turned a corner. "Too quiet, like."

"This place is huge," Rose agreed. "If he's here, he could be any."

Something, somewhere, crashed. They both jumped, and Rose had to bite back a scream.

"Merlin's beard, what was that?" Al demanded, raising his wand.

"It was that way," Rose said, pointing to the right, and making a move to go in that direction.

"Wait, we're going towards the terrifying noise?" his face was incredulous.

She glared up at him, fighting a crick in her neck. It was hard to glare properly when you were
snuggled together under the same cloak. "It could be Scorpius."

"It could be a gang of Smugglers!"

"We're invisible, aren't we? Let's go." She tugged him hard to the right so that he had no choice but to follow her, or risk being left cloak-less in the middle of the corridor. They made their way towards the source of the sound, slowing down as they got further into the centre of the mill, where there were less windows and therefore less light. There was an eerie orange glow to everything. The sun must be going down, Rose thought. Oh, I hope we get out of here before it gets really dark...

"Wait." Albus stopped her. "I heard something."

"I don't hear -"

"Quiet."

Rose stopped, and let Albus pull them back into a shadowed corner. She could hear it too, now, the unmistakable sound of approaching footsteps. Her heart pounded inside her chest as she tried to quiet her breathing. It seemed to echo ridiculously loudly in here. Whoever it was was definitely coming towards them, the footsteps heavy and laboured. She narrowed her eyes and squinted through the dying light. A figure was lurching towards them over the rubbish and debris, and she only realised who it was at the same second that Albus shouted "Scorp!" and stepped out into his path.

The figure barrelled into them and went sprawling. Albus and Rose staggered, but somehow remained standing. Rose threw off the cloak and hurried to kneel at Scorpius side. "Scorp," she said, in disbelief. "Scorp… are you okay?"

He certainly didn't look okay. He was considerably more alive than he had looked the last time she had seen him, but he was still deathly pale, and shaking. He was covered in dirt and dust and mud, his shirt was torn at the shoulder and he was bleeding. But his eyes were open, and he was looking up at her in awe. "Rosie?" he croaked.

"It's me," she said, tears of relief coming to her eyes as he struggled up onto his elbows. He was here. He was here and he was alive and they had found him.

"What… what are you doing here?" he asked, wide-eyed.

"We've… um, come to rescue you," she said, smiling weakly.

He made a face so exasperated that it might have been funny, any other time. "People really have to stop doing that," he muttered. "Who's 'we'? Is Al here too?"

"Right here, mate." Rose looked around just in time to see Albus drop the cloak to his shoulders, leaving a floating head in the air. Scorpius made a startled choking noise.

"It's all right," she told him quickly. "We've got uncle Harry's Invisibility Cloak."

"Oh. That's… really creepy."

She helped him sit up, and he shook his head and pinched himself hard on the wrist. "Are you okay?" she asked again.

"No time for that," he said, his voice still thick and hoarse. "Help me up?"

Albus came forward, and between the two of them they managed to get Scorpius to his feet. He
leaned heavily on Rose's shoulder, and she felt sure he was close to collapsing.

"Any idea how we get out of here?" he asked. "A safe way? I already fell… very hard. Don't want to do that again."

"Yeah, it sounded painful," Al said. "Don't worry, it's this way."


"You sure?" Albus asked, his concern visible on his face even in the failing light. "I could give you the cloak."

"I can't hold him up and manage the cloak as well," Rose hissed. "Just go."

Al nodded reluctantly and pulled the hood back up, vanishing into the darkness. "Lumos," she heard him whisper, and suddenly there was light, moving steadily away towards the exit. She couldn't see her cousin anymore, but she took a step forward, following the light. Scorpius stumbled along beside her, relying on her more and more with each step. As they took a sharp turn into the entrance space, he tripped on something and half fell. Rose had to move quickly to catch him, and then it took all her strength to haul him back up.

"Saved your life," she said, in an attempt to lighten the mood.

"Sorry," he gasped as he found his feet again. "It's this damn Moonsilver… so tired… I dunno... how much more I…"

"You can do this," she told him firmly. "I know you can. It's just a little further." They took a few agonising steps into the room with the air-conditioning unit. "See," Rose said encouragingly, pointing with her free hand. "That's the way out, just there. We'll go out past the gate and hide under the cloak 'til the Aurors get here. Then Teddy or someone will take us home."

"What?" Scorpius stopped dead, and turned to stare at her. "The Aurors are coming?"

"Yes - but not for you - well, sort of for you. They won't hurt you. They just want - "

"My father," Scorpius said darkly. He stiffened noticeably, swaying a little as he took more of his own weight onto his feet. "When were you going to tell me this?"

"I just did! Scorp, there's no time -"

"But they'll put him in prison! I could at least warn him -"

"Scorp, no!" She tried to pull him towards the opening, but he was pulling away from her, and then someone shouted, so loud that it echoed around the concrete walls and made her heart jump into her mouth.

"SCORPIUS!"

She gasped and whirled round. Draco Malfoy was standing behind them, wand drawn, an expression of pure fury on his face.

~*-S-*-~

~*-S-*-~

"Father," Scorpius croaked, his legs trembling threateningly beneath him. Desperately he tried to put
as much distance between himself and Rose as he could, but he could only manage a stumbling half
step that almost made him topple over. "Father, please -"

"No," Draco hissed, taking a step closer, his fingers whitening around his wand. "No, I cannot credit
this. You have brought our doom down on us. Convicted and sentenced us both, damn you. Is that
the kind of gratitude you show your own blood, boy?"

"Gratitude?" Scorpius could hardly believe the man would dare use the word. "Gratitude? For what?
For sending me to Durmstrang? For getting me arrested? For kidnapping me? Which part of any of
this am I supposed to be grateful for?"

The light from Al's wand had gone out, but the moonlight coming through the grimy windows was
enough to see by. Scorpius felt a movement behind him, and then Al's voice whispered in his ear.
"I'll distract him. You two better run when it's time."

"Who is this?" Draco was demanding, gesturing at Rose with his wand. Rose was very still, not
daring to reach for her own wand while the man had her in his sights.

"No one," Scorpius said carefully. "She's not an Auror. Just a friend."

"She's a Weasley," Draco spat. "I know a Weasley when I see one. Just what do you -"

Suddenly the man convulsed and pitched forward, mud and filth dripping from the back of his head.
It took Scorpius a second to realise that Al must have thrown a handful of the sewage that lay
puddled on the ground. Draco cried out in anger and whirled around, sparks flying from his wand,
but there was nothing for him to aim at. He seemed to freeze for a moment, then a thin, lunatic smile
spread over his face. "Potter," he muttered. Scorpius heard Rose gasp.

"Good guess," called Al's voice from the empty air.

"I knew it," Draco growled, raising his wand defensively in front of him. "You and that damned
cloak - I thought your days of cowardly mud-slinging were long over, but clearly I was wrong.
Show yourself!"

Rose tugged at Scorpius' sleeve. For a moment he didn't realise what she was doing, until she hissed
"come on."

Scorpius didn't want to leave, not if it meant leaving Albus here, alone, with his father. But Al had
the cloak and a wand, which were two things Scorpius certainly didn't have, not to mention energy
enough to dodge a blast. He let Rose take his weight again as they backed slowly towards the
opening.

"No fear!" Albus called out cheerfully. Scorp wouldn't haven't thought his friend capable of being
quite so cavalier in the face of a dangerous criminal, but then, people were always telling him that
some things were just built in. Maybe it was genetics finally taking over.

But father thinks he's his dad, he realised as Draco shot curses out in random directions, looking for a
target. That is, he thinks he's Harry Potter. Oh, there is no way this can end well.

"You've some nerve," said Draco. "You think you're better than everyone because you were
Chosen? Tell me Potter, were you chosen to destroy people's lives? To tear apart families? I lived in
squalor for fifteen years while you lorded it about at the Ministry, swanning around changing things
to your liking. You, Mudblood Granger and the Weasel, ruling the world, not caring that my father is
rotting away in front of my mother's eyes. How do you do it?"
"You picked the wrong side, Malfoy," Al called out. He had done something to his voice, made it deeper, but it still didn't sound much like the Auror Potter. Then again, Draco wouldn't know what the man sounded like now. "Get over it."

Scorpius winced.

"Come on," Rose said again, her voice thick with fear and determination. "Just a little more…"

"How dare you?" Malfoy spat, his face red with pure fury. "How dare you do this to my family? How will you like it if I take away something you care about? If your family was destroyed?"

As soon as Draco raised his wand again, Scorpius knew what was going to happen. He saw again that room, the flowers piled up over the table, the coffin covered in a white shroud. I'll save her. You hear me? I can save her.

As his father whirled around, as Albus shouted "No!", as Rose took a desperate, useless step back and fumbled for her wand, Scorpius felt something click inside his brain. It all made sense now. This was what the dream had warned him about. This was what he had to do. A beam of crackling blue light shot across the room, illuminating the cracks in the walls, the shards of glass on the floor. It shone and refracted off the air-conditioning unit. Scorpius gathered every last bit of energy he had and threw himself towards it, hurling his body in front of Rose as the curse sped through the air towards her. He wasn't frightened at all. As the spell hit him in the chest and threw him back, it didn't even hurt.

He felt his body collide with Rose, and heard her scream, and he thought… see. I saved her. Told you I could save her.

Chapter End Notes

As always you can check my blog, misssaiionfic.tumblr.com for information on upcoming chapters/stories. Shortly after posting this chapter I'm going to post some images of the abandoned mill described in this chapter, which is a real place in Oldham, England.
"NOOOO!"

Rose heard the scream as if from far, far away. It was Scorpius' father.

"You bastard!" she heard Albus yell, his voice breaking in mid-word. "What the hell did you do?"

"No - " Malfoy said. "I didn't mean - Scorpius, my son -"

She heard a scuffle in the debris, as if the man was coming towards her, but then Albus stepped in front of her and whipped the invisibility cloak off his shoulders, his wand trained on Malfoy. "You stay the hell away from him," Albus growled.

"But - no - " another scuffle that might have been a step back - "but you're not -"

Rose didn't need to hear Malfoy splutter that Albus wasn't Harry. She shut her ears to it. "Scorpius," she said instead, forcing herself to look at him, forcing herself to press her hand harder over where he was hit, just below the ribcage. Blood covered her hand already. "Scorp… can you hear me?"

"Scorp," she begged him. "Please… please talk to me."

His head lolled, he blinked again. "S… saved your life," he said, hoarsely, echoing her earlier words, and she felt her heart go all to pieces.

"Episky," she said, desperately, waving her wand rigorously over the wound. "Episky, Episky. Al, it's not working, I don't know what to do…"

Albus took a few steps backwards, keeping his wand on Malfoy, until he could look down and see. "Oh God," he said, in a choked voice, as Scorpius coughed and blood stained his lips. "Oh… God…"

"HELP!" Rose screamed, not knowing what else to do. "SOMEONE HELP! Al - the Aurors, they'll be here somewhere by now…. we have to send up sparks."

"But -" Albus looked helplessly between her and Malfoy, who had lowered his wand and was just standing there, looking wide-eyed and defeated.

"He's dying," Rose cried. "We need help, please just go!"

Al didn't wait to hear the rest. With a final glare in Malfoy's direction, he dropped his wand arm and
ran out, his feet splashing audibly in the mud puddles as he went through the opening.

Scorp coughed again, his whole body convulsing slightly with the force of it. Blood began to dribble from his mouth, and the wound had covered both her hands and her wand by now. Rose looked around desperately and saw the Invisibility Cloak lying abandoned on the ground. But it was too far to reach, and she knew she couldn't leave him. She looked up at Malfoy, still standing there staring like a deer in headlights. "Give that to me," she demanded. He looked at her in confusion. "The cloak, give it to me!" she repeated, motioning her head towards it.

She didn't look to see if he obeyed her but turned back to Scorpius. His eyes were half closed and he was even paler than before. "No," she said, helplessly. "No, Scorp, you have to stay. Please stay. Can you hear me?" Pressure on the wound, pressure on the wound. "Can you hear me? Please say you can hear me..."

The cloak landed over her hands and Mr Malfoy's long fingers pressed between hers. She looked up at him, staring at the man's pale, blank face. "What did you do?" she asked him, her voice trembling. "What did you do?" she repeated, almost yelling.

"It... a curse..." he said, staring down at the blood that now stained his hands. "An old curse. Sword of lightning..."

Rose felt anger hit her like a wall. "Then TAKE IT BACK!" she screamed at him. "DO SOMETHING! HE'S YOUR SON!"

"He should be dead already." The man's voice was bleak, emotionless, but she could see the pain in his eyes.

"No!" she cried, bunching up the cloak and pressing it harder to staunch the flow. Pressure on the wound. "He won't die! He can't!"

Malfoy let go of the cloak and got up, backing away. "What are you doing?" she demanded.

He shook his head. He was staring at the ground. Her heart pounding in her throat, she followed his gaze.

Her knees were wet with blood. The ground around them was stained with it, red with it, and she hadn't even noticed. But it hadn't come from the chest wound, it couldn't have, there was too much of it. It had come from somewhere underneath. The curse had gone all the way through; the body was limp and white, and not moving.

Shaking, she looked up at Malfoy, his tall form blurry through her tears. "You killed him," she said, venomously. "You killed him."

And then there was a loud banging noise from behind her. She half fell, half threw herself forward, protecting Scorpius with her body from the new danger. But then her dad was there, beside her, and he was telling her to come away. And there were people shouting, shouting everywhere, and spells flying, and Malfoy fell to the ground with magical ropes binding him. And then her uncle was there, shouting orders, and then there were people in robes crowding around her, trying to get her to let go.

"It's all right," her dad was saying, holding her gently but firmly by the arms and trying to pull her away. "Come on, let the Healers look after him."

"They can't," she cried, her tears bubbling up to the surface as they dragged the body away from her. "He's dead, he's dead, he killed him." And her dad pulled her towards him and she sobbed, unashamedly into his shoulder, staining his robes with the blood from her hands, and through her
tears she could see Albus kneeling on the ground where Scorpius had been, retching, and then the medi-wizards were putting the body on a stretcher and Portkey-ing him away. "No…" she said, helplessly, reaching for him, but he was gone, he was dead and gone and she was never going to see him alive again.

This is your fault. A voice, mewling and nasty inside her head. If you'd never have come here, this wouldn't have happened. The Aurors would have found him and he would have been safe because he wouldn't have had to save you. He jumped in front of a curse to save you and he didn't even have a wand.

"My fault," she sobbed, as her dad tried to soothe her with calming words she couldn't even hear over all the shouting. "Daddy, it's all my fault.."

And then…

She wasn't sure what happened after that. There was a brief sensation of time passing, of people speaking but she couldn't understand what they were saying.

And then she was sitting in a chair in front of a bowl of water, and someone was washing the blood off her hands.

~*-A-*~

~*-A-*~

Rose was in shock, they said. They took her to the hospital once they had determined that there weren't any other smugglers hiding in the old mill, and Malfoy was searched and sent off to the Ministry holding cells.

"He had a Portkey on him the whole time," Albus heard his dad tell another Auror as they left. "Good thing for us he was too slow to use it."

Albus felt anger surge through him like a wave. Malfoy should have taken the Portkey. As soon as he knew Scorpius was escaping, he should have taken it and gotten out and then no one would have got hurt. Scorpius wouldn't have…

But not all the anger was directed at Malfoy. None of the Aurors seemed to care what had happened to Scorpius. Just as he had suspected, catching Malfoy was all anyone could talk about. Even his dad didn't say anything at all comforting.

Albus thought he might be in shock, too, but no one seemed to care about that, either. Harry managed to keep the others away from him as they left the mill, keeping a tight grip on his son's arm until they were outside the wards. "Can you Apparate?" his dad asked quietly.

Albus nodded.

"Home," his father told him, and waited. Albus closed his eyes, focused as hard as he could, and did the half-turn that ended with him on his knees on the kitchen floor.

Lily screamed. She and Hugo were sitting at the table, the remains of their dinner sitting on the sideboard as they finished up their Potions project. Albus hoped they'd washed their hands before and after eating. "Al?" his sister said, sounding frightened and strange. "What… are you okay?"

Al looked down at himself. His hands and knees were covered in blood and muck where he had fallen to vomit. His clothes stank. "I'm fine," he said, flatly. "Fine. Where's James? Mum?"
"Mum still hasn't come home," she replied. "But you -"

There was a loud crack, and Harry walked in from the hallway. "Albus, go and wash," he said firmly. "Now. I'm going to call you a Healer."

"I don't need -" Albus began, but the look on his father's face was enough to silence him this time. He swallowed hard and ran past his family and up the stairs to the bathroom. He tore off his clothes and piled them haphazardly on the floor. The blood had soaked through his trousers to his bare knees. He felt his stomach heave and he just made it to the toilet before he lost the rest of whatever he had eaten that day. Then, because it was all he could do, he got in the shower and scrubbed it all away.

He wished he could wash his brain clean as easily as he scrubbed his skin. From downstairs he could hear his dad yelling, probably at James for letting Al run off, as if he was a child.

*But Dad was right*, he thought, as he leaned his forearms against the tiled wall and let the water stream soothingly down his back. *I - we - shouldn't have gone. We're not Aurors. We were stupid. And HE was stupid. Jumping in front of a curse like that... why'd he have to be so stupid?*

But deep down, he knew that if he hadn't, it would have been Rose lying motionless and bleeding on the ground. He, Albus, had been too slow. The incantation for a shield charm had been there, on the tip of his tongue, but he had been *too damn slow*. In the moment, when it really counted, he had frozen.

His dad wouldn't have frozen. Wouldn't have been too slow. The famous Harry Potter would have been able to save his best friend. Everyone always talked about how great and brave his dad was. A hero. Had Albus been trying to be a hero? Guilt weighed down on him so that his knees shook and he almost fell. Scorpius was dead because Albus had tried to be a big damn hero. Because he wanted the glory for once, to be the one that everyone called great and brave. Now they would know him as the one who had got his best friend killed.

~*-A-*~

~*-A-*~

When he came out of the bathroom, ducking his head to hide his red-rimmed eyes, there was a familiar woman in Healer's robes waiting for him in the living room. He sat in an armchair in the first clothes that had come to hand, letting her poke at him with her wand until he wanted to scream. His dad stood there the whole time, arms folded across his chest, his brow fixed in a permanent frown that distorted the old scar on his forehead into less of a lightning bolt and more of a squiggly line.

After what seemed like hours, the Healer smiled sympathetically at him. "I think he'll be all right, Harry. No physical damage. A little shock, perhaps, and some grief, but that's to be expected."

"The curse?" Harry asked curtly.

"Still intact, I'm sorry to say."

Harry nodded. "Thanks, Susan. I appreciate it, I know you're busy."

The Healer, who Albus remembered making numerous house calls for him and his siblings when they were younger, shook her head. "I'd do anything for you and Ginny, you know that. Anyway, I don't think he needs to go to St Mungos, but keep an eye on him unless anything changes."

"We will." The finality in his father's tone, any other time, might have worried Albus, but frankly
being grounded at this point would be a relief.

The Healer left. Albus sat still, staring at his knees. He was going to have to take a lecture now, and all he wanted was to find a way to go back in time and fix everything. The scene kept playing over and over in his mind, Malfoy whirling on Rose, the bright blue, jagged light, like a streak of electricity, hurtling through the air and lighting up everything so that he could only just see, through squinted eyes, the figure flying forward into the path of the curse, and being thrown back with the force of it and onto the ground. The bleeding body of his friend on the ground.

After what seemed like an age of silence, he looked up. Harry was leaning against the wall, pinching the bridge of his nose with one hand.

"Dad?"

Harry dropped his hand and gave him a hard look. "You know you're lucky you aren't dead."

Albus swallowed. For a moment he thought he might be sick again. "I know. Dad, I…"

"I told you to stay here. I told you to stay out of it."

"I know, but I -"

"What makes me the angriest..." his father shook his head. "You know, I would have done exactly the same thing at your age, not that that's any excuse, mind. I might have expected the same from James. But I thought you had more sense than that, I really did."

Albus went back to staring at his knees. "I guess you don't know me as well as you think," he said. There was silence for a while. "Is Rose going to be okay?" he had to ask eventually.

Harry shook his head. "I don't know, son."

Albus felt his heart sink, if it was possible, even lower. They had practically had to drag Rose away. She had been more depressed than he had ever seen her when Scorpius was merely a few hours broom flight away. What was she going to do now? Would she ever be the same? Would either of them?

His dad was still standing there, looking at him. "Shouldn't you… I mean, shouldn't you go and… deal with Malfoy?" Albus asked.

Harry shook his head and sighed. "The Department can handle all that. I'm going to stay here until your mum gets home." He came over and sat on the sofa opposite. There was a long pause, as if he was gathering all his patience. Then he looked up. "Albus," he said, solemnly. "I care about you, Lily and James more than anything else in the world. You know that. Everything I do is to protect you."

Albus looked back up into his father's eyes. People always said how alike they were in appearance, but right now Al thought he had never felt more different. He felt very small and young and pathetic. "That's just it," he somehow managed to say. "You care about us. Uncle Ron cares about Rose and Hugo. The Minister and the Aurors care about catching Malfoy. But me'n Rose are the only ones who ever care about… cared about…" He couldn't quite bring himself to say it. "What… what's going to happen to Malfoy?" he asked instead.

"Azkaban," Harry said shortly and without hesitation. "Especially now we can add attempted murder to the list of charges."
"Good," Al said fiercely. "He deserves it. If anyone deserves it, it's him. I hope he - " he stopped. He looked up at his father in disbelief. "Wait… did you say… attempted murder?"

~*~R~*~

They kept trying to tell her that Scorp was still alive. She didn't believe it. She had felt the life go out of him, had knelt in his blood, had seen his pale face. It seemed impossible that he could have lived. "Second time in a week, poor thing," she heard one of the Healers sighing. "That boy has nine lives."

"He's still very sick, love," her mother had said, when she had only stared, wide-eyed, on being told the news. "But the Healers are doing everything they can."

They gave her a nasty-tasting potion, to calm her nerves, but her hands still shook for ten minutes after. Then they gave her another Potion that put her to sleep for a few hours, and after that she decided not to drink anything else they gave her. She wanted to be awake. Just in case.

"Can I see him?" she kept asking, and they kept telling her no. They wouldn't tell her anything.

The Healers told her mother that she was fine now, though Rose didn't feel fine. Hermione took Rose home by Side-Along Apparition, as if she were a child, but then she realised that even if she had been in the right state of mind to Apparate herself, she still didn't have her test. Things like Apparition tests seemed like they belonged to another world.

When they got home, Albus was there waiting for her. He looked very pale and somber, but he managed a smile just for her, and when he hugged her, she felt something come forth within her that she had been unaware she was even holding back. She gripped him around the waist and buried her face in his shoulder. There were no tears, she didn't have the energy for tears, but with him there, she felt like she came back to life a little.

Neville, Hannah and Lizzie were in the living room with Ginny, but Hugo, Lily and James were still at the Potters. Albus led Rose to an empty sofa, and they sat close together. "Did they tell you anything?" Hannah asked Hermione. She was twisting a handkerchief between her fingers. Rose felt yet another stab of guilt. She had forgotten how much Hannah loved Scorpius.

"Not much," Hermione replied. "But that he's made it this long is a very good sign. There's lots of hope."

That's just words, Rose thought, curling closer into Al's arm. She didn't see him. She didn't feel the life go out of him.

No one said anything after that for a long time. To Rose it felt like they were just sitting around waiting for Scorpius to die. Several times she thought she was going to be sick, but she forced it back, not wanting to move, as if by doing so she might jolt something askew in the universe that might sever the tiny thread he was hanging by.

There were a few Floo calls, and Hermione went to answer them. With each one, Rose felt her heartbeat quicken and her stomach churn as she prepared herself for the worst, but most of them seemed to be reporters. By the fifth one of these, Neville seemed on the verge of tearing his hair out.

"The bloody Prophet," he growled as Hermione returned again, "a bigger bunch of bloodsucking leeches I have never heard of - present company excepted, of course, Ginny."
"I have to admit I'm inclined to agree," Ginny sighed. "Me working there... well, it protects our family a little, but only our family. It makes it a lot harder for them to just make things up about Harry or the kids."

"I'm glad I didn't stay an Auror," Neville muttered, getting up to pace irritably. "There might have been a serious abuse of authority if I'd had the chance to go down there and knock a few heads."

"Sit down, sweetheart," Hannah said softly. "Please... you aren't helping anyone by working yourself up."

Neville stopped pacing, but didn't sit down. "I promised to protect that boy," he said, low. "After what happened last summer, I promised myself. I should never have let Malfoy take him in the first place."

"This isn't your fault, Nev," Hannah said earnestly.

"No," Albus muttered. "It's mine." Rose looked over at him. Her cousin, despite the comforting arm around her shoulder, seemed all folded up inside, somehow. "It was my idea to go up there. If we hadn't, Scorp would've been fine."

Rose shook her head. "You weren't the one he tried to save," she said.

"No, I was just the one pretending to be Dad," he said angrily. "How high up is that on the list of dumbest things I could have possibly done?"

"Stop that, all of you," Ginny said sharply. "No one is going to start blaming themselves. It's not healthy and it's not helpful."

The Floo went again. Neville made a jerking motion as if he was going to storm into the kitchen, but Ginny stood and put a hand on his arm. "I'll deal with it," she said. "I'll get them to stop calling." She waited a moment to make sure she had stared him down sufficiently before going into the kitchen.

"He didn't even have a wand," Albus muttered, so quietly that only Rose could hear. "Why'd he do such a stupid thing?"

For me, she thought. Because he loves me.

Ginny came back, looking grim. "It's Harry," she said. "You better go talk to him, Hermione."

"Whatever is it now?" Hermione asked, getting up wearily from her armchair.

"It seems like they found out what caused the gap in security that let Malfoy get into St Mungos. And you aren't going to like it."

~*-S-*~

~*-S-*~

The first pain he was aware of was a dull stabbing between his eyes, but this, bad as it was, was almost totally eclipsed by the second pain. When he took a breath it seemed as though his ribcage was on fire. He gasped, and coughed, and that hurt even more than he would have ever thought possible.

"Steady," said a voice from somewhere. There was a coolness against his lips, and he parted them slightly, spluttering a little as something sweet and refreshing pooled in his mouth. "Slowly," said the
He opened his eyes. He had to close them again, quickly, because the stabbing in his head worsened significantly when the light flooded them. But in that brief, agonising moment he had caught a glimpse of red hair. "R… Rosie?" he tried, his voice coming out hoarse and unrecognisable.

"No. Not Rose." It was a man's voice.

Scorpius shuddered and tried to move, but strong hands held him down. "Now, now. Calm down. It's all right. I'm sorry if I scared you. You're in St Mungo's. Again."

The movement had jarred his whole body, so that there was pain everywhere and it was hard even to register these words. Gradually though, the pain subsided until he felt brave enough to try opening his eyes again.

It wasn't Rose at all. It was Rose's dad. Scorpius groaned.

"I know it hurts," the man said, perhaps misinterpreting the sound. Then again, maybe not. "That potion should help with the pain. They can't heal you properly while you're still having a reaction to the Veritaserum."

Scorpius drew himself together just far enough to focus on the rest of the room. He did seem to be in the hospital. Memory, fuddled already by Moonsilver and clouded still further by the pain, began to piece itself together in his brain like an old jigsaw puzzle. Some of the bits were bent or broken, and some were missing altogether, but the general image began to emerge. "What…. you…” he managed to say, any sense getting lost somewhere between his brain and his mouth.

Ron Weasley nodded. "I'm probably the last person you expected to see," he said sombrely. "Maybe I'm the last person who should be here, I don't know. Your friends are waiting to see you. I just need to tell you that I… I'm sorry, lad."

Scorpius blinked. He was almost sure that that made no sense, even taking into account his jumbled brain. "What?" he croaked.

The older man sighed. "When you were here before, after your arrest, I was... in charge of security around the ward. I created a breach in our defences. I… I suppose you could say that I let your father abduct you."

Scorpius could not think of anything to say to that. The mere notion seemed to send his poorly-functioning reasoning into meltdown.

"I had a feeling your - that the Shadow - would come after you. I thought perhaps we could catch him in the act, and if not, if he got away, we could follow you to wherever they went." Another sigh. " Completely against all protocol, of course. Harry was livid... so was the Minister. And I've been suspended. I just thought you should hear it from me, first." A hand on his wrist. Scorp thought he should pull away - wanted to pull away - but somehow his limbs were refusing to move. "You weren't supposed to get hurt," the man said, low. "No one was. You saved my daughter's life, and I'm not ignorant of that. I just hope you can forgive me."

The man's face floated in and out of focus as he got out of his chair. The touch on his wrist vanished, and Scorpius heard the footsteps as he moved away.
The next few times he woke, there were three or four Healers crowding around him, asking questions. What had he had to eat and drink? Where was the pain and how bad was it? Could he move his arms or legs? The answer to that last was always no. He seemed to fall in and out of consciousness with no great ceremony, but each time he came back there was another Healer and more questions. He answered in mumbled half-sentences, sometimes without even opening his eyes, and then they gave him a potion that stopped the pain - and everything else - until he woke up again. When he slept, the void alternated between a dark, terrifying nothingness, and a warm, safe place where there was a low murmur of sound, somewhere far off but somehow still comforting. And sometimes there was singing. He tried to sing along, but his mouth wouldn't work in the void.

And sometimes he dreamt, and he saw again the blue light coming for Rose, and sometimes he saved her, and sometimes he didn't. And sometimes he saw the future ghost boy from his vision-dream, and sometimes he just had normal dreams, and those were the best, except when they were full of nightmares.

And then, he wasn't sure how much later, he opened his eyes to find Hannah sitting in the chair beside his bed. He was in a small room, with eerily blank walls and no other furniture but the bed and chair. He opened his mouth to speak, but pain lanced down his spine and pooled agonisingly just under his ribs, and all that came out was a sort of whimpering grunt.

"Scorpius?" she put down whatever she had been holding - a book, perhaps - and moved closer to him. "Are you all right, sweetie?"

He tried to swallow, but his mouth was dry again. "Hurts," he managed to choke out.

"I know, love. Here." She held a cup to his lips. "Drink this, it'll help."

"Wait," he said, trying to lift his arm to push the cup away. It only spasmed oddly beside him and would not rise off the bed. "I… I want… stay awake. Don't. want sleep… again. S'goin' on?"

Hannah put the potion down somewhat reluctantly. "You're in St Mungos," she said slowly. "Do you remember what happened?"

Scorpius didn't think he was ever likely to forget. "Yeah," he said, grimacing, and took a short, pained breath. He could feel something inside him moving. He made yet another attempt to lift his arm, but it refused to follow his commands. So too did all his other limbs, as they had done since he could remember being here. "Why… why can't I move?" he asked, dreading the answer.

"A petrification spell. The Healers had to keep you still to stop you doing more damage to yourself while you're healing."

Another stab of pain. Scorpius groaned and bit his lip. "But… it's not permanent… right?" he managed, when it had mostly passed.

Hannah put a hand over his where it lay on top of the sheets by his side. "The Healer will explain all that, dear. Just try to rest. You're going to be all right, now. You're safe."

But Scorpius couldn't rest. Not yet. "Rose," he said, his voice coming out in nothing more than a whisper. The last thing he remembered was he stricken face above him, specks of red blood on her cheek. "She was… is she…"

"She's fine. We've been taking turns watching over you during visiting hours."

"I… heard people talking."
"Some of us read to you." Hannah held up the book. It was *Oliver Twist*. "And Albus and Cleo played you some music."

"Oh." *The singing*, he realised. He thought he had heard singing. "Er... how long?"

"About a week."

"Really?" It seemed like only hours. "Did... Hogwarts... did I miss school?"

"No, dear. It's only August the fifth."

Scorpius let out a breath. He did not have the energy at the moment to worry about whether or not Hogwarts was even an option for him anymore... as long as he hadn't missed the train. When Hannah offered him the cup again, he accepted it, letting the cool liquid moisten his lips and tongue before it flowed down his throat, leaving a sort of blissful numbness in its wake.

~*-S-*~

~*-S-*~

This time, someone was kissing him. He had the strangely coherent thought that it really better be Rose, this time, before he opened his eyes and she was there, bushy red hair tumbling haphazardly over her shoulders. She smiled at him. "Hey."

"Hey," he said hoarsely. "How long was it this time?"

"Only a few hours," she told him, to his relief. "The Healer said we could wake you up properly once you started asking questions."

"We?" Scorpius blinked and looked around.

"Hey mate," said Albus, smiling grimly. "You had us worried for a while there."

Hannah was there too, and Neville, and Rose's mother. Scorpius felt like some sort of exhibit, the way they were all staring at him. "I'll get the Healer," Hermione said quietly, and hurried off. This didn't really improve matters in terms of general crowding, since it was only a very small room to start with.

"How do you feel?" Neville asked. His voice was measured, but he was giving off a would-be-calm vibe that was making Scorpius nervous.

"Er..." The pleasure of seeing Rose had distracted him momentarily, but as soon as he thought about it, he felt a stab of pain through his torso that did not relent, but ached and throbbed constantly, in and out with his breathing like a tide. He grimaced. "Like there's a hole through my chest. And I think I'm... I can't move..."

Rose slipped her warm hand into his cool, non-responsive one. "It's just a spell," she told him. "It's keeping you safe."

"Doesn't mean I have to like it," he muttered. He looked up at her, frowning slightly as he tried to search her face for any sign. "You okay? Really? You're not hurt?"

"I'm fine," she promised him, though her face fell a little.

"What?" he said quickly, zeroing in on this perceived weakness. "What is it?"
"No, it's not... I'm fine now. It's just... we thought you were dead..." her voice faltered for a moment and she took a deep, calming breath, averting her eyes slightly while she gathered herself. "You really scared me, you idiot. What would you go and do that for?"

"I'm sorry," he said. "I had to do it. It was in my dream." Out of the corner of his eye he saw Neville and Hannah glance at each other. "I'm not crazy," he said quickly. "I dreamed what would happen. You were there," he said to Neville, matter-of-factly as if he should already know this. "First you were a little boy in the woods, and then you were older and I saw your scar when it was new, and there was a bathroom and all this weird stuff happened there, and then Alice took me to my father's house, and then we went to the Leaky Cauldron and you were telling Mr Weasley and Mr Potter that you knew I didn't know about my father and that they shouldn't have lost me because I was like your nephew, and they could learn a lot from me and you were going to find a Seer."

He coughed, and groaned, because the act of coughing was pretty much agonising, and by the time he felt ready to talk again they were all staring at him. "What?" he demanded, painfully.

"Are we sure he's quite ready for this?" he heard Hannah say in what she probably thought was a tone too low for him to hear. He was about to demand what they were talking about when Rose's mother returned with a smiling, greying wizard in lime green Healer's robes. Scorpius vaguely recognised him as one of the ones who had been asking him questions while he teetered on the brink of consciousness.

"And how are we today?" he asked. His voice was deep and fruity, the sort of voice you might expect from a much bigger man, and posher even than Scorpius' father.

Scorpius glared. "I wish people would stop asking me that," he muttered.

"In some discomfort, I see," the old Healer said cheerfully. "Not to worry, a curse straight through the torso will do that to a person."

Scorpius swallowed and glanced up at Rose again. He trusted her, and the comfort of her hand in his, a lot more than this stranger. "I was kidding," he said, low. "It really went right through me?" He wondered how on earth it was that he was still alive.

"Indeed, indeed," interrupted the Healer. "Incredibly, not as much damage as there could have been. A few inches higher and it would have blasted your heart apart! Lucky thing, eh?" He said this as if he found it rather more fascinating or amusing than horrifying.

Hermione sighed. "Knox, has anyone ever told you that you have a terrible bedside manner?"

"Oh, all the time, dear lady," said Healer Knox, beaming. "But they put up with me because I get results, you see?" He turned to Scorpius again. "You were more or less dead when you came in, sonny, but I brought you back, of course. People don't mind a bit of truth told 'em so long as they walk out the next day, hale and hearty as ever they were." He looked extremely proud of himself.

"So... I'm not going to die?" Scorpius asked. He thought he might as well clarify things.

"Not at all dear boy, no, no, no, though it was touch and go there for a while. You lost a lot of blood, you see, and we had to regrow a couple of ribs. And of course your recent, ah, poisoning, was not at all helpful in that regard."

Scorpius groaned. "The bloody Moonsilver? Still?"

"I asked about that," Rose said, reassuringly. "It was such a big dose that it stayed in your system for a long time, and it made it even harder for you to heal. But it's all gone now, isn't it, Healer Knox?"
"I believe so, yes, certainly," Knox nodded emphatically. "The only problem remaining is ah… your spine. Quite a large chunk of it was destroyed, you see, and regrowing a spine isn't quite so easy as downsing a few vials of Skele-Gro..."

Scorpius felt his heart sink. Suddenly the spell holding his arms and legs in place felt a lot less like a helpful healing spell. "That… sounds bad."

"Oh, without magic it certainly would be!" the old man chuckled. He really did have dreadful bedside manner. "In a Muggle hospital you would have been paralysed for life, if you even lived! Those poor Muggles. It's a mystery to me how they do any real medicine without magic."

"Yes, thank you Knox," Neville sighed wearily, while Hermione and Hannah both looked slightly indignant. "Could you try and get to the point?"

"Yes yes," the man nodded and consulted a clipboard which seemed to appear quite out of nowhere. "Well, we've had to combine some pretty potent Potions and charm work in order to restore the nerves. We can start removing the petrification charm in a day or so, get you some movement in your arms and chest, but the rest… will take time, I'm afraid."

Scorpius wished he could sit up. He felt pathetic and helpless lying here, unable to move more than his head. "How long?" he demanded.

"Well, I suppose that depends," Knox said, folding his clipboard away under his arm and looking Scorpius in the eyes. "Your body is effectively going to have to learn to work with a new spine. We can give you exercises to do, and you will have to keep taking Potions at night. It will be quite painful," he added. Scorpius had to admit that the man was at least honest.

"How long?" Scorpius repeated. He was starting to panic. Was he going to be in this bed for weeks? Months? Years, even? He didn't think he could bear that.

Knox sighed. It was the first sign he had shown of any discomfort with the situation at all. "We should be able to get you in a chair in a few days. After that… depending… well, I'm afraid we have no real way of knowing. Months, at least."

A moment's silence. Scorpius knew they were all staring at him, but he forced himself not to look away from Knox. "But it could be forever," he found himself saying.

"Unlikely," Knox said. "Ah... yes. Unlikely."

"But possible." Scorpius wished the man would just drop the act and be straight with him.

"We'll just have to see," Knox said, looking uncomfortable. "We'll see how you're doing after a few weeks in the chair, eh?"

"A chair?" Neville asked, frowning, while Scorpius did his best to digest. Months. He wouldn't be able to walk for months, and maybe even longer than that. Perhaps for the rest of his until ten minutes ago his biggest worry was whether he was going to be arrested again.

"Not usually used by wizards, I'll grant you," Knox said, all cheerful again at the prospect of an interesting project. "We do have a few here at the hospital, and I'm sure we can manage any adjustments needed. I must say this is a most challenging case. I'm thinking of writing a paper on it."

"Bully for you," Scorpius heard Albus mutter, and he looked around at him, surprised. His friend had been quiet throughout all the diagnosis.
"We'll give you one more night of rest and regrowth before we start," Knox said, and Scorpius realised he was speaking to him again. "How does that sound, eh? Jolly good!" The old healer gave him one last irritating smile and sauntered off without waiting for an answer.

"Oh dear," Hermione sighed.

"That guy?" Neville said, jerking a thumb in the Healer's direction. "Really?"

"Yes, I know he seems a little eccentric, but he really is the best," Hermione assured him.

Rose was still holding Scorpius' hand. He could sense her watching him, trying to catch his eye, but he couldn't quite bring himself to look at her just yet.

"How are you feeling, dear?" Hannah asked him, and this time he was too overwhelmed to be annoyed.

"I've had better days," he muttered. "I don't mean to be ungrateful, I mean… I didn't think… I'm surprised I'm alive at all, to be honest. It's just…" He took a deep breath. He could feel his chest rise and fall. That was marginally reassuring. "I don't know."

"It'll be all right," Rose promised him. "You'll be up and about in no time."

"If you say so." It was difficult to be optimistic. He didn't think he could really be blamed for that.

"I do need to ask you something," Hermione cut in. "We need to know if your father ever gave you anything that might have been… well, that might have had any Dark Magic on it."

"Mum!" Rose protested. "What a way to put it!"

Scorpius blinked. "What are we talking about?"

"Something your father gave you that's been in your dormitory for a while," Rose explained, with a glance at her mother that had daggers in it. "Can you think of anything like that?"

Scorpius frowned. "Er… he only gave me one thing, except for clothes and books and things. That stupid box thing. He took it with us to that abandoned building, as well. I thought that was weird. If it was the same one."

"Hey, I remember that box thing," Al said. "I thought you got rid of it."

"Nah, I just keep it in my trunk. It's for hiding stuff, and I never really needed to hide things. Why?"

Hermione had a triumphant smile on her face. "Let's just say, by tonight we should be able to break that curse you're both under."

"Great, does that mean I can leave the house without an escort?" Albus demanded.

"We'll see," Hermione said shortly. "Your parents have good reason to want to keep an eye on you, young man."

Scorpius shook his head weakly. This was all rather over his head, and he had long since lost track of what was going on. Instead, he looked up at Neville, thinking he may as well ask. It wasn't as though the situation could get much worse. "Um… am I still under arrest?"

Neville smiled faintly. "No, lad. Kingsley decided to drop the charges against you, under the circumstances. The Aurors will want to talk to you, though, once you're well enough."
"Right." He closed his eyes for a second, but he couldn't just leave it there. "And my father?" he asked. He felt Rose's hand tighten slightly, and Albus let out a little hiss of anger.

"In a holding cell until the trial."

"Oh." So they had caught him. He wasn't sure how he felt about that. When he tried to think about it, he felt oddly numb inside, as if all feelings concerning his father had been put on hold, somehow. "Okay." That was all he could think of to say.

"Don't you worry about that though, love," Hannah said, smiling faintly. "You just think about getting yourself better."

"We should go," Hermione said abruptly. "Scorpius needs his rest."

"Oh, but Mum - " Rose protested.

"It's okay," Scorpius said. "I am getting sort of sleepy again." This was more or less true, but really he felt he just needed some time to think, without all these people staring at him.

Neville patted his shoulder, and Hannah gave him a kiss on the forehead. Albus stood there awkwardly for a minute until Scorpius told him flatly to bugger off. He grinned. "See you tomorrow mate," he said. "We'll get you sorted out. Don't you worry about that."

And then it was just him, and Rose. Her mother waited patiently by the door as she leaned down to kiss him again. Her lips were soft and her cheeks slightly wet.

"Don't cry," he told her. "You're right, a few months is no time at all. I'll be fine."

She smiled weakly at him. "Yeah," she said, wiping her eyes. "Yeah, you will. I… I'll be here tomorrow."

He smiled back. "Yeah. Okay."

At the very least, he thought, as she left the room and real weariness began to set in once more, at least they were finally together again. That was something.

Chapter End Notes

Don't forget to check out my blog @ misssaisongfic.tumblr.com for info on updates, music, pictures, and this week a deleted scene from chapter 4.
Chapter Summary

"But -" he said, his heart sinking a little as he realised, "the Healers said... well... I'm not going to be able to..." suddenly the thought of Hogwarts made him feel a little ill. All those stairs. Would someone have to carry him up them every time he needed to move between classes? And Ravenclaw Tower was one of the highest in the whole castle. "I might have to move into Hufflepuff," he said defeatedly.

~*-R-*~

~*-R-*~

It had been a long few days. At almost the same time they got the news that Scorpius was most certainly going to live, the story of what had happened at the Oldham mill hit the press. The headline was "MYSTERIOUS SHADOW CAUGHT", and underneath, "DRACO MALFOY TAKEN AWAY BY AURORS", and then 'HARRY POTTER'S SON SPOTTED AT CRIME SCENE". It was not a very nice article. It mostly picked on Harry, saying that, since he knew Malfoy, he should have caught him a lot earlier, and that he was irresponsible for letting his son and niece into a building where a dangerous smuggler was hiding. Harry brushed this off for the most part, saying that he was used to ignoring people's opinions about him. "Though perhaps this time they're not completely wrong," Rose heard him mutter.

The story about catching the Shadow was the biggest news, but page three had a picture of Scorpius, and the headline "SHADOW KILLS OWN SON". That part had made Rose feel ill, even though she knew it wasn't true. She wasn't sure where they had got the picture, but it must have been from one of their classmates from Hogwarts. It had been cropped out of a larger image. She could make out bits of the lake in the background and he had his arm around someone - probably Albus judging by the lock of hair that occasionally drifted in and out of frame. The picture-Scorpius laughed and silently joked occasionally with whoever was taking the photo. It seemed like ages since she had seen him smile, properly, like that.

A decent portion of the rest of the paper was Shadow stuff, too. Someone had done a lot of research into the investigation, trying to say that Malfoy couldn't be the Shadow, based on his financial history and the fact that he didn't seem to have many accomplices. A scowling picture of Gregory Goyle with the word WANTED in big letters was on page nine, but no one seemed to think him very important in the grand scheme of things.

There was also a bit about the events at the Ministry that had let to Scorpius being first poisoned, then abducted. There were quotes from Aurors explaining away the poisoning, saying, more or less truthfully, that Scorpius had agreed to take the Veritaserum. The Prophet writer questioned whether that was a ploy by 'the young Malfoy' to get himself into St Mungos where he could be rescued by his father. Another writer in a strongly-worded opinion piece claimed that there was no evidence that Aurors hadn't forced him to sign the documents.

No one was sure even now why he had signed them. That question, however, was rendered more or less unimportant when, the next day, the Prophet found out about Rose's father, and the part he had played in the whole debacle. Predictably, the paper had a field day.
Her uncle Harry had explained, very solemnly, that Ron was being suspended from the Aurors for deliberately leaving the Potions and Poisons ward practically unprotected from magical attack. Rose hadn't quite believed it at first, but the look on her mother's face spoke volumes. Apparently he had come right out and admitted it, but that didn't make her feel any better.

She had never really believed people when they told her what would happen if she started dating Scorpius. Hugo had tried to tell her, so had Albus, so had Scorpius himself, come to think of it. How many times had he told her he was sure her dad hated his guts, and she had just shrugged it off as a silly exaggeration? She had always thought that, while her dad might be hesitant about accepting their relationship, once he saw how happy they were together he would come around. Never in her life had she imagined that her own father would, given the opportunity, put her boyfriend in almost fatal danger. He couldn't have known that he would only be kidnapped. Malfoy could have sent someone to murder him. Or Malfoy could have taken off with Scorpius, and they might never have found him, and he would have been lost forever. The more she thought about it, the angrier she got.

She hadn't spoken to her dad since, unless absolutely necessary, and when she had to speak to him she did so as shortly and blankly as possible. She spent as little time as possible in the house. Ron was more or less stuck there while on his suspension, especially once the Prophet got wind of the reasons behind it and started staking out the house. She went to the hospital, and sat with Scorp until visiting hours were over. They kept him on sleeping potions for days, but it made her feel better just to see him, just to watch the steady rise and fall of his chest. She brought some of his favourite books and read them to him out loud until she all but lost her voice. Then Albus - well, Cleo - had the idea of playing music for him to listen to. She had no idea if it made any difference, but she had to try.

The day after they took him off the sleeping potions, she got up early and went back to the hospital without even catching sight of either of her parents. Hugo was avoiding her as well, apparently for no other reason than to bypass the tension that was now constantly in the air in the Weasley household.

"Hi Mr Knox," she said, at the entrance to the Scorp's room. The Healer smiled at her as he made his way out. It had taken a few visits for him to start recognising her, since he didn't seem to actually see people unless they were patients or fellow Healers. Knox was a bit of a... well, her dad would say he had a few screws loose. He cared about medical mysteries in almost the same way that Hagrid loved killer creatures. But he was nice, in his own strange sort of way, once you got to know him.

"How is he?" she asked.

"Feeling better, I believe," he said, cheerfully, but then, he was always cheerful about illness. It was kind of unnerving. "Go on in, go on in."

Rose hesitated. "Um, visiting hours don't start for another half hour," she pointed out, always the honest citizen.

"Tish tosh," Knox waved this away with one flamboyant hand. "Go in. I've heard that friends and family can help the healing process."

Rose smiled gratefully and moved past him, just about hearing the man mutter as he passed "... absolute nonsense, of course." She ignored it and made her way into the room.

Scorpius was already sitting up. He did look a little better than he had yesterday, but then, no one ever looked their best while being told they were going to be stuck in a wheelchair indefinitely. It had been terribly difficult to watch. "Hey," he said, on seeing her.

"Hi!" she said, putting on the brave smile she had almost perfected over the last few days. "How're
"How's it going?"

He shrugged. "Eh, I've had better days," he said. "But at least now I can see more than just part of the ceiling." He winced and put a hand to his navel. "Ow."

"Painful?" she said. It was probably a stupid thing to say, but her options were limited.

"It's no joke," he said bravely. "Help take my mind off it?"

She smiled and leaned down to kiss him. It went on for quite a long time.

"Been a while since we've done that… without anyone watching," he said afterwards, with a slightly dazed expression on his face.

"While we were both conscious anyway," she replied, and he raised his eyebrows. "What?" she smiled impishly, sitting down in the chair by the bed.

He chuckled weakly and sat back in his pillows. There was a few seconds of slightly awkward silence. After a moment he shifted and looked at her out of the corner of his eyes. "You really okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine," she promised him. "I'm just so glad you're still here. I thought…" she shook her head, feeling that sick, terrible feeling she had been carrying in her stomach since she had realised she was kneeling in his blood begin to stir once again.

He swallowed and rubbed his chest gingerly. "Can we not talk about it?" he asked. "We can… I mean, later, but…"

"Oh, yeah sure," she said quickly, nodding.

"Great," he replied.

"Okay," she said.

The awkward silence was back. It was there even while they were saying words just to fill the void. They could sit close together, but the memory of the scene in the abandoned mill stood between them like a gigantic, ugly elephant in the room. Rose tried desperately to think of things they could talk about that might distract him from his pain. "Oh," she said suddenly. "Cleo gave me the CD of your song."

He looked up at her, his expression brightening slightly. "You mean your song?"

"Yeah." She flushed a little. She had listened to it several more times over the last week. She found it both heart-wrenching and comforting at the same time.

"You like it?" he asked. His voice was still slightly hoarse, but then, she supposed he hadn't had much chance to use it for days.

"Oh yes," she said quickly. "It wasn't anything like I expected, but… I love it, I really do."

"Good."

"Cleo's been here a few times, you know. With Al, mostly. You know they're going out?"

The expression on his face said he hadn't. "Well that's not really a surprise," he said after a moment's consideration. "How's that going?"
"Honestly? I don't really know. She's nice, but… well, they don't have a lot in common. Except their ability to snog for hours on end, apparently." She rolled her eyes.

His lips twitched. "They've been at it a lot, huh?"

"Like you wouldn't believe." She sighed dramatically.

He chuckled. "Well, he did used to complain about us, a lot -"

"Hey, at least we have some sense of common decency," she shot back. "You haven't seen them. It's enough to make you want to claw your eyes out."

He smiled, properly this time. "Well, good for Alby, eh?"

She made a face. "Ew. You are such a guy, sometimes."

"Thanks, I'll take that as a compliment."

The small talk continued in this vein for a while, both of them carefully steering around the issue at hand. Rose understood why he didn't want to talk about what had happened. But it did make things rather uncomfortable. And, after all, they always talked about things, no matter how weird or awkward. But it would take time before he was ready to discuss it, and she had to tell herself that that was fair, that she oughtn't to pressure him into reliving it all so quickly.

Time, however, caught up with them soon enough. There was a knock on the door about an hour later, and Teddy poked his head in, his eyes widening at the sight of Scorpius sitting up in bed. "Cor, look at you," he said, grinning.

"I know, semi-conscious and everything," Scorpius replied. He looked genuinely pleased to see his cousin, though Rose could tell by the way he lifted one arm to wave that he was in a lot more pain than he was letting on. "Where've you been?"

Teddy's expression changed slightly into one of guilt. He had brown hair today, and was wearing his own face. He just looked pretty average, which Rose supposed was one of the reasons he made such a good spy. "Yeah, sorry I haven't been in to see you," he said. "It's been mayhem down at the office, because of… well… you know. Anyway I did come once or twice but you were asleep. I only just heard this morning you were up."

"It's okay," Scorp said quickly. "I didn't expect… I mean you didn't have to…"

"Oh shut up," Teddy said. "Anyway I've been busy tracking down your next of kin, among other things."

"Oh." Rose looked at Scorpius, concerned by his tone. Had he been quite so pale, before? "Um, you mean…"

"Your mum, of course," Teddy said, smiling. "Well, it took a while, 'cos I guess she moved, and changed her name, and I've been busy with other stuff, too - finding Goyle, for one thing, but that's another story… anyway, I found her, and she's going to come see you. That's good, right?"

Scorpius swallowed. He didn't look exactly pleased. "Er… yeah. Great."

"When?" Rose asked, unable to help herself.

"Today, I think. Three o'clock-ish. She has to go answer some Auror questions, first."
Scorpius started a little, and she heard him wince. "They're not going to arrest her, are they?"

Teddy looked surprised. "No, of course not. They just need to know if she knows anything more about this whole business, I mean that Mal - your dad - er - that he might not be telling us."

"Surprised he's talking at all," Scorpius mumbled, and Teddy looked suddenly guilty again.

"Well, that's not anything you need to worry about," he said, with forced joviality. "You just leave the investigating to us, eh? It'll sort itself out."

Scorpius looked unconvinced. Rose wasn't surprised. "Teddy," she said, as sweetly as possible. "Can I talk to you out in the hall for a minute?"

"Sure," he said, surprised.

She got up from the chair. "I'll be right back," she said to Scorp. He only nodded, clearly too preoccupied with his thoughts to take much notice.

"What's up?" Teddy asked once they were outside the room and the door was safely closed.

Rose put her hands on her hips and glared up at Teddy. "What on earth do you mean by just dumping that on him?"

"What?" he blinked, taken aback. "His mum coming? That's good news!"

"Ted, he hasn't seen his mum in…" she thought for a moment, "nearly three years! She basically abandoned him. And he's struggling enough with the truth about his father, and what happened to him… now he has to deal with seeing her again on top of all that?"

Teddy grimaced. "Okay, I see your point. But there wasn't really any choice. He can't stay in the hospital forever. His only other next of kin are his grandparents -" Rose snorted angrily. "Yeah… Neville sort of told us they might be a bad call," Teddy admitted. "Anyway, them or his aunt Daphne, and she doesn't want -" he paused and lowered his voice with a glance towards the closed door. "She doesn't want anything to do with him," he said, almost in a whisper. "She says her sister left her husband for another man, and she won't involve herself in her life or the boy's life any further. Purists," he added, shaking his head. "And after that it's only my Gran, and you know she's too frail to look after anyone but herself, now."

"I'll look after him," Rose insisted. The words came to her lips without even thinking.

Teddy looked at her sceptically. "At your parents' place? Yeah, that'll work. Anyway you aren't a relation. It's his mum, or we have to call the French Ministry to appoint a guardian."

"But…" she stared at him, her stomach twisting again suddenly. "But Teddy, if she gets him, she'll take him away. To France again or wherever -"

"Belgium," Teddy said, grimly. "She lives in Belgium."

"No," Rose said firmly. "I let his dad take him before, but I won't stand by and let that happen again, no way. What about you?" she asked suddenly. "Couldn't you take him?"

"Me? Rose, I don't even have a house; I'm out of the country half the time, and anyway I'm not even a first cousin. I'm sorry, but his mother's coming, and we can't change that now. You never know, maybe she'll just stay here. It's only until September, in any case."
"That's nearly a whole month! And look what happened last time someone in his family took him away."

"Rosie, as far as we can tell, his mum's never done anything illegal. He won't be in any danger."

Rose shot him her most cynical look. "You don't know that," she snapped. "You can't know that. French Ministry or no French Ministry, I'm not going to let them take him away again. Not when I just got him back."

~*-S-*~

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"You all right mate?"

Scorpius blinked. Albus had been talking for the last five or so minutes, and he hadn't been paying the slightest bit of attention. "Hm?"

"I said, you all right? You need a bucket, or something?"

He swallowed. "I'm not going to throw up."

"Well good, cos I don't want to deal with that any more than you do."

Rose had disappeared on some unknown errand soon after Teddy's news, and Albus had come to babysit him until she came back. That wasn't the word they used, of course, but Scorpius got the feeling that no one was comfortable leaving him alone for very long. Most of him was grateful for their concern, but there was just a little niggle at the back of his brain that kept wishing they would just leave him alone so he could wallow in the ruins of life for a while.

"How long 'til your mum gets here?" Albus asked, with forced enthusiasm.

Scorpius looked up at the clock for what felt like the thousandth time that day. "About ten minutes."

He clenched his fists under the blankets and tried to look calm, though inside he felt anything but calm. He was practically shivering with nerves.

He didn't know how to feel about his mother coming to see him. On the one hand, it had been so long since he had seen her. On the other hand, she hadn't made any effort to contact him in over two years, since she had left his father and taken her new baby with her. He had written countless owls, even a few letters sent by Muggle post, but there was never any reply. He had thought the message was pretty clear. But now she was coming to England. So she must care a little. He started to think that perhaps she hadn't got any of his letters. Didn't Teddy say she had moved? Maybe he had been sending them all to the old address. Or maybe she had got some of them but she was too scared to write back. Or maybe Belanger wouldn't let her write.

He wondered what would happen. Would he have to go back to Belgium with her, like Rose seemed to think would happen? Or could they find a temporary place here, for the two of them? Or three, because she must want to bring the child with her. Maybe Belanger as well, though inwardly he hoped not. He didn't even know the man. Anyway it would only be for a few weeks, until school started. As long as he was allowed back to school, of course. No one seemed to be able to give him a straight answer about that. He wondered if he could write to Professor McGonagall and ask. But if he wasn't allowed back, then what would happen? Would he have to stay with his mother until he was able to walk again?

"Sorry," he said, trying to bring himself back to the present again despite the ever-present ticking of
the damn clock. Albus had been unfolding his issues with Cleo for the last minute. "What were you saying?"

"I said, it's just that we don't have a whole lot to talk about," Al sighed. "I mean once we've exhausted Quidditch, and her search for a new flat. Because I don't know anything about music, really, and I can't even bring up NEWTs since she's decided not to do them…"

"She's looking for a new flat?" Scorpius interrupted, confused.

"Yeah mate, I already said that. She wants to move out of her mum's place 'cos she's got three sisters and its mad. And that's great, you know, 'cos then I could go there and not be at home all the time, and - "

"Oh yeah?" Scorpius managed a lofty smile. "And what do your parents say about you staying over at a girl's house?"

"I've… not brought it up yet," Albus admitted. "Anyway she hasn't found a place yet so it's a moot point."

"Look, if you're not getting on why don't you just break up with her?" Scorp suggested. It was hard to get into best-friend mode at the moment.

"Oh, we're getting on fine," Al protested. "I really like her. You know, she's really independent and everything, and that's cool, and she likes me, I think. She loves coming round our place..."

"Uh huh." Scorpius looked up at the clock again. Eight minutes to three.

"But… well, it's just sometimes I can't help wondering if -"

Someone knocked on the door, causing Scorpius to almost jump out of his skin. Albus sighed and sat back, looking annoyed. "Yeah, come in," he called.

"Wait -" Scorpius began. He wasn't ready. How could he be ready? What on earth was he supposed to say?

But it was Rose. And Neville and Hannah. And Rose's parents. Rose looked a little put out at the presence of the latter. Even more surprising than all this though, was when none other than Professor McGonagall came in behind them, walking with a stick but looking as stern and unmoving as ever. They all filled the tiny room so that there was hardly any room to move, but there was still no sign of Mrs Malfoy.

Scorpius' chest heaved with nerves, causing his wound to sear agonisingly, and he groaned. "You scared the bloody death out of me," he muttered to Rose as she came over to kneel beside him, since Al had the only chair. "What's going on?"

"Nothing," she replied innocently, brushing his hair back delicately with her fingers. It had just started to properly grow out again. "We just thought you might need a little support."

"This is… quite a lot of support," Scorp pointed out, as Albus respectfully vacated his seat for Professor McGonagall.

"We just want to make sure you're safe, lad," Neville said. "Since the Ministry obviously can't be trusted to do anything of the sort." He shot a dark look towards Mr Weasley, who did not answer. He had his arms crossed over his chest, and still managed to look intimidating despite the dusting of freckles over his pale face.
"My mother won't hurt me," Scorpius said. "I think," he added. After all, he had never thought that she would try to cut him out of her life, either. And he had never imagined his father capable of the things he had done. Maybe he just wasn't all that good a judge of people. He turned to look enquiringly at Professor McGonagall. "Er…" 

"I am here as a representative of Hogwarts," she said primly. 

"I really could have done that, Minerva," Neville pointed out. 

"Some things one must do for oneself, Professor Longbottom," McGonagall said curtly. "And I should hope I am not such an ancient invalid that you should consider it unsafe for me to enter a hospital." 

Scorpius looked from one to the other with confusion and just the slightest hint of hope. "Does that mean… I can come back?" he asked tentatively. 

"Since the charges against you were dropped, I see no reason at all why not," McGonagall announced, apparently unaware of the enormous weight it lifted from his shoulders as she spoke. 

"But -" he said, his heart sinking a little as he realised, "the Healers said… well… I'm not going to be able to…" suddenly the thought of Hogwarts made him feel a little ill. All those stairs. Would someone have to carry him up them every time he needed to move between classes? And Ravenclaw Tower was one of the highest in the whole castle… 

"I might have to move into Hufflepuff," he said defeatedly. 

"Don't be silly," Rose said quickly. "Of course you won't have to move to Hufflepuff." 

"But I -" 

"I've had a word to Healer Knox about the chair," Hermione cut in. "It'll all be fine, don't you worry." 

Scorpius stopped and forced himself to calm down. He really wished people would stop telling him not to worry. He couldn't walk. Surely that was a bloody fine reason to start worrying. But the pain in his chest when he got himself too worked up was equally convincing. The spot just below his ribs where the curse had gone through was burning constantly. He hadn't even been able to bring himself to even look at it yet. 

Rose leaned over him, no doubt to tell him once again that it was all going to be 'fine' - something else he was getting pretty tired of hearing - when there was another sound of someone knocking on the door. His stomach churned. He had almost forgotten what they were all here waiting for. 

Teddy stuck his head round the door, looking very surprised to see so many people crowded into the little room, but recovering quickly. "Er… hi, everyone," he said, without hardly missing a beat. "This is Mrs M - er, Belanger." 

The woman who came through the door was almost unrecognisable to Scorpius. She had dark brown hair, long and flowing over her shoulders with only a couple of pins to hold it out of her face. She was wearing Muggle clothes: a knee-length skirt and stockings under light pink shirt and brown fitted jacket. She was a little plumper in the face and around the middle, perhaps the result of her second child. As a disguise, it most certainly would have fooled most people. Scorpius might not have looked twice at her in the street, even if it was a Muggle street. 

He stared at her. She stared back at him. The room held their silence for a long, long time.
"Hello mother," he said eventually, when he thought he just simply had to say something. "You look different."

"So do you," she said immediately. A sad sort of smile spread across her face as she looked at him. "So much older."

"That happens," he said. He did his best to keep any bitterness out of his words, but she sensed it anyway, and the smile faded. "I just meant -" he began, wondering how on earth he could explain the mess of feelings that were clouding up his head right now.

"No, you're right," she stopped him. "It has been a long time."

"I wrote to you," he said, faltering.

"I know," she replied. She didn't offer anything else.

Hermione made a soft hissing noise and motioned impatiently at her daughter. Rose reluctantly moved out of the way, allowing Hermione to conjure up another chair for Mrs Belanger to sit beside the bed. "Thank you," she said softly, sitting and clasping her hands over her knees. She looked as though she might be gearing up to say something but wasn't quite able. Scorpius knew the feeling, but didn't feel particularly inclined to help. She hadn't written back. Of course she hadn't. Instead, he decided to ask the question he most badly needed answered. "Did you know? About Father?" It wasn't hard to talk about that anymore - physically, anyway. Albus had told him that the information he had given Mrs Weasley about the secrets box had helped the Department to break the curse on both boys. Emotionally, the words still tended to stick in his throat. But he had to know.

His mother looked at him for a while, then looked down at her hands. "No," she said quietly. "At least… not the details."

"But you knew it was illegal," he shot back. "You knew it was all wrong."

"I didn't ask," she said, a hint of her old, biting tone coming into her voice. "At least, not twice. It was not my place to question his methods."

Scorpius didn't have any answer to that. He stared down at his lap, twisting the sheets around the ends of his fingers.

"Scorpius," she said, making him jump. "I feel… I should… it's only fair to explain to you… why I left…"

"I know why you left," he said shortly. "I'm not an idiot. I knew long before Father did."

Her eyes widened. "You did? But… how?"

"I heard you and Belanger talking about the baby," he replied, shrugging lopsidedly and ignoring her shocked expression. It hardly seemed to matter now, that secret he had only ever told to Albus and Rose. It didn't seem to matter who knew it anymore. "And then I came home and you were gone. Father said I was never to think about you or mention your name ever again. I thought something horrible might have happened to you." He looked up at her, accusingly.

Astoria sighed. "I had hoped," she said, quietly. "I had hoped he would tell you I was dead. That I had died… after bearing the child, and he… he with me."

Scorpius stared at her. "Why?" he demanded, feeling his wound get hot and painful again, but pushing the pain to the back of his mind. "Why on earth would you want me to think that?"
"Because I wanted a new life," she said, looking up to the ceiling, apparently for divine inspiration. "A fresh start, away from… all that. If you heard us… you know how unhappy I was…"

"You think I was overjoyed with my life?" Scorpius said incredulously. "That summer he wouldn't even let me out the house! And for weeks I thought you were dead, or worse! Do you have any idea what that was like?"

"I had to go," his mother said, her voice shaking slightly. "I had to, he knew about me and Raoul as soon as our son was born, he would have killed me…"

"But you should have taken me with you!" Scorpius exclaimed. The intensity of his exclamation brought on a coughing fit that seemed to hurt even worse than anything he had felt so far. He groaned and clutched at his navel. Rose made a startled move forward and Professor McGonagall almost got out of her chair, but he waved them down with one hand while forcing his breathing back under control. "I'm fine," he snarled, clenching his fist in the sheets. "Fine."

His mother had not moved from her stiff position on the chair. "I couldn't take you with me," she said, when he had fallen back into his bracing pillows with a sigh.

"Why?" he demanded, without looking at her.

"Because you were never really mine," she said, almost inaudibly. "You were always his. The only reason he ever married was to have an heir. You were ten times more important to him than me. If I'd have taken you with me, he would have never let us go."

Later, Scorpius would think about this and know that she was probably right. Now, however, all he felt was the unfairness of it all. "Yeah, I'm really important to him," he muttered. "Real important. So important he tricked me into joining his smuggling ring, got me arrested, kidnapped me, tried to kill my girlfriend and shot a hole through my chest."

Astoria closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "I never thought he would hurt you. Please believe that."

Scorpius didn't think he could ever remember his mother saying 'please' to him. She was so different now, in more than just appearance. Gone was the woman who would take just enough time to snap at him to do his homework, or insist that he stay in his room while Goyle was in the house, or sit stone-faced through 'family dinner', lips pursed, without any attempt at conversation. The only time he had seen that woman show any emotion was when she was with Belanger. Now, she looked at him with an almost pleading expression, although perhaps it was desperation to get out of the room full of people which was gradually getting quite warm and stuffy. Not to mention the way Rose was glaring daggers at her. "I do," he said, eventually. "I believe you." She looked a little relieved. "And you… you're happy?"

"Oh yes," she sighed, the sad smile returning. "I live quite a different life now, with Raoul, and our boy. I help Raoul in the new Apothecary, and we live in a little house in a Muggle town…"

"But you hate Muggles!" Scorpius protested.

Astoria looked around nervously around. "I was… misinformed. Raoul is teaching me to put aside such antiquated thoughts."

"Oh." Scorp hadn't quite been expecting that. He had always thought both his parents shared their views on Muggles. But people can change, he reminded himself. I did. I forced myself to change, and so can she. "Er… good for you, then. That… sounds nice." Suddenly the idea of moving to
Belgium for a bit didn't seem so terrible.

He just heard the little puff of air that was Rose's extremely disapproving noise.

"Rose," Hermione hissed, warningly.

"Well, it's not! Nice, that is. She just as good as told him she's heaps happier without him around!"

"Rose!"

"Well she did! She can wrap it up in all the fancy talk she wants, but that's what she's saying."

Scorpius stared at Rose. Was she right? Was all the talk of the Apothocary and the little Muggle house just a way of saying...

"You never had any intention of taking him, did you?" Neville said suddenly. Scorpius jumped - and then winced at the stab of pain through his navel. The Professor had been so quiet, and at the back of the crowd, that Scorp had almost forgotten he was there. He was very noticeable now, though, his arms crossed stiffly across his chest and his eyes shining dangerously with anger as he glared at Scorpius' mother. Hannah put a hand on his arm, but he didn't even seem to notice her presence.

Astoria looked at Scorpius. He looked back at her. "You… don't want me to come back with you," he said. It wasn't a question. There was a lump of something like cement in the pit of his stomach that told him he already knew the answer.

She put out a hand. He almost flinched back, but at the last second relented and allowed her to touch, just for the briefest moment, the side of his face. "My boy," she said, so quietly that he wasn't sure he had really heard it, and then her hand fell. "I… would like to see you again," she said then, standing up slowly and with a tone of finality that was very much part of her old self. "Someday, perhaps, when we… but I can't… I just can't…"

"Let me into your great new life. Yeah, I get it," he said. Where hope had been just a few minutes ago was now an ugly tangle of bitterness in his chest. The pain of his wound was almost nothing compared to it.

"Just seeing you…" she whispered. "You look so like him. I look at you and I see the worst years of my life. I'm… so sorry, Scorpius." She looked into his eyes one more time, then, apparently unable to do so for longer than a few seconds, turned away and made her way hurriedly through the crowd, to the door. Teddy opened it for her with a lot less ceremony than he had on the way in, and shut it behind her.

"Well, good riddance," Rose said flatly, when she was gone.

"Yeah, you're better off without her, mate," Albus agreed, though the pity in his voice was almost too much to bear.

"But… she was supposed to help me," Scorpius said, suddenly feeling more lost than he could ever remember. He had been spending all his time worrying about having to leave again so soon, or imposing his crippled body on his mother's family. He hadn't ever really expected her to turn him down altogether. "I don't have anywhere else to go…"

"Yes you do," Neville said firmly. "I will apply to the French Ministry to be your legal guardian."

Hermione started and looked over at him in surprise. "Neville… are you sure…?"
"More than sure. I would have offered earlier but I thought the boy deserved the chance to be reunited with his mother." He said the last word as though he was doing his very best not to be sarcastic. Professor McGonagall made a harrumphing noise of agreement.

Scorpius didn't know what to do with his feelings. They had suddenly swelled so that his whole body felt fit to burst. "But… I can't..." he said, hating himself for having to speak the words. "It's too much work, and you have the pub -"

"No, Hannah has the pub," Neville said, waving his protest aside. "I've done everything I need to do for the summer, barring the greenhouse visits, and Lizzie can take care of those if necessary. You can have Tony's room, and I can easily keep an eye on you for a few weeks until school starts."

"We already talked about it, love," Hannah said, coming over to take his mother's vacated seat and putting a hand on his shoulder. "You're coming to the Leaky with us as soon as you're well enough, and no arguments."

He looked at her, and saw all the care and concern in her eyes that he had wanted to see in his mother where there had been only pain. He felt his chest get uncomfortably tight, and he swallowed hard as his own eyes filled with tears. He wanted to say 'thank you', but the words stuck awkwardly in his throat. Hannah put her arms around him and he let out a choked sort of sob into her shoulder. He felt Neville's large, calloused hand patting his back. "It's all right, lad," he heard the Professor say. "It's been a long day. We should all let you get your rest, eh?"

People started trailing out of the room. Someone produced a handkerchief from somewhere and he was just wiping his eyes and wishing to Merlin that Albus wasn't standing there, not to mention Professor McGonagall, when he heard Rose announce - "Wait." He looked up to see her turning to face her parents. She took a deep breath. "I'm going with him," she said, in a rush.

Hermione's eyes widened and Mr Weasley's expression twisted into a deep frown. "What?" he said, low.

"I'm going to the Leaky Cauldron too, until school starts," Rose repeated. Her face was set, and Scorpius could tell she meant it. She turned to her father. "I love you, Dad, but… I just can't be around you right now after what you did."

"Rosie -" Hermione began.

"I'm sorry, Mum. I love you too, but I'm an adult now and this is my choice." She turned to look round at Hannah and Neville. "I can pay for a room," she offered. "I have some money saved up."

"Don't be silly," said Hannah, despite looking rather taken-aback. "I'm sure Lizzie wouldn't mind sharing for a few weeks. That is…" she looked questioningly at Hermione.

Hermione sighed. "Perhaps it would be best," she said, looking up at her husband. "She is of age… and you owe her this much, Ron."

Rose's dad hesitated. The man had been silent throughout the entire interview, and Scorpius had the feeling he had only come to protect his daughter from any further unforeseen danger. Now he looked over at Scorpius, and their eyes met. Scorpius only had a vague memory of the last time they had seen each other. He had only been half conscious, after all, and the details were foggy, but now the man's voice seemed to resonate inside his head as though he had only just spoken.

You weren't supposed to get hurt. No one was. You saved my daughter's life, and I'm not ignorant of that. I just hope you can forgive me.
Then, almost imperceptibly, he nodded. Scorpius supposed that was the best he was going to get for now.
Chapter Summary

Mr Weasley’s suspension was yet something else Scorpius was responsible for, even if he knew he couldn’t have stopped it happening. No doubt there was now a serious lack of trust between the Head of Magical Law Enforcement and his partner, and they had always been such an efficient team. If the man got fired, Scorp had no doubt he would never hear the end of it.

2023

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The atmosphere in the Potter household had been extremely tense for the last few days. James, when he wasn’t at Quidditch practice, escaped it easily by going to Fred and Roxie’s. He and Fred were both training for the Chudley Cannon reserves. Roxie was still looking for a reserve position but was working in the Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes shop in Diagon Alley in the meantime. James and Fred spent most of their time flying or going over their training books - at least, that’s what Albus assumed they were doing. James had recently broken up with Flora, and while Roxie had a mysterious boyfriend that no one had met yet, Fred had yet to form any kind of serious relationship.

Lily would have gone to Hugo’s, but the vibe there wasn't much better. She mostly stayed in her room, reading her new NEWT-level books. She had achieved eight OWLs - less than Albus but more than James - and was still determined in her desire to be an Auror.

For Albus, there was no escape. Except for when he went to St Mungos to visit Scorpius, he was forbidden to leave the house. He didn't waste any time trying to argue that he was seventeen, and legally could do whatever he wanted. The look of disappointment on his father’s face every time they saw each other was enough to silence any protest. Luckily this happened rarely, since Harry was very busy at the office. From what Al could gather, the Aurors were trying to use their new information to track down as many members of the Shadow’s organisation as soon as possible, before news of the arrest spread all over the continent.

His mum was around considerably more, but he couldn't quite bring himself to have any real conversation with her. He knew she was just as angry as Harry was, by the brief way she spoke to him and the way she wouldn't quite meet his eyes. He wrote to Cleo and told her not to visit. No one had forbidden it outright, but he had no intention of subjecting her to the level of discomfort he now had to deal with.

He knew the hiatus would only last so long. The only reason he had not yet been punished was because of Scorpius and the fiasco over Uncle Ron’s suspension, and his parents being busy. But he knew it was coming. His biggest fear was that they would ban him from Quidditch. He was determined that this year would be Ravenclaw’s first cup win in four years, in his last year as captain. It seemed like the worst thing that could happen would be to have that dream shattered. A dark voice at the back of his mind reminded him that he deserved whatever his parents could throw at him. And if Scorpius had died, he wouldn't even have cared about Quidditch. He felt guilty now for worrying
about it just because, by some miracle, his friend was still alive.

The day Scorpius was due to leave the hospital for the Leaky Cauldron, Albus woke up to find both his parents in the house for the first time in days. Instinctively he felt that the hammer was about to fall. With a sense of impending doom, he went downstairs. His father was sitting in the kitchen wearing an old T-shirt and with damp hair lying uncharacteristically flat from the shower. He looked exhausted. Ginny put a bacon sandwich in front of him and he smiled gratefully at her. "Thanks, love."

"Well, you need some proper food, for once," Ginny said sternly. "It's not like you have any extra body fat to fall back on."

"Thanks a lot," Harry muttered.

"Morning," Albus said, shuffling into the kitchen.

"Good morning," his mum said. "There's bacon left in the pan if you want some."

"Thanks." He found a plate and some bread and started putting together his own sandwich. "Where's Lily?"

"Aunt Hermione's," Ginny replied. "And your brother has practice."

"Oh." Great, he thought. That's convenient.

He sat at the table and ate his breakfast, though suddenly he had no appetite for it at all. Harry finished his off in record time and went back for more. Albus realised that since Harry was hardly at home lately, he was probably hardly eating at all. He tended to put his work before his stomach, and since he no longer had his best friend to share the workload, he was doing twice the normal amount.

When his parents had finished eating, they put the plates away and came to sit back at the table. Albus felt a sick heaviness in his stomach and pushed his own half-eaten sandwich to one side.

"So, Alby, we need to have a talk," his mum said, not unkindly.

"I kinda figured," Al mumbled.

Harry slipped his glasses off and wiped them on his T-shirt. "I'm sorry I haven't been around much during all this," he said. "I know it's been a terribly difficult week."

Albus nodded. "It's okay. I know you're busy with Auror stuff."

Albus nodded. "It's okay. I know you're busy with Auror stuff."

Harry pinched the bridge of his nose and put his glasses back on. "I hope you realise that what you did… walking into that building knowing full well the danger… it's not just about disobeying me. It was all I could do to convince the Wizengamot not to bring you and your cousin up on charges."

Albus looked up, startled. He hadn't realised.

"Far apart from getting yourself killed, you could have seriously impeded the investigation. Malfoy could have gotten away, taking Scorpius with him."

Al set his jaw. He knew his father was right. In a way, that would have been better than what had actually happened. "Scorp got hurt because of me," he said, flatly. "I was trying to distract Malfoy and it just made him angrier. I get it."

Harry's mouth twitched. A day or so after the madness, Albus had had to sit and relate the entire
incident in detail. His dad hadn't said anything at the time, but he did now. "While I'm inclined to think that throwing mud at him was a stroke of pure genius," he said, earning a disapproving look from his wife, "goading Malfoy wasn't a very smart thing to do. You had a wand. You know how to use a Stunning spell, don't you?"

Albus blinked. He did know. But it hadn't even occurred to him. He realised, with a sinking in his stomach which he had thought could never sink any lower as long as he lived, that he could have stopped it all from happening. He had been invisible. Malfoy might never have seen it coming. Then he could have been the hero who brought Malfoy down, rather than the idiot who almost got his cousin and best friend killed. He stared down at the tabletop, wishing the kitchen floor would develop a black hole to swallow him up.

"Since you insist going to Oldham was your idea and not Rose's, I'm leaving her punishment up to Hermione," Harry continued. "Though frankly between all this and what happened with Ron, the poor girl's probably been through enough. I thought about banning you from Quidditch…" - Albus flinched guilty - "but I don't think that would serve to actually teach you anything. Instead, I've spoken with Professor McGonagall and arranged to get you out of school every Sunday to volunteer at St Mungo's."

Albus sat still for a moment, taking this in. At first it didn't sound so bad, until he realised the impact of a whole day each week that he couldn't practice Quidditch or study for his NEWTs was going to have. "For how long?" he asked.

"Until your exams," his mum replied. She was looking at him searchingly, as if expecting some kind of protest. "Are we agreed?"

Al nodded. There wasn't really anything he could say.

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When they woke him that morning, Scorpius was grateful. The potion they gave him to drink at night made his back and chest ache uncomfortably, and it had been a rough night. When he had finally slept, he had had strange and disturbing dreams. When Knox came to nudge him into wakefulness, he had been dreaming that Rose was screaming, somewhere, and he was stuck still, unable to go to her.

"Good morning!" Knox announced, in the irritatingly optimistic way he started every morning, good or otherwise.

"Morning," Scorp mumbled hoarsely.

"Time for you to go home, then," Knox said, consulting his chart. Scorpius didn't bother to correct him. The Leaky Cauldron was probably as close to home as he was ever going to get, after all. "We'll get you into your chair before we see you off."

"Does that mean I can eat real food tonight?" Scorpius asked. Since the accident, they had been feeding him with nutritional potions, which, while no doubt effective in restoring the strength he had lost while in a Moonsilver-induced coma for four days, were not exactly five star cuisine. His mouth started to water at the mere thought of food.

"I can't see why not," Knox replied, entirely oblivious to the relief this induced in his patient. "And where's your lady friend this morning?"
"Moving out," Scorpius replied, somewhat guiltily. It was her decision, of course, and far be it from him to try and stop her, but he couldn't help feeling responsible for Rose's fall out with her parents. "My friend should be here soon, though."

Albus did come, a little later than he had said he would and looking miserable. While Knox went to fetch the dreaded chair, Al explained the conversation he had had with his parents that morning. "I know I should be grateful it's not worse," he sighed, "but how am I meant to revise for NEWTs and do this volunteer thing on top of Quidditch?" He made a face. "I think they're trying to get me to quit Quidditch on my own. That's just cruel."

"Sorry," Scorpius said, low. Now Albus' family was showing cracks. Sometimes it felt like he, Scorpius, was personally at fault for ruining everyone's family life. The Weasleys, the Potters, the Longbottoms, not to mention his own family...

"Don't be an ass," Al said sharply, blowing hair out of his eyes. "You didn't ask me to put us all in danger like that. Anyway I'm not going to just up and quit - Ravenclaw's counting on me for a win this year. Gryffindor needs almost a whole new team, Slytherin is predictable, and Hufflepuff..." he shrugged. "Well, we can handle Hufflepuff. I'm not going to let a few sick people get in the way."

"At least you can timetable your practices around it," Scorpius pointed out. He was doing his best to pay full attention to the conversation. It gave him an excuse not to think about what was coming.

Luckily, Neville showed up before it arrived. Triumphanty he handed Scorpius a piece of parchment, naming him as Scorpius' legal guardian until he turned eighteen. "At least I assume that's what it says," he said glibly. "I was never much good with languages."

Scorpius skimmed the parchment, translating from the French in his head. "Looks legit to me," he said, grinning. "Thanks, Neville."

"Well, no one deserves to be the ward of any Ministry, if you ask me," the man replied, looking slightly embarrassed. The uncharacteristic anger of a few days ago had since been replaced with his usual bashful optimism. "They tend to be more concerned with fending off Muggles than looking after kids. Not that you're a kid," he added quickly. "Whoever heard of coming of age at eighteen, anyway? Ridiculous." He rubbed his palms together and looked around. "Where's the madman?"

Albus snorted. "Getting the chair," he explained.

"Ah." Neville's expression turned serious as he looked over at Scorpius. "Nervous?"

Scorpius' heart did an uncomfortable little flip in his stomach. "No," he lied.

"It's only for a few weeks," Neville said encouragingly. Scorpius considered that erring on the seriously deluded side of optimism. "And it has to be better than just lying around in bed all day, right?"

Scorpius nodded emphatically. "Anything would be better than this."

"There you are then. Albus, how's your dad?"

Albus started. "Er... tired, I think."

"I'm not surprised. People need to start reminding him that he doesn't have to save the world single handed. Any more," he added. "They still haven't replaced Ron?"

Al shrugged. "I don't think Dad wants to. He trusted Uncle Ron more than anyone." He glanced at
Scorpius - just for a spit second, but it was enough. Mr Weasley's suspension was yet something else Scorpius was responsible for, even if he knew he couldn't have stopped it happening. No doubt there was now a serious lack of trust between the Head of Magical Law Enforcement and his partner, and they had always been such an efficient team. If the man got fired, Scorp had no doubt he would never hear the end of it.

At this point, Knox came in, wheeling the contraption that Scorpius was going to have to live in for as long as it took for him to heal, and all other thoughts were momentarily blown out of his mind. At first glance, it was just an ordinary wheelchair, the sort he had seen occasionally in Muggle Paris and that one, glorious trip into Muggle London last summer. But as Knox drew it closer to him, Scorpius began to notice things that you probably wouldn't find on a Muggle chair. There was a wand holder, for one thing. For another, there were runes and symbols engraved into the frame around the wheels, and while the wheels themselves were metal and rubber and looked sturdy enough, the seat was made of wood. It didn't look especially comfortable.

Knox waved his wand and, without warning, removed some of the Petrification spell on Scorpius' legs. He felt them go limp and strange under the covers. That he could feel them at all was probably a good sign, he decided, but when he tried to move them, nothing happened. He sighed. With his lower back still paralysed for the healing spells, he knew his legs would never take his weight anyway. "All right then," he said, shifting himself up on his palms and pushing the sheets back. He wondered if he was going to have to walk - or rather, roll - outside in his hospital pyjamas. "Let's do this."

Knox used a very powerful levitation charm to lift him out of bed and manoeuvre him into the chair in a sitting position. Scorpius was glad of that, at least; he wasn't sure he could have stood the humiliation of anyone having to carry him. He shifted on the chair, twisting his body slightly from side to side with his hands on the wheels. The seat wasn't as uncomfortable as it had appeared - some kind of cushioning charm, he supposed.

"How does that feel?" Neville asked.

"Er… okay, I guess," Scorpius replied, not quite sure what he was expected to say in this situation. He looked down at his bare feet, sitting uselessly against the footrest. As he lowered his head, something inside him seared, and he hissed in pain. He had grown used to the constant aching from his chest, and the twinges he occasionally felt from the sealed wound were not quite so unbearable as the first few days, but sitting up like this seemed to be triggering a whole new set of nerves. Knox frowned - quizzically rather than out of any real concern, Scorpius couldn't help thinking - and flicked his wand a few times.

"Everything okay?" Al asked nervously.

"Oh yes, fine," Knox said eventually, nodding. "There are bound to be a few niggles during the healing process."

Scorpius wondered what Knox would consider real pain, if this was what he described as a 'niggle'. He rubbed at his torso through the pyjamas, grimacing. It didn't help, of course.

"All right, lad?" Neville asked. His face, in comparison with Knox's, was all concern.

"Yeah," Scorp breathed, fighting back the urge to cough. The pain made him hold his breath, which made him want to cough, which he knew would hurt a lot more. "Fine."

"Mm." Neville made a noise that suggested his understanding that 'fine' was stoic code for 'really not fine at all'. He turned to Knox. "Can't you give him anything for the pain?"
Knox raised an eyebrow, as if surprised that anyone might make so much fuss over a little 'niggle'. "I could, but it would make him drowsy."

"No," Scorpius said quickly. "I'm fine, really - it was just for a second. The pain was fading, a little. I want to be awake for this."

Neville still looked reluctant, and Albus looked like he might start arguing as well, but they exchanged glances and seemed to come to some silent agreement. "Well, if you're sure," Neville said.

"I will give you a potion that you must take twice a day, once at midday and again before bed, to help with the regrowth," Knox explained. "In addition to various numbing potions, to be taken every other day. And you must come back here, weekly, for me to examine you and to have the paralytic charm weakened."

"So noted," Neville said, before Scorpius could reply. "Do you think we could get him home now, Healer Knox?"

Knox seemed unfazed by this. "I'll fetch the paperwork," he said, nodding, and left again.

"I brought you some clothes," Albus said suddenly, reaching for the bag he had brought with him. "We already moved all your other stuff into Tony's room yesterday. Um, your Hogwarts stuff and the things that were at your house are still in evidence at the Ministry, but Dad said he should be able to get them released by later today."

"Thanks." Scorpius watched as Al emptied the bag to reveal his Muggle jeans and his favourite T-shirt, the black one with the slogan *I listen to bands that don't even exist yet*. There was also fresh underwear and a pair of loose, elastic trousers.

"These are mine," Al explained, looking slightly awkward as he held them up. "I thought you might like something easier to put on… um, but it's up to you… I mean, they're yours if you want them."

"Thanks," Scorpius said again, with a combination of relief and regret. "I might take you up on that."

His desire to wear his own clothes again was only just overshadowed by the thought of having to physically struggle into the jeans. The very idea made him feel ill.

"Do you need help...?" Neville asked. The question mark was only just audible, as though he already knew the answer. Scorpius looked at the clothes with a growing sense of dread. The T-shirt he could manage, perhaps, but the rest, even with the elastic, suddenly seemed exhausting to him if not downright painful. But somehow the thought of Neville dressing him made his stomach turn over.

"I'll help him," Albus offered brightly. "You go sign the paperwork Knox was on about."

Scorpius nodded with relief, and Neville left the small room as well. "Thanks," he said to Albus when they were alone. He could stand to let Albus help him with his trousers. He wasn't sure why he felt differently; because they were best friends, or because they had shared a dormitory for six years and were a lot more even in terms of equality of nakedness.

"No problem," Al said, coming round to help remove the pyjama top. "You'll have to figure something out for later though, unless you want Rose or Hannah dressing you."

"No fear," Scorp muttered, slightly muffled as the top was pulled over his head. His back and chest burned with the effort.

"Well, maybe we could look up some spells. This can't be the first time this has ever happened to a
That made Scorpius feel slightly better. He dropped his arms as Al got the last of the shirt, and looked down. He wasn't sure what he had been expecting to see - a giant hole, perhaps, through which you could see right to the other side - or a horrible, seeping wound. Instead, between his navel and the bottom of his ribcage, there was a red scar. It was almost oval, but slightly jagged around the edges, as if someone had run him through with some sort of spiked javelin. In a way, he supposed that was more or less accurate.

"Curse scar," Albus said faintly, after a moment. "Good luck with that."

Scorpius made a face. "Is there one on the back as well?"


"Oh, well thank Merlin and his tribe of water nymphs for that, then," Scorp sighed.

Albus sniggered. "That's a new one. Where'd you hear that?"

Scorpius tried to shrug, but it hurt too much, so he gave up. "Durmstrang, I think. I can also swear in Russian, Norwegian and Polish." Privately he thought that if it hurt that much just getting in and out of bed, he was eventually going to run out of swearwords in all five languages, and might have to start making up his own.

"Well," Albus said, picking up the T-shirt with an air of determination. "I'd say that scars are good for attracting the ladies, but since you're currently dating my cousin and I don't want her dropped for some random bint with a scar fetish… let's do this."

~*-S-*~

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The effort of getting up and dressing had left Scorpius too tired to push the wheels around himself, and Neville had pushed the chair out St Mungos and right through Muggle London. They got a few strange looks from people. Scorpius wondered if it was the unconventional design of the chair, or if everyone who couldn't walk got stared at like this when they went out in public. Grimly he decided it might be a bit of both.

They could have Apparated, of course, but no one was quite sure that the chair would come along with them, even if Scorpius could manage it. Floo powder was out of the question, for obvious reasons.

"Should've borrowed the car," Albus had muttered as they walked the last few streets towards the entrance to Diagon Alley.

Scorpius looked up at his friend where he was walking beside them. "You what? You can't drive."

"Says you!"

"Ever tried?"

"No, but I bet I could figure it out. Dad only drives it to the train station and back each year but he seems to know what he's doing."

"Do you even know how a car works?"
Albus hesitated. "Er, no. Do you?"

"Course I do. Outstanding in Muggle Studies OWL, remember?" There were few things in his life that Scorpius was really proud of - that result was one of them.

"You can't drive either, though," Albus shot back.

Scorpius nodded pointedly at his legs. "Well, not right now. Anyway you need to be eighteen to get a license."

"Wait, you need a license? Like for Apparition?"

"Course you do, otherwise everyone would do it. Then they'd just be driving around willy-nilly and running into each other."

Albus frowned. "Oh. I guess that would be kind of dangerous, wouldn't it?"

Neville chuckled. "Sometimes, Albus, you are just like Arthur. I hope you aren't planning on any Misuse of Muggle Artefacts."

They reached the Leaky Cauldron and went around the side of the building to a nondescript side door. It was a bit of a squeeze getting the chair through the narrow opening, but it was still infinitely preferable to being wheeled through the pub with all the patrons staring at him. Scorpius offered Neville a grateful smile as the man finally released the chair in the back kitchen, which was nicely quiet at this time of day. He could just hear people's voices from the front kitchen, probably getting ready for the lunch hour.

"What about the stairs?" Al asked, ever the optimist.

Neville frowned. "I suppose we could levitate -"

"No thanks!" Scorpius said quickly. "No offence, Neville, but I've seen your levitation spells." This was true - the previous summer he had seen more than he wanted to, most of which involved the end result of broken plates or glassware.

"None taken," Neville sighed, though he did look a bit miffed. "Oh well. Knox said stairs wouldn't be a problem once we got your wand in."

Scorpius looked down at the spot where a wand was obviously supposed to be slotted in; it was similar to the one on the neck of his guitar. "Does it fly?" he asked nervously. He had never been much good in the air.

"Cool," Al said appreciatively.

"Honestly I'm not sure," Neville admitted. "Those symbols probably have something to do with it, but I never did Ancient Runes. Just between you and me, Professor Warren bores me to tears."

Al snorted.

In the end, Neville went to find Hannah, who came back to greet them with flour on her hands and a smile on her face. "I went to the Ministry this morning," she said, once she had hugged both Albus and Scorpius, leaving white handprints on the back of his T-shirt, but it wasn't as if anyone was going to see. "I got all your things. The man working there was not very polite," she added, with a tone of great disapproval.
"Thanks," Scorpius said, surprised. He had thought he might have to go back to the Ministry himself to get his effects.

"I had all the right paperwork, but he insisted on going through it all with a fine tooth comb," Hannah said irritably.

"That's just procedure, dear," her husband told her soothingly.

"Oh, procedure," Hannah sighed, extending the word in a thick tone to show just what she thought of that sort of thing. "You're well out of all that, if you ask me."

Neville rolled his eyes behind Hannah's back. Scorpius couldn't quite help a smile. "What an... interesting looking wheelchair," Hannah said, bending down slightly to inspect the strange runes. "It's not much like the one my great Aunt Rhonda used to get about in. She must have wounded a few dozen pedestrians a week on that thing," she added, to general amusement.

"So far it's mostly a seat with wheels," Albus explained. "We think we might need his wand to get it started."

"Oh, of course," Hannah tapped herself reproachfully on the forehead, leaving a dusting of flour in her hair. "Albus, do go upstairs and find Rose, will you? She knows where everything is. Do you want something to eat, dear?" she added to Scorpius as Albus jogged up the stairs.

"Yes please," Scorpius said, without hesitation and with great enthusiasm, even if the thought of seeing Rose again had temporarily distracted him. Even though they had seen each other every day since he had woken up, his heart still lifted every time he saw her face. He wasn't sure he would have got through the last week at all, without her. "If it's not too much trouble," he added eventually, remembering his manners.

"Don't be silly," said Hannah, waving a hand. "I'll make you baked beans on toast, that was one of my favourites when I was younger."

Scorpius had never heard of such a thing, but he assumed it must be a Muggle food, and he was hungry enough that he would eat anything. "Yes please," he said again, politely.

There was a pounding of feet on the staircase that led up to the apartment, and then Albus came back, accompanied by both Rose and Lizzie. Both the girls hesitated when they saw him - just for a split second, but he saw it. "Am I that shocking?" he asked lightly.

"You've always been shocking," Lizzie said, sticking her tongue out at him. It was odd to think that while she had seen him over the last few weeks, lying unconscious in a hospital bed, it had been months since he had seen her.

"You cut your hair," he said, noticing as she flicked some of it back. She had always had long hair, like Hannah's, and it was strange to see it hanging just under her ears.

"Yes well, it kept getting in the way when I was gardening," she said, running a hand through it. "Thank you for noticing." She shot Albus a dark look, and he sighed.

"I noticed," he protested. "I just didn't comment. I didn't think you'd want me to."

"You mean you didn't want to in front of your girlfriend," she muttered in reply. Scorpius suddenly got the feeling that he'd accidentally stumbled on an old argument, but luckily Rose came towards him then, beaming. "It's so good to see you out of bed," she said softly. "You okay?"
"Great," Scorpius lied.

"You sure? You look a bit peaky."

"He's regrowing his spine, Rosie," Al said, rolling his eyes. "Course he looks peaky."

Scorpius couldn't help smiling. "I have the nicest friends," he said off-handedly to Neville. Hannah was making toast, the slow way without any magic, and the smell was already making his mouth water.

Rose handed him a drawstring bag. "This is all the stuff the Aurors took off you," she said. "We put the rest of your things from the house in Tony's room."

"Are you sure Tony doesn't mind me taking his room?" Scorp asked Lizzie as he took the bag gingerly out of Rose's hand.

Lizzie scoffed. "He only sleeps in it a couple weeks every year," she pointed out. "He might be miffed when he finds out we took down his Gryffindor posters, but all the lions were starting to get lazy, they hardly ever moved anymore."

Scorpius was hardly listening. He had emptied the bag into his lap, revealing his wand, a pile of shoelaces, and his coming of age watch. He picked up the watch and stared at it. Somehow, he had forgotten that the Aurors had taken that. He had thought he must have left it behind in the abduction, or perhaps his father took it away, or it was lying in the pile of rubbish he had fallen into at the old mill when he had cut his shoulder. He had tried not to think about it, sure that it was gone forever. But there it was, in his hand, looking as good as new. That made him feel a little better about life in general for a moment. "I thought I lost it," he said, slipping it easily on over his wrist.

"Well, aren't you glad you didn't?" Al said, peering interestedly over Hannah's shoulder as she poured something orange and gloopy out of a can and into a saucepan on the stove.

Scorpius ignored the shoelaces. The shoes they went with were probably long gone. He picked up his wand and ran his fingers carefully over it. There didn't seem to be anything wrong with it that he could tell, though he was sure they would have done lots of tests on it. Experimentally, he slotted it into the holder in the chair. Nothing happened. "Oh good," he said, breathing a sigh of relief. "I was really hoping it wouldn't start zooming around the place."

Albus turned back to see what he had done, and looked disappointed. "Ah well. We'll try the stairs after you've had lunch."

"Nearly ready," Hannah announced. "Sit down, all of you, come on."

Scorpius looked around in confusion. He had never seen anyone eating in the back kitchen before. It was mainly used for Longbottom family cooking, and for the pub only if the front kitchen got really busy. The family always ate upstairs in their apartment. But Neville was already summoning a little table towards them, and the others were transfiguring things temporarily into chairs, and soon enough there was a little dining area. Everyone sat around it so that Scorpius hardly had to move, and then Lizzie helped her mother serve up the meal. Scorpius itched to help. He wanted to pull the plates out of their hands. Being waited on was what he did at - here he flinched inwardly because he had almost thought at home - in Paris where they had servants, and his father expected it, and there was no other choice. At the Leaky Cauldron he had always earned his own way, always, except the few days last summer where he'd been too sick to get out of bed.

"Now, I know it looks like salamander eyeballs," Neville said, misinterpreting Scorpius' slightly
miserable expression. "But it's actually good, trust me."

Scorpius shook himself out of it and smiled gratefully at Hannah. "I never thought it wasn't," he told her earnestly, and she beamed at him. He took a big spoonful. It was good, if a slightly strange texture, but it probably could have been salamander eyes and he would have eaten it anyway. He polished the whole thing off in just a few minutes, and Hannah happily fetched him some more. He made the second portion last longer, listening to the idle chatter around him, letting it soak into his being and feeling it lift his spirits. It seemed such a long time since he had heard people laughing, heard a conversation about something as trivial as NEWTs, or eaten anything that tasted as good as baked beans on toast. But a sly, treacherous voice at the back of his mind - one that spoke in a suspiciously familiar voice - told him that the hardest trials might still be yet to come.
The Last Summer Part 10: The Chair

Chapter Summary

They went together into Tony's bedroom, where Scorpius' things had been either put away in the wardrobe, or gently piled into his school trunk at the foot of the bed. His guitar had been taken out its case for the first time in months, and leant strategically in a corner. As they came in, Rose saw Scorp's eyes widen and linger on it for a moment.

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Rose knew Scorpius, and she knew that he was in more pain that he was letting on. It was the way he moved slightly slower and more hesitantly than usual, the way his eyes would occasionally widen or close suddenly, and then return to normal so that you weren't sure if you had really seen it. She knew he didn't want anyone to worry, or ask if he was all right, or fuss over him. She thought he would dislike fuss immensely. But it was hard to watch him wheel himself awkwardly away from the makeshift table, hard to see the exhaustion in his face and do nothing. "That was great, Hannah," he said. "You have no idea how good it is to have real food again."

"I'd be careful if I were you," Lizzie warned. "She'll really fatten you up if you give her half a chance."

Hannah shot her daughter a disapproving glance as she cleared the plates. "Thank you, Elizabeth. Don't you have any homework you should be doing? That isn't Herbology?"

"Oh mum," Lizzie sighed, and Rose saw Neville hiding a grin behind his hand. "You know Herbology's the only NEWT I really care about."

"No daughter of mine is going to deliberately fail three out of four NEWTs," Hannah said firmly. "Besides, after this summer I should hope you're all going to be doing better in Defence Against the Dark Arts."

The room fell suddenly silent. Rose immediately felt so guilty that she couldn't meet anyone's eyes. She knew without looking that Albus would be feeling the same. When she glanced at him, Scorpius was staring down at his lap, his fingers moving slowly and absent-mindedly over the textured surface of the wheels on his chair.

"Mum," Lizzie breathed, shocked.

"No, she's right," Albus said flatly. "What good's learning to stun people or do a shield charm if you can't do it in a real life and death situation? They don't teach you that stuff in school."

Neville was frowning now. "Be glad you haven't had much opportunity to practice," he said. "Still, I'm inclined to agree. You never know what could happen, even these days. I'll have a word to Professor Tufty about it."
Hannah was looking about as ashamed as Rose currently felt. "I'm sorry, dear," she said to Scorpius. "I wasn't thinking."

"No." Scorpius folded his hands in his lap and looking up at her. "It's fine."

"Let's test the stairs then," Albus said, in a desperate attempt to change the subject for which Rose was grateful. He took hold of the back of Scorp's chair and pushed it gently to the foot of the staircase. Scorpius looked up at the stairs with trepidation.

"I don't think I can -" he began, but stopped in surprise as the chair shuddered of its own accord. He gripped the wheels and swallowed hard. "What was that?" he demanded.

Albus grinned. "It's like my Phoenixer before a game. It wants you to tell it what to do."

Scorpius looked unconvinced. "If I say it, how do I know it won't shoot up and hit the ceiling?" he asked doubtfully.

Rose came around to look more closely at the runes engraved in the wooden chair frame. She could see the symbol for levitation there, among others that were indeed similar to those you might find on a broomstick before the marks were polished off. "Well?" Scorpius asked her. "Is it going to kill me?"

She smiled at him. "I doubt it," she said. "Just be gentle. Think it, as well as say it. Like your guitar, if you… if you had to tell it to play quietly."

Scorpius frowned thoughtfully, as if this comparison hadn't occurred to him. Then he sighed. "All right. I trust you," he told her.

"Hey!" Albus protested.

"No offence, Al, but I've seen that mad broomstick of yours nearly throw you enough times to doubt your judgement," Scorp told him. He was gritting his teeth slightly, and Rose knew he was preparing himself to take the next big step - metaphorically, anyway.

She drew her wand. "If you fly up, I'll be right here to bring you back down," she said. There was certainly no way she was just going to let him get hurt again. "I promise."

"Gently," Al reminded him.

"I've got it, thanks," Scorp growled. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a second, then, while everyone waited in silent expectation, he said - barely audibly - "up."

Nothing happened.

Albus sighed. "Not that gently," he chided. "Come on, d'you want to get up there or not?"

Scorpius gave him an incredulous look.

"Well it's not going to work if you don't want it to," Albus said flatly. "That's how magic works. Try it again."

Scorpius set his shoulders and grit his teeth. "Up," he said firmly.

Rose gripped her wand tightly as the chair rattled happily and lifted a few inches off the floor. She heard Scorpius let out a short gasp, and then his fingers slowly released from their death grip on the wheels. Under his touch, they started turning slowly, and, with a delicacy she might not have thought
possible of an old piece of furniture, the chair began to float serenely up the staircase. It was a tight fit, but the thing never even touched the sides.

"Cool," Lizzie said appreciatively. They watched as the chair reached the top step, and heard Scorpius say "stop! Down Down!." The three of them hurried up the stairs after him in single file as the chair sank reluctantly back down to the floor.

"That was great," Albus said, grinning as he helped Scorp push the chair into the living room.

Rose didn't say anything. Scorp had gone even paler than before, and she could see even the short trip up the stairs had tired him out. "Where's Alice?" he asked, in an offhanded way that Rose knew meant he had probably been busting to ask since his arrival.

"At Grandad's," Lizzie replied. "Just for a few days while you get settled in. Mum thought a hyperactive five year old might not be the best thing when you're trying to rest."

Scorpius looked disappointed. Rose didn't blame him; she knew that he loved Alice as if she was his own little sister.

"Come on then," said Albus. "Let's get you settled in."

They went together into Tony's bedroom, where Scorpius' things had been either put away in the wardrobe, or gently piled into his school trunk at the foot of the bed. His guitar had been taken out of its case for the first time in months, and leant strategically in a corner. As they came in, Rose saw Scorp's eyes widen and linger on it for a moment. "Do you want to play?" she asked. It might help relax him a little, she thought, or at least distract him for a while. "You'll probably have to tune it -" she reached for it, meaning to pass it to him, but before she could even touch it, he interrupted her.

"No," he said, almost harshly. She turned to stare at him and he shifted uncomfortably. "Not right now," he added, not quite meeting her eyes. "Maybe later."

She nodded, though his reaction still worried her a little.

"Time for your potion anyway," Albus said, checking his watch.

Scorpius rolled his eyes. "Trust you to remember all Knox's instructions. This St Mungo's thing should work out just perfectly for you."

"What's this?" Lizzie asked, frowning.

"Yeah, what St Mungo's thing?" Rose asked, and Albus, with a long-suffering look, explained his punishment.

"It's not too bad, I guess," he sighed. "Especially since Dad said the two of us could have been charged with interference in a major Ministry investigation." It wasn't the first time Rose had heard this - her mother had been extremely clear on the subject, in fact - but it still gave her a sick, twisting feeling in her belly.

"Rot," Lizzie scoffed. "The Wizengamot wouldn't dare bring you up on charges. The papers would have a field day if they arrested Harry Potter's son. Do you have to volunteer as well?" she asked Rose.

Rose shook her head. "This is the first I've heard of it."

Albus made a face. "Dad said you'd probably 'been through enough'," he quoted. "Isn't that nice.
Anyway, I was the one who was *cursed*.

Lizzie rolled her eyes. "Yeah, really scary curse. It wasn't hurting you, was it?"

Al glared at her. "I'll get the potion," he muttered, and stalked out of the room.

"You two are on excellent terms again, I see," Scorpius said, raising an inquisitive eyebrow.

"Oh, well," Lizzie sighed, sitting down on the bed with a *whumph* noise. "He's infuriating. And he waves that Cleo girl around in my face every chance he gets."

Rose blinked, surprised. She hadn't been paying much attention to anyone's personal relationships lately, but she thought she might have realised if Al was being particularly ego-driven. If anything, she thought he'd been quite withdrawn all summer, even before their ill- advised trip to Paris.

"Didn't you break up with *him*?" Scorpius pointed out to Lizzie, in defence of his friend. "You can't really blame him for going out with someone else, can you?"

"I was *not*," Lizzie protested. "Blaming him, that is, and yes I *did* break up with him, it's just that I wish they weren't so... so..."

"Obvious?" Rose suggested. There were times when she had felt more or less the same, to be honest, but if Al was happy, she had no right to protest. Particularly in view of the fact she was dating his best friend.

"Showy," Lizzie muttered.

"Cleo's just outgoing," Scorpius explained, in a way that reminded Rose how utterly clueless he could be sometimes. "She's nice really, once you get to know her."

Lizzie merely shook her head, her newly-cropped hair bouncing enthusiastically around her ears. "Well," she said, getting up off the bed. "Dad's put me in charge of the school greenhouses while you're here, Scorp, so I better go check that nothing's burst through the roof since yesterday. Tell Mum I'll be back before dinner?" she added to Rose.

"No problem." Rose watched her go for a second, then turned back to Scorpius. He looked back at her. "So."

"So," he said, with a tired sort of smile. "How'd your parents take you leaving, in the end?"

She shrugged. "Not too bad," she said, more or less truthfully. "Dad's not happy about it, but Mum kept reminding him that I'm of age, and he can't stop me."

Scorpius grimaced. "I bet that really improved matters."

"Not really," Rose agreed. "But I couldn't stay there another minute, honestly I couldn't. Mum and Dad had a huge row last night." She was surprised how easily the words came. She hadn't planned on talking about it at all.

"About me?" Scorpius asked. "Or you?"

"No, about Dad," Rose said. "Mum's hardly been speaking to him since we found out. She thinks he should do something to make sure he gets his job back. Dad just wants to wait it out, I think. He said he apologised to you. Did he?"

Scorpius nodded slowly. "Unless it was a hallucination," he joked lamely.
"Good. What did you say?"

"Me? Not much. It was all I could to understand what he was saying."

Rose glowered, feeling yet another stab of anger. "Trust him to try and apologise when you were only half conscious," she muttered. "He really ought to come here and say it again, properly."

Scorpius looked pained. "Once was enough, Rosie, really. As long as I don't get kidnapped again... I'll get over it." There was a slight bitterness in his tone that gave the lie to the words, however.

"You're a better person than I am, then." Rose shook her head and ran her fingers through her hair, making bits of it frizz up with static. She took a step closer and peered down at the chair again. "Is this thing even comfortable?"

"Surprisingly yes. I think it must have all sort of charms on it."

"The runes are pretty strong magic," she said thoughtfully. "I wonder how old it is?"

"You can do all the research you want when we get back to school," Scorpius sighed. "Make it a special NEWT project."

Rose looked up in surprise at the sudden bite in his tone. "Are you okay?"

He frowned for a moment, then his shoulders relaxed slightly and he looked away. "Sorry," he muttered.

She knelt down beside the chair and covered his hand with hers. "Look at me," she said, and he did, albeit somewhat reluctantly. "You're going to get better," she told him firmly.

"We don't know that for sure," he murmured.

"Well I do," she said. "I know."

"Are you a medi-witch now?" he asked, and it might have been her imagination, but she thought she felt his hand tremble a little.

"Knox can say whatever he wants," she said, not taking her eyes away from his. "I know you're going to walk again because you're brave, and kind, and special, and you saved my life, so I owe you a life debt and if its the last thing I do, I'm going to make sure that you get out of that chair. Okay?"

"But what if I don't?" he asked. There was a fearful yet resigned tone to his voice that she didn't like at all. "What if I'm stuck like this forever? We know its possible -"

"Then I'll still be here," Rose promised. It was all she could do, all she had to offer. "And Al will be here, and Neville and the others. And we will keep helping you until you're well again."

"But what if -"

"Stop," she told him, in the firmest voice she had ever heard her mother use. "You have to stop thinking like that. You have to believe that things will change or it won't ever happen. You're not going to get better until you really, truly believe you will."

Scorpius sighed. "You make it sound so easy, like it's some sort of... story. But it's real life - *my* real life - I can't help - "
At this point, partly to shut him up and partly because she thought he might really, really need it right now, she lifted herself onto one knee, leaned over and kissed him. He made a soft, surprised noise, but he didn't protest or push her away. As he relaxed and she felt the cool, gentle touch of his fingertips on her cheek, she realised that she might have needed this a little, as well.

"Merlin's saggy left - I can't leave the two of you alone for five minutes?"

Rose turned and glared at her cousin, who had appeared in the doorway with a small vial of bright green potion in one hand. "You can talk," she snapped. "Like I haven't walked in on you and Cleo a dozen times this summer."

"Maybe you should have knocked." Albus shrugged.

"I would if you ever remembered to shut the door," Rose muttered.

Scorpius was looking with trepidation at the potion. "Is that it?"

"This is it." Albus tossed the vial into the air and caught it again, making Rose's heart jump.

"Don't!" she cried.

He gave her a puzzled look. "What? I wasn't going to drop it - anyway there are like twelve more, downstairs."

"Oh, just give it here," Scorp sighed. "Don't throw it - not all of us have your reflexes."

Albus handed the potion over with exaggerated care, and Scorp downed it with a grimace. "Gross," he muttered, and yawned.

"That's how you know its good for you," Al said. "You better - er, I mean - do you want to have a rest, or…?"

Scorpius shot him a look that suggested he saw straight through the switch of approach as clear as glass. "Do I have a choice?"

"Of course you do," Rose said, resisting the sudden urge to flick Albus around the ear. "You can do whatever you want."

"Yeah, right." Scorp winced and put a hand to his ribs, swallowing hard. "Hell. Knox didn't mention how hard that stuff kicks in."

"Should I fetch -" Rose began, but he shook his head.

"Just… help me out of this thing," he muttered, not looking at either of them but pushing the chair back towards the bed.

Albus took a hesitant step forward. "You want to get changed?" he asked.

"No. Once was enough for one day, thanks. No one's going to care if I'm rumpled."

Al nodded and looked at Rose. Their quarrel temporarily forgotten, they went around opposite sides of the chair and physically lifted him out of it and onto the bed. His body below the waist was very stiff under the paralytic charm, and would not twist from side to side, though his legs bent at the knee just enough to allow him to lie down. He was surprisingly, worryingly light.

He made a low, pained noise as they let him down, though they couldn't have been more careful if
he had been made of glass. When they stood back, his eyes were scrunched up and his lips pressed tightly together as if holding back a cry.

"Sorry," Rose said helplessly. He let out a low grunt of acknowledgement, and then a sort of strangled whimper as his body spasmed. Rose looked up at Albus in disbelief. "Can't we do anything?" she demanded.

Her cousin frowned at her and beckoned her away from the bed. Reluctantly she followed him to the edge of the room. "He's in pain," she whispered. "Can't we do something?"

"The pain is the potion working," Albus pointed out. "It's regrowing his spine. It's bound to hurt. And he's not allowed a numbing potion till tomorrow... I don't like it anymore than you do, but if the Healer says it's okay..."

"Knox is a madman," Rose snapped in a low hiss, only just remembering to keep her voice down. "I don't believe he's ever had so much as a splinter in his whole life, or he'd have some sense of human..."

"Rose." Albus nodded towards the bed.

Rose looked. Scorpius' breathing had evened out, and one arm had fallen limply across the bed. He was still pale, but it looked as though the fit had passed.

"He needs to rest," Al said, when she would have gone back to him. She stopped, reluctantly. Lying on the bed, his chest slowly rising and falling, you might not have seen there was anything wrong with him at all.

She turned away and let Albus lead her back into the living room. "I hate this," she muttered, when they were well out of earshot. "I hate it. If I ever see Malfoy again..." she clenched her fists, fighting back expletives, and then rounded on her cousin. "And all you can do is joke around!" she burst out.

Al looked surprised. "Oh? And what am I supposed to do? Moaning and moping around is just going to remind him how much his life sucks right now. It's killing me, too, you know. You're not the only one who cares."

She was about to snap that of course she knew he cared, she just wished he would show it, but the look on his face made her hesitate. "This is our fault," she said, softly. "If we hadn't been there..."

"I know," he said, darkly, his expression suddenly as serious as her own.

"I should be in that chair," she said. She had had the same thought several times already, but saying it out loud made her realise just how true it really was.

"If he'd hit you, you'd be dead," Al said. "Knox was clear about that - Scorp was really, really lucky. The only reason it didn't kill him was because he was in the air, at an angle, and cos they got him back in time to give him back the blood he'd lost."

"I don't know if that makes it better or worse." Rose swallowed and sat down in one of the Longbottoms' living room chairs. She put her head in her hands and tried to gather herself. "So what do we do now?"

~*-S-*~

~*-S-*~
This time he dreamed that he had got in another fight with Jian Chung, and the Slytherin boy was looking up at him from the ground with an odd expression on his face - not malice, but something else… fear, perhaps? It was weird, not just because Scorpius couldn't imagine himself knocking anyone down - particularly Chung who was a dab hand at curses - but because Jian just sat there, staring at him. When he woke up, he lay there for a while, reflecting on the strangeness of it. He hadn't even spoken to any of the Slytherins outside of class since Jian had hexed Rose in Defence Against the Dark Arts. That had to be two years or so ago, now.

He lay in the soft bed and stared at the spot on the wall that was a slightly different colour, probably due to a poster that had hung there for a long time. The room hadn't changed much since Tony had lived here - or at least, that he could tell. The sheets on the bed were creamy white, with a thick duvet in a neutral sort of dusky grey. It was very warm, and comfortable, except for an itch on his knee that he couldn't quite reach. He grimaced and did his best to ignore it.

There was a chest of drawers, and above that hung Tony's framed OWL and NEWT results. They were too small to read from here, but Scorp knew the Longbottoms' eldest had come top of his year in almost everything, particularly in his NEWTs. Poor Lizzie, he thought. No wonder she didn't want to get her mother's hopes up.

There was a little bookshelf as well, and while the books in it were obviously Tony's - he could make out 'A Study and Comprehensive Glossary of Eastern Runes' from here - he could see his own books in a pile on top. There were quite a lot, he realised, when you added the Muggle books to all his school things, including the NEWT texts from Durmstrang, most of which were now in a jumbled, half-translated state. What a waste of time that was, he thought, half annoyed and half relieved. He really hadn't been looking forward to doing his NEWTs in Russian, and even the French Charms exam had made him nervous. In comparison, the June exams stood in the future like a bright beacon of hope and joy.

There was a framed mirror, and various wooden or metal pendants hung off it. He guessed they were charms used in Cursebreaking. He wondered why Tony hadn't taken them with him. The mirror was too high for him to see into, he realised, and wondered if he could move it with magic, or if he'd have to ask someone to do it for him. He sighed inwardly as he realised just how much help he was going to need.

The objects in the room that stood out were his own things. His school trunk at the foot of the bed - hard to see from here, but knowing it was there was comforting - holding all the things he had had to leave with Albus before the sudden move to Durmstrang; his Muggle clothes, presents from his friends, the new iPod he had had since his birthday, and the old one he had carried around with him since he was eleven. It didn't work anymore, but it had been a part of him. After two months or so without it though, it seemed a little silly to hold on to it, even if the thought of getting rid of it was highly uncomfortable. His notebook, with months worth of music-related scribbles, was sitting on the desk next to his wireless. It was strange to see the book there, because he knew he had hidden it in the loose floorboard in the cupboard of his room in Paris. The Aurors had been quite thorough in their search of the house, then. He wondered if they'd been able to get into the safe.

And then there was his guitar. It stood in the corner beside the bookcase, the afternoon sun peeking through the gaps in the curtains and gleaming off the polished woodwork, making it harder and harder to ignore.

Last summer, here in this same building, he had played every night in front of a crowd. People had liked him. He had spent all his free time tuning, tweaking and experimenting with the magical strings from the little knick knacks shop on Horshom Alley, and inventing his own charms to improve the sound. Before Durmstrang there had hardly been a day he hadn't played. There had
been band practices every Saturday and there had been plans for concerts - or 'gigs', as the others called them - and there had been a dream.

He turned his head to the side to the much less interesting view of the bare wall. The thought of picking the guitar up now made him feel sick. He could only imagine clumsily trying to jam it into the chair, and if speaking caused his chest to burn, then singing would be even more painful, and probably impossible. The thought of sitting on stage with Cleo, Trevor and Dave was laughable. If people didn't laugh at him, they would pity him, and he couldn't decide what would be worse.

The pain wasn't so bad now, though he still had the disconcerting feeling that things inside him were moving around. He had a feeling he was going to dread the administration of those little green vials of potion, however important they were in aiding his recovery. He was sure he hadn't actually fallen asleep but rather passed out from the pain in his back as his friends moved him onto the bed. There had to be a better way of doing that. He imagined being at Hogwarts in the Ravenclaw boys' dormitory, having to ask Albus, Peter or Gaius to help him into bed, or to help him dress, twice a day, or - he shuddered inwardly - help him go to the lavatory. At least, he determined, he wasn't going to be pushed around everywhere. He was going to learn how to use the damn chair properly if it killed him. Gritting his teeth, he planted his palms firmly on the mattress beneath him and dragged himself into a sitting position. That much at least he had figured out in the hospital, but it was risky. Sometimes it set off his back again. He waited a few seconds until he was sure he was safe, and let out a long breath.

There was a soft knock on the door, and Neville came in. He smiled when he saw Scorpius sitting up. "Wasn't sure you were awake," he said. "How're you feeling?"

"Been better," Scorpius admitted.

"Rose told me you struggled with the potion." Neville's smile faded. "I'm sorry, lad. It's going to be a tough few weeks."

_I had noticed that, yeah. He almost said it. But to speak to Neville like that would be like base ingratitude, and Scorpius wasn't quite so far gone as that, just yet. The man had accepted guardianship of him, wheelchair and all, with three kids of his own, apparently without a thought to how the rest of the Malfoys would take this news. Scorpius tried not to imagine his father's reaction. He tried not to think of his father at all._

"Listen… I've managed to fend off the Department of Magical Law Enforcement so far," Neville said, perching on the end of the bed. "Since you're not actually a suspect anymore, they can't force you to answer any questions. But… well…"

"You think I should," Scorpius guessed.

"You don't owe them anything," Neville reiterated. "Merlin knows. But yes. Maybe it's just the ex-Auror in me speaking, but now that you can speak about what you know… yes, I think it might help."

"I really don't know much," Scorp pointed out. "I didn't know about any of it until about fifty Aurors were forcing me to the ground in Borgin & Burkes."

Neville nodded. "Well, it's up to you, anyway. Whatever the paperwork says, as far as I'm concerned you're of age, and you don't have to do anything you don't want to do."

Scorpius smiled gratefully. "I... don't mind doing it if it's Mr Potter," he said, surprising even himself with that statement.
"Well, Ron's unlikely to be there, if that's what you're worried about," Neville said, shaking his head. "Honestly, that man. I don't know what gave us all the impression that he'd given up terminal idiocy after he had kids, but it appears we were all mistaken. Don't tell Rose I said that," he added, as an afterthought. "Do you want me to come with you?"

Scorpius started to say 'no', but the word stuck in his throat when he remembered the last time he had entered the Ministry building. Anything could happen, and it wasn't as if he was in the best condition to defend himself. "Do you mind?" he asked instead.

"Course not," Neville said cheerfully. "I'll tell Harry. Do you think you'll be up for it tomorrow?"

Scorpius shrugged. Then he winced.

"Better make it the day after tomorrow," Neville answered his own question. "I know it's probably the last thing you need right now."

Albus went to Flourish and Blotts that afternoon. Technically he was still grounded, but even his mum couldn't argue with letting him stay the rest of the day with Scorpius, when Rose was living at the Leaky Cauldron. That morning, he had promised Ginny that he would be back in only a few hours, but she had to work in any case, so she wouldn't be home. James was in charge, but he had never been the responsible type. He was unlikely to be biting his nails waiting for his brother's return, so Al took his time. He left the pub and ducked into Wizarding London with his head down, in case anyone recognised him. There had already been a close call with a reporter the day before. Apparently having a family member on the Prophet staff was no longer sufficient protection from the media, when you were friends with the son of the Shadow. Draco Malfoy's face had been front page of the paper again that morning.

He was surprised to find, however, that he was recognised as soon as he entered Flourish and Blotts, not by a reporter, but someone he knew. "Hey, it's miniature Potter, isn't it?" the young man behind the counter grinned at him. "Not so miniature anymore."

"Ben!" Albus grinned and shook the man's hand. Ben was a close friend of Teddy's; they had shared a dormitory at Hogwarts. He had chocolate-dark skin, close-cropped black hair, and an infectious sense of humour that had always been the ideal balance to Teddy's often serious and occasionally cynical personality. "How long've you been working here?"

"'Bout three months," Ben replied. "Terrified of the Hogwarts rush already. I've heard all the horror stories. You're early, aren't you? I didn't think the book lists had come out yet."

"Oh, they haven't," Albus had assured him. "Anyway I have all my NEWT stuff. I need something else… for a friend."

"Ah." The man seemed to sober a moment, and Al wondered if he was just now making the connection between the boy in front of him and what he might have read in the Prophet recently. "I see. Anything I can help you with?"

"Er…" Albus looked up at the tall, endless bookshelves. "I'll go with yes, I reckon. Um, my friend is… injured, temporarily, and he can't move around much. I was wondering if there were any charms for, well, getting dressed, washing, self-levitation, that kind of thing."

Ben grinned a bright white grin. "I love it when people ask for cool stuff like that," he said. "If one
more mopey girl comes in here asking about love spells, I'm quitting."

"Yeah, right." Albus remembered Ben as a notorious book nerd, and Flourish and Blotts was known to be choosy about its staff. It could afford to be, after all, with all the hundreds of resumes they received every year from newly-graduated students with no idea of what they wanted to do with their lives.

"Mm, you're not wrong," Ben agreed, leading him through the maze of shelves. "It can't get much better if you're into books, barring the post of Hogwarts librarian, and that old fellow seems intent to stick around until he dies. Here we go," he said, tapping a shelf as they reached it. "You're right - plenty of wizards have had arms and legs cursed off, or turned to stone, or whatever. They have better Healing charms now, of course, so it's not as common, but there's still a good supply of material."

"Thanks!" Albus said, pleasantly surprised. Ben helped him pick out a few volumes that might be useful. One was centuries old and cost a small fortune, but Scorpius didn't need to know that. As far as Al was concerned, Scorp's pride could go be damned.

"Must be a pretty important friend," Ben said off-handedly as he packed the books into an unbreakable paper bag. Al saw through this straightaway - the man surely knew exactly who it was.

"I messed things up for him big time," Al muttered. "I owe him."

"Well then. Good luck with it. And it was good to see you."

"Yeah, you too. See you round." Al turned round and was almost at the door before Ben called out - "Oh - well if I won't see you for your Hogwarts books, I guess I'll see you at the wedding, then?"

Al turned and stared. "Er.. what?"

~*-A-*~

~*-A-*~

"So get this," he said later when he had found Rose and Lizzie camped out in the Longbottoms' living room with Scorpius. "Did you know Teddy and Victoire are getting married?"

"What?" Rose gasped. "No! How do you know? Did he tell you?"

"No, I got to hear it from his best man," Al said, dumping the bag of books beside Scorpius' wheelchair. "Ben Washington is working at Flourish and Blotts. Apparently he didn't realise none of the rest of us had any clue."

"Well… I always knew they'd get engaged eventually," Rose said, shaking her head in disbelief. "But why on earth wouldn't they tell us? Teddy can't be afraid of telling Bill and Fleur - they love him." She sounded a little resentful at that. Albus could guess why.

"Maybe they're just waiting for the right moment," Lizzie put in wisely. Albus turned to look at her. She was sitting cross-legged on an armchair, using some sort of potion to clean the dirt out from under her fingernails. "I probably wouldn't want to announce something like that right now, in the middle of all your family drama."

"Oh," Rose said, with an air of guilty realisation. "I suppose that might be it."
"When's the wedding?" Scorpius asked. He looked a little less beaten down than he had earlier, but there were noticeably dark circles under his eyes, his hair was drooping lifelessly over his forehead and he was still wearing the same clothes he had slept in.

"May," Albus replied. He couldn't help feeling hurt that Teddy hadn't told him. He wondered if his dad knew. Teddy usually told Harry everything, since the man was the closest thing he had ever had to a father, and the Potter children always considered him more of a brother than an honorary cousin. He especially couldn't believe that Victoire had managed to keep a secret like that. She was usually the first to share such juicy gossip, and if it meant she could be the centre of attention, so much the better.

"But that's during term," Scorpius said, frowning. "Won't you miss it?"

"Flitwick'll let us go home for something like that," Al said absently. "And say 'we', Scorp, for Merlin's sake, you know Teddy'll invite you."

"You really think so?" Scorpius looked mildly surprised. "I've never been to a wedding."

"You're his cousin, so he'd better," Rose said fiercely. "And if he doesn't, you can be my date, so there."

"I still can't believe they never told us," Al said sulkily, flopping into the only remaining chair.

"I'm sure they'll get around to it eventually," Rose sighed.

Albus made a face. "Well, it's not a secret anymore, is it? Don't see why I shouldn't tell anyone, no one's told me to keep it a secret."

"You oughtn't," Lizzie argued. "What if there's an important reason they haven't told anyone?"

"Like what?" Al demanded. He couldn't think of anything so important that Ted wouldn't tell his own family.

Lizzie shrugged. "I dunno. Maybe Victoire's pregnant."

Rose gasped. "Oh my god! Do you think she is?"

"Well I don't know, do I? I haven't seen her since your birthday. Have you?"

"No-o… but she didn't look pregnant."

"How d'you know? Maybe it's recent. You couldn't tell Mum was pregnant with Alice 'til about four months in, I reckon."

Rose was still frowning with a slightly far-off look, as if trying to remember if Victoire had been glowing with some kind of pregnancy radiation at all the last time she had seen her. Albus decided to change the subject before the discussion went somewhere he was uncomfortable with. "Those are for you," he said to Scorpius, pointedly nodding at the large paper bag at his side. "Ben knows his books, I'll give him that. How'd you manage to get up?"

"Neville helped me," his friend muttered, reddening slightly at this admission. He reached carefully into the bag and, with a pained grunt, pulled out the first book, which was entitled *Forty-Seven Tried and Tested Techniques for Self-Levitation: Ideal Charms for the Witch or Wizard with Limited Mobility.* "This is great!" he said, opening the book and flipping through the pages to look at the diagrams. Then he peered down into the bag. "Oh… there's a lot of them," he said, with a tone that
suggested concern while erring on the verge of not wanting to appear ungrateful. "How much do I owe you?"

"Don't be a prat," Al growled.

"Albus -"

"Shut up." He glared at his friend. Sometimes being rude about it was the only way you could get the younger boy to accept things. He remembered, all the way back in first year, trying to give the Scorp his iPod only to have it practically thrown back in his face. Pride was one thing, however, but in this case he felt that it would take a lot more than a few books to pay back what he owed Scorpius for almost getting his heart blown to smithereens.

Scorpius seemed to struggle internally for a minute, but then gave up. "Don't have any money anyway," he sighed. "Thanks."

"You're welcome," Al said firmly.

~*-R-*~

~*-R-*~

"I'm worried about him," Rose said later, lying flat on her back on the bed next to Lizzie's. It was several inches lower than Lizzie's bed, and made her feel like the seven year old child she had been the first time she had slept over at the Leaky. It had been Transfigured out of an old futon, and she would have to renew the charm each day, but it was comfortable, and safe, and at least she could get in and out of it whenever she wanted. Midnight, who seemed to have no issue with the move from Rose's parents' house to the Longbottoms', was curled up by her feet, already vibrating with her sleepiest purr.

Lizzie sighed audibly. "We're all worried about him, Rosie."

They had put Scorpius to bed an hour ago, this time making sure to get him in bed before he drank the potion. It didn't seem to get any easier each time he took it. She had held his hand while he spasmed through the magic burning through his veins, until his breathing evened out and the permanent frown he wore now had softened in sleep. She had wanted to stay with him, but Hannah had convinced her to come away.

Rose shook her head, though she doubted Lizzie could see it by the thin slice of moonlight coming through the chink in the curtains. "That's not what I mean. I mean, yes, I am worried about the chair and… and everything. But he'll get through that. I know he will. It's the other thing."

She heard Lizzie roll over, and saw her silhouette as she bent her elbow and rested her head on her hand. "What other thing?"

"He hasn't…. he hasn't talked about it," Rose said. "About what happened. Except when his mum came. And even then…" she chewed her lip for a moment, thinking.

"He might have talked to Al," Lizzie suggested. "Or Dad. I could ask."

"But he always talks to me about things," Rose protested. "And it's not healthy… just bottling it all up like that… I just wish he'd have some sort of reaction."

"Isn't it good, that he's calm about it?" Lizzie flopped back onto her back, making the bedsprings creak slightly.
"He's always calm about things," Rose muttered. "That's what's so bloody frustrating. He's always just put up with people treating him horribly, since we were little. Those Gryffindor boys in first year, Jian and his lot… my uncle George, his own grandparents… Even… my dad." She swallowed hard, glad it was so dark so Lizzie couldn't see the look on her face. "It's like he doesn't even care that Dad used him like a… like a pawn. Like he was disposable," she added, the word grating on her tongue.

"Your dad made a mistake, Rose," Lizzie's voice came out of the darkness. "He wasn't deliberately trying to get anyone killed."

Rose refused to listen to such logic. She wasn't ready to forgive yet. "But this was Scorp's father that hurt him," she continued. "He's seriously hurt, and he's not even angry. That you could tell, anyway," she sighed. "And if he does get annoyed he goes all surly and quiet and you can't get a word out of him. He won't talk about anything."

"So you want him to have a screaming fit?"

"No! I just wish… I wish he'd say how he was really feeling, for once." She heard a snort from the other bed. "What?" she demanded.

"You're one to talk about real feelings," Lizzie said. "Who was it harboured a secret crush on him for months and then sprung it on him out of nowhere without giving him a chance to get used to the idea?"

Rose shifted guiltily. "Okay, but that's different…"

"Is it though? Listen, he's just getting used to everything right now. We all are, right? Things'll go back to normal once we're back at Hogwarts."

"But the day after tomorrow he has to go to the Ministry - and after what happened- "

"Dad'll look after him." Lizzie sat up and tugged the gap in the curtains closed, a clear signal that the conversation was over. "Don't worry about it."

But Rose did worry. She couldn't help it. All she could think was of Scorpius, alone. If it was her, she knew she would be terrified. Terrified of being kidnapped again. Terrified of waking up in the middle of the night in agony. Terrified that she might never wake up again once she closed her eyes. She lay awake for what seemed like hours, staring up at the ceiling until she imagined she could see shadowy shapes moving across them, and for the first time she wished she was home, in her own bed, with Hugo's snoring coming from the next room. When it got to the point she thought she couldn't stand it a moment longer, she pushed back the covers and gently slid her feet out and onto the floor. Midnight opened one orange eye and purred in protest. "Shh," Rose whispered. "Here. You can have this one all to yourself." As an afterthought, she reached under her pillow and pulled out her wand.

She tip-toed along the corridor to Scorpius' room. The door was already ajar, since no one felt quite right closing the door on him all the way. From here she could see Neville and Hannah's bedroom. That door was ajar, as well. Dimly she wondered if anyone was sleeping properly at the moment. She pushed the door so that there was just enough space for her, and slipped inside. Scorpius was lying in the exact position she had left him, too exhausted to do anything but sleep. She padded over and crawled onto the bed, carefully, one limb at a time, so as not to disturb him, but he didn't even stir. She had to hold her hand close to his nose to make sure he was still breathing. She put her head beside his on the pillow, and ever so gently lay one arm across his waist. She positioned her wand in her other hand, pointing away from him just in case.
If anyone came for him now, she thought, at least she would be ready.
"Pretty accurate dreams you've been having lately," Albus said thoughtfully as Scorpius started eagerly copying down sections of the book. He remembered what Aunt Hermione had said about Moonsilver inducing vivid dreams and visions. "Don't suppose you dreamt that I get recruited early? Or that I ace all my NEWTs?"

2023

~*-R-*~

~*-R-*~

She woke up to something tickling the back of her hand. She flinched and opened her eyes to Scorpius' grey ones, staring back at her. "Morning," he said. His voice came out a little hoarse.

"Morning," she yawned, and giggled. He was tracing circles on the back of her hand with a forefinger. "Stop it," she chided, and pulled her hand away. "How long have you been awake?"

"A while. I was watching you. You're very pretty when you sleep, you know."

Rose blew a frazzled lock of hair out of her face. "Rot. I always wake up looking like I've slept under a bridge." She put a hand to the back of her hair, felt a pile of frizz, and groaned.

"Still the best view I've had of a morning for a while," he said. "Though… this isn't quite how I imagined our first time waking up together."

She reached up to slap him on the arm, but stopped herself just at the last second.

"Just because he's talking normally doesn't mean he is normal," she reminded herself firmly. "How did you imagine it then, gutter brain?" she demanded. She winced and shook out her right hand, which had cramped around her wand during the night.

"Oh, no," he said, with an innocent expression. "I get to keep my fantasies to myself." He coughed dryly and made a pained face.

"I'll get you some water," Rose said. "Then we can try out some of those self-cleaning charms in those books Al got."

Scorpius' eyes widened and he sniffed at his sleeve. "Oh. I suppose it has been a while since I washed properly."

"The Healers must have bathed you when you were in St Mungos," she said, sitting up and stretching. She avoided looking at her reflection in the mirror on the wall, since she knew it would only mortify her.

"Yeah, while I was unconscious," he muttered. "That's fun to think about." He shifted backwards and used his hands to pull himself into a sitting position with a stifled groan. Rose lifted a hand, but stopped herself again. She turned away and bit her lip, trying to remember what Al had said.
yesterday about not reminding him. It was just so hard to act normally when he was clearly in pain.

"I'll get you that water," she said softly, and got up, her feet stinging in protest against the cold floorboards. It must still be quite early, she thought, since no one else seemed to be up, and it was freezing. Summer was coming to an end already.

When she came back, Scorpius was rifling through one of the new books with a determined expression, his wand sitting on his lap. "Anything good?" she asked lightly.

"Some of this stuff is ancient," he said. "Like, Merlin ancient. Good thing I read Latin."

"Oh, don't tell my mum that," Rose sighed. "She thinks all wizarding children should be taught Latin before Hogwarts."

"Maybe they should," he said shortly, without looking up. "It does help with Charms."

Rose was about to argue, but realised he wasn't really paying attention. She handed him the glass instead and leaned forward to read over his shoulder. "Well you won't find any sanitation charms in there," she pointed out, laying a hand gently on his stiff, unmoving knee as he sipped from the glass and flipped pages at the same time. "Even Merlin probably stank to high heaven in those days."

He paused in his flipping and turned to look at her with an oddly determined expression. "I had a dream last night," he said. "I was in the chair, but it was moving by itself, like it did up the stairs. It was kind of like I was controlling it… like with my mind."

She nibbled on the edge of her lip, wondering what she could say that wouldn't get his hopes up too high. "Well?" she said lamely after a moment.

"So, I think there's more to that chair than levitation." He went back to the book and turned the page again. "It's like Al said, you have to really want it to go where you want it to go. You said it was sort of like a broomstick, right? Don't brooms work off the instinct of their riders?"

"The really good ones do… sometimes," Rose admitted. "You still need to direct it, though. I wouldn't want to fly Al's Phoenixer on pure instinct."

"No one would, but the point is, I've been pushing the damn thing when I really just need to think forward, backward… see? It's like music."

Rose blinked. "Um… you've lost me a bit there."

"Non-verbal spells. Like music charms, like the one I did in my OWL. You can create music out of nothing, but you have to think it right, or it'd just sound like…" he waved a hand dismissively. "Noise." He started to turn another page. "I thought if the chair's that old, there might be something…"

She reached over and put a hand over his, stilling the movement. "It's still just a dream, Scorp," she said softly. "It doesn't mean -"

"Are you going to help me or aren't you?" he asked suddenly, turning on her with a glint of anger in his steely grey eyes.

"Yes," she said, firmly. "You know I'll do anything, but I don't see -"

"You said you'd look up the runes on the chair, right?"
"Yes, and then you got shirty at me for no reason, like you are now," she pointed out, pulling her hand back and crossing her arms. "Not that you don't have every right to be angry, but -"

"I'm not shirty," he muttered, snapping the book shut.

"Scorp, you know you can tell me… I know this is really hard for you… if you'd just talk to me about it - "

They were interrupted suddenly by a harsh voice from the doorway. "Is someone - oh. Good morning, Rose." They both looked up to see Neville, sleepy-eyed and tousel-haired in just his pyjama bottoms, standing in the doorway. There was a long ropey scar snaking over his shoulder and over his chest, much more visible than the one on his face which they were so used to by now that they hardly noticed. But it didn't seem to bother him at all. Rose wondered if some horrible plant had attacked him, or if it was another souvenir of the Year of Terror. His wand was hanging lightly from his hand, but she was sure that just a moment ago he had been aiming it at her.

"Morning," she said, sheepishly. "Did we wake you?" She was suddenly very aware that she was in her pyjamas and had spent the night in a boy's bed, never mind that he couldn't even sit up without straining himself. Of course, Neville couldn't know that she'd spent the night, but still…

"Not at all. I was getting up anyway, and I heard voices. How did you sleep?" he asked Scorpius.

"Weird dreams again," Scorpius muttered.

"No pain?"

"Not really. It doesn't hurt so much when I lie down." He sighed. "That's one argument for not getting up, I guess."

Neville nodded and tapped the doorjamb thoughtfully with his wand. "Well, I suppose you're right. You won't want breakfast then? Only I heard a rumour that Hannah might be making her famous chocolate-chip pancakes this morning…"

Scorpius groaned. "That's just cruel. I haven't had pancakes in months."

"You're the one who doesn't want to get up."

Rose smiled gratefully at Neville as Scorpius sulkily shoved back the bedding. Three children of his own, a bunch of Herbology students and a House full of Gryffindors had obviously prepared him more than adequately for Scorpius' reservations. Neville smiled back. "Rose, how about you wake Lizzie up and go help Hannah with breakfast?"

"Um, okay," Rose said, turning back to Scorpius. She wondered if she ought to leave him, but then she saw that he was reddening in his pale cheeks and would not quite look her in the eye. Of course he wouldn't want her to witness him being manhandled out of bed, she realised. "I'll see you down there," she told him, as lightheartedly as she could, and hurried back to Lizzie's room to change and brush her hair.

~*.-S.-*~

~*.-S.-*~

Albus was already there by the time Scorpius got into the living room. Neville had taught him a freshening charm, so at least he didn't stink, though it wasn't as good as bathing. He'd have to look through the books properly later. He was wearing a fresh T-shirt, though he had flat out refused to
change his trousers. The memory of the discomfort caused by putting them on was still raw. Anyway, they were comfortable, and it wasn't as if his legs would care if they got dirty. He wasn't using them, after all. Neville had not seemed pleased by this logic, but he had let the issue go for now, although he had had to help him go to the bathroom, and that was something Scorpius was trying extra hard not to think about. The sooner he mastered the mobility charms the better.

And then he was back in the chair again. Oddly he didn't feel as disinclined towards it today as he had yesterday. He hadn't told Rose, but he had quite liked the dream he had had that night. He had been moving the chair around easily, with no strain on his arms or chest, and no one had had to help him. He had just told it how fast to go with his mind while steering with gentle touches to the wheels. He'd never had a broomstick of his own, but he supposed it might feel a bit like that - like you and it were one, moving together as a single unit.

Neville had pushed the chair to the dining room, where the breakfast table was already set up with plates. Breakfast was usually the only meal the Longbottoms ate in their apartment, except for Christmas dinner and special occasions - the rest they ate in the pub - but they had had dinner here last night, for which Scorpius was grateful. Not that he wanted to stay in the apartment for the next two weeks, but he didn't feel quite ready yet to face the crowd of staring people that would surely greet him the second he went past the kitchens. Neville let go of the chair, but Albus came forward and grabbed the handles before Scorp could decide whether to try pushing it the rest of the way on his own. It irked him that his friend was so desperate to stop him lifting a finger, but he refrained from saying anything. Rose was right. Taking his frustrations out on the others wasn't fair.

Lizzie came in, yawning and rubbing her eyes. "It's so early," she complained. "Why are we doing pancakes? Is it someone's birthday?"

"No," Neville said cheerfully. "It is a special occasion, though. We should find out in just a few minutes."

"Sounds ominous," Lizzie muttered, pouring herself a glass of milk.

"Do that for your guests as well, Elizabeth Anne," Hannah scolded as she came through with a tray. Lizzie rolled her eyes and fetched three more glasses.

"They didn't have pancakes at Durmstrang, then?" Rose asked, pulling up a chair next to Scorpius. Normally it would be a bit of a squash around the table with five fully grown people and the chair, but the table had been magically enlarged like it had been the last few times he had come for Christmas dinner.

Scorpius shook his head. "I don't think pancakes fit into Professor Reznicek's world view," he muttered. "They don't prepare you for everything the world may throw at you and help you strive towards excellence in all things." It was strange, but even though he'd been there for a month, Durmstrang seemed like nothing else but a bad dream. He put his hands on the table and subtly curled his fingers back to look at the curse lines left across his palm by Reznicek's antique punishment. They had almost faded completely, so that he might not have noticed it if he wasn't looking. He shuddered to think how many times Arkady must have been hit to have been left with a proper scar. "Sadist," he growled.

Rose seemed to realise she had touched on a dangerous subject. "Well, I'm sure the House Elves at Hogwarts would be happy to make you pancakes whenever you like," she said confidently.

Scorpius didn't doubt it, but he had greater things than pancakes to worry about where Hogwarts was concerned. He had missed the last month of school, and would surely be behind in all his classes. What little he had learned at Durmstrang had mainly been in Potions, which he wasn't even taking at
NEWT level. He had guessed the answers to most of his exams, and he hadn't taken a Muggle Studies one at all. And even with classes aside... the thought of going back to school, like this...

Two pancakes were slid onto his plate, and he shook himself out of his pit of self pity long enough to say thank you to Hannah. Lizzie was still trying to wheedle the 'special occasion' out of her father. "Aw, c'mon Dad," she begged. "Spill."

"I shall do no such thing - oh, there they are, look."

They all looked up to see three owls swooping down towards the window. one of them pecked impatiently on the glass while Neville hurried over to the let them in. "Owls?" Lizzie said disappointedly. "That's it?"

"Your last Hogwarts owls," Hannah corrected, smiling sadly.

Lizzie rolled her eyes as Neville carefully removed the letters from their ties and handed out owl treats to each bird. "Calm down Mum. Don't get all weepy - Alice'll still get seven of them eventually."

"I know, but my little Lizzie all grown up," her mum sighed, hugging her around the neck from behind.

Neville handed the letters out. One to Lizzie, one to Rose, and one to Scorpius. "I wasn't sure mine would come here," Rose said, sounding surprised.

"The self-addressing spell never fails," Neville said. "Somehow it always knows where you're really living. My sixth year, it came addressed to 'Neville Longbottom, Tent in the Back Garden, 331 Valery Road'. Gran was furious," he added.

"Mine must have gone home," Albus said, to Scorpius' enquiring look. "I'll get it later."

"Don't worry," Rose said. "I'm sure you're still Quidditch captain."

Albus gasped and went pale. "I hadn't even thought of that," he breathed. "Thanks a lot. Now I'll be thinking about it all day."

Scorpius looked down at his own envelope. It looked the same as the others. He put it aside and picked up his fork instead.

"Arent't you going to open it?" Rose asked, surprised. Hers was already open and lying on the table. Since she already had all her NEWT textbooks, it merely reminded her to return to school on September the first.

"Later." He cut into his pancakes and stuffed a forkful into his mouth. Hannah's pancakes were really very good, but even that couldn't quite quell the uneasy feeling of dread in his stomach.

"Oh no!"

They all looked around to see Lizzie staring down in horror at something shiny that had fallen out of her envelope. Albus, who was closer, peered at it and his eyes widened considerably. "Ooh, look who made Head Girl," he said.

"But I'm not even a Prefect!" Lizzie protested, staring wide-eyed up at her parents.

"Actually - fun fact - Head Boy and Girl aren't always Prefects," Albus put in. "Actually its better if
they aren't, because then you're not less two seventh-year Prefects."

"But… but…" Lizzie stammered, picking up the small gold circle between thumb and forefinger as if it might spontaneously combust. "Why would she pick me? I'm not really clever or confident or anything like that…"

"The Head Boy and Girl are students who can be depended on to help others when they need it," Neville explained. "Professor McGonagall feels - and I agree - that you more than fit that description."

Lizzie looked up at her dad, her eyes narrowing in suspicion. "You knew about this. Was it your idea?"

Neville looked affronted. "Of course not. I had nothing to do with it."

"People will say it was your idea," Lizzie muttered.

"Oh dear," Hannah sighed. "It's Tony all over again."

"First of all," Neville said sternly. "Professor McGonagall asked my opinion, but so did she of all the other Heads of House, and that was only to confirm her decisions. And second of all, do you really care what people say?"

Lizzie flushed. "No. Not really."

"That's my girl." Neville reached over and ruffled her bob haircut. "I'm proud of you, Lizbet."

"Da-ad," Lizzie complained, pawing her hair back into place. "No one's called me Lizbet since I was six. Except for granddad," she added, ruefully.

Watching them, Scorpius couldn't help but feel the same surge of envy he always felt when observing the Longbottoms with each other. That's what families should be like, he thought. He bent over his pancakes and glanced over at Rose while Lizzie - somewhat reluctantly - pinned the badge to her t-shirt. Rose was smiling, happy for Lizzie, but he knew her well enough to guess at an edge of disappointment behind the smile. Rose was top of the year, but while Lizzie could often be seen chatting amiably with people from all houses and on all year levels, Rose wasn't really the sort to go out of her way to meet people. She and Albus tended to keep to themselves for the most part, except for Scorpius, the Quidditch team, and occasionally their younger siblings.

"Do you know who's Head Boy?" Albus asked. He didn't sound hopeful. Scorpius didn't blame him - between Quidditch, NEWTs and volunteering at St Mungos, Al hardly had time for extra duties. For a brief, fleeting second, Scorpius wondered what would happen if he had been made Head Boy. Then he laughed inwardly at himself. Scorpius Malfoy, crippled, ex-con Head Boy. Yeah, that'd go down well.

"I do, actually," Neville said. "It's one of mine. Adam Warren."

"What?" Albus jumped and nearly knocked over his milk. Lizzie grabbed the glass, rescuing it just in time. "Warren?" Al repeated, red-faced. "Is McGonagall out of her tree?"

"Gosh, thanks ever so," Lizzie muttered.

"But he's a thug!"

"Now, Albus, that's not fair," Neville said, holding up a hand. "Just because he's a… a big fellow…"
"He's a big bullying git is what he is!"

"Al," Scorpius warned, his grip tightening almost painfully on his fork. "Don't."

Albus turned to stare at him incredulously. "Don't you care?" he demanded. "After what him and his pals -"

"Al, shut up." The words came out of his mouth before Scorpius could stop them. His chest and back were burning again.

"But -"

"Look at me," Scorpius growled, anger unfurling in the pit of his stomach like a Venomous Tentacular. "Look at me." He gestured with a stiff, jerking motion to the chair, to his still and unresponsive legs. "After everything… you think I care about that now? That was nothing -"

"Just because you've had worse doesn't make it right," Al said stubbornly. Scorpius glared at him. He would bring that incident up now, in front of everyone, after over a year.

Neville was watching the exchange with a dangerously stiff expression. "Have I missed something?" he asked, in a warning tone.

"No," Scorpius said, without taking his eyes off Albus.

"What are you talking about?" Rose demanded. "What did Warren do?"

"It's not important," Scorpius began, "it was ages ago -"

"What was ages ago?" Rose growled. The look on her face was frankly more disturbing even than Neville's.

"Albus," Neville said, in a would-be-calm voice. "Scorpius, If you know of a reason why Warren's appointment should cause problems - with any student - I should like to know now, please. This is not a negotiation. This is your Professor speaking, not your friend. I think enough has been said for me to make assumptions, but I would prefer to hear it from you." He sat back in his chair expectantly, his pancakes going cold on his plate.

There was a moment of horrible silence in which Scorpius had to resist the urge to reach across the table and punch his friend for bringing this up. Not that I could, he thought miserably, and put a hand to his ribs. The wound was aching, a constant stabbing reminder. It didn't seem fair that something he couldn't even see could hurt so bloody much.

"Warren and some of his Gryffindor mates caught up with Scorp after that Recent History class in fifth year and blacked his eye," Albus muttered eventually. "Not even with magic. He ended up in the Hospital Wing. Bastards," he added, not meeting Scorpius' eyes.

"That's where you both went that night?" Rose gasped. "Why didn't you tell me?" Neville shook his head sadly and pinched the bridge of his nose, but said nothing. Rose on the other hand, Scorpius could sense her getting even angrier as the seconds ticked by.

"I didn't want… I didn't want a fuss," he said. His appetite was suddenly gone, and he stared down haplessly at his plate, trying to ignore the increasing pain in the small of his back. "That whole day was just horrible, and I just wanted to lie low for a bit…"

"But he just got away with it!" Rose protested. "This is what I'm talking about, Scorp, you can't just
"As a matter of fact, I suspect the incident did not go entirely unpunished," Neville said, frowning. "I seem to recall a group of fifth year Gryffindors who went to the Hospital Wing the year before last with some unusual Transfiguration hexes…"

"The chicken legs!" Lizzie sniggered.

"That wasn't us," Albus said quickly.

"Oh, I'm quite sure it wasn't," Neville growled. "What a shame your brother is now too old for me to give him detention."

Scorpius felt a sudden touch on his shoulder, and looked up to see Hannah leaning over him. "Are you all right, dear?" she asked. "You've gone terribly pale."

Scorpius opened his mouth to answer, but nothing came out. He closed his eyes. The pain was starting to make him feel sick and dizzy, and on top of that, Rose's words kept ringing around in his head. You try to avoid a confrontation and it all just blows up in your face…

How many times had he sorted through those papers at the townhouse, how many times had he seen what was going on but chosen not to understand it, chosen not to investigate… hadn't he agreed to take the damn parcel, after all? Hadn't he agreed to go to Durmstrang? How many times had he stood there and let people walk all over him? Ever since he was an undersized eleven year old and older students had made a game out of breaking ink bottles over his books… Hadn't he held out his hand for Reznicek? Hadn't he agreed to take Veritaserum, knowing it would be toxic to him to the point of being almost fatal? He hadn't realised at the time, of course, but deep down… he must have still known.

"You're right," he muttered, not really sure if he was talking to Rose or himself. "I've just been feeling sorry for myself… but if I'd just stuck up for myself in the first place, none of this would have happened. Stupid," he mumbled, and winced as a line of icy sharp pain shot up his spine.

"I think perhaps this argument could have waited until a little later than his second day out of St Mungos," Hannah chided everyone. "Neville, where's that pain potion?"

"He's not supposed to have it until noon, Han."

"Get it. Now."

Scorpius felt her cool hands brushing his hair back. His pulse seemed to be pounding in his ears. A vial was pushed gently into his hand, and he lifted it shakily to his lips, feeling the lukewarm liquid spread slowly through him, calming the stabbing pain in his back.

"I'm so sorry Scorp," he heard Rose say, her voice trembling. "I didn't mean…"

"I know," he said through gritted teeth. That potion was supposed to last him two days, he realised. He vaguely remembered being given it the day before last in the hospital. He hated to think what the pain would be like without it, if this was how bad it could get while on it. The horrible stabbing sensation seemed to move around, never worse or better in any one place. One minute the site of the wound, just below his ribs, the next his navel, the next, anywhere from the base of his spine to the small of his back.

"This is ridiculous," he heard Hannah mutter to Neville, echoing Scorp's own sentiments. "How can
Knox justify only every other day?"

"That's the strongest brew they have, Han," Neville muttered back. Scorpius wondered if they thought he was deaf just because he had his eyes shut. "Do you want him to end up like Justin?"

Hannah let out a little gasp. "That's not fair, Neville…"

"The man was in rehab for six months. You want to give the boy withdrawal on top of everything else?"

"Sitting right here," Scorpius muttered, taking a deep breath and opening his eyes as the pain eased. Then he chuckled. "Always sitting right here," he said, and for some reason he found that incredibly funny. He started laughing softly, and Lizzie giggled. Al snorted and stuffed the rest of his pancakes in his mouth in self defence. Unfortunately, Rose didn't seem to see the humour in it.

"Are you high?" she asked sternly.

"Told you it was strong," Neville muttered. "I do hope he's a bit better by the time school starts again."

"That's not even three more weeks," Rose said, looking concerned.

"I'm fine," Scorpius protested. "I'll be fine… just… the lot of you stop fussing over me. Please? It's just a lot to get used to. And leave Warren alone." He looked at Neville sidelong. "I don't need it all brought up again now."

"Well," Neville said reluctantly. "Since it was over twelve months ago… I doubt he looks back on the incident with much nostalgia, either. I will be keeping a close eye on him, however, and any abuse of power will result in demotion, believe me. I don't suppose you'd like to tell me which other students were involved?"

Scorpius shook his head firmly, and Neville sighed. "Didn't think so."

"Don't feel bad, Dad," Lizzie said, pushing her plate back. "You can't watch them all the time."

"How I ended up with Gryffindor I will never know," Neville grumbled. "Sometimes I should have fought Tufty harder for Hufflepuff."

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"It could be worse," Scorpius said later, when Rose and Lizzie had gone out for groceries and left him and Albus to start going through the books in earnest.

"What could?" Al asked, looking up from a particularly dry paragraph on bone density. He liked books as much as the next Ravenclaw, but he couldn't help feeling relieved at the distraction.

"Warren being Head Boy. I mean it could have been Thornton."

Albus snorted. "Fat chance."

"More chance than you or me had, probably."

Al shook his head. "Why would that be worse? Gary's never hit anyone, as far as I'm aware. Chung would have been worse. Or Carcer."
"Yeah well, if Chung got it we'd know McGonagall was mad," Scorpius agreed. "Head Boy, though… it's bound to make you really popular…"

"You're afraid Rose would dump you for Gary?"

Scorp's cheeks went pink under the permanent layer of pale he wore lately. "No."

"They kissed one time. And it was dreadful, remember?"

That seemed to cheer him up. "Yeah, I guess," he said, and turned the page in his hefty volume. "Did you want to be Head Boy?"

Al blinked, the question taking him by surprise. "Hadn't really thought about it," he said. It was only half true. "There's been a couple in my family. My mum was Head Girl. My grandparents - the dead ones - they were Head Boy and Girl, together. And two of my uncles, I think."

"And Teddy," Scorp reminded him, one eyebrow raised.

"Technically doesn't count but thanks ever so for rubbing it in," Al sighed. "At least James wasn't. I'd never be able to live that down."

"Lizzie deserves it though," Scorpius said, as if thinking to himself. "She's like Hannah that way - you know, friendly with everyone."

Albus felt a weird sort of pinching in his stomach. He remembered the shellshocked look on Lizzie's face as the badge had fallen out of the envelope, her little button nose screwed up in surprise. For some reason the image kept popping up in his mind. And whenever he thought of Lizzie it was hard not to imagine himself snogging her behind the Quidditch shed before the first game of the season…

He grunted noncommittally and went back to flicking through pages. *Snap out of it, Potter. You have a girlfriend.*

His book was slightly newer than Scorpius' - not by much, but at least it was in English. He didn't want to think how long it would take to decipher the whole thing, since the text was handwritten and only passing readable, but there was the occasional woodcut. He came across one of these and stopped with a "hm", of interest.

"What?" Scorpius asked, not sounding particularly hopeful.

Albus turned the book around to show him. There was a picture of a wheelchair, not dissimilar to the one Scorp sat in now. The runes certainly looked more or less the same. Albus had done the OWL in A Study of Ancient Runes, enough to recognise the similarities, but not to translate without some serious textbook backup. Rose was better at that sort of thing, and he knew his Aunt Hermione was fluent in some Runic languages.

Scorp's eyes widened, and he gestured for the book. Albus got up and handed it to him, and watched his friend squint as he read the accompanying paragraph. "I knew it," he muttered eventually. "It's magically intuitive, like in my dream. If I practice I should be able to move it just by thinking. And there are spells… command words…" He reached for his wand, unclipped it from the chair and stabbed it towards the desk. "Accio parchment!"

"Pretty accurate dreams you've been having lately," Albus said thoughtfully as Scorpius started eagerly copying down sections of the book. He remembered what Aunt Hermione had said about Moonsilver inducing vivid dreams and visions. "Don't suppose you dreamt that I get recruited early? Or that I ace all my NEWTs?"
"Hasn't come up," Scorpius said absent-mindedly. "Anyway you know dreams are usually just your brain's way of trying to tell you something. That's not Divination, it's like… science."


By the time Albus really had to go home or risk being forbidden ever to leave the house again, they had found a whole list of commands for the chair that Scorpius could say aloud or practice using non-verbally until the chair attuned enough to be able to obey his commands instinctively. Albus had his reservations that this would really work, but Scorpius seemed pretty sure, so he didn't argue. "See you tomorrow afternoon," he said.

"Yeah," Scorpius sighed. Albus didn't blame him for not looking forward to the next morning, when he would be back in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement where all this had started.

"Don't worry," Albus said, doing his best to be encouraging. "It's just my dad. I swear he doesn't bite."

Scorp smiled weakly and nodded. "Yeah. I know."

Albus piled all the books - ignoring Scorp's pained look at being unable to help - and hurried to the fireplace to Floo home.

~*-S-*~

~*-S-*~

Scorpius did not sleep well that night. The potion - whatever it was, he still wasn't quite sure, but it was the worst potion he'd ever had to drink by a long shot, including Veritaserum - hit him like a knife to the gut as usual, and where before he had passed out fairly quickly, it took him at least an hour to settle into a troubled sleep. He woke himself twice during the night, shaking from some forgotten nightmare. Both times he found Rose's head on the pillow beside him, her arm lying protectively across his waist. When he woke up the third time, however, morning sunlight streaming through the gap in the curtains, she was gone.

He sat up, feeling exhausted but equally determined, and pulled his notes from the last afternoon's research session towards him. He found his wand on the bedside table and summoned some clean clothes from his trunk. Then he performed the bathing charm Al had found, which left him feeling refreshed even if the sheets got a bit damp, and then the much more complicated spell which bewitched his dirty clothes off. The borrowed track pants wriggled animatedly down his thighs and scurried off the side of the bed onto the floor. Scorpius smiled triumphantly. and set about the final spell which was meant to put clean trousers on. This one was not quite so successful, so that by the time Neville came in, he had ended up with the waistline around his knees and the whole thing back to front.

"Next time I'd take these off before the bathing charm," Neville said lightly, gingerly picking up the damp track pants.

"I almost had it," Scorpius complained, rubbing at the spot on his temple where he now had a splitting headache.

"The potions you're on right now, even simple charms should wear you out," Neville warned, turning to help him on with the rest of his clothes. Scorpius felt his cheeks turn a little red, but it couldn't be helped until he learned to do it himself. "You'll need your strength for today."

"You're… coming with me, right?" Scorpius asked. He felt like a child for asking, but he couldn't
help it. After what had happened at the Ministry before, all the assurances in the world couldn't convince him that it was all going to go smoothly, this time.

"I'll be with you the whole time, if you want," Neville promised.

Everyone wished him luck over breakfast, and Hannah kept having to prompt him to eat. "Alice should be here when you get back," she said, with a half smile as if she wasn't quite sure how he would react to the news. "She's so excited to see you." That did make him feel a little better, but only until it was time to go, whereupon his stomach started doing flip flops again.

He couldn't Floo in the chair, and he was in no condition to go by Portkey or even Side-Along Apparition. He wondered if he was to Apparate himself, what would happen, but knew it would be silly to risk it even if Neville would agree to the experiment. Instead, much like they had from St Mungo's, they went the Muggle way. Scorpius had never been on the Underground before. Neville, from the way he checked and double-checked each sign and fumbled with the money for the ticket machine, was no expert either, though Scorpius was sure that Hannah would have managed easily. It didn't help that all the ticket machines were old and run down - half of them had 'out of order' signs on them. Scorpius noticed that hardly anyone else was using them, and watched with fascination as Muggles raced through the ticket barriers by swiping their mobile phones against a little reader that emitted a low 'beep' sound with each swipe. He made a mental note to ask Professor Clearwater about it.

Neville had to push the chair down the ramp into the station and onto the train. Scorpius didn't mind quite so much this time because he was too busy looking around at all the people, and the weird patterns on the seats and the advertising taped up everywhere, with pictures that didn't move like eerie moments frozen in time. He wished he had brought his notebook so he could jot some things down. He could certainly write an entire essay on the London Underground and tickets on telephones.

Gradually he became aware that people were staring at him. Not openly, for the most part, but he kept getting the feeling he was being watched, and then, when he looked, everyone was suddenly very interested in their book, or their mobile phone or those machines - he forgot the name of them - that was like a thick sheet of parchment that could bring up any book in the world that you wanted to read. Now that was something really magical. Scorpius wanted to ask if he could have a proper look at one, but by the time the train came to a smooth halt - quite unlike the shuddering chugga-chug of the Hogwarts express - he still hadn't got up the nerve. No one in the carriage had said a single word to each other for the whole journey, and he didn't want to attract even more attention to himself.

It wasn't very warm in London that day, but Scorpius started to sweat as soon as they had left the station, his shirt sticking uncomfortably to the small of his back. Neville kept asking him if he was all right, and he answered 'yes' as confidently as he possibly could, while doing his best to stop his stomach twisting inside him with dread.

Neville pushed him towards an old broken-down looking telephone box, and somehow managed to squeeze them both inside it, with the chair taking up most of the room and Neville practically hugging the phone. Scorpius had never been into the Ministry through the visitor's entrance, before. He vaguely remembered being Side-Along Apparated into an area near the holding cells, last time, but he had been too terrified and confused to really pay attention. Neville spoke into the telephone receiver, saying both their names, and that they were there for an interview with the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Two badges were dispensed and Scorpius' pinned his on with his heart in his throat.
The telephone box descended into the ground, and it went dark for a while. "Welcome to the Ministry of Magic," said a woman's voice, echoing around the high ceiling of the long, brightly-lit hall.

"This is the Atrium," Neville explained, pushing the chair over the lip of the telephone box - which, unlike the special disability ramps in the London Underground, was clearly not designed for it. Despite his trepidation, Scorpius couldn't help but be impressed. He wasn't sure what he had been expecting - something a lot grimmer, probably, but the Atrium wasn't any scarier than the Underground, and almost as interesting. It seemed to be very busy, with people moving in and out all over the place. The double rows of fireplaces flared green every few seconds with an incoming or outgoing passenger, and the air was thick with the cracks of people Apparating and Disapparating. He turned his head and saw a tall obelisk, made of what looked like black marble, occupying a large open space about halfway down the hall. There were no ropes or chains or anything to section it off, but the crowd was still giving it a respectful berth. An Indian family, who were almost certainly tourists, were standing in front of it, staring up at what seemed to be words engraved into the stone.

"Is that a memorial?" he found himself asking as they went past. "Like the one at Hogwarts?"

"Yes," Neville said, low. "There are two hundred and thirty-eight names on it."

"Two hundred?" Scorpius choked. He thought back to the Recent Wizarding History class where they had learned about the war. He didn't recall McGonagall mentioning anything like that number - but then, he hadn't exactly been paying rapt attention throughout the entire day. He'd spent at least an hour wondering how best to turn himself invisible.

"Not all in one day, but yes," Neville said sadly. "A lot of Ministry people and their families were killed. Some in battle - most by decree. Those who resisted, some who tried to help the Order. But mostly Muggleborns."

"That's horrible!"

Not for the first time, Scorpius wondered how on earth his father and grandparents could have leant themselves to such a cause. Of course, there was a school of thought that said there hadn't been a great deal of choice, but still... sitting back and letting that sort of thing happen was just as bad as doing it yourself, wasn't it? Well, almost. You can talk, said the nasty voice at the back of his mind that always spoke in that same, drawling tone. You've done nothing but sit back and let things happen.

They went through security - which took a little longer than normal because of the chair, and Scorpius could tell because of the annoyed muttering of all the people waiting behind them - and got into a lift, which ascended shakily, announcing each floor on its arrival as wizards and witches moved in and out. A few of them gave Scorpius startled looks. He ignored them. "You know," he said thoughtfully to Neville. "I know electricity doesn't really work around magic most of the time, but you have to admit that stuff like trains and lifts work a lot better in the Muggle world." One of the older wizards in the lift gave him a disapproving look at this comment, but was then forced to leave as they shuddered to a halt on level four.

"Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, incorporating Beast, Being and Spirit Divisions, Goblin Liaison Office and Pest Advisory Bureau," said the announcement.

"I mean, you'd think someone would have figured out better spells for those things a long time ago," Scorpius went on. "Is this one magic, or is it just pulleys and weights? The voice must be magically operated."
Neville shook his head. "Do you know, I've never even thought about it. Are you thinking of pursuing magical engineering?"

Scorpius snorted. "Not likely. Just saying someone should. I just think - "

The doors opened on level two. "Department of Magical Law Enforcement," stated the announcer with no care for the way it made Scorpius' heart sink. "Including the Improper Use of Magic office, Auror Headquarters and Wizengamot Administration Services." The doors opened, and Scorpius had no choice but to allow himself to be pushed out of the lift and into the corridor lined with doors. "Um," he said to Neville, before they turned the corner into the Auror Office. "I've got it now. Thanks."

If Neville was surprised, he didn't show it. He let go of the chair's handles and allowed Scorpius to take control. He couldn't drive the chair himself in Muggle London, since it was obviously lacking in any electricity which could account for it moving by itself, and he hadn't dared try it down in the Atrium with such a big crowd, but he was damned if he was going to go back in there being carted around like an invalid. He put his hand on his wand, clipped snugly into its holder on the arm, and said, quietly, "portardus."

The chair moved forward, slowly, and in the right direction, with no greater effort than it floated up and down staircases. When they got to the corner, Scorpius thought verso, and it turned left, with only a moment's hesitation that he suspected was more his fault than the chair's. He felt the ridiculous urge to pat the thing like an obedient hound.

The Auror office was busy, even though it wasn't even nine in the morning. Every desk was occupied, and there were people moving constantly up and down the aisles. Scorpius couldn't help noticing a man being led through the crowd with his hands locked behind his back with red, enchanted handcuffs. The visitor's desk was, thankfully, the only place that didn't seem to be being bombarded. Neville led Scorpius over to it. Consto, Scorpius thought, and the chair came to a smooth stop.

"Longbottom?"

The woman behind the desk could have been Professor McGonagall's granddaughter. She had honey-blond hair tied tightly back into an elegant bun, and wore square, rimless spectacles balanced precarious on a sharp, pointed nose. She looked older than Neville, but not by much, and was looking down at him with a slightly puzzled and not altogether pleased expression. The desk was about the head height of an average full-grown man, and she was sitting on an incredibly high stool, which meant that she towered over the both of them, and unless she tilted her head forward Scorpius could quite easily see up her nose.

"Morning, Miss Yarrow," Neville said politely. "It's been a while."

"Indeed." The woman tapped her quill on the desk. "How… very nice to see you again. How may I help you this morning? Not… re-enlisting, are you?"

"I wouldn't do that to you, Bethany," Neville said sweetly. "I'm escorting my ward, here. We have an appointment with Harry at nine."

"Ah. Yes. Take a seat, Professor."

The way she said Professor had a slightly derisory tone to it, and she didn't even spare Scorpius half a glance - possibly because his head was so far below her line of sight that he might as well have been a crawling insect with the tenacity to be sniffing around her desk. Neville flopped into one of
the small, uncomfortable-looking chairs, and Scorpius used his hands to back the wheelchair up beside him while Miss Yarrow descended what must have been a small staircase to the ground and disappeared into the throng. "That woman's always had it in for me," Neville sighed, before Scorpius could ask. "Harry, Ron and I joined the Aurors right after the war - no NEWT's, no training, nothing. Bethany had to do two years of training just to run the desk and do paperwork, and there we were. They needed us, mind - the Department was a lot smaller after the Year of Terror, but she wasn't the only one who thought it was unfair."

"Does she have it in for the others too, then?" Scorpius wondered out loud.

Neville snorted. "No one argued with Harry's appointment. Most people wanted to make him Minister for Magic - and him hardly older than you! Ron caught three Dark Wizards in his first week and won everyone round." He sighed. "I had a lot going on in those first few months. Responsibilities. I was only here when I wasn't helping the rebuild at Hogwarts, and cleaning up the mess at St Mungo's, and looking after... well. Most of the Aurors were friendly, but people like Yarrow never really thought I belonged here. They weren't wrong, really. I was never cut out to be an Auror."

"After this place, teaching must have been a relief," Scorpius said, staring out at the sea of desks and resisting the urge to put his hands over his ears at the sheer noise.

Neville laughed. "I suppose you could say that, yeah," he chuckled. "Heads up."

Scorpius followed Neville's line of sight, and saw Yarrow coming back. Standing on the ground, Scorp was surprised to see that she was incredibly short, no taller than Professor Flitwick. The reason for the enormous desk suddenly became apparent, and Scorpius had to bite his lip to keep from laughing. She pursed her lips, looking so disapproving that Scorpius wondered if she couldn't read his mind, and pointed them towards an office to their right. "Thank you Bethany," Neville said politely as they passed. The little McGonagall-like woman smoothed her child-sized robes and went back to ascend her desk once more.

Harry Potter's office had one wall all made out of glass, so that you could see out of it no matter where you stood. It also meant that you could see in, so Scorpius saw who was waiting for him before the door had even opened. For a moment, he thought they had all lied to him and Rose's dad was going to be there for his interview, until he realised that the redheaded man sitting with Potter was a different man altogether. He was just as tall, with similar features, but he wore half-moon spectacles and there was an authoritative, superior sort of air to him - something in the stiff way he sat. Scorpius had seen him at King's Cross station a few times, and at the Memorial Day service at Hogwarts. It was Lucy's father.

"Hello, Mr Malfoy," Mr Weasley said, not quite unfriendly but not exactly warm, either.

"Hello, Deputy Minister," Scorpius said, nervously. He realised he had stopped in the doorway, blocking Neville from entering and drawing the attention of anyone within hearing distance. Portardus, he thought, but the chair remained stuck where it was, unwilling to go any further.

"Won't you come in?" Mr Potter said politely.

"All right lad?" he heard Neville say softly behind him.

"Fine," he replied, thinking portadus again, but the chair was having none of it. Scorpius realised that he didn't really want to enter the room. His will must not be strong enough. In the end he gave up and pushed the chair the rest of the way with his arms. It made his chest burn painfully with the
effort, but it wasn't far, and then he was stopping in front of Potter's desk. This one, at least, was normal height. There was nothing on it. There were a couple of pictures on the walls - Scorpius could see a young Albus, with Lily and James, waving at him from one of them. But other than that, the office was incredibly sparse, as if it didn't get used very much.

"Professor," said the Deputy Minister, nodding as Neville sat down in the last remaining chair. A fourth chair, Scorpius noticed, had pre-emptively been moved to one side, against the wall.

"Percy," Neville replied, nodding back. His expression was unreadable, but his tone was slightly disapproving. "I didn't know you'd be here."

Behind Mr Weasley's back, Mr Potter made an apologetic face.

"Mr Shacklebolt wanted to attend," Mr Weasley explained. "Unfortunately he has once again taken a turn for the worse, and he asked me to come down in his place."

Neville looked surprised. "Again?" he said, frowning. "What's wrong with him?"

"Sadly he has still not quite recovered from the incident last Christmas. He was admitted to St Mungo's this morning and is expected to stay at least a week. So far we have managed to keep this away from the press - I expect I can trust in your discretion." He looked at first Neville, then Scorpius, peering at them sternly over his half-moon spectacles.

"Of course," Neville said, and Scorpius nodded, feeling ill again. They still hadn't found out who had sent the package that had almost killed the Minister on Christmas day, along with the one that Harry Potter himself had only just avoided. Now that Scorpius thought about it, there was a certain newness to the office. This was where the other package was delivered, he thought, staring at the bare surface of the desk. Did the whole place blow up? Is that why there's nothing here? Is that glass explosion-proof?

Mr Weasley coughed, as though preparing to say something thoroughly unpleasant. Scorpius braced himself. "First of all," he began, steepling his fingers on the desk in front of him. "The Ministry of Magic would like to extend our apologies, Mr Malfoy."

Scorpius blinked. "Um, okay."

"We appreciate your cooperation, in light of… recent events," the Deputy Minister went on. "We have strict laws here regarding the treatment of suspects and detainees - particularly those who are underage. There was some confusion at the time, I understand, because of the difference between our laws and those of France, but that is certainly no excuse, either for administering Veritaserum or for, for…" he paused, as though trying to find a polite way of saying -

"Using you as bait," Mr Potter put in. Scorpius looked over at him and their eyes met properly for the first time since he had entered the room. "I'm really sorry," Harry addd. Scorpius could tell he meant it.

"My brother has always had a tendency to act before he thinks," Percy said, with a scathing tone that Scorpius was glad wasn't directed at him.

"It's not all Ron's fault, Perce," Harry sighed. "I was there making him sign the paperwork too. If he hadn't ended up in St Mungos, none of this would have happened."

There was uncomfortable silence for a moment. "Well," said the Deputy Minister eventually. "We'd best get on."
"Right." Harry produced a scroll of parchment out of nowhere, followed by a quill. When he unrolled the scroll and placed the quill carefully, it stayed balanced on its point, ready to take dictation. Then, to Scorpius' surprise, he also pulled out an old notebook and a biro. "I like to have a backup," he explained, at Scorpius' puzzled look. "You never know sometimes with these Dictoquills. All right. Would I be right in saying that you haven't had any problems talking about your father since the curse was lifted?

Scorpius shook his head. Not physically, anyway.

"Good. Now, this isn't an interrogation. There's no procedure, you can stop whenever you like. Even ask me questions if you want. I promise I'll do my best to answer."

Scorpius nodded, feeling a little foolish at his silence so far. So he said, "um… what do you want to know?"

"Everything," said Percy, at the same time that Harry said, "anything."

"Anything at all," Harry added, shooting the Deputy Minister a look. "Anything that might help us round up the rest of the Shadow's organisation - or anything that we can use as evidence in his trial - though of course I understand if that's… well… a conflict of interest. I know it must be hard."

Scorpius took a deep breath and shook his head. "No… it's fine."

He could feel Neville's solid, comforting presence at his side, and he knew he was safe. Now he was here, and despite the piercing stare of the Deputy Minister, the whole thing didn't seem quite so dreadful as he imagined. So he told them everything. He started with the conversation he'd had with his father when he come back from Durmstrang. The paperwork he'd read and how something about it had never seemed a hundred per cent, even if he hadn't quite imagined the scale of the deception. About what had happened with the package and Borgin & Burkes, and the mysterious Ezekius. And about what his father had said at the abandoned mill, what he could remember of it, which were mostly fragments of sentences that rang loudly in his head when he thought about them, drowning out everything else.

That bastard, Potter… as if taking my fortune, my home, my very future away from me, as if that wasn't enough… he tried to take my son… I still have connections… important connections. I have more power than Potter thinks… I saved you… they would have let you die…

Now he thought about it, quite a lot of that conversation seemed to have been centred around Harry, but he didn't bother trying to make it sound any other way. And then, as best as he could, he described his attempt at escape, and what his father had been screaming out into the night before he turned his wand on Rose and the crackling blue fire sped through the air towards them…

"Thank you," Harry interrupted him. "That more or less marries with what the others told us."
Scorpius wondered if he meant just Al and Rose, or his father as well. "That's all… very helpful."

Scorpius swallowed. He was sure he must have been talking for hours. "Could I have a drink of water, please?" he asked.

Harry conjured one for him, and he gulped it down gratefully. Harry flipped back through his notebook while he waited, pausing on a page that seemed to upset him. His brow furrowed. "I have to ask. Have there been any… side effects? From the secrecy curse, I mean?"

Scorpius blinked and put his glass back down on the desk. "Er... don't think so," he replied. "Why, should there be?"
Harry and Percy exchanged glances. For a moment Scorpius thought they might not tell him, but they had promised to answer his questions. "Curses like that..." Harry began. "Secrecy curses, especially very old, dark ones... sometimes come with a release clause. A kind of self destruct, to use the Muggle term."

Beside him, Scorpius felt Neville go quite stiff, suddenly. "You mean..."

Harry grimaced. "It could have been triggered to kill. At any time. Either remotely, by the secret keeper, or during the disarming process."

Scorpius, who had finally been feeling a little more relaxed, felt all his nerves tighten again. A terrible chill ran down his spine.

"What? Why didn't you tell us this?" Neville demanded. "Does Albus know?"

"No," Harry shook his head. "We didn't want to worry him, and Scorpius was unconscious at the time. Neville, trust me, I had a whole team of our best cursebreakers taking that box apart. If you don't believe I would take every precaution for your ward, you have to know I would do it for my own son. I did everything I could to minimise the risk -"

Neville was red with anger. "But he could have been killed! That's a pretty serious risk. You couldn't have just..." he gestured loosely with one hand, searching for words.

"We had to disable the curse," Harry said, firmly. "The longer we left it intact, the more danger there was of a remote trigger, and we couldn't keep Malfoy quiet for ever. It could be anything as simple as a spoken word, and then..." he frowned even deeper and his grip tightened noticeably on the biro. "We would have lost both... possibly all four boys, if you count the others in the dormitory. We still don't know for sure what kind of a range the thing had."

The cold had spread through Scorpius' body until he felt numb all over. His stomach was no longer doing flip-flops, but felt rather as if it had been turned to lead. Part of him, a very small part, wanted to scream that his father wouldn't do that, not to him... but the more sensible part of his brain was drawing logical conclusions that said that the Shadow would have to have a contingency plan, even for his own son. What if Scorpius found out something he wasn't supposed to know? What if he told the wrong person about a sudden suspicious increase in gold flow? What if Scorpius got arrested by Aurors who would do anything they could to find out the truth... frankly it was surprising he was still alive at all. And on top of all that... Albus could have been hurt. So could Peter and Gaius, who knew as little about the Shadow as they did about aerospace engineering. But the Shadow didn't care, as long as the cursed box kept all his secrets.

"That reminds me, lad," Harry was saying, the words reaching Scorpius' ears from what seemed like a long way away. "I've been talking to your father..." He paused, as if expecting some sort of answer. Scorpius couldn't think of anything to say, so after a moment, he continued. "He keeps asking for you. I've told him that you're alive, but funnily enough he's disinclined to take my word for it. Would you like to visit him, if I could arrange it?"

"No." When Scorpius spoke, something caught in his throat so that he could barely hear himself. "No," he said again, after swallowing to clear the lump. "You can tell him I don't want to see him. Ever again."

No one argued. He was grateful.

"There's something I still don't get," Neville said, into the silence. "This secrecy curse. How does it work, exactly?"
"We're not entirely sure," Harry admitted. "That's part of the reason why the Shadow has been so successful. From what we can tell, those curses are through all his people, especially the higher-ups. You can put it directly on the person, but they have to agree to it, like a binding oath. Or - as this case has so poignantly brought to light - you can put it on an object that, if its in close enough proximity over time, will eventually rub off. In this case, the secrets box Malfoy sent to Scorpius had the curse embedded deep into the runes that were already there - to protect the secrets of the box, you see. And because it was in his dormitory, it affected Albus as well, so that neither of them could say anything they knew about the Shadow even if they wanted to."

"I tried to talk," Scorpius said quietly, remembering. "But I couldn't remember what I wanted to say... I didn't know what I knew. It was confusing."

"Exactly." Harry sighed. "You should never have been asked to sign anything in that state, Scorpius. I'm sorry."

Scorpius looked up. The man was staring at him with those eyes that, while the exact same colour as Albus', were somehow a lot more intense. Harry had said that before, but this time, there was something different, a sort of urgency in his voice as though he might break down any minute. Scorpius really hoped he didn't. "It's okay," he said, uncomfortably.

"No. No, it really isn't." Harry sighed deeply and ran a hand through his hair. "You know... a long time ago, I was on trial for a breach of the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery," he said. "They made me go into one of the lower courtrooms - where they usually try criminals - alone. I was fourteen years old."

Scorpius' eyes widened. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed that Percy suddenly did not look quite so superior as before - rather, he had gone slightly pink in the cheeks with what might have been anger and might have been embarrassment.

"Arthur - my father in law - took me to the Ministry, since I was staying with his family at the time, but they wouldn't even let him come in with me. Can you imagine? A fourteen year old in a courtroom without even a parent or guardian - let alone legal representation. In the Muggle world they would call that a serious violation of human rights. I was lucky in the end - Dumbledore stood up for me - but that's not the point. It was a horribly flawed system. And I thought - I hoped - that we had fixed all that. Most of it, at least. And now I hold myself responsible for the poisoning and kidnapping of an underage wizard under my care, and we all know it could have been a lot worse. And I know there's nothing I can do that could... that would..."

Scorpius wasn't sure he could take it any longer. "It's really fine," he found himself saying, before he could stop himself. "I mean its not, really... but I don't blame you."

Harry smiled sadly. "That's kind of you," he said. "Unfortunately I happen to be Head Auror. Whatever happens to anyone while they are in our custody is essentially my responsibility." He leaned forward on the desk, fixing Scorpius with that emerald green stare. "I know I can't change what happened to you," he said, low. "But if there's anything I can do, if you ever need anything... a place to stay..."

"I have a place to stay," Scorpius said. He hasn't meant it to come out sounding so sharp, but Mr Potter sat back, abashed.

"Of course you do," he said, no longer meeting Scorpius' eyes. "Of course. I'm sorry."

Scorpius wished the man would stop apologising. For some reason it made him feel guilty. "I hope you find Goyle," he said, in the hope of changing the subject. This only served to make Mr Potter
look even more haggard.

"So do I," muttered the Deputy Minister.

"Go tell the Department of International Magical Cooperation, why don't you," Harry growled. "I keep telling the other Ministries that they need our help to take the rest of these people out, but do they listen to me? Not that I blame them considering the mess we made…"

"Sounds like you've got a lot of work to do," Neville said diplomatically. "Would it be all right if we went home now, do you think? The boy tires out easily."

Scorpius wanted to protest, but he had to admit it was getting difficult to concentrate. His back was burning again.

"Of course," Harry said, nodding. "Yeah, of course. Thank you both for coming in." He reached over and shook Scorpius' hand.

"I don't think I helped much," Scorpius muttered, when he and Neville had left the office, Neville pushing the chair again. "I basically told them I didn't know anything."

"At least they believed you this time," Neville pointed out as they got back into the lift that would take them down to the Atrium. "And at least they won't be administering Veritaserum like that again in a hurry."

"Won't that make things a bit difficult?" Scorp wondered aloud. "I mean, anyone could say they were allergic, couldn't they? Then they wouldn't be able to use it on anyone."

"Maybe that's for the best," Neville said, low. Scorpius wondered what he meant by that. "Right. We can go straight back to the Leaky Cauldron or we could get some lunch first. What do you think?"

Scorpius rather liked the idea of being out in the sunshine for a while. He was about to ask if perhaps they could go to Florean Fortesque's - it had been such a long time since he'd had ice cream - but then people started coming into the lift as they descended, each one staring at him for a moment before hurriedly looking away, as if trying to pretend they had never looked in the first place. He wondered if people would ever really stop staring, and he wondered if it was just the chair, or if it was the stories in the papers, the ones about him being dead, the ones about him being a criminal, or even the ones that were fairly close to the truth. He realised with a feeling like a punch to the gut that it was going to be harder than ever to carve his own way in the world, when people would forever associate him with The Shadow. The Shadow, who even now sat in a cell somewhere in this very building. Scorpius meant it when he said he never wanted to see him again. The man had almost killed him. Had tried to kill Rose. And all along had had the ability to kill either him or Albus with a single word.

Suddenly he felt very deflated. Trivial things like ice cream seemed to belong to another world.

"No," he sighed, sighing as he watched the doors of the lift rattle open onto the bustling crowd in the Atrium. "Let's go home."
Chapter Summary

Scorpius was glad of the Sorting, because it gave people something to focus on other than him, and when the food finally appeared on the House tables, he even managed to enjoy his first meal back at school. Still, he thought he might miss baked beans, and he wondered if he could convince a House Elf to make him some, and if they would even be the same.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

~*-A-*~
~*-A-*~

The next two weeks passed in a bit of a blur for everyone. The summer holiday seemed to have gone past in a rush of chaos, and now, when they were finally all together, it nevertheless refused to slow down even for a moment. Albus went to the Leaky Cauldron every day, though on one of those days he went with Lily to get her NEWT books and to stock up on his own school supplies, so he only had time to wave hello to Scorpius as they passed through the Floo on the way home.

Scorpius was getting better and better at controlling the chair, and now very rarely said the command words out loud. This was lucky, because he went back to St Mungos twice before school began, and by the last visit there were still no signs of improvement. It was hard to tell how his friend felt about this, though he, Albus, knew he would be devastated if it was him. "I knew it would take longer than two weeks," was all Scorpius would say, "it just needs more time." Rose would smile and pat his shoulder or his knee when he said something like this, encouraging him to think positively, but Albus could spot a platitude when he saw one. He wondered if Scorpius really believed he was going to heal, or was just saying such things to make everyone else feel better. At least Knox had said he only had to take the regrowth potion at night from now on, to Scorpius' obvious relief, although he also changed the dose of his pain potion.

"Once a week," he had said. "May seem drastic, but we don't want you getting dependent on it."

The last Sunday of August, the day before they were due to catch the Hogwarts Express, Albus went to Cleo's house in Cambridge. He had been more or less ignoring her ever since Scorp came back, and while she was, to a point, understanding, he knew he couldn't just fly off to school without saying a proper goodbye.

The goodbye lasted most of an hour, lying on Cleo's bed in her tiny bedroom, and, if Cleo's parents and younger brother not been in the house, might have ended with more clothes being removed than just his jacket. As it was, she was wearing a tiny skirt that barely deserved the name, and a tight-fitting, low-cut top that left very little to the imagination. "You okay?" Cleo asked him softly when they finally had to stop for air.

"Mmm," he murmured, closing his eyes and trying to think about all his elderly relatives naked. It helped, but not by much.
"I'll have my own place by Christmas," she promised him, kissing him lightly under his jaw. "You can come over then. Stay the night."

The implication of this was not lost on Albus. "Yeah?" he said, in a slightly choked voice.

"Of course. Frankly I'd have you right here and now, but my mum would know. She has a sixth sense about stuff like that."

Albus swallowed. "I'll probably stay at Hogwarts for Christmas," he admitted regrettfully. "Unless Scorp goes to the Leaky for the whole holiday."

"Then you can sneak me into your fancy school and we'll find a broom cupboard," she said, rolling her eyes. "It's been three months, Alby."

Albus grimaced. Sexy as all the talk about broom cupboards was, the thought of doing that with Cleo made his stomach tighten up. He told himself it was nerves, but he wasn't sure.

"I can't believe you never did it with Lizzie," Cleo went on, stretching back on the bed so that her top rode up and revealed her bare midriff with the belly-button piercing. Certain other parts of Albus' body started berating his stomach for being a whiny idiot, and he was very glad he was wearing quite loose trousers. "How long were you guys together?"

"Six months," Albus muttered, wondering what Cleo's mum would think if he used their bathroom to take a long, cold shower. "But she wasn't of age yet."

"So?" Cleo raised an eyebrow. "So her dad would have murdered me."

He winced inwardly as he remembered the conversation he'd had with Neville on Christmas day. The man had made it crystal clear that he would take an extremely grim view of extra-marital relations before Lizzie was seventeen, and hinted that even then Albus would have to be the perfect gentleman or he might wake one morning to find a Venomous Tentacular had taken root under his bed and was slowly chewing its way up his legs.

"He wouldn't have to find out." Cleo said, pulling a lock of Ravenclaw-blue hair over her forehead and twisting it around her forefinger.

Albus wondered why on earth they were talking about this. "It's Hogwarts," he tried to explain. "You can't keep secrets there. Half our year knew Rose and Scorpius were a couple before they even started dating."

Cleo made a face. "Speaking of Scorp, did you talk to him?" she asked.

Albus nodded. Cleo had asked him multiple times by owl to see if Scorpius wanted to meet up to talk about the band. They had endeavoured to continue without him, she explained, but it just wasn't the same. "I tried," he said. "He hasn't even touched his guitar since he got back. I think he needs a bit more time."

"Shame." Cleo sighed. "Well, tell him he can't leave it too long or we'll have to find someone else. Not that there is anyone else, unless we start scouting for Muggles."

"Dave's a Muggle."

"Dave's a Squib, so he knows about magic. Anyway Scorp's the only one who can do things with a
guitar like he can, or we'd know about it. You will tell him, won't you?"

"Yes." Albus resisted the urge to say that if she wanted to tell him so badly, she could Floo over to
the Leaky Cauldron just as easily as he could. "Can we talk about something else for a bit? I came
here to have a break from all that drama."

She pouted theatrically. "I thought you came here to see me."

"That too." He leaned over, put an arm over her waist, and, quite effectively, changed the subject.

~*-R-*~

~*-R-*~

Rose had a feeling that Scorpius was dreading the Hogwarts Express, though of course he would
never say as much. It was their last year at Hogwarts, and she knew he would rather die than miss
the train. Besides, it wasn't as if there was any other way that he could get there, as Knox was still
adamant he shouldn't Floo or Apparate. A Portkey was alway a possibility, but you needed all sorts
of permissions to activate a Portkey to Hogwarts.

She wasn't sure if it was just the journey that worried him, or the very idea of going back to school
before he was healed, but every now and then she would catch him with a look on his face that was
only just short of real terror.

She couldn't blame him. He had stayed within the Longbottoms' apartment since his return from the
Ministry, barring his hospital visits, and hadn't even ventured into the public area of the pub, but
Rose had. Occasionally she saw someone from school, especially in the last few days when
everyone was doing their last minute school shopping, and they would ask after Scorpius as though
he were lying on his death bed. A couple of them even gave their condolences, believing that he had
actually died. The Prophet had printed so many conflicting stories that some had clearly been unable
to keep up. A few others - some Slytherin fifth years she didn't even know - spoke loudly within her
hearing about how he had got what he deserved for working with the Shadow. That time, it was
lucky that Lizzie was there to hold her back, or she would have hexed them into next week. It had
been hard to hide her anger from the others, and even little Alice had asked why her face was so red.

Belinda and Peter came to dinner on the last day of the holiday, and that more than anything seemed
to signal that they couldn't hide away forever. Still, it was nice to talk about normal school things.
Everyone congratulated Lizzie on her new appointment as Head Girl. Peter was clearly a little put
out that he hadn't been made Head Boy. Belinda had failed two of her sixth year exams, and had to
redo them before she could continue with her NEWTs. The subject of Scorp's chair was carefully
avoided. By the time they got to dessert, they were talking and laughing together as if the summer
had never even happened.

Scorpius came out of his bedroom on September the first wearing his Hogwarts robes, mostly open
against the heat, with the result that his Ravenclaw tie was displayed proudly on his chest. She
smiled to see it, and he grinned back at her. He had, for the first time since he had left Hogwarts, put
some effort into his hair, so that it curled slightly at the ends in the way she liked so much. In fact,
with the exception of the wheelchair, he looked almost himself again. "There you are," she said.
"Packed?"

"Yes. I dunno if I can go down the stairs and magic my trunk at the same time, though."

"I'll take care of it," she said, grateful that he had asked for help, for once. Perhaps his nerves had
made him forget to be stubborn about doing everything himself. She went into the room, and flicked
her wand to levitate his trunk. She was about to turn back when she noticed that the guitar was still sitting on its stand in the corner of the room. She frowned at it.

"Scorp?" she called out.

"Yeah?"

"Where's your guitar case?"

There was a short silence in the living room. "Um... I wasn't going to take it," he called back eventually.

She shook her head, put the trunk down, and rummaged around in the room until she found the case stuffed under the bed. "Don't be silly," she said as she opened it and packed the guitar into it. The strings let out a low *thrumm* noise as she jostled them. "Of course you're taking it."

She picked up the case and levitated the trunk again. Scorpius glared at her as she came out, but she ignored him. "You don't have to play if you don't want to," she said innocently. "But you can't leave it behind."

"You're the not the boss of me," he said childishly.

"Says you," she shot back. "Go on, the others are waiting downstairs."

He sighed and rolled his eyes. Apparently not in the mood for an argument, he guided the chair out of the room and down the stairs to the kitchens. Rose took a deep breath, steeling her determination.

They were taking the Underground to King's Cross St Pancras station. Neville, Hannah and Alice wore Muggle clothes, and Rose and Lizzie were going to change into their Hogwarts robes on the train, but since that option wasn't really open to Scorpius, he attracted quite a few strange looks, between the chair and his uniform, and the three trunks they carried with them. Neville had put a subtle feather-light charm on them, so at least they weren't heavy as well as noticeable. Luckily, Neville had Floo'd Midnight and Lizzie's owl into Hogwarts already, and the cat was probably already waiting for them in Ravenclaw. She didn't like the Floo, but Rose had a feeling she would have hated the crowded underground train even more.

"Mummy, people are looking," Alice complained as they finally got off the tube and headed for the lift that would take them up to King's Cross station.

"People are so nosy," Lizzie scoffed. She was wearing her Head Girl badge pinned to her t-shirt. "You're getting good at ignoring it all, Scorp."

"Who, me?" Scorpius said, smiling shakily. "Nah, I live for all the attention." He was pushing the chair with his hands through the station, in case any Muggles got suspicious. Rose could see the effort this caused him in the slight shake to his shoulders on each rotation. Her hands itched to help him.

"Speaking of attention, we're making a bit of a crowd," Neville muttered as they piled into the lift, trunks and all. Hannah had to pick up Alice, who was getting too big for this to be easy, to keep her from getting crushed. "Might be tricky going through the barrier."

"We'll split up," Rose suggested. "I'll go with Scorp."

"Then I'll come with you," Neville said. "Hannah?"
"I'll take the girls," Hannah nodded. "Meet you there."

They parted as they came out of the lift. Hannah, Alice and Lizzie made some pretence of going to look at a cafe while Neville, Scorpius and Rose headed for the barrier between Platform 9 and Platform 10. Rose pulled her own trunk behind her, and Neville took Scorpius', until they found a trolley that would fit both of them. Rose glanced down at Scorpius. "You all right?"

Scorpius nodded. "Yeah. It might even be easier on wheels. My fath…. I used to have to walk through it, slowly. More dignified, I guess, but I bumped my head the first time."

Rose winced sympathetically. "Dad used to let me ride on the trolley," she said, remembering. The first time going through the barrier seemed so long ago, now. Scorpius lifted an eyebrow and patted his lap suggestively. She made a face at him and felt her cheeks go red. "Oh, just go," she said, with mock sharpness.

"We'll cover you," Neville said. Scorpius looked around and nodded. Rose realised that, while kids mucking around on trolleys was a daily occurrence at the station, the Muggles might react to seeing a skinny teen hurling his wheelchair towards a brick wall.

As they turned away, Neville leaned over slightly so he could talk to her without being overheard. "How are you?" he asked.

"Fine," Rose replied, surprised by the sudden question.

"Good." Neville sighed. "You and Al are going to have to keep a close eye on him. Especially at the beginning."

She nodded. "Yeah, I know. We'll look after him. I mean, if he'll let us."

He let out a breath. "Good. I'll check up with you at mealtimes, but I think it might really annoy him if I start showing up in Ravenclaw Tower."

She smiled at him. "Hey, Neville... I've been meaning to say thanks. For taking us in. It means a lot - especially to him. But me too."

He didn't say anything for a moment, but she could see the tips of his ears and spots on his cheeks turning red. He coughed and looked over his shoulder. "He's gone," he muttered. "Come on then."

She turned and started to head towards the barrier, but before she could get up speed she felt his hand touch lightly on her shoulder. "You're welcome," he said, and she beamed and hugged him tightly.

~*-R-*~
~*-R-*~

By the time Lizzie came through the barrier with Hannah and Alice, they had found Albus and were in the process of loading the trunks one by one onto the train. Scorpius was hanging back, talking to Harry. Rose hurried back over to them as soon as her trunk was stowed, but he didn't seem distressed at all. She hugged her uncle and aunt. "You be good now, all of you," Ginny said with a sad little sigh, pulling Lily close to her and causing the girl to groan in protest. "If we don't see you at Christmas we'll see you on May second. And behave yourselves," she added, giving Albus a firm look. Rose saw him squirm slightly under his mother's gaze.

"We will," Lily promised.
Hannah was just hugging Lizzie and leaning down to do the same for Scorpius, with Alice clamouring to have her turn, when Rose heard someone calling her name.

"Rose! Rose!"

She looked around. When she saw who was running towards her, she felt her heart do a little leap. "Mum!" she exclaimed. She had almost forgotten that they would be here, but there was Hugo, puffing along beside them with his hair askew.

"Late!" he shouted, waving at her as he passed by. Lily hurried over to help him get his trunk onto the train.

"Oh Rosie," her mother exclaimed, hugging her tightly around the shoulders. "We thought we might miss you. There was traffic, and your father would insist on driving..."

Her dad did look less than happy, but he smiled warmly when Rose turned to him. "Hello love. You all right?"

"Fine," Rose said. It was hard to be angry at him when he smiled at her like that. "You?"

He shrugged. "Fortunately I can't say this has been the worst couple of weeks ever. That's one of the few advantages of having a bizarre death-defying childhood."

"Ron," Hermione sighed.

"What?"

The train let out a long, low whistle. Rose looked over her shoulder to see the others waving her over. "I have to go," she said regretfully. Somehow, although the previous year she had gone a whole seven months without seeing her parents, the two weeks since she had left home seemed like even longer. She hugged them both, and then, as the Potters and the Longbottoms came over, Hannah and Neville again. Neville would be Apparating directly to Hogsmeade from the station to prepare for the arriving students.

"Bye!" she called over her shoulder as she hurried up to the train. She was one of the last to get on - as she climbed the last step the door slid shut behind her and she had to run through to the compartment to wave through the open window. "Phew," she breathed when their families were out of sight. "That was close." She looked over at Scorpius, who was taking up a lot of space in the aisle. The Hogwarts Express, unlike the London Underground, did not make allowances for wheelchairs. "What are we going to do when the trolley comes through?" she asked.

Albus shrugged. "Frankly I'm relieved we got on the train. We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

"I can go over there." Scorpius nodded towards a niche behind the seats typically reserved for baggage that wouldn't fit in the overhead compartments. "As long as she gives me enough warning." He seemed to have perked up now they were finally on the train. Rose remembered that he had taken his pain potion that morning. Perhaps it was just now kicking in.

"Well, I don't know about you lot," Albus sighed, flopping down onto the seat with a force that made all the air whoosh audibly out of the cushion. "But I'm glad that summer's over."

~*-S-*~
Scorpius could feel the eyes on him. It was bad enough when he tried to levitate the chair onto a horseless carriage outside Hogsmeade station, only to get stuck in the opening. It took both Rose and Albus to get him out, and then in again by the turning the chair sideways, while pockets of fascinated students looked on. It was humiliating. By the time they had got him into castle, sitting at the Ravenclaw table - at the end, because there was not enough space for the chair between the benches - it felt as though every single person in the Great Hall was looking at him, talking about him behind their hands. It didn’t even make him feel better when Neville and Professor Clearwater both waved cheerfully at him from the head table, or when Gaius and the seventh year girls came to sit down the far end with them. "This is nice," Janey said, tipping her hat jauntily to one side. "Head of the table. Probably our rightful place as seventh years, right?"

"Hi Scorpius," Yuni said, a little timidly, he thought. "All right?"

"Good to see you mate," Gaius said before he could answer. "Felt a bit empty in the dormitory, after you left."

That made him smile a little. "Thanks, Gaius."

Peter came over looking a bit grim, but he had other things on his mind than Scorpius’ embarrassment. "Those bloody Scamander boys," he sighed.

"What have they done now?" Janey demanded. Sometimes Scorpius forgot Janey was a Prefect. Peter, on the other hand, never let anyone forget it.

"I don't know yet but they are definitely up to something. Keep an eye out. All right Scorp?"

Scorpius nodded. "Yeah."

"It was bloody quiet upstairs without you, you know. I sort of missed having music to study to, now and then."

Scorpius thought guiltily about his guitar, no doubt sitting by now in its customary place in the boys dormitory. He hadn't been able to bring himself to touch it, and had fully intended to leave it behind so he wouldn't feel guilty every time he looked at it. Part of him was glad Rose had made him bring it, but he wasn't sure how long it would take before he could quite pluck up the courage to pick it up again.

"Look out, here comes the ickle firsties," Alyson said, pointing. "Oh my god, they're so cute…"

There were a lot of first-year students to be Sorted that year. Scorpius wondered how on earth they had all fitted into the boats. By the end of it, Ravenclaw had twenty-one new students, and Gryffindor had nearly thirty. Slytherin hadn't done quite so well, with only twelve, but even that was still more than average.

Scorpius was glad of the Sorting, because it gave people something to focus on other than him, and when the food finally appeared on the House tables, he even managed to enjoy his first meal back at school. Still, he thought he might miss baked beans, and he wondered if he could convince a House Elf to make him some, and if they would even be the same.

And then, when they were finally, finally back in Ravenclaw Tower, after they had left dinner early to avoid a spectacle and Scorpius had levitated the chair up seven flights of stairs, after Rose had told him she loved him and kissed him goodnight, after, despite a haze of exhaustion that had hit him around dessert, he had forced himself through the charms to take off his clothes, he pulled himself into bed with a motion learned only by trial and error and summoned the box of potions he had had
to bring with him from St Mungos. He looked at the vial of green liquid with a kind of sullen apprehension before downing it, and laid his head back on the pillow, closing his eyes as pain started to ripple from the base of his spine all the way up to his heart, as bone shifted against bone, as nerves moved minute distances and grazed each other, causing a toe or a finger to spasm against his will, and he grit his teeth, and tried to sleep.

~*-S-*~

When they handed out the timetables the next day, Scorpius was handed a folded note in Professor McGonagall's handwriting, just saying 'See Me'.

"What's that?" Rose asked, and he showed her. "Oh," she said, biting her lip. "Well I'm sure it's nothing bad. Should I come with you?"

"No, you have class," Scorpius said firmly. "I can manage."

She was reluctant to let him go, but her first class was Potions and she knew she was dying to tell Professor Patil about everything she had read over the holidays. Scorpius wanted to ask what she thought was the worst thing that could happen to him, but stopped himself just in time. *Stupid question*, he thought crossly to himself as he glided out of the Great Hall and over to the marble staircase. There were a few people milling around at the foot of it, all of whom turned to gape at him as he began to ascend. *Ignore it*, he told himself firmly. *The novelty will wear off. Just ignore it.*

It took a long time to get all the way up to McGonagall's office, and then the gargoyle seemed unsure whether to let him through or not. When he had finally convinced it that he was a student, not some kind of wheeled siege weapon, there was a battle of wills between the moving staircase and the chair, neither of which seemed to know what they were meant to be doing, and when both started to move at once, they went at different speeds and left Scorpius feeling quite dizzy by the time he got to the top and knocked on the door.

"You're late, Mr Malfoy," McGonagall said, when the door opened.

Scorpius glowered. "I'm a little slower than usual," he pointed out through gritted teeth. It wasn't his fault, after all, it didn't seem fair that he should get in trouble for it.

"I was expecting you at eight o'clock," McGonagall said calmly. Scorpius blinked - he hadn't even received the note until half past eight. "The details were in your school letter," she explained, at his blank expression.

"Oh." Scorpius felt stupid. "Um... I never actually opened that." He had assumed it would just say, as the others had, that he should return to school on September the first. Some of the portraits on the wall behind the Headmistress' desk tutted and shook their heads. Scorpius looked up at them nervously. He hadn't been up here since the Dungbomb incident in his second year, but he remembered the way three of the portraits in particular had tried to weigh in. Luckily, Dumbledore seemed to be elsewhere at the moment, so did Phineas Nigellus. Snape was there, lounging at the edge of the frame, apparently extremely interested in his own fingernails.

McGonagall coughed, and Scorpius looked quickly back at her. She peered disapprovingly at him over the tops of her square spectacles. With the intensity of that stare, Scorpius could well believe she was a cat Animagus. "I see," she said shortly. "Well, in that case we have some things to talk about." She drew a pile of parchment out from behind her desk. "I received your exam results from Durmstrang," she said, causing Scorpius' spirits to sink, if it was possible, even lower.
"Sorry," he muttered, automatically.

She raised an imperious eyebrow at him. "It is true they are abysmal," she said, causing some of the portraits to snicker, "but I find it admirable at the least that you attempted to complete them, considering that some are not in either of your native languages, and some are in subjects you had not visited in some time. The best mark you received, incidentally, was an A in Potions."

Scorpius grimaced. "So... I failed the rest of them?"

"It would appear so." McGonagall laid the parchment down on the desk. "As such I cannot allow you to continue with your NEWTs until the tests are retaken - the Hogwarts tests, of course," she clarified, as Scorpius' mouth fell half-open in disbelief. "And only in the subjects you wish to continue. I assumed you would want the one for Muggle Studies," she added, a slightly questioning air to her tone.

"Yes," Scorpius said firmly. He couldn't blame McGonagall for being unsure, after hearing Draco berate him for taking the OWL, but there was no reason to keep his promise to his father now. "Yes please. But... well... I haven't studied, or anything..."

"That is unfortunate," McGonagall said, with no indication of any sympathy whatsoever. "If you had opened your letter, you would have been more prepared. However, all that is required is a passing result. You should be able to achieve that. I seem to remember a time when you were one of the top three students of the year."

Oh yeah, Scorpius thought, as McGonagall handed him the exam papers and conjured a desk for him to sit at on the other side of the office from her own. Back when I wanted to impress my father with good marks. I don't think I've ever cared about school that much as I did back then. Still, if he couldn't do his NEWTs, there was no point in being at Hogwarts, so he had to pass those tests. He spread out the parchment on the desk - four of them, one for each subject - and took a deep breath. He was going to pass those bloody tests if it took him all week.

~*-S-*~

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~*-S-*~

In the end, it did not take quite so long as that. He scribbled on the parchment until his quill snapped and he had to ask McGonagall to borrow another one. His hand started to ache, then to cramp, but when a sandwich appeared on the desk at twelve o'clock, he barely stopped to eat it. He charged through Muggle Studies first, then powered his way through Charms and Transfiguration. Defence Against the Dark Arts took the longest. He knew most of the material, except for some things he must have missed after the move to Durmstrang, but it was hard to write about curses without thinking about the lightning curse that had crippled him, or the secrecy curse that had put both him and Albus in near-fatal danger. He kept drifting off into the events of that summer, and had to drag his brain back to the present, back to the questions on the page, every few minutes.

Finally, he guessed his answer to the last question and stretched out his hands, wincing as he felt a blister coming up on his forefinger. "I'm finished, Professor," he announced.

"Very well." McGonagall, who had been doing her own paperwork the whole time, looked up at him. "I shall send them to the appropriate teachers for marking tonight, and we should know by tomorrow whether you may return to classes. You may return to your common room."

"Okay." Scorpius hesitated at the door. "Um, Professor?"
"Yes, Mr Malfoy?"

"Er, could you turn off the moving staircase, please? The chair doesn't like it much."

McGonagall looked so surprised, Scorpius was surprised her glasses didn't fall entirely off her nose. Behind her, Scorpius thought he saw the portrait of Severus Snape glance momentarily up at him, and back down again. "Oh. Yes… of course," McGonagall said eventually, sounding slightly flustered. "Very well." She waved her wand towards the door. "And... how are you getting along?" she asked, almost as an afterthought.

Scorpius shrugged. "Not too bad, I guess. It can always be worse, right?"

She was silent for a moment, and Scorpius was just thinking that perhaps she wasn't going to answer and he should just leave, when she said, "I think that one, should one wish to live one's life to the fullest, and in order to keep looking forward, rather than to the past, should try to think a little more positively, Mr Malfoy."

This time, the Snape portrait definitely looked up at him, and held his eyes for just a fraction of a second before disappearing out of the frame entirely.

~*-S-*~

~*-S-*~

It was sometime between lunch and dinner, he guessed as he made his way back down from the Headmistress' office. He considered going back to Ravenclaw Tower, but he was sure it would be quite depressing there by himself. Perhaps he could go outside. If there were no Herbology classes on at the moment, he could visit Neville at the greenhouses. His plans were thwarted, however, as he passed the Transfiguration classroom.

Someone came out of the door, clearly in a hurry, and tripped over the wheelchair. Scorpius yelped as the jarring movement caused his back to protest painfully. The chair, hiked onto its side, balanced precariously for a moment on two wheels, until gravity forced it back onto the ground with a thud that quite took Scorpius' breath away. He panted, gritting his teeth and trying not to let the sound of his pain escape him. The last thing he needed was to started whimpering right in the middle of the corridor.

But then, his pain was forced to the back of his mind as he focussed on the person who had nearly toppled him. Staring up at him from the ground, eyes wide with some unnamable emotion, was Jian Chung. This in itself was not quite so shocking as the realisation that he had seen all this before. Two weeks before. He was in the exact same place, and Jian was lying in the exact same position as in his dream. But in the dream, he had thought they had been fighting, and that he had knocked the other boy down. That scenario, he realised, holding a hand to his aching ribs, was scraping the heights of optimism.

"Scorp!" Inwardly, Scorpius groaned as Rose came running towards him, her bag swinging over her shoulder. "Are you all right? Flitwick said you were doing exams, but you've been ages. You're not hurt, are you?"

"Fine," Scorp muttered. The classroom was emptying into the hallway - the NEWT Transfiguration class, so of course he knew all of them. Fantastic.

"What d'you think you're about, Chung?" Albus demanded, grasping one of the handles of the chair as if getting ready to shove it to one side, should it come to a fight. "How about looking where you're
Jian scrambled awkwardly to his knees, then to his feet. There were grubby marks on his robes where he had fallen. He looked at Scorpius. Scorpius wondered if the Slytherin boy was going to curse him, or just make a scathing remark. Instead, quite unexpectedly, he said; "My apologies, Malfoy. I was careless. Sorry." The last sounded so shockingly sincere that Scorpius' mouth actually dropped open. He closed it again, feeling embarrassed.

"S'okay," he breathed. Albus poked him hard between the shoulder blades. "What?" he snapped, half-turning his head to glare at his friend. "He said he was sorry."

"What's going on out here?" Professor Davies poked his head around the door. "Why are you lot all standing - oh." He paused, seeing Scorpius, and smiled an uncertain sort of smile. "Good afternoon Mr Malfoy. Everything all right?"

"Yeah, fine thanks Professor," he replied, punching Albus' in the knee, since that was the only place he could reach. Jian had already dispersed with most of the crowd, anyway. "Just getting the hang of being back, you know how it is…"

Davies nodded, and after professing that he was sure Scorpius would be back in his class by the next day, he waved them on their way.

"Hang on," Scorpius wondered out loud once they were out of earshot. "What's Chung doing in NEWT Transfiguration anyway? He didn't do it last year, did he?" He was pretty sure he would have remembered that - he hadn't been gone that long, after all.

"I didn't ask him," Albus muttered. "Summer school, maybe."

"That was strange though, wasn't it?" Rose said thoughtfully as they walked. "Chung, I mean. He was almost nice about it."

"He's an arse," Albus grumbled. "Are we forgetting that time he hexed you in Defence Against the Dark Arts? Or when him and his mates cornered me in the library? Or, and this is my personal favourite, the time they nearly suffocated Scorp with Dungbombs?"

"Cornered you?" Scorpius scoffed, unable to help himself. "To hear you tell it, you practically attacked all of them, one-on-four."

"Yes, well." Albus shrugged. "Chung started it. Going on about half-humans and that. He's always been bad news - you just caught him off guard, that's all."

Rose sighed. "You're probably right. He couldn't exactly shout at you with Professor Davies right behind the door."

Still, Scorpius thought as his friends peeled off to their next classes - Rose to A Study of Ancient Runes and Albus to Care of Magical Creatures - the fact that he had seen Jian fall in his dream was more than a little unsettling. It wasn't the first time this had happened since the Moonsilver, and he couldn't help but feel that he ought to pay attention to whatever the dreams were trying to tell him. Too bad he had failed his Divination OWL, he thought, willing the chair down the marble staircase and out into the marvellously fresh air of the Hogwarts grounds. He wondered if he should tell someone about the dream. His friends would no doubt tip-toe around him even more than they did already, so they were out. Neville would probably be as comforting as he could, but not helpful. McGonagall would think he was mad. The thought of asking either Professor Trelawny or Firenze about it wasn't really appealing, either. On the other hand, it wasn't as though he was dreaming about
anyone dying or anything drastic like that… anymore. *It's probably a coincidence,* he decided. *No need to worry anyone. Not yet, anyway.*

If it happened again, he decided, he would do something about it.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for your patience everyone! It's been writer's block now for a few weeks, on top of work and extra curriculars and oh yeah, a torn ligament. I hope the chapter was worth it.

This time, I'd love it if you could comment and tell me how you found my story. Did you stumble across it or were you looking for something similar? Was it recommended to you? I want to know!


On Saturday morning, he got a letter from Cleo wishing him luck, and saying that she had found a potential flat in London. The thought made his stomach twist slightly, and not just because of what she had offered just before he had left for school. It just seemed such a grown up thing to do, getting a flat. Although he was nearly eighteen, he didn't feel old enough to even consider moving out of home, and Cleo was three months younger than he was.

~*-A-*~

"So?" Albus asked Scorpius the next morning as he stared down at the class timetable Professor Flitwick had just handed to him. "Did you pass?"

"Must have," Scorpius replied, spreading the parchment on the table next to his porridge. "They're all on there."

Rose craned over her breakfast to inspect his timetable. "Well we knew you would," she said happily.

"There's a lot of free time on this," Scorpius said, frowning and turning it over as if it was some kind of trick.

"It's to give us more time to do our coursework," Rose explained. "You know, the special NEWT projects."

"Oh, yeah." The look on his face was one of anxious realisation.

"Have you thought about them at all? You know we were meant to come up with prospective topics over the sumn…” She interrupted herself at the look on Scorpius' face. "Oh. Well, that's fine. We'll help you, right Al?"

Albus swallowed down his last bite of breakfast. "Yeah no problem. At least you only have to do four. We've got to do five each, and I still don't know what I'm doing for Care of Magical Creatures…”

"You could raise a Hippogriff from infancy," Rose suggested impishly. "I bet Hagrid'd love that."

"Or I could get the Scamanders to do it for me," he ruminated out loud. "Did you hear what Peter and Janey found in Lysander's trunk last night?"

"No," Rose's eyes widened.

"A half dozen pixie eggs. They were all curled up in his robes like a little nest. He has to do detention with the Caretaker for a week."
"Lorcan too?"

"Nah, they didn't find anything on him."

"Well that's not very fair. They must know they were in it together, they always are."

"That's just what Peter said, right Scorp?" Albus turned back to his friend. He was bent slightly over his porridge, his spoon gripped too-tightly in his right hand. "Scorp? You all right?"

"Fine," Scorpius grunted, his head jerking suddenly as if he'd been woken from a particularly deep daydream. Rose put a hand on his arm and he smiled weakly up at her. Albus couldn't help but feel slightly jealous, though he wasn't sure that was the right emotion at all. It annoyed him that Rose could make him feel better with just a touch and a smile while all he, Albus, could do was make jokes and try to pretend as though everything was fine.

"We better get to Defence Against the Dark Arts, then," he said after a moment.

"We're early," Rose protested. She still had half a piece of toast left.

"Yeah but..." he made what he hoped was a subtle indication towards Scorpius' wheelchair.

"Stop that," Scorp muttered. "I bet I'm faster than both of you. I don't need pandering. Finish your breakfast."

Rose shot Albus a disapproving look, as though her boyfriend's mood was suddenly his fault.

~*-A-*~

Defence Against the Dark Arts, when they got there, seemed to have been turned on its head. Tufty announced that there would be a lot more duelling practice and periodical 'practical tests' all the way up to their NEWTs. It seemed that Neville had made good on his promise to talk to Professor Tufty about including more practical classes into the curriculum. While this was probably a good thing overall, it irked Albus that the tight-lipped old Professor kept looking at him whenever she mentioned these changes. Everyone else seemed a lot more worried by the way she talked about the 'practical tests' analysing their reflexes.

"She had a dodgy look in her eye," said Lizzie nervously as they left the classroom. "Why do I get the feeling she's going to be jumping out at us from behind suits of armour when we're least expecting it, and hurling curses?"

"Tufty's way too stiff for something like that," Gaius argued. "She'll set some monsters on us while we're sleeping."

"I could see her locking the whole class in a room for a week and seeing who survives," Albus sighed. No one laughed.

He decided not to mention that it had been his actions over the summer that had led to this sudden change in the curriculum. Somehow he didn't think it would do much for his popularity.

The week seemed to go very quickly, once they got back into the rhythm of classes and homework. A couple of younger Ravenclaws asked Albus when he was scheduling Quidditch tryouts, reminding him each time that he had ignored his playbook all summer and needed to try out a new Keeper. Unfortunately his weekend was already full to brimming with homework, and his first St. Mungos visit. Rose offered to run the tryouts for him, but he grimaced inwardly at that thought. He was the captain. He'd look a right prat getting his first Chaser to run his tryouts for him.
while he did his community service.

"I'll do it next week," he promised. "We might not have as much homework then." He realised this was scraping the barrel of optimism, but he really couldn't afford to fall behind in his NEWTs, with his parents in their current mood.

On Saturday morning, he got a letter from Cleo wishing him luck, and saying that she had found a potential flat in London. The thought made his stomach twist slightly, and not just because of what she had offered just before he had left for school. It just seemed such a grown up thing to do, getting a flat. Although he was nearly eighteen, he didn't feel old enough to even consider moving out of home, and Cleo was three months younger than he was.

Scorpius had a letter too. He glanced at it, frowned, and tucked it in his pocket, ignoring Rose's attempts to read over his shoulder. "Ready?" he asked.

"Yeah," Albus sighed. "Let's get it over with, then."

"Anyone would think you were going to get prodded at by Knox for an hour," Scorpius told him bitterly once Rose had waved them goodbye and they had headed off into the grounds. While Scorpius still had to go to the hospital every week, it made sense for the two of them to go together, so they had organised Albus' work hours to match Scorp's appointments. "How bad can it be?"

"What if I have to attach someone's severed arm, or something?" Albus grimaced.

Scorpius shot him an incredulous look from where he was rolling sedately along beside him, the wheels of the chair hovering ever so slightly above the uneven ground. It really was clever how he did that, Albus thought, and then he wondered if his friend even realised he was doing it. "I doubt they'd let you do something like that on your first day," Scorpius said practically. "You'll be lucky if you get to wipe some kid's snotty nose, I expect."

"I s'pose so," Al sighed, uncertain.

Hagrid opened the gates for them at the boundary, and they went a little way beyond the great stone boars to make sure they were beyond the Apparition wards. "Sure you don't want to Side-Along?" Albus asked, eyeing his friend as he brought the chair to a smooth stop.

"I can manage," Scorpius shot back, as if he had been expecting the question. That was pretty much his standard response to anything, lately. Knox had given him permission to Apparate to St Mungos and back as soon as he felt 'up to it', whatever that meant. Albus thought it wouldn't make any difference whether he felt 'up to it' or not if it turned out he really couldn't take the chair with him. "Anyway I'm going to the right place if I splinch myself," Scorpius pointed out, when Al still hesitated. "Go on. I'll meet you."

Reluctantly, as he hadn't at all planned on going first, Albus Disapparated. He was a bit out of practice, but it was a bit like riding a broom; once you got the hang of it, it was something you never forgot how to do. He arrived in the waiting room of St Mungos, startling an elderly witch with what looked like scales growing on her nose and chin. "Watch yourself young man!" she wheezed disapprovingly. "You nearly landed in my lap!"

"Sorry," he muttered, moving hastily out of the way. A second later, Scorpius appeared with a crack beside him, chair and all, narrowly missing the bench but not looking any the worse for wear, except for maybe being a bit sweaty around the temples. He gave Al a triumphant look, as if to say told you I could do it. Albus resisted the urge to roll his eyes. He went up to the welcome witch and told her they were here to see Healer Knox. She nodded apologetically and spoke into a brass
speaking tube on a stand. It didn't seem to be connected to anything, but they had only waited ten
minutes before Knox showed up, cheerful as ever despite an extremely obvious bloodstain down the
front of his robe.

"Er… is everything all right?" Albus asked nervously as the man came up to them.

"What? Oh, this?" Knox waved a hand dismissively. "Silly fool shouldn't have tried to keep a
Grindylow in his bathtub. And how's my most interesting patient this morning?"

Scorpius made a face. Albus could tell he didn't like the sound of 'most interesting'. "Same," he said,
shrugging.

"Well, come along then. I'll do your examination and then we'll start some exercises to get your body
working naturally again." He turned to lead Scorpius to the elevator.

"Um… what about me?" Albus asked quickly.

Knox glanced back over his shoulder, surprised.

"My parents organised some volunteer work with you…" Albus said, attempting to jog his memory.
"Doing Healing? Um…"

Something like recognition and a little like annoyance flickered in Knox's expression. "Ah. Yes. Potter, isn't it?"

Albus blinked. Surely Knox remembered him. He'd been in and out of the hospital the whole time
Scorpius had been here, even if his father hadn't been the most famous wizard in the world. "Uh…
yeah…"

"Hm." Knox cross his arms and stroked his chin with the hand that still held his wand. "Know many
Healing spells, do you?"

Albus swallowed. He hadn't realised there would be a quiz. "Um… just the ones we learn at school," he admitted. "Er… Episky? … Ferula?"

"Ferula is not a healing spell," Knox chided. "A Healer would not need to immobilise a broken
bone, unless there were complications. And Episky is for very basic hurts. Anything else?"

Albus thought desperately for a minute, but had nothing. He wondered why they
didn't do more
Healing charms at school.

"Healing," Knox said sternly, "is a focused, extremely taxing discipline which requires complete
concentration of the mind and delicate magical skill. Do you really believe you have what it takes,
Mr Potter?"

Al stared. It wasn't as though he had asked to come here. Somehow he thought 'I'm only here
because my parents made me', was not an answer that would satisfy the mad old Healer, however.
Behind Knox, Scorpius was nodding his head with a slow, exaggerated movement. "Yes?" he guessed.

Knox nodded, though still did not appear enthusiastic. "Very well then," he said. "We will begin
after the examination."

~*-S-*~
Knox did as he had promised, and dragged Albus away as soon as he had pronounced Scorpius ready to begin his therapy. Scorpius had never felt less ready for anything in his life, especially when two young witches came in and announced they were going to show him exercises that would encourage his lower body to work properly with his new spine. The first thing they had to do, he was told, was remove the immobilisation spells on his hips and legs. Scorpius bit the inside of his cheek. This was the only way things were going to get better.

Once the spells were off, however, it became perfectly clear to everyone that even starting the exercises might be a lost cause. His legs dangled uselessly and painfully, every movement sending a stab of pain up his back so forceful that he gasped and grabbed the chair arms for dear life. He felt a hope that he hadn't even realised he had been harbouring begin to shrivel up and die. "Now, now," one of the Healers said, with polite admonishment. "Take it one step at a time, my dear."

Scorpius glared at her. "No pun intended," she added, cheerfully. Scorpius wondered if it was a job requirement for Healers to act blasé about stuff like this. "Your body has gotten used to being in that fixed position. It's good to stretch it out a little. Can you try and lift your foot for me?"

Scorpius grimaced. He was having a hard enough time sitting up straight in the chair.

"Come on now, try for me," the Healer urged.

"I am trying," he growled through gritted teeth.

The two Healers exchanged meaningful glances. "What?" Scorpius demanded. "Is that bad?" Of course it's bad, he told himself sternly. Don't be a baby. You knew this could happen. But that didn't stop a ball of misery from expanding steadily in his chest.

"Not to worry," the Healer said, through a horribly false smile. "How about you try to move your knee for me?"

Without either of the boys, and no Quidditch Practice to attend, Rose ended up in the library on her first weekend back at Hogwarts. There were only a few people in there - mostly other Ravenclaws, it had to be said - so it was nice and quiet, and she got through several of her weekly assignments much faster than she might have with Albus or Scorpius to distract her, even if her mind did wander occasionally to what they could be doing.

It was nice to do homework. That was really the only way she could explain it, silly as it sounded even in her own head. It was such a nice, normal thing to do, that compared to the drama of the last few weeks, it was practically relaxing. And for the top witch of the year, not even particularly difficult.

Her mother had told her to make sure she got a head start on the NEWT projects. A significant percentage of NEWT scores were attributed to these projects, a form of coursework that varied from subject to subject but was, for the most part, up to the student what it entailed. They ranged from the entirely theoretical - an extended essay on the associated dangers, difficulties and history of the Animagus Transformation, for example - to the practical - such as actually becoming an Animagus. That was certainly a tempting project for some people, but you had to get special permission from the Transfiguration Professor and Headmistress, and you were not allowed to
perform any of the spells without supervision, so you had to keep making appointments, and of the
few who had tried it, only one in living memory had ever actually managed it in their seventh year.
Everyone knew that the student had been Professor McGonagall, but rumour was that she hadn't
performed the transformation in many years. Of course, the extended Potter family knew a little more
than most others about a few Animaguses that hadn't got permission, and had managed the
transformation much, much earlier than their seventh year.

Still, Rose thought, as attractive as Professor Davies was, the idea of having to sit in his office doing
Animagus spells and trances several times a week - and possibly not even get anywhere - was less
than appealing. And anyway, she had four other subjects to worry about. For Potions she was going
to try some advanced brews, with variations, and write an accompanying essay on her findings. She
was going to create an interactive presentation about protective, secrecy and concealment spells for
Charms, and a research project on the history of the classification of Dark spells for Defence Against
the Dark Arts, which just left A Study of Ancient Runes. She knew what she wanted to do. She just
wasn't sure if Scorpius would go for it, and if he wouldn't, well, the whole thing was rather pointless
really.

She stood up and stretched, looking around the library. There was a section at the far end, in the
Restricted Section, where the library kept previous NEWT projects by former students. They were
supposed to go back hundreds of years, and the idea was that they would provide inspiration. Rose
was sure they had some way of stopping people from copying them, though how they managed it
was beyond her. Maybe that was part of the reason they were in the Restricted Section in the first
place.

Thinking she may as well have a look, to see if anyone had done anything similar, she obtained a
pass from Madam Pince and headed into the section entitled 'NEWT Coursework - A Study of
Ancient Runes - 1543-2023'. There were a lot of scrolls. Luckily they were also very well labelled.
She walked up to the far end, where the more recent scrolls lay piled neatly on the shelves. Instead of
looking for a specific subject, she found herself eyeing the names on the labels, some of which meant
nothing to her, but a select few stood out as if they were different entirely. She saw Teddy's name
first, and Victoire's, next to it. Molly's was an earlier scroll, but on a shelf much too high to reach.
She went down a shelf or two until she reached the late nineties, and paused with her fingers
hovering over a particular name.

Making up her mind - there was no harm in being curious, after all - she picked out the scroll and
unrolled it, reading the title as it unfurled; "The Tales of Beedle the Bard, written by Beedle the Bard,
Translated by Hermione Granger for the NEWT in A Study of Ancient Runes, 1999." Eyes glued to
the page, she turned back into the aisle with the aim of returning to her table to read, but before she
could take another step she had collided with someone coming the other way. Whoever it was
dropped a whole armful of scrolls all over the floor. She opened her mouth to apologise, only to find
Jian Chung's dark, narrow eyes staring back at her.

"Well," she said, putting her hands on her hips. "You are clumsy this term, aren't you?"

Chung grimaced. "Sorry, Weasley." He knelt on the floor and started gathering his scrolls. Rose
immediately felt sorry herself. She had been expecting him to sneer at her. She knelt and started
helping him with the scrolls, noticing as she picked them up that they were all projects from NEWT
Transfiguration.

"Bit of light reading?" she asked, by way of apology.

He blinked and looked up at her quickly, as if trying to work out if she was being sarcastic. "Oh…
yes, I suppose so," he said, picking up the last of the scrolls. "Thought I better… just to get some
ideas. You?"

Rose flushed and fumbled around in her pile for her original scrolls. "It's um, my mum's," she explained sheepishly. "I was just curious."

Jian actually chuckled, to her great surprise. "Yeah well, I bet you're not the first one to do that," he said. "Are you collecting them all, or just interested in Runes?"

Rose could not very well explain why this particular project was so important. "Runes is the only one I'm not decided on, yet," she said instead. "Are you er… struggling with Transfiguration, particularly?"

Jian made a face. The expression looked, for a moment, so much like Albus that she almost did a double take. "I'm a bit behind," he admitted, cautiously.

Rose hesitated. Then, "How come you decided to take it this year?" she blurted out. "You must have had to do a lot of work over the summer…"

He nodded and suddenly wouldn't quite meet her eyes. "My uncle insisted," he muttered.

"Oh," she said, nonplussed. "He, um… couldn't have insisted a year earlier?" she meant it as a joke - sort of - but his expression was far from amused.

"I only went to live with him this summer," he explained. "My father… passed away, last term."

Rose put a hand to her mouth. "Oh my god," she gasped. "I'm so sorry…"

He shrugged and shook his head. "Never mind," he said. "I didn't expect you to know."

Why not? Rose wanted to ask, but then she wondered if she would have heard about it anyway. She had been too miserable herself towards the end of last term that any such gossip had surely passed her by entirely. "Well I'm sorry anyway," she said. "But now your uncle wants you doing Transfiguration?"

He nodded. "I had to drop Arithmancy."

She winced sympathetically. His OWL in Arithmancy had been second only to her own. She tried to imagine her parents making her drop A Study of Ancient Runes for something else she was much less practiced in, and couldn't. Not that she would have listened, in any case. "I could help…" she began, almost before she realised what she was saying.

He frowned. "You are helping," he pointed out, nodding towards the piles of scrolls in her arms.

"No, I meant…" she flushed slightly. "With Transfiguration. If you want. Its a bit much of your uncle to expect you to catch up on a whole year of advanced material by yourself."

He cocked his head to one side slightly. "You'd do that? Why?"

She regarded him carefully. Why was she offering? Albus and Scorpius would both say she was mad. But when she thought about it, all the things that Albus had talked about when it came to Jian had happened a long time ago. Looking at the Slytherin boy now, he seemed to have grown up when no one was looking. And if there was anything her relationship with Scorpius had taught her, it was that everyone deserved a second chance.

"Because I'm a nice person," she said firmly. "Do you want tutoring or not?"
When she got back to Ravenclaw Tower that evening, Albus was sprawled on one of the big sofas with his eyes closed, and Scorpius was sitting nearby, reading a huge book - or at least pretending to read it. He looked utterly miserable. She sighed, gathered herself as best she could, and made her way over to them. "So… how'd it go?" she asked tentatively.

Albus groaned into a cushion without opening his eyes. Scorpius didn't say anything, but gave the tiniest of minute shrugs.

"Well I'm glad you both had such a good time," she sighed, shoving Albus' legs out of the way so she could sit down. He grumbled and curled himself into a little ball at his end of the sofa. "Did you at least learn something?"

"Oh yes," Al said emphatically, his voice muffled slightly by the cushion. "I learned charms for cleaning sheets, charms for cleaning floors, charms for mopping up blood, charms for cleaning sick off human skin…"

"Gross," Rose wrinkled her nose.

"Just leave me alone to die," her cousin moaned, pulling his arms over his head.

Rose gave up on him as a lost cause and turned to Scorp. "Scorp?" she prompted tentatively. "You okay?"

"Fine." He closed the book, leaving his finger between the pages to mark the page. Luckily he wasn't very far in, or the thing might have crushed his finger. From here she could just read the title upside-down - 'A History of Magical & Muggle Relations Through the Ages 5000 BC - 2000 AD'. "They just said it'll take a while, that's all." There was something odd in his face that she read as disappointment. Somehow she managed to conjure up a smile.

"Well, we knew that," she said sensibly. "That it might take time. Right?"

He nodded, and she searched around for something with which to change the subject. She didn't have to look far. "So… you guys will never guess who I literally ran into in the library.

Rose launched into the whole story, quite enjoying the way Albus' expression flickered between shock, disgust and red fury.

"Hang on - you offered to TUTOR him?" he gasped eventually, his eyes wide behind his glasses. "Rose, this is Chung, the guy who -"

"Brawled with you in the library, three years ago?" Rose suggested sweetly.

"What, his dad dies and suddenly he's a nicer person?"

Rose glared disapprovingly at her cousin. Even Scorpius looked slightly shocked. "When was the
"last time you spoke to him, Albus Potter?" she demanded. "How can you possibly know what he's like? He could have changed two years ago and none of us would know about it."

Al turned to look desperately at Scorpius. "Come on mate," he said quickly. "You can't be okay with this, right?"

Rose raised her eyebrows at Scorpius expectantly. Scorpius understood about second chances.

He looked uncomfortable for a moment, then he said. "Well… I think its great you're trying to help, and all… I just… don't much like the idea of you being… well, alone with him…"

Rose gave up. "Boys," she exclaimed, getting up from the sofa and storming over to the dormitory staircase.

~*-A-*~

~*-A-*~

The next three weeks passed overly quickly for the seventh years. By the end of September, the teachers for all their classes were demanding proposals for their NEWT projects on top of all the extra homework they now had to do for their advanced classes. Most of the students had become rusty over the summer holiday, even though they had been able to use magic; hardly anyone had practiced their non verbal spells, except possibly some of the Ravenclaws. Peter beat Rose in their first Transfiguration test of the year, and was smug about it for the rest of the day. Albus couldn't really blame him; the poor guy worked hard for his marks. Not that Rose didn't, but she was also an extremely talented witch who picked things up with an uncanny ease that occasionally annoyed people.

The reason Rose wasn't performing to her usual standard was clear enough. She spent as much time as she could with Scorpius, helping him catch up with those classes that they shared, and even the one they didn't (Muggle Studies) by testing him out of the textbook. In fact, the only time she wasn't with him during the day, other than Quidditch practice, was when she went off to meet Jian Chung in the library twice a week. Albus still did not feel good about this, but he reasoned that she was still the best in the year at Charms and would no doubt be able to defend herself if the situation arose. Still, it made him uncomfortable. Scorpius was not forthcoming on his feelings, but then, he was becoming less and less talkative as time went on. It worried Albus, and he could see that it worried Rose as well.

Rose couldn't be with Scorpius at night, though. Instead, Albus got to lie awake and listen to his friend moan and whimper in his sleep as the vile green potion took effect. Peter and Gaius started casting deafening charms on themselves before they went to sleep, but Albus knew he could do no such thing. He forced himself to listen to every stomach-churning second of it, tensed, expecting at any moment to hear a scream. Someone had to. He would never forgive himself if he shut himself out from the sound, allowing himself to enjoy a peaceful sleep when Scorpius slept fitfully, in pain all night long, and all brought on by Albus' own personal brand of idiocy. No, he had to listen to it, and be ready in case something bad might happen - even at Hogwarts, with Draco Malfoy locked up in a different country entirely, he couldn't help feeling that they still weren't entirely safe from the Shadow, who had, after all, infiltrated their dormitory before. But the result was that both boys slept little and were tired all day. Scorpius' marks improved much slower than they would have otherwise, and Albus' not at all, as he had both Quidditch and his weekly stint at St Mungo's on top of everything else.

He had finally held the Quidditch trials in the second week of term, after all the other House teams. There were no really outstanding Keepers amongst the applicants, so the reserve Keeper, a tall girl in
Lily's year, got bumped up to full position, and he cast the Scamandlers as back up Keepers with the thought that he would probably regret that later. His cousin Lucy, who he had never thought was really into Quidditch, did well enough at the trials that he made her reserve Chaser. Those were really the only changes to the line up, since all the Ravenclaws in the upper years were too busy with NEWTs to try out. Albus had to convince Janey to stay with some difficulty, since apparently her mother had been pressuring her to get all Os.

After a particularly tough practice at the start of October, he trudged all the way up to Ravenclaw Tower, only to be informed by Rose that they were all going to study in the library after dinner. He frowned at her suspiciously. "Don't you have a tutoring session tonight?" he asked, knowingly.

"Maybe," Rose replied, with a failed attempt at evasiveness, then she sighed. "Well that's why I think you all should come. He's not that bad, honestly."

"Rose, I'm knackered. With St Mungo's yesterday, and Quidditch…"

"Have you started your Charms proposal yet?"

Albus glared at her, but was forced to admit that he hadn't, and it was due in two days. So, after dinner, he reluctantly gathered his things and followed Scorpius' wheelchair back up to the library.

The study group was bigger than he had expected. Lizzie was there, for one. So was Belinda. "Bel," Albus said, sitting deliberately down opposite her and not at the other end of the table where Rose sat with Jian. "Haven't seen you much since school started. How's things?"

Belinda made a face. "Not great," she sighed. "I passed those make up exams, but Charms just keeps getting harder. I'm afraid I might have to drop it, if I keep getting behind."

"I'm sure you won't," Al said. "Peter will tutor you."

Rose gave him a look that said she knew exactly what she was doing - or possibly just disapproval for talking in the library, he wasn't sure. He ignored her. Scorpius, at least, seemed to have no interest in sitting with Jian either. His chair drew up beside Albus, for which he was utterly grateful.

"He tried," Belinda sighed. "It was a bit of a strain on the relationship." Lizzie had her nose deep in her Herbology textbook, but Albus heard her snort.

The old librarian came round to shush them until submission, and after that they mostly settled into their various essays, notes or reading. Well, most of them did. Albus was too tired to concentrate.

When he drifted off, he kept thinking about the things he had seen at St Mungo's in just a few short weeks. That first day had been dreadful, it was true. Knox had gleefully forced him to clean up the most foul of bodily fluids, which was apparently what the mad old Healer deemed a thorough grounding in medical procedure. But the following week, he had let Albus help close a few wounds, cast numbing charms, even set a broken bone. These things, he was told, were simple spells that first year Healers were taught. By the following week, he was restarting heartbeats. Yesterday, a man had come in with one of his arms turned into a tentacle, and Albus had helped with the research into how to reverse it. Magical injuries, the Healers kept explaining to him, were the hardest to deal with, and that was what Healers really trained for. None of them seemed to think of setting bones or restarting hearts as anything particularly challenging or even special. To Albus, it was all rather incredible. He had never really hurt himself badly, except a couple of Quidditch scrapes, and so had never experienced a real Healing, although James and Lily had broken an arm each, growing up.

As he daydreamed, he slowly became aware that he was staring at Lizzie. She was leaning forward
over the desk, her chin in one hand as she read, the book propped open on the table. Her still-short hair hung softly around her face, her lips moving ever so slightly in concentration. There was dirt under her fingernails, but then, there usually was, these days.

"No," Rose said suddenly into the silence. shattering Albus' peaceful reverie. At the same time, Lizzie seemed to realise his eyes were on her, and looked up, frowning. He looked quickly back down at his proposal. "The Hexotransfigural Reversion goes before the actual conversion."

"What?" Jian's voice sounded exasperated. "That makes no sense."

"You have to reduce the subject to its basic parts before it can be transformed," Rose started to explain.

Albus glared down at his parchment, feeling his face heat up steadily. He was so tired, he'd gone and let his ex-girlfriend catch him staring at her like a lovesick puppy. He scribbled a few sentences that made less sense than they ought, making a hurried pretence of looking something up in his textbook. He had decided to research disguise charms for his project, but unsurprisingly there was a lot of material to wade through. He was still working his way up to asking his dad if he could borrow the Invisibility Cloak for his presentation. He didn't hold out much hope, since the last time he'd used it he'd taken it without asking and it had gotten thoroughly soaked with Scorpius' blood. Perhaps he better wait a few more months before sending any owls…

When he looked up, Lizzie was back in her book, and it seemed like nothing had happened. Still, it made it hard to concentrate through the next two hours, at which point the general consensus was that it was bedtime.

They were just leaving the library when Lizzie pulled him back. "Can I talk to you?" she asked, the expression on her face quite unreadable. He swallowed, and waved Scorpius and Rose to go on without him. Bel went with them after Lizzie shot her a pointed look, and Jian wandered off in the direction of the dungeons.

"Yeah?" he asked, a little nervously.

She seemed to hesitate for a moment, then she said, in a rush, "I just wanted to see if you were okay. You know, with the whole Scorpius thing, and St Mungos…"

"Oh." Well, he shouldn't have known she didn't want to say anything too personal. After all they were in a public corridor, even if it did seem that they were the only group of seventh years mad enough to be studying in the library at this time of night. "Well, yeah. I guess so."

She raised her eyebrows at him. "Uh huh. The bags under your eyes and the vacant staring into space you've been doing tell a different story."

He made a face at her. "Thanks a lot."

"As Head Girl, I'm supposed to look out for my fellow students. And Warren's not going to look after you. I think he's still a bit scared of you, to be honest."

"For the last time, I had nothing to do with the chicken legs! That was all James and Fred and Roxie!"

"I know, but everyone knows you've got… connections."

Albus snorted. "Usually when people say that, they mean my dad. Weird to think of James as leverage."
Lizzie crossed her arms over her chest in the way that said she meant Serious Business. "Al, you're exhausted. Did you actually write anything for the last two hours?"

Albus thought grimly of the ink-stained parchment in his bag. "Course I did. Might not make any sense, but I definitely wrote something."

"That's what I thought. You've got to take better care of yourself."

Al stared at her. "You're adorable when you're giving someone a telling off," he said, before the words could bypass his brain.

Lizzie's mouth dropped open for a moment, her eyes wide with disbelief. "You're an arse," she said eventually, and turned to leave, but he caught her arm and brought her back into a lingering kiss. For a second, she seemed to relax a little against him, and he could have sworn her fingers brushed his cheek. But then she was shoving him away, an indignant expression on her face. "Albus!"

"What?"

"You have a girlfriend."

Albus blinked. Right now, it didn't seem to matter. Cleo was far away and seemed to belong to another lifetime, when he'd been someone else. Lizzie was right here in front of him, and he was only just now realising it. But before he could say anything to that effect, as little sense as he knew it would make, she was turning around and storming off down the corridor, and he was left staring after her.

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Seventh Year Part 3: Healing Days

Chapter Summary

Still, these little true-dreams didn’t seem like much to worry about, at least, not to the point where it should warrant asking Professor Trelawny about them. Or that was what he thought until the morning of the following Tuesday, when they entered the Great Hall to whispers and people pointing at them.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

2023

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By half way through October, Scorpius had had two more dreams literally come true. They were only little, stupid things, but it was disturbing all the same. In one of them, Albus had spilled half a boat of gravy down his robes, and the exact same thing had happened that very night, when Lizzie walked past and shot him a dirty look. The two of them were not talking, for some reason - or at least, Lizzie was not talking to Albus, and Albus was sulking about it. In the other dream, he had predicted the arrival of three exciting letters, and two mornings later, at breakfast, the invitations to Teddy and Victoire's wedding had arrived. They would be married in May, just before NEWTs.

"Like we haven't already known for weeks," Albus muttered as Rose exclaimed over her invitation.

"But now its official," Rose sighed dreamily.

Albus merely shrugged and went back to eating his bacon and eggs.

Scorpius was pleased, and secretly relieved, by the invitations. Not because he hadn't expected to get one - Albus had managed to convince him otherwise several weeks ago - but for the lack of any other post. He had been getting dozens of letters since the first week of school, some stamped with the Ministry seal. It didn't take much imagination to figure out who they were from. He hadn't read any of them, even if some were so thick that he had had to open them before he could tear them up. His father had had plenty of chances to talk to him; Scorpius didn't see why he should listen anymore.

Still, these little true-dreams didn't seem like much to worry about, at least, not to the point where it should warrant asking Professor Trelawny about them. Or that was what he thought until the morning of the following Tuesday, when they entered the Great Hall to whispers and people pointing at them.

"What now?" Scorpius sighed, looking around. He had thought the novelty of him and his chair had mostly worn off. Oddly though, the attention seemed to be more on the others than on him.

"You'll never guess," said a grumbling voice from beside them, as someone came over from the Gyffindor table. It was Hugo.
"What is it?" Rose demanded, keeping her voice low. "Did something happen with the Shadow?"

Her brother shook his head, and handed her a copy of the Prophet in answer. Rose looked at it. Then she gasped. Albus, reading over her shoulder, swallowed hard. "Bloody hell," he said, breathlessly.

"What?" Scorpius demanded, unable to see from his position beneath and in front of the paper. Verso, he thought crossly, with one hand on the right wheel, and the chair spun around to the left so he was facing them.

Reluctantly, Rose showed him the front page. The Headline read: SHACKLEBOLT RESIGNS. And underneath, in smaller type, read: HERMIONE WEASLEY TO BECOME MINISTER FOR MAGIC. And underneath that, in even smaller type: "Harry Potter approves appointment of war heroine".

Scorpius felt queasy. Only two night's ago, he had dreamed that Kingsley Shacklebolt had fallen over in his office. It was weird, since he had never even seen seen the Minister except at a distance at the yearly memorial services. But since he, Scorpius, wasn't in the dream, and it had been followed by a scene of some House Elves doing a circus act, he had dismissed it as just a normal dream. But now he wasn't so sure.

"I knew he was ill," Albus muttered as they went over to sit at their usual place at the Ravenclaw table, and did their best to ignore the staring. "I didn't think he was that ill."

"Oughtn't your uncle have been made Minister?" Scorpius asked. It was the only thing he could think of to say. He looked down the table to where Lucy Weasley was chattering excitedly with her friends and passing the paper around.

"Percy?" Albus snorted. "I think he only took the deputy position under duress. He didn't want to be in the Ministry at all, after the war."

"I can't believe this," Rose muttered, scanning the article for more detail. "Its so sudden. The Wizengamot usually take ages to decide on a new Minister… historically, anyway…"

"Does it say what happened to Kingsley?" Albus asked, sounding concerned as he leant over her shoulder. Scorpius remembered what the Deputy Minister had said during his interview, about how Shacklebolt had taken an unexpected turn for the worse over the summer.

"It just says he's unable to continue his duties," Rose replied, turning to the continuation on page three. "I hope he's all right. He was Minister for over twenty years."

Peering awkwardly over Rose's shoulder, Scorpius read:

An overwhelming majority of the Wizengamot were in support of Minister Weasley's appointment, despite concern from the public gallery regarding her husband's recent suspension from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement (more on this story, Page 6). Minister Weasley assured the public this morning that those circumstances will not affect her Ministership, and that she expects him to be reinstated soon. She then went on to clarify that she will not interfere with the politics of that situation, but will leave it to the Head of Department, Harry Potter.

Former Minister Shacklebolt declined to make a speech, as is customary, but Deputy Minister Percy Weasley read a statement on his behalf, conceding the leadership of the Ministry to Mrs Weasley and confirming that the attack on him last December by the smuggling gang leader, known as the Shadow, has left him in ill health and unable to continue in the role. The identity of the Shadow is now alleged to be Draco Malfoy, the son of convicted war criminal Lucius Malfoy. He is currently in
the Ministry cells awaiting trial. A date has not yet been set.

Scorpius tried to remember his dream. Had the man just fallen, or had he collapsed, clutching his chest and gasping for air? His imagination seemed to make the scene worse and worse the more he tried to think about it.

"Well, congratulations, Minister's daughter," Albus said, grinning. "Won't it be nice to be the centre of attention for a change?"

~*-S-*~

That night, perhaps because of the events of the morning, and having worried all day about whether he had really witnessed whatever had happened to Kingsley Shacklebolt to make him resign, he dreamed a dream he had had once before, about Rose sleeping, except that this time, it was more detailed.

*He saw mistletoe hanging above the bed, and heard singing, as if from far away.

*Ding dong merrily on high.... the angel bells are ringing*...

*He sat there for a moment, watching her sleep. She was truly beautiful, even when lying still in a hospital bed. Her bushy hair shone redder than usual in the dim light, spread out over the crisp white pillows. She was quite pale, and there was sweat beading on her forehead. As he watched, her expression twisted from one of peace into one of pain.

*Ding dong verily the sky... is riddl'd with angles singing*...

*He tried to move towards her, but someone grabbed his arm. And then, as he tried to pull away, the dream-Rose opened her eyes, and began to scream.*

He woke up with his back afire with pain, as if he'd tried to twist himself around in his sleep. Gasping, he tried to straighten himself out, tears springing to his eyes as he gripped the sheets with white knuckles and tried to hold back a groan.

"Scorp?" said a sleepy voice from Albus' bed. "You okay?"

It took a few more seconds, but he managed to answer. "Yeah... fine," he breathed. "Go back to sleep."

~*-S-*~

Professor Trelawny, when Scorpius had floated his chair all the way up to her classroom, had flatly refused to open the trap door, even when he practically shouted up through it that he needed help. Apparently he had ceased to exist, in her mind, at the same point he had dropped her class. Firenze the centaur was only slightly more accommodating, and just as unhelpful.

"The dreams of humans are like shadows of the moon," he said cryptically, glaring at where Scorpius' chair had made muddy furrows in the grassy floor of his classroom. "They are of little significance."

"Even when they come true?" Scorpius had asked, annoyed.

"All dreams are a reflection of truth," was the only answer. "But truth in the future is an illusion.
Only the stars know the true path."

The only other place he could think to look was the library, but two hours of research had led to nothing but a vague paragraph about the effects of Moonsilver poisoning in a book about Healing.

*No one is certain why the reaction to Moonsilver occurs in certain wizards only, but similar to Dragonpox, the affliction appears to be present only amongst Pureblood wizards. Exposure is usually limited once the wizard becomes aware of the allergy; this usually occurs in childhood with a reaction to night lights. However, of those adult wizards who experience severe exposure, reactions are varied. Magical ability will almost always be dampened until the effects wear off, and the body's natural ability to heal will also be affected. Deep sleep and vivid dreams are common, and some will experience a rash on the affected area. Without treatment, ingesting the substance is almost surely fatal to allergic wizards and witches.*

No where did it say anything about symptoms continuing after the wizard had been cured. Frustrated, he went back to trying to write his Charms proposal. He wondered if he ought to ask Rose about the problem. It was true that she disliked Divination, and always had done, but she couldn't dismiss it as any old silliness when something so obviously real was happening to him. He ruminated over this for a while, doodling idly with his quill between the occasional muddled sentence. He had initially dismissed the idea of talking to his friends, but he was quickly running out of avenues. Still, the more he thought about it, the more he knew he couldn't tell Rose. She didn't need anything else to worry about. And Albus even less so - Scorpius knew he wasn't sleeping properly, and he had enough on his plate.

It wasn't until he got back to the dormitory, and saw the wedding invitation propped up in pride of place on his bedside table, that the solution occurred to him.

~*-S-*~

~*-S-*~

Dear Scorpius, the letter began.

*Glad to hear you can come to the wedding. Of course we had to invite you! You're family. Someone has to sit with Gran and stop her grumbling all through the ceremony (not that she doesn't love Victoire, she just doesn't like the idea of me permanently leaving the house at last).*

Scorpius smiled thinly at that. He had been worrying that they'd only invited him because Rose would complain otherwise. He wondered what Victoire's family thought of it. Dom and Louis liked him, at least, but he'd never really met her parents. He had a dim memory of a willowy, beautiful woman with silver-blond hair, and a tall redhead man with scars all over his face.

*As for the other thing, I've never even heard of someone becoming a Seer overnight. It's usually something people are born with, or they go through ancient ceremonies and trials and things to open their 'inner eye'. Can you tell I never took Divination? Ben did, though, so I heard enough about it while he was studying out loud in the common room.*

Scorpius sighed. It had been a long shot. His eyes widened a little, however, at the next words.

*I think I have an idea who you could talk to, though, since your teachers aren't any help. I really suggest you don't bring this up with Professor McGonagall, by the way. Ever. You get a real insight into her prejudices when you're Head Boy. Divination is one of them. I think the only reason she ever kept Trelawny or Firenze around is because old Dumbledore promised to keep them.*
Anyway. I'm talking about that Seer woman that Neville found to help track you down after your dad nabbed you out of the hospital. Normally the Ministry doesn't truck with Divination either, but this woman was the real deal. Albus must have told you about it. No idea where to find her, but you can ask Neville. Rumour is they were an item back in the day! Hope that helps.

And to your other question: your dad's case is still being investigated. It's taking a while, as you can imagine, especially with all the reshuffling of government happening now that Aunt Hermione's taken over (I have to call her Minister Weasley, now. Weird!) All things going well we should be able to go to trial by the end of the school year. Don't worry about it until then, eh? Get on with your life. Trust me.

See you soon I hope,

your cousin

Teddy.

Well, it was all very well for him to say not to worry about it, Scorpius thought, skimming over the letter again while the others chatted over their breakfast. Teddy didn't have to worry about repeating his account of the whole experience in front of a room full of people. And if they didn't get around to it until the end of the school year, Scorpius would be eighteen - finally of age no matter what country he was in - and no longer under whatever dubious protection the international loophole gave him.

Still, the reminder about the Seer woman made him think. He'd completely forgotten that part of the story from when Albus had explained how they had found him, using nothing but a map and his old iPod. The more he thought about it, the more he thought he remembered hearing Neville talk about her, though he couldn't remember exactly when. Thinking about it started to give him a headache, and he rubbed his temples irritably.

"You all right?" Rose asked, startling him. It was Sunday, and he and Albus were dressed for another day at St Mungos. Albus looked up from his breakfast, and so did the nearest five or ten people within hearing distance.

"Fine," he muttered. "Keep your voice down, will you?"

Rose's expression settled into the one of long-suffering he had come to know so well. "Sorry," she sighed.

"Can we go to the greenhouses on the way down?" Scorpius asked Albus as they got up from the table. "I need to ask Neville something."

"Course," Albus said. He sounded distracted, as he had done now for several weeks. It was hard to see his face as they went along, Scorpius' head being at Albus' waist level, so he couldn't tell whether his friend was worried about something, or just tired. Tired, probably. Seventh year was going to chew Albus up and spit him out the other side if he wasn't careful.

"Do you like going to St Mungos?" Scorpius asked after a while, the question coming to his lips unexpectedly.

"Huh?"

"Do you like it? I mean I know its a pain...."

Albus snorted. "Too right." He sobered a little, and kicked a stone out in front of him, as the wheels of Scorpius' chair moved effortlessly across the grounds. "But I guess its not the work that's so bad.
Knox is all right, once you get past the fact he's obviously insane, and the other Healers... And I'm learning lots. I like helping people."

"But?" Scorpius sensed the word hanging in the air.

"Well... you know. It's tough. Knowing you can't help everyone. It doesn't feel like I'm really, you know, changing anything." His friend refused to meet his gaze. "I wish I could help you, more."

~*-A-*~

~*-A-*~

Scorpius didn't let Albus come into the greenhouse, so he had no idea what he and Neville were talking about, and Scorp wouldn't tell, either. "It's personal," was all he would say as they made their way out to the Apparition point. The little side trip meant that they were almost running late.

"How's stuff with you and Rose?" he asked instead. Scorpius shot him a dark look.

"Still personal."

Albus sighed and shook his head. "Why do I have the strange urge to knock your heads together?"

"She's annoyed at me because I'm moody all the time," Scorpius said, low. "And I can't help being like that when I'm constantly in pain and these stupid hospital visits aren't getting me out of this stupid chair any faster. I know I'm being a crap boyfriend."

"Mate, she knows you can't help it. You just have to give a little. Talk to her. Occasionally tell her she looks pretty, stuff like that."

"Are you serious?"

"Trust me." The conversation was interrupted by their arrival outside the Apparition wards. In a manner that was quite well practiced, by now, they Apparated to London, and arrived together in the St Mungo's waiting room. Albus rubbed the back of his neck, where he always seemed to get an ache after Apparition. "All right?" he asked Scorpius, who was grimacing.

"Fine."

"I better go find Knox," Albus sighed. "See you after." He fled, feeling a sickening twist of guilt in the pit of his stomach. He wasn't sure if it was because he was leaving his friend to the mercy of his healing session, which he knew he hated, or because the whole Lizzie thing had left him feeling guilty more or less constantly ever since it had happened. Lizzie had not spoken to him since the incident, unless she had to, and did not even look at him except to glare. The fury of the look the first time had caused him to spill gravy all down himself, much to the amusement of the Lysanders and the other younger Ravenclaws at the table. He wondered why she cared so much. It wasn't as though she had ever liked Cleo.

His relationship advice to Scorpius was therefore not pulled entirely out of the air. He'd been thinking about it for some days now; if he hadn't been so involved with Quidditch, if he had made the effort to spend more time with Lizzie and tell her how much he appreciated her, she would not have broken up with him and he wouldn't be in this wretched mess. Of course, he had wanted to break up with her just as much at the time, but that thought was not at all comforting, so he pushed it to the back of his mind.

He made his way to Knox's office, always a jumbled mess of papers and books and probably old...
take away dinners, but it was empty. Still moody and brooding, he trudged down the corridor to the
wards the man had patients in, but there was still no sign of him. Bethany, a young Healer he
remembered as being Head Girl at Hogwarts in his fifth year, was in the last ward, dosing yet
another tentacle victim with anti-Transfiguration potion. Albus knew enough now to recognise it,
and to know that it didn't always work.

"Another one?" he asked, doing his best to keep a look of disgust off his face.

"Yes," Bethany sighed, moving out of the man's earshot. "It's like some kind of epidemic, or
something."

"Octopusitus," Albus suggested, grinning.

"Yes," Beth said with no trace of humour whatsoever. "That's what they're calling it. Looking for
Knox?"

"Yeah," said Albus, after a moment's surprised hesitation. "Do you know where he is?"

"Went out with a patient about half an hour ago," she replied. "This woman was convinced she was
a tree, and she was going to put out roots and get stuck if she stood still for long enough, so he took
her out to see if she would."

Albus blinked. "Seriously?"

She sighed and rolled her eyes. "You know Knox. That's the sort of thing he does. I would have just
given her an anti-Confundus Potion."

"So you're here by yourself."

"More or less, but there's nothing really serious happening."

"Oi!" protested the man with tentacle arms, having overheard.

"Except you, Mr Flannigan," Beth replied patiently, without looking round. While she was very
good at her job, it was becoming increasingly obvious that Knox had trained her. Albus wondered if,
by mere association, he was going to become just as nonchalant in the face of squid mutation as they
both were. "You may as well help me with my rounds," she said to Albus. "Just see if anyone needs
anything. And come ask me if anything goes pear-shaped."

"Um. Okay." Albus tried not to look nervous. He'd never had to talk to a patient alone, before. That
was silly, he realised as he went out to start going through the wards again. He knew most of the
long-term patients, though there weren't many of those, and anyone who didn't know him was sure
to realise he wasn't a Healer, himself, dressed as he was in old jeans and a jumper that had proven
itself to be effective in not absorbing bodily fluids.

There were only two people on the first ward. One of them, Mrs Garrett, knew him. The other was a
large, ruddy-faced man Al had never seen before, looking very disgruntled at having to wear hospital
pyjamas. He looked like he might have been Hagrid's cousin, with a dark, tangled beard and very
thick limbs. "Er… hello," Al said nervously, wiping his slightly sweaty hands on his jeans. "Can I
er… get you anything?"

"Water," the man grunted, with a somewhat surprised tone. Al turned away to fill a glass from the
jug on a stand, and when he turned back the man was staring at him with eyes as wide as saucers.
"You ain't… yer never…" he began to say, his expression twisting in confusion.
"No, I'm not Harry Potter," Al sighed. It wasn't the first time an addled patient had insisted he must be a war hero in his forties, despite the fact that he was obviously a seventeen year old boy. He handed the glass over, and the man took it clumsily almost without taking his eyes off of Albus' face.

"No… ye must be the son, aren't yer?" he said, relaxing a little with comprehension. "I've seen yer in the papers!"

Al nodded with a fixed, not-so-patient smile on his face. He was sure he could fill in the next words while he turned to check the supplies in the nearby cabinet.

"I remember when yer were born! It was big news for a few days, eh? Eh? And I remember when yer dad did for the Dark Lord - wasn't that a great day! Singin' and dancin' in the streets there were, even out in the country. And my poor wife was bawlin' her eyes out for days with 'arpiness…"

Al nodded and made noises to show he was listening, even though he was sure the man had no idea which son he was, and was probably talking about James' birth, not his own, which had not even been front page news.

He had just finished straightening the rows of self-sticking bandages in the cabinet, and was getting ready to escape the steady stream of enthusiasm from the country gentleman who didn't seem to even have anything wrong with him, when a man came rushing through the door of the ward, carrying a small girl in his arms.

"Someone help!" he said desperately. His race was red from running, and he had straw-like hair which was badly messed about as though he had run through a gale. The girl, when Al looked, had her eyes closed and was very pale. There was a white bandage stuck to her forehead, and a red stain was coming through it. For a moment Al just stared, looking around, then he realised the man was looking at him.

"But -" he began.

"They said to come up here," the man said, tears of panic staining his cheeks as he laid the child on the closest bed. "Help her, please! She fell off that stupid broomstick and her mother wasn't home - you have to help!"

Al opened his mouth to say that he had come to the wrong floor, that broom-related injuries were typically treated on the ground floor, but stopped when he saw the look of utter desperation in the father's eyes.

"I have to get -" he began, starting to make for the door, to fetch either Beth or the nearest qualified Healer, but the man reached out and grabbed his arm.

"You can't leave!" he practically shouted. "You can't leave her like this! Please…"

"Okay, okay," Albus said, almost panicking himself. Surely Beth must have heard the noise. She would be here any moment, anyway.

He turned back to the girl. She was perhaps six or seven, with long pigtails the same straw colour as her father's. For a brief, oddly painful moment, he was strongly reminded of Lizzie. Gingerly he peeled back the inexpertly-applied bandage to reveal a deep red gash on her forehead near the hairline. It bled freely, and he put his hand back over the bandage hurriedly.

"Why didn't you heal this?" he demanded of the man angrily. The cut was deep, but anyone who had taken the compulsory OWL Charms course could do the heal-all Episky spell, foolproof for non-magical cuts, bruises and even some breaks. The girl had clearly lost a lot of blood, and the healing
spell would have prevented that much better than a bandage.

The man spread his hands helplessly. "I'm... not a wizard," he said, almost choking on the words. "My wife..."

Albus, understanding, nodded and turned back to the child. The man was a bit of an idiot for letting his daughter fly a broom without a witch or wizard to supervise, but at least he'd had the sense to bring her to a wizarding hospital. Though how he had gotten in was a bit of a mystery, since Muggles usually couldn't see the entrance to St Mungos, in the same way that they were blissfully unaware of the Leaky Cauldron. Perhaps holding a child with magic had bent the rules just enough to let him in.

Al drew his wand and, carefully pulling back the bandage once more, drew it carefully along the line of the gash. "Episky," he said, low, and the cut closed, the skin on either side knitting neatly together without leaving even a scar. He was pretty pleased with that. The girl continued to lay still, very pale, and only the slight rise and fall of her chest reassured him that she was still alive at all. "She'll need a blood-replenishing potion," he said, with a barely-disguised sigh of relief.

The man knelt beside the bed as though his legs could no longer keep him upright. He stroked her hair back from where the wound had been, anxiety writ all over his face. "She's so still," he said, looking up at Al imploringly. "Why isn't she waking up?"

Al frowned. "She... probably has a concussion," he said realised out loud. He had learned about head injuries with Knox - the likelihood of getting a bludger to the brain had given it particular relevance to him at the time. Tentatively he put the tip of his wand to her forehead again and whispered the diagnostic spell. Immediately the hologram-like image of the girl's brain appeared to him in midair. The bruised area was clearly visible, glowing slightly red. Probably a good thing the Muggle father couldn't see it, Al thought. He jogged down the corridor to the supply cabinet, used Knox's password to open it, and brought back a potion that would heal the damaged area as well as another to replace the blood she had lost. "They'll take a while to work," he said, as he used another handy spell to force the liquid down the child's throat. "Come let me know when she wakes up."

The man nodded eagerly. "Thank you so much," he said with sincere gratitude, tears sparkling in his eyes. "What's your name?"

"Albus," said Albus, and saying his name seemed to bring him back to himself with a jolt. Was he mad? He wasn't a Healer! He could barely pass for a Healer's apprentice. And yet he'd done all that with hardly a thought, and he'd actually said 'come let me know'. Let me know. Where the hell had that come from?

"Is everything all right in here?"

Bethany had chosen that moment to stick her head around the door, frowning slightly at the Muggle man with blood staining his shirt.

"This young doctor saved my daughter's life," said the father, standing and shaking Al's hand vigorously. Al's face went bright red with embarrassment. He extracted his hand from the man's grip, and hurriedly took Bethany aside to explain it all.

"I'm so sorry," he said finally. "I honestly didn't mean to, it just sort of... happened on automatic."

Bethany had been listening to the story with an undecided sort of look on her face. Now, to his surprise, she smiled at him. "Don't worry about it," she said. "I guess Knox was right after all."
He blinked. "Er… sorry?"

"Knox. He's been saying for weeks that you're a natural. He says you've picked up all the basics faster than anyone he's ever trained. He suggested it might be time for you to do rounds on your own." She frowned. "I'm starting to wonder if that's not why he wandered off, today. Sneaky bastard."

Al realised his mouth was hanging open, and closed it quickly, only to open it again to say, "but… but I'm not… I'm… that wasn't even a magical injury, though!"

"A lot of people would have panicked," Bethany said, waving off his protest. "You probably should have come found me, but you had it all under control. At least no one died." She smiled impishly. Al suddenly felt like throwing up a little. "You've got talent, kid," she went on. "You want to be a Healer after Hogwarts?"

Albus blinked. "I'm… going to play Quidditch," he said without thinking.

The girl raised a surprised eyebrow. "Really? Well, don't be surprised if Knox tries to talk you into staying. It'd be a bit of a waste to spend the rest of your life throwing a ball around."

"I'm a Seeker," Al said blankly. Beth only shrugged and handed him a blank clipboard to take the unconscious girl's history.

_A Healer?_ Al thought, as he filled in the form on auto-pilot. _For real?_ He'd never even considered doing anything other than professional Quidditch. With the exception of Professor Flitwick, who disliked all careers that didn't involve books in some form or another, no one had ever suggested that he needed to consider any other options. His brother and cousin were in the game, just as his mother had been. No one had ever doubted that he, Albus Potter, would make it too.

But if he chose to be a Healer, well, it wasn't as if he had _failed_ at Quidditch. Just that he had chosen a different path.

He hung the clipboard on the girl's bed and cleaned the blood off the father's shirt with one of the charms he had learned his first week of community service with Knox. It was definitely something he'd have to think about. Maybe he could change something, after all.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks everyone for your patience in waiting for this chapter. As you can tell I have less and less time for writing these days but still determined to get through this story! Please leave a comment to show your support, I truly appreciate all your feedback and your comments motivate me to get writing!
"You are divided," she said, now not even looking at him but staring at a spot just beside his right ear. "You wish the visions to cease, but you know that without them, your friend would have died by the spell that put you in that chair. You fear both knowledge of the future, and ignorance."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The next weekend was a Hogsmeade weekend. Rose and Al tried to get Scorpius to come with them to the joke shop (Rose had checked ahead to make sure none of her more volatile family members would be there) but he refused, saying he had other things to do. When Rose offered to go with him, he said no to that, as well.

"It's personal stuff," was all he would say, as he wheeled his chair away from them. "I'll meet up with you guys later."

"What on earth does that mean?" Rose demanded of her cousin, as they walked the shortcut over the hill to the western side of the village. "'Personal stuff'? What personal stuff could he possibly have in the village?"

"How should I know?" Al shrugged. He too had offered to go with Scorpius and been shot down. She could tell it hurt him, even if he would never say so for Scorpius' sake.

"I don't like it," Rose sighed. "What if one of his dad's people gets to him?"

"In Hogsmeade?" Al raised an imperious eyebrow.

"Or… or what if he's got another girl?" Rose said, flinging all caution to the winds. "I mean what else could it be?"

Al snorted. "Yeah, right. He rolls down the tower and out of the castle at night and has a secret love affair with one of the village girls -"

"He could have met someone at Durmstrang!" Rose snapped. She knew she was being ridiculous, but there was very little else she could do when every logical question she put to Scorp was met with either a scowl or a blank look. She was tired of it, but she didn't know any other way to tell him that she wanted him to talk to her.
"Don't be stupid," Al sighed. "I'd know if it was something like that - we're together enough. And you know he loves you. There was a time he wouldn't shut up about it."

Rose glared at him. "Exactly. Once upon a time."

"He's got other stuff on his mind, now, Rosie," he said, kicking a stone ahead of them on the path.

She gave up and decided to sulk in silence. It was a lot more satisfying anyway, when not faced with logic at every turn.

They went to the joke shop, but it wasn't as much fun without anyone there that they knew. Al then insisted on going to the bookshop, which wasn't much on Flourish and Blotts, but was the next best thing other than the library. "There's hardly anything on Healing in the library," he complained on the way. "Not the serious stuff, anyway, just the basic stuff you have to do for Charms."

"Did Knox give you reading homework?" Rose said, surprised. "That seems unfair, making you buy books when you won't be there after a few more months, anyway."

"Mmm," Albus murmured, but offered no further explanation. Rose sighed. One day, she thought irritably, I'll find a male of the species who will actually give me a straight answer.

Al disappeared into the stacks marked 'Healing' once they entered the store. Rose decided to browse the shelves for any more material on her Ancient Runes project. It was a lot slower going than she had expected. Scorp's wheelchair itself was the only decent research she had on mobility devices for wizards. There were plenty of examples of medieval wizarding staffs, of course, and she'd found a few vague references to charmed wooden legs, and a note about a mobile box made out of sapient pearwood, but the note itself was so short it might as well have been scribbled in the margin. The book Al had found in Flourish and Blotts, with the engraving of a wizarding wheelchair... well, as far as she could tell, there might have been only one chair ever in existence, and the one Scorp was using now was the self same one. There wasn't much information in the chapter either, other than the illustration. The runic language on the chair was only half legible, and seemed to be a mish-mash of several different languages. She'd been thinking it might be worth sending an owl to Knox, to ask where he had got it. Someone had to know something.

She had her head well into a thick volume entitled *Runic engraving: one thousand and one uses through the ages*, when she sensed someone coming up behind her. Flinching, she whipped round, snapping the book shut and brandishing it like a club.

"Merlin," said Jian, taking a surprised, but somehow still graceful, step back. "Someone's jumpy this morning."

Rose sighed and lowered her makeshift weapon. "Oh, it's you. Sorry about that. No offence, but someone *did* try to kill me not so long ago."

"No one would dare," Jian said, coming forward again with the sort of self-satisfied smile she had used to find so insufferable, but had now more or less gotten used to. "Unless they want to get their head bashed in by an encyclopaedia."

"Ha ha," Rose muttered. She hefted the book and made to move past him to the counter, but he turned and caught her arm.

"Hey," he said, with an uncharacteristic note of concern. "Are you quite all right?"

Rose blinked. She was used to asking the question, once every hour or so, but it seemed like ages since anyone had bothered asking her if she was all right. "I'm fine," she said, with all the fake
cheerfulness she could muster. "Just… not in the mood for jokes, right now. Sorry."

"Hey Rosie, I got the -" Albus came round the corner, frowning when he saw Jian with his hand on her arm. "Chung."

"Potter," Jian said politely, nodding.

"I'll… see you for Charms, tomorrow," Rose said, gently tugging her arm away. By the look on Al's face, it was probably a good idea to separate them before there was a repeat of the library brawl. "C'mon, Al. Didn't you want a Butterbeer?"

~*-S-*~

~*-S-*~

Neville's friend had agreed to meet him at the Three Broomsticks. It wasn't as private as Scorpius would have liked, but he thought that maybe once he met her he could ask that they move to the HogsHead. He ordered himself a Butterbeer - with some difficulty, as the bar was higher than his head - and found the quietest corner of the pub to sit in while he waited. This wasn't easy, with all the Hogwarts students around, but at least most of them probably wouldn't turn up until later, after they had done their sightseeing. He couldn't use a booth because of the chair, so he found a table in a dark corner. and made himself a space where he could see the door.

He was halfway through his Butterbeer when he started to wonder if anyone was coming. Neville had warned him it was a possibility that the woman wouldn't show up. Scorpius hadn't quite told the truth about why he wanted to meet her, making it sound as though he just wanted to thank her for helping him. Still, he hadn't really expected to be stood up. His stomach churned at the idea that he might have to think of somewhere else to look for answers. He looked down at his Butterbeer, suddenly not thirsty anymore, but when he looked up -

There was a woman sitting opposite him, pale-skinned and dark-haired, peering curiously at him through dusky blue eyes. He blinked. He couldn't have been looking away from the door for more than a few seconds. "Did you just Apparate?" he asked, forgetting all his manners in his surprise. If she had it would be the quietest Apparition he'd ever witnessed.

The woman only smiled, a piteous smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "I am Emmeline," she said after a moment. "You want to speak to me." It wasn't a question.

"Yes," Scorpius said, gathering himself. "Sorry - I'm Scorpius. Malfoy," he added reluctantly. At first she seemed not to have heard him. She was staring at him with a disturbingly curious gaze, as though she could see right through his head to the other side. He shifted uncomfortably. "Um…" he began, not really sure what to say or whether she would even pay attention. "I've got this… sort of problem. I thought you might be able to…"

"Yes," she said, closing her eyes. This was frankly a bit of a relief, but he was still confused all the same. "You want to speak to me." It wasn't a question.

"Yes," Scorpius said, gathering himself. "Sorry - I'm Scorpius. Malfoy," he added reluctantly. At first she seemed not to have heard him. She was staring at him with a disturbingly curious gaze, as though she could see right through his head to the other side. He shifted uncomfortably. "Um…" he began, not really sure what to say or whether she would even pay attention. "I've got this… sort of problem. I thought you might be able to…"

"Yes," she said, closing her eyes. This was frankly a bit of a relief, but he was still confused all the same. "You are troubled."

"Well… yeah," Scorpius agreed. He was starting to regret this whole venture. "I've been having these dreams… visions, I guess. And they've been coming true. Most of them - there's one I'm afraid is going to happen, but it hasn't yet."

Emmeline steepled her fingers and opened her eyes only to stare at him again. "And what exactly do you wish done about these dreams?"

Scorpius swallowed and clenched his fist under the table. "I want it to stop! I'm not a Seer. I've got
enough problems right now without having to know what happens!"

The woman raised a thin, dark eyebrow, ever so slightly. "Are you sure? There are many who would sacrifice much to have only the merest glimpse of what is to come. I myself much prefer to focus on what is. That is why I have a certain reputation for my ability to find lost things." She inclined her head delicately towards him, and he shuddered inwardly.

"Well I hate it," he muttered. "Most of them - the dreams - they aren't even interesting or important -"

"The future is rarely interesting or important, for most people," she replied, her expression never changing. "But your foresight has already changed the future, once."

Now it was Scorpius' turn to stare. "How did you…"

"You are divided," she said, now not even looking at him but staring at a spot just beside his right ear. "You wish the visions to cease, but you know that without them, your friend would have died by the spell that put you in that chair. You fear both knowledge of the future, and ignorance."

Scorpius felt a chill run down his spine. The truthfulness of his discomfort was as if someone had dunked him in ice. "In my dream… she was screaming," he explained, hoarsely. "Will that happen?"

That odd smile again. Scorpius shivered. "I told you. I See only what is. I gave up trying to See the future years ago, when I realised what pain it could cause."

Scorpius scowled. "That's less than encouraging."

"That's as may be." The Seer woman spread her hands before her on the table. "One thing I See, whether it bring you pain or comfort. The opening of your Inner Eye is a side-effect of the sickness you suffered. It will fade in time."

Scorpius didn't know what to say. Ten minutes ago he would have been happy; now he wasn't so sure. "How long?" he asked.

She only shook her head. "Right," he sighed. "Never mind." He took another long swig of his Butterbeer. When he put down the empty glass, she was staring at him again, blue eyes wide. "What is it now?" he sighed. She wasn't quite as frustratingly vague as Professor Trelawny, perhaps, and she was certainly easier to talk to than Firenze, but she gave him the uncomfortable feeling that none of his thoughts were quite private anymore. He wondered if she was in fact reading his mind - they had learned about Legilimancy in Defence Against the Dark Arts…

"A darkness in you," she said, sadly. "Not a curse, or poison. Nothing that can be cured by magic."

There was that chill again. Scorpius folded his arms, trying to disguise his discomfort. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Her expression turned a little sad, and she shook her head as she got gracefully to her feet. "There are difficult times ahead for you, my dear. I wish you luck with them."

"I thought you couldn't see the future," Scorpius shot back.

"I don't need to," was her only reply, and before he could think of a reply she was moving between the tables and out of the pub, and his chair was too bulky to follow her with any speed. Not that, he decided after a second, he particularly wanted to chase after her. He had enough to be unsettled about with what she had said already.
He was just considering whether to give up the afternoon as a waste and go on back to the castle to get a head-start on his homework for the weekend, when someone else came over and sat at his table. "Hiya Scorp!"

He blinked, utterly taken aback. "Cleo?"

"Who'd you think it was?"

She was dressed for winter, in Muggle clothes with her blue-streaked hair loose over her face and slightly wind-swept, a glass of some sort of fizzy drink in her hand. He wondered how much of the conversation she had heard. "What… are you doing here?" he asked.

"Well, to see Al, officially, but I was hoping to run into you." She leaned back in the chair and sipped her drink. "You didn't answer any of my letters."

"What letters?" Scorpius asked, then thought guiltily of all the envelopes he'd been throwing away without opening. It was indeed possible that they hadn't all come from his father. He'd only opened Teddy's because he'd been expecting it - who else would owl him? Other than Hannah, and she always sent her messages through Lizzie, in letters addressed to the both of them.

"I've sent you dozens. Don't pretend you never got them. C'mon, Scorp. The band needs you."

Scorpius shook his head. He was still reeling over the conversation with the Seer - he did not have the patience to deal with this right now.

"It's been -" he did a swift calculation - "it's been nearly six months. You haven't found anyone else?"

"Oh, we tried a few people, once we realised you really weren't coming back. None of 'em have your style."

He sighed. "Cleo, you don't get it. I don't play anymore. I haven't even touched the guitar since I got back."

She frowned and leaned forward onto the table, pushing her drink aside. "Well that can't be good for you. Why the hell not?"

"I just - I don't feel like it, all right? Anyway even if I wanted to, I'm stuck in this stupid…" he motioned to the chair.

"I know. Al told me. But that doesn't mean you can't play."

He rolled his eyes. "Yeah. Right."

"It doesn't! You've heard of… Ray Charles, right? Stevie Wonder?"

"Those guys are both blind."

"Well… I couldn't think of anyone who's in a wheelchair. Wait - that guy from Def Leppard had his arm cut off."

He made a face. "You're making that up."

"I am not! He had one arm and he was a drummer. It's not like you even need your legs to sing!"

Scorpius bit his lip hard. He clenched both his fists under the table. "You're not hearing me. I'm not
coming back. It's not me, anymore."

"Don't be stupid, of course it - "

"Cleo, I said NO." He said it so loud that several other patrons turned to stare, even with the general noise throughout the bar.

She sat back, still frowning. "At least tell me you're still writing," she said, after a moment, with no change in her tone whatsoever.

"I - " Scorpius began to say no, but that would not, after all, be entirely honest. He had filled two notebooks at Durmstrang, and another one since leaving the hospital, but none of it was any good, in his opinion. Just scribbles. He told her so, and she shook her head at him.

"Send it anyway. I bet it's better than you think. We'll credit you if we use it."

Scorpius gave up. "Fine," he mumbled. "Much good may it do you."

She beamed, apparently satisfied that she had at least partially got her way. "Great! And hey, listen, there's always a spot in the band for you if you change your mind. Whatever dweeb we get to fill your spot, we can always kick him out when you're ready. And if you'll excuse me, I do believe that's my boyfriend coming in…"

Scorp watched dully as she got up and went to greet Albus, who was just coming in the door behind Rose. The resulting snog received several wolf whistles from nearby students. When they broke apart, Al was red to the ears, but grinning. Rose rolled her eyes and came over to Scorp's table. He winced inwardly at the look on her face. "Were you meeting Cleo?" she demanded, hands practically on hips.

Scorpius opened his mouth to say no, to protest that she'd basically ambushed him, but then realised that he would have to explain the real reason he was there, and that was about ten times more complicated. "Yeah," he sighed eventually. "She wanted to talk about band stuff."

"Well why wouldn't you just say that?" she said, narrowing her eyes and crossing her arms over her chest.

Unable to think of any answer that wouldn't get him in further trouble, he shrugged. This did not seem to placate her, however.

"Butterbeers?" Al said, a little breathlessly, as he approached the table with Cleo hanging off his arm.

"I had one," Scorpius pointed out, lifting his empty glass.

"I had one," Scorpius pointed out, lifting his empty glass.

"Well, have another," his friend said, a little too cheerfully. "Live a little."

Scorp sat back in the chair, steeling himself for an awkward afternoon. It was going to be a long one.

~*-A-*~

~*-A-*~

The day after Hogsmeade, Albus had scheduled an extra-long Quidditch practice. The team needed the practice, as the first game of the year was Gryffindor versus Slytherin, and the green-and-silver side were coming up remarkably well already from what he'd heard. After the practice he stayed a little longer in the showers, letting the blissfully steaming hot water soak his aching muscles; his body
tired from more than just Quidditch.

He was tired. He was tired from going to the hospital every week, from his coursework which already seemed unrealistically heavy, from staying up all night listening to Scorpius groan and whimper in pain, but most of all from putting all his remaining energy into trying to make up for almost getting his best friend killed. Tired of smiling all the time, of putting on a brave face he couldn't really feel. Every minute from getting out of bed in the morning to crawling bone-tired under the sheets every night was becoming such an effort. It was nice to be alone for a few minutes, just him and the hot water and the steam that leached the lethargy from his bones.

By the time he emerged from the showers, skin wrinkled from the water, everyone else had already gone up to the castle.

He went up slowly, carrying his broom over his shoulders. He could hear the noise from the Great Hall before he even reached the big oak doors. He sighed as he went through them, letting the warmth of the castle settle over him. He looked towards the Hall, where the clatter of knives and forks almost drowned out the buzz of conversation, and realised with a dull slowness that he couldn't go in. He couldn't take another evening of pretending everything was fine while Scorpius pushed food around his plate and winced with every movement.

His stomach rumbled. Resigned, he turned away from the Great Hall and slumped towards the kitchens. Knowing where they were was one of the perks of being both a Potter and a Weasley. The House Elves set up a cheer of sorts when he came in, and immediately started piling food into a bag when he mentioned he'd quite like something to eat.

He was just on his way out, chewing on an eclair - because why bother eating things in a specific order? - when he found himself face to face with Lizzie Longbottom, coming past from the Hufflepuff dormitories. He stood there stupidly with pastry half hanging out of his mouth while she raised her eyebrows at him and crossed her arms. "Albus Potter, what on earth are you doing?" she sighed.

He chewed his mouthful and swallowed before he was quite finished. He felt it go down his throat in an uncomfortable lump. "I… dunno really," he said, after a moment's thought. Suddenly, looking at her face, he felt utterly miserable. He'd been so busy with everything else, he'd barely had time to feel guilty about his indiscretion with her in the hallway. Except yesterday, when he'd seen Cleo at Hogsmeade. He should have broken up with her, probably. But Scorpius needed Cleo. Al had asked her to come meet them in Hogsmeade, because he had some crazy idea that getting his friend back into music would somehow help him. But he hadn't quite thought it through, and he'd ended up having to kiss her and smile and put his arm around her waist, all while thinking about the way Lizzie had looked at him after they kissed. "I don't know what I'm doing," he said, slumping against the wall.

The anger went out of Lizzie's eyes and she took a step towards him, putting a small hand on his shoulder. Her hair was curling slightly under her chin. It really did make her look older. Albus knew he was of age, technically a man now, but he thought he had never felt quite so young. "Al?" she said softly, trying to meet his eyes despite his constant efforts to look away. "Al, what's wrong?"

"What isn't wrong?" he said, and the words came out harsh and choked, and before he knew it there were tears in his eyes, and her arms were around his waist, and he was crying into her shoulder like a child.

"Come on," she said after a minute, kinder than he might have expected. "Come to our dormitory. There's no one there - everyone's at dinner."
"Why - why weren't you at dinner?" Albus asked, wiping furiously at his eyes as she turned him around and began to lead him the other way.

"Greenhouse incident. Took me ages to wash up."

He leaned on her a little as they walked, and she did indeed smell strongly of some kind of flowery soap. It wasn't at all unpleasant. She led him into the Hufflepuff common room, and down a side corridor that seemed to lead to her dormitory. "Will your door let me in?" he asked doubtfully.

She giggled. "Oh, someone figured out how to undo the anti-boy charms down here ages ago. Shhh, House Secret."

"What? But, in Ravenclaw - "

"Oh yes, you lot think you're so clever, but you aren't the only ones with brains, you know. The teachers renew the charms occasionally but the counter charm has been passed down from generation to generation."

Dumbfounded, he could think of very little else to say as she closed the door behind them and led him by the hand until they were both lying on her bed, his head on her shoulder and her arm across his waist, almost as though they had never broken up, at all. "Now," she said, in a practical tone that was such the perfect imitation of her mother that he almost laughed, "tell me what's going on."

So he told her. He told her everything, from his sleepless nights and his guilt over Scorpius to his worries about having to give up professional Quidditch to become a Healer. He told her about how he wasn't sure they could win the match the next week, and his fear that he wouldn't be able to lead the team to glory in his final year like he had always wanted. And finally he told her how, although he had spent several hours with his girlfriend in the town the previous day, he hadn't been able to enjoy a single second of it.

"Why not?" she asked, in her soft voice, stroking his hair away from his forehead.

"Because I love you," he burst out, cringing a little at how pathetic even his own voice sounded.

She giggled, and he looked up at her in hurt surprise. "You do not," she told him, with a little smile. "I do!"

"Maybe you love the idea of me," she admitted dryly. "But Alby, we were awful together. Don't pretend you weren't bored to tears by the end of it."

"I wasn't - not to teary" he protested, red-faced. "Lizzie, I was a stupid git back then. Just a kid. I can be better, I promise, if you just - could you - give me another chance? Please?"

Her smile faded and she reached out to touch under his chin with one fingertip. "Last I checked you still had a girlfriend who wasn't me," she said seriously. "Did you break up with her?"

Albus bit his lip guiltily and she sighed and let her hand fall. "Alby…"

"I would, Liz, honestly I would, only… Scorpius…"

She frowned at him and sat up. "Albus, you cannot keep going out with this girl for Scorpius' sake, if you're unhappy. And especially not if you're also seeing me. That's despicable, and if you'd even consider it, then…" she sighed. "Look, it doesn't matter how much you think what happened to Scorp is your fault. It certainly wasn't all your fault, and you don't owe him a doomed relationship."
He wouldn't want you to keep it going if he knew."

Albus sat up too, and sat in an awkward cross-legged position on her bed. "Okay," he said, after a
moment's agonised decision. "I'll... I'll tell her it's over. I'll send her an owl in -"

"In person."

"What? But that's another few weeks before I'll even see her!"

She hesitated. "Well... get permission to Floo-call, then. Dad'll let you use his fireplace. But I can't
start seeing you until it's over with her. Okay?"

Al felt a little spark of hope, and his lips twitched into almost a smile. "So... you will start seeing me,
then?"

"Maybe. I have to think about it."

"Maybe?"

"Al... are you sure you even want a relationship right now? With all this other stuff you have going
on - Quidditch, school, the hospital -"

"But that's exactly why I do need you," he said, reaching out to touch her hand. She didn't pull
away, which he took to be a good sign. "I need you to keep me sane."

"Oh?" she looked him a little more fondly, but he could still sense a hesitance. He wondered if it had
anything to do with his tear-stained face and no doubt red, puffy eyes. He must look a right mess.
"And what do I get out of it?"

Al deflated. He had to admit he didn't have a great answer to that. "I... dunno," he said lamely. "Just
me, I guess." He winced. "Doesn't seem like much of a deal, I admit."

She smiled and stroked back the last lock of his hair with one finger. Then she leaned forward and
gave him a soft kiss on his cheek. "Maybe not," she said. "But I suppose I could settle for just that."

He brightened. "Really?"

Her expression twisted, as though she might be changing her mind, but then she let out a loud sigh
and ran an exasperated hand through her hair. "Damnit," she said, and kissed him again, this time on
the lips, and much more forceful. "You swear you'll break up with Cleo?"

"Tomorrow," he promised.

"Damnit," she said again, and suddenly his hands were inside her robes, her hands were undoing his
tie, and there was very little room for any more conversation.

~*-R-*~

When Rose came downstairs early the next morning, she was surprised to see Scorpius sitting in his
chair in the Common room alone, with a face like thunder. "Where's Al?" she asked, a little
nervously.

"Came in late," he grunted, his thumb running stiffly along the runes on the arm of the chair.
"Reckon he's skipping breakfast this morning."
"Oh." She picked up her Charms book from where she'd left it on a table the previous night and tucked it into her bag. When she turned back, he was glaring at her as if she'd just cursed him. "What?" she asked, completely nonplussed. "What's wrong?"

He stared angrily into her eyes for a few more seconds, then shook his head and spun the chair around. "Never mind," he muttered, and started to float the chair towards the door. "We should go to breakfast."

"No, wait -" She hurried towards him and spun the chair around. This was easier than it might have been since it was floating slightly above the ground. "Tell me," she demanded. "I'm sick of this - you never tell me anything anymore. If something's wrong, I want to know."

"Like you don't know," he snapped, his expression twisting into a kind of sneer that she had never seen before on his face. He looked for a moment like his father, the man who had tried to kill her, and she let go of the chair quickly and took a step back. "I don't!" she cried, not caring that people were staring, and others were starting to poke their heads out of their dormitory doors at the noise. "I don't know, Scorp! Because you never -"

"I know about you and Chung," he said, so suddenly that she was struck dumb.

"What?" she gasped, when she regained the ability to speak.

"Yeah. What did you think - because I'm a cripple, I wouldn't find out?"

Rose felt tears come into her eyes, but was suddenly too furious to care. "What are you talking about?" she demanded. "You're insane!"

"Oh, I'm crippled and crazy now, am I? Thanks a lot. You know if you wanted to drop me you could have just said, not kept me hanging on, like some sort of -"

"Stop!" she yelled, clenching her fists. "Just stop it! I don't know where you're getting this from, but I am not seeing Jian and I never was!"

"Give it up, Rose," he sighed, the sneer fading into a look of sad betrayal that was almost even worse. "I saw you."

"I'm tutoring him!"

"You're snogging him!"

"I am NOT! Shut UP!"

Tears streaming down her face, she pushed past him, knocking the chair back a few inches, and ran towards the door. She tripped over some first years on the way out, but she ignored them, careening down the stairs and through the corridors until she reached the library. Everyone was either just getting up or having an early breakfast, and there was no one in there at that time in the morning. Or almost no one.

She had just found an armchair in the reading area and curled up to have a good cry where no one could see, when the sound of soft footsteps alerted her to a presence. Unthinking she pulled out her wand and pulled it out as she jumped up to face the intruder.

"Bloody hell, Weasley," Jian sighed, holding up both empty hands in self defence. "This is the second time in three days. You've got to stop pulling wands and heavy books on people who are just
walking innocently past."

"Sorry," she said, struggling to put her wand back under her robes and wipe her eyes at the same time. "It's just - I - I thought you were Scorpius."

He gave her a look. "Oh? Attacking your boyfriend now, are we? What did he do, hex you in class again?"

Rose sniffed, wand still in hand, and looked up at him. "You remember that?"

"Everyone remembers that. You threw what my mother would have called a 'lovely tantrum'."

She sniffed. "Well… no. It wasn't that. I'm sorry, it's just… oh, he said the most horrible things…"

Jian looked momentarily confused. "Malfoy did?"

"Well who do you think?" she practically shouted, stamping her foot. Luckily it was too early for the elderly librarian, or he surely would have appeared to shush her, tears or no tears.

"Sorry. It's just I thought you and him were… well, you know." He held up one hand and crossed his middle and forefinger. For some reason the sight of those two crossed fingers made her want to kick something.

"We were," she said, furiously. "But he - he - oh, it's so stupid…"

Jian uncrossed his fingers. "So… not any more?"

She held up her hands hopelessly. "I don't know. Maybe. I didn't give him the chance to actually break up with me, but he obviously wanted to. He thinks…oh, I don't know…"

He took a step towards her. "Does it matter what he thinks?"

"No - yes - I don't…"

She looked up into face, his almost feline nose and sharp jaw, his dark eyes, and felt a brief moment of indecision, but it was too late. She was already kissing him. Or he was kissing her. He wasn't sure who had started it, but their lips were touching and then his tongue was in her mouth and she could barely breathe. Her back came up against a bookcase, and the books dug into her shoulder blades as he pressed against her, one long-fingered hand coming around to cup her head under her hair. For a moment she lost herself in that kiss, fuelled by her anger, by the unfairness of it all, by her secret desire to be wanted by someone with whom there was no guilt, no family feud, no potentially fatal consequences.

But then his hand moved inside her robe and all that went away, and suddenly all she could see in her mind's eye was the terribly hurt look on Scorpius' face. He had known.

She lifted her hand still holding the wand, and with a thought she pushed Jian away from her, so hard that he went sprawling onto a table and a pile of books went thumping to the floor. "Sorry!" she gasped, fumbling her robes back into position and grabbing her bag. "I can't - I'm sorry - I just - can't." She ran back out of the library, her bag thumping against her side, not sure where she was going or what she was going to do when she got there. Now what was she going to do?

Chapter End Notes
So sorry for the epic delay, everyone… I hope you all haven’t lost your patience with me! Hopefully I should now have a little more time for some more regular updates.
I’ve been sitting beside hospital beds my whole life,” Neville said. “Believe me, I understand what it feels like. You feel helpless, you feel trapped, and most of all you feel guilty because you’re not the one who’s in pain.” Albus felt a wave of emotion come over him. He hugged his arms to his chest, biting his lip and holding it in as best he could. “But guilt isn’t what he needs from you right now,” Neville went on. He put a hand on Al’s shoulder and squeezed gently. “He doesn’t need you to solve this, either, he has trained Healers for that. He just needs you to be his friend. That’s all.”

By the end of that day, Ravenclaw Tower was in a highly tense mood. The yelling in the common room that morning had been loud and public, and it didn’t take long for most of the school to hear about it. If Rose had hoped that perhaps people would not be interested, she had forgotten that she was now the Minister for Magic’s daughter, and of course Scorpius had his own kind of macabre infamy.

Scorpius was suspiciously absent all day, and Rose decided to skip dinner both to avoid the stares and whispers and potentially having to face him again. She went to her room instead, closed the curtains around her four-poster and tried to remember all the ways she knew to reverse time. She wondered if her mother could get her a time turner, or if - she amended, after considering the futility of that idea - she could steal one. There were one or two left, she recalled, under extreme security in the Ministry of Magic. Her dad, she thought, might know where, but he was even less likely than Hermione to be sympathetic to her situation.

The curtain was pulled aside, and she buried her face in her pillow against the lamplight, and against anyone seeing her red eyes.

“What’s going on?” her cousin’s voice broke through the fog of misery, and she looked up, blearily.

“Albus - what-?”

“Everyone’s saying Scorp accused you of snogging Chung,” Al said with expressive distaste. “And neither of you were at dinner.”

Rose fell back. “Go away, Al. How did you even get in here?”

“What’s his problem?” he demanded, ignoring her. “I mean why would he say that? Is he mental?”
“I don’t know why he said it,” Rose mumbled miserably.

“Dickhead,” Albus growled. Rose blinked at him. She couldn’t remember any time in the last three months that Albus had said a single bad word against his friend. “I mean, Chung? Is he crazy? Did he take too much of his potion, or what?”

She sighed and sat up, running tired hands through her hair and staring down at the sheets bundled in her lap. “Al…”

“No, really. Look I know he’s been through a lot, and I’ve been doing everything I can to support him, but why would he say -”

“I did it.” Rose said quietly.

“- something like that? You - what?” Albus blinked again and made a scrunched up, puzzled face. “What did you say?”

Rose took a deep breath, continuing to stare at her knees. “I said, I did it. After he yelled at me, I went to the library, and Jian was there, and I just…” She shook her head. “I don’t know how it happened.”

Al’s expression twisted even further into a confused grimace. “What d’you mean? When was this?”

“I said, this morning, after he… he yelled at me about seeing Jian, and I told him he was crazy, but he seemed so sure about it and it just made me so angry, and I… I… I don’t know, I met Jian and he kissed me, and I… kissed him back. Sort of.”

Al looked as though he’d been hit with a Confundus Curse. “You did what?”

“Al, please don’t make me feel worse than I already do…”

“It’s true??”

“No! Well… I mean, no, it wasn’t when he said it, but then…”

“That makes no sense!”

“I know! I know, it’s crazy…”

“Why would you do that??” he demanded, his face bright red behind his glasses.

“I told you, I was really angry, and upset, and he was being nice…”

“Wait. Wait.” Al held up a hand, his expression changing rapidly from confusion to anger. “Did you say Chung kissed you?”

“Al, that’s not the…”

He growled animalistically. “That mother-”

“AL! That’s not the point, okay? It’s done. It happened. Now I just have to figure out how to make Scorp ever talk to me again. Can you help me with that?”

For a moment she thought he would refuse. He looked angry enough; but in the end he seemed to decide he was angrier with Jian than he was with her. “Fine,” he said, shortly. “What do you want me to do?”
“Just….” Rose swallowed, wondering what possible way this would come out the way she wanted - the way she needed it to go. “Ask him how… why he said those things. Why he thought I would… I would do that to him.”

“He was right, though.”

Rose glared at him. “I’m aware of that. But it never would have happened if he hadn’t accused me of it in the first place. Never! He has to know that. He has to.”

“So you’re blaming it on him?”

“No!”

He gave her a sharp look. “It kind of sounds like you are.”

Rose did her best to stamp down the anger that was once again rearing its ugly head. “If you’re not going to help you can just go away,” she snapped, and turned her back on him, curling up on her side on the bed and shutting her eyes. After a moment, she heard his footsteps retreat towards the door. “Al?” The footsteps paused.

“Yeah?”

She curled up closer into the pillow, tears coming to her eyes again. “Please just… tell him I’m sorry.”

~*-A-*~

~*-A-*~

Albus stared, blankly, into the slightly reddened face of his friend. “You… what?” It seemed like he was saying that a lot today. “This is mental,” he added, rubbing his forehead. He was getting a headache.

Scorpius shrugged and didn’t meet his eyes. “Yeah. Well.”

“How long has this… this…”

“I told you. Since the Moonsilver.” Scorpius shrugged again. “But it’s been mostly stupid things,” he added. “Except a couple times. Well, a few times, I guess… like the Minister’s heart attack… um…”

Albus held up a hand. “Okay, okay, just… shut up. Why didn’t you say anything??”

“Do you want me to shut up or do you want me to explain?”

Albus glared at him. “Explain in a way that makes sense,” he said through gritted teeth.

Scorpius sighed. “I thought after a while they would go away,” he said, looking decidedly shifty. “Like it was just a weird side effect that would wear off. But the dreams are… well, they’re… not going away.” He shrugged again. “And usually it’s hard to tell what’s real, and what’s usual nonsense dream stuff. But this time, it really felt real. Real like it must have already happened. I don’t know.”

Albus tried to process this. He’d woken up late that morning after sneaking out of Lizzie’s dormitory once all her fellow Hufflepuffs were asleep. He was aware that this was more than a little skeevy, but
when they’d all come in from dinner while he and Lizzie had been already ensconced under the covers, there hadn’t been much he could do about it. So he’d spent most of the day thinking about that - and, if he was honest with himself, when he could organise for it to happen again. He’d sat with Lizzie in classes, not noticing that Rose and Scorpius were either absent or not sitting together. He had noticed that they weren’t at dinner. Only then had he started to pick up on the whispering going on around him; especially once he got back to Ravenclaw Tower. Now, not only was he having to take in the fact that Rose had kissed Jian, but that Scorpius was apparently now a dream Seer, and had been ever since they’d brought him back to the Leaky Cauldron. He shook his head. “You really can’t catch a break this year, can you?” he said.

Scorpius did not smile.

“Look,” he went on, wondering if there was even some tiny scrap of all this to be salvaged and if so, how on earth he was going to manage it. “Rose is really upset. She’s not been with Jian, or anything, she’s not seeing him behind your back. Do you really think she would?”

Scorpius had at least the decency to look uncomfortable. “Well… no, not really,” he admitted. “She did kiss him though,” he added, with a low ferocity. “Didn’t she?”

“Well…” Albus was wishing Rose had never come clean to him. “Yes.”

Scorpius’ face, if it were possible, became even more miserable, as though he’d been holding out one last shred of hope that he’d been imagining things.

“But only after you yelled at her about it in front of the whole common room,” Albus went on. “I guess she thought you were blaming her anyway, might as well give you something to blame her for. Its not an excuse, but…”

“What? But - ” Scorp frowned and pinched the bridge of his nose. “That doesn’t sound like her either,” he said after a moment.

“No, it doesn’t. She’s really a mess about it. She said to tell you she’s sorry and she didn’t mean for it to happen.” At least, he thought that had been the message, it was hard to get any kind of clarity out of the events of the last hour.

Scorpius’ frown only deepened, and he said: “don’t tell me you’re taking her side.”

“Mate, I don’t know. I have no bloody idea what’s going on. I’m just telling you what she said.”

His friend seemed dissatisfied with this, but Albus could think of nothing else to say. Instead he got up and started changing into his night things while Scorpius just sat there in his chair, apparently thinking.

“Hey,” he said after a while. “Where were you last night?”

“Huh?” Albus wondered if it were possible to pretend he had been here all along. Probably not, he thought. Shit.

“Last night. You didn’t come in til way past lights-out.”

He hesitated. Any other time he would have been thrilled to tell Scorpius all about where he’d been and what he’d been doing. Now was the worst possible timing, but it couldn’t be helped. Any half-baked lie would be sure to come out sooner or later, and he owed Scorpius better than a lie, anyway. “I was, er… with Lizzie,” he said, finally, sitting on the edge of the bed in his pyjamas and taking off his glasses - mainly so he wouldn’t have to see his friend’s face.
“You - what? At two in the morning.”

“Um. Yeah.”

There was a very heavy pause as Scorpius tapped his fingers on the arms of his chair. “Aren’t you still with Cleo?” he asked, in a slightly dangerous tone.

Albus winced. “Not anymore.” He really didn’t want to have to relive that conversation, ever. Even via Floo - especially by Floo - it had been extremely awkward. Cleo had actually been upset - he was sure he’d seen tears in her eyes. He wasn’t sure why he’d just assumed that she wouldn’t really care. He hadn’t said anything about Lizzie - he was not that stupid - instead blaming the long distance and their lack of anything in common for his sudden decision to break it off. But he thought she might have sensed the truth, anyway.

“Oh.” Another pause. “Did you… you know…”

Albus grinned, despite himself. “Yeah.”

Scorpius swore softly, but he didn’t sound angry. “What was it like?” he asked finally. Albus wasn’t sure, but he thought he detected more than curiosity in his friend’s voice. Immediately he felt guilt wash over him in a wave, and the grin faded. Much as he disliked the mental image of his best friend in bed with his cousin - ugh - he knew Scorpius was wondering if he would even ever get the chance, himself.

“Fine,” he said, quickly, going red and making as if to go to bed.

“Al,” Scorp said shortly. Albus forced himself to meet his eyes. Scorpius smiled at him, a little sadly, but it was a smile, all the same. Relieved, Albus smiled back. “Seriously,” Scorp prompted.

Albus’ smile widened. “It was incredible,” he said, finally allowing himself to enjoy the feeling that had filled him all day.

~*-S-*~

~*-S-*~

It had actually been a relief to talk to Albus for half an hour about his night with Lizzie - though he’d insisted on being spared the details. Lizzie was after all like a sister to him, and he wasn’t sure he’d be able to look Neville in the eye again otherwise. But at least for half an hour he hadn’t had to think about himself, about the endless dreams that plagued him every night, about the giant crack in his relationship that he may or may not have caused, about his father being in prison and the trial that could happen any day, and most of all about being unable to walk, of being unable to wash or dress himself without magic, and of the pain he was in constantly as his body struggled to heal itself.

But now, with nothing else to occupy his thoughts, the pain returned, and got worse. He was always in pain at night, after the regrowth potion, which was still working on strengthening the new bones and nerves in his spine. But usually after a few minutes he got drowsy enough - exhausted enough - to drop off to sleep, where despite the occasionally disturbing dreams he at least could sleep through the pain. Tonight though, sleep refused to come.

Rose had kissed Jian. What did it matter whether she’d done it before or after he told her he knew about it? She’d still done it. A treacherous voice insisted that Albus had not exactly been the most chivalrous example, either, and Scorpius was still friends with him, but at least Albus had had the
sense to break up with Cleo as soon as possible. How did Rose expect things to just be the same? When he’d had to watch that awful scene in the library... in the dream, he hadn’t heard any of the words, but he’d seen quite enough, and woken in a sweat. When he’d seen Rose the next morning, he hadn’t been able to stop himself. He couldn’t look at her without seeing her with her arms around Chung. But the look on her face when he accused her... it had been real. Albus must be right - Scorpius had driven her to it. It was his fault.

Sleep, he thought desperately. You have to stop thinking about this and go to sleep.

The pain was getting worse. His brain refused to shut down, and the more he thought about it, the worse it got. Eventually all thoughts of Rose and Jian were driven out of his mind, and he started to realise that something was really wrong. He hadn’t been in this much pain since St. Mungos, and maybe even then...

He lay still as a statue, not daring to move, while agony laced up and down his spine. He wasn’t due his pain potion for another two days. He would have taken it anyway, but when he finally tried to move, to reach for it, the pain was so bad he saw stars. At one point, unable to bear it anymore, he tried to call for help, to call Albus’ name, but his voice didn’t seem to be working. He tried to scream, and nothing came out. Any minute, he thought, any minute he would pass out, and when he woke up it wouldn’t be as bad. His back was burning. His chest was burning. He was on fire. His curse scar was like a white hot spear through his body.

He wondered if he would die. At least then it wouldn’t hurt anymore, he thought, but then he thought of Hannah, and Neville and Alice and the people who cared about him. He thought about Rose and how the last thing he would have ever said to her would have been stupid words. He thought about Albus, and how guilty he’d been even though it wasn’t really his fault, and how much worse it would be after he, Scorpius, had gone, and he thought about how he would miss Teddy and Victoire’s wedding. He didn’t want to die, he thought feverishly as he tried to cling to the living world. Hours passed, and still he lay there, unable to move or speak, feeling weaker and weaker with each minute that went by. Help, he thought. Someone... please...

Suddenly, someone drew back the curtains. “Scorp?” said an urgent voice. It was Albus. “Are you okay? What’s wrong?” It was dark; Scorpius could only just see his face outlined by the moonlight through the gap.

He bit his lip hard and shook his head, gritting his teeth against the way this sent hot lances through his chest.

“Shit.” Albus came around to the pillow, nearly tripping over Scorpius’ trunk in the process. “Lumos,” he muttered furiously, and Scorpius shut his eyes quickly against the sudden light. “What is it? Do you need your potion?”

“It’s worse... than that,” Scorpius managed. His voice came out in a hoarse, half whisper. “Al, it really hurts...”

“Peter!” Albus called. He turned his face away but the sudden sharp sound still made Scorpius start and open his eyes. It was bright, but at least he could see, and he was no longer alone in a dark cage of pain. He groaned.

“What’s going on?” muttered Peter’s voice from somewhere. “It’s two in the morning.”

“Go get Madam Pomfrey,” Albus said sharply. “Tell her to call Healer Knox at St. Mungo’s, then come up here.”
“Al…” Scorpius whispered. He didn’t know what he wanted to say, or do. He just wanted someone, anyone, to make the pain go away.

“It’s okay,” Albus said, dragging over a desk chair and sitting on it so he could take his friend’s hand. “It’s okay. I’m right here. Help’s coming.” His voice was shaky, but firm. Scorpius looked up at him and took a deep breath. Albus wouldn’t let him die.

~*-A-*~

Pomfrey and Knox came, and though it was probably only a few minutes, it felt like hours. Pomfrey was out of breath - she was after all getting on in years - but didn’t let it get in the way of her quickfire diagnostic charms. Knox muttered to himself while doing his own spells. One of them made Scorpius’ whole body shudder, and his hand tightened hard on Albus’ fingers.

“You’re hurting him!” Al protested. His heart was in his throat. Scorpius was deathly pale. The vision of him lying in a pool of blood in the abandoned factory kept flashing in front of his eyes. This couldn’t be happening. They’d come so far, been through so much. How was this happening now?

“Hold on, lad,” Knox said, low, in Scorpius’ ear. The seriousness in his voice was even more terrifying than the way Scorpius was grimacing in pain. Albus knew Knox. Had spent every Sunday since the end of summer observing him with patients. Knox was never serious.

“Hurts…” Scorpius murmured, his voice only just audible. “Please…”

“Its okay,” Albus said, forcing himself to speak calmly. He had done this before, with patients at the hospital who were in pain, sat with them, reassured them. It always made him feel good afterwards, knowing that he had helped even if only some tiny way. But this was different, this was his best friend. He could sense Peter and Gaius standing awkwardly in the background in their pyjamas, not sure what they should be doing or if they should be doing anything. “Just hold on.”

Pomfrey took a small bag from her pocket and enlarged it with her wand. She dug through it, pulled out a handful of vials, uncorked one of them, and held Scorpius’ head so that she could pour it into his mouth. He coughed a little, but managed to swallow it, and after a few seconds his breathing evened out, his eyes fluttered shut, and his hand went limp in Albus’ grip.

“What’s wrong with him?” Albus asked, carefully straightening his friend’s arm by his side before standing up shakily and looking over at Knox. He knew the man wouldn’t lie to him.

Knox’s face was troubled in a way that he’d never seen it. “It could be a number of things,” he said. “How long has he been like this?”

Albus felt the question like a stab to the heart, but all he could do was answer honestly. “I don’t know,” he said, his mouth dry as a bone. “He was like this when I woke up. He… usually tosses and turns, all night. But I woke up just now and he was dead quiet, so I thought I should check… but he was fine when we went to bed, I swear,” he added, realising with every awful passing second that Scorpius could have been like this for hours, and Albus had been two feet away the whole time. “He was smiling, talking normally…”

Knox checked his watch and did a few more spells, still frowning. Scorpius, still and pale, looked as though he wasn’t even breathing.
Albus swallowed. “What… what do we do?” he asked.

“Perhaps he should go to St Mungo’s,” Pomfrey suggested.

Knox shook his head. “No,” he said, scratching his chin. He exchanged glances with her, and Albus could read the reason in their eyes. They didn’t think Scorpius would survive the journey. “He shouldn’t be in this much pain, still,” Knox muttered, in the way he did when he was concentrating particularly hard on something. “The structure is whole, we were merely strengthening the nerves…”

“Could it be a reaction?” Albus suggested. “Could he be allergic to something else int he potions, not just Moonsilver?” Out of the corner of his eye he saw Madam Pomfrey look at him sharply.

“A sound hypothesis, but any reaction so severe as this would have shown itself long before now, if it were the potions,” Knox said.

“Something’s gone wrong with the Healing then,” Albus said. It was the only explanation he could think of. Knox gave him a sharp look, although he hadn’t meant it to sound accusing. He was just trying to find an answer, something they could fix, to make him okay again.

Seeing he was of no more use, he backed off and sat on his bed, watching as the two Healers did more spells and muttered to each other in low voices. There was nothing else he could do. His foot quivered against the floor; he was cold in his pyjamas, but he didn’t even think of moving to get a cloak. He kept his eyes on Scorpius’ face, afraid that if he looked away even for a second, something else would go wrong.

Eventually Knox stood back. “I must go to the hospital,” he said. “For some research. Mr Potter, you’re in charge of general care until I return.”

Albus blinked and looked at Madam Pomfrey. She was frowning a little, but did not argue. When Knox had swept out of the dormitory, apparently fully aware of where he was going - Albus remembered vaguely that Knox had once told him that he’d been a Ravenclaw, himself - Pomfrey straightened the sheets around Scorpius’ body before coming around to Albus’ side. “Are you all right?” she asked, with a softness he’d never heard from her before. Behind them, Peter and Gaius were inconspicuously getting back in their beds, whispering quietly to each other.

He shook his head sharply. “This is my fault,” he said hoarsely. “I should have known.”

“But you did know,” Pomfrey reminded him. “You sensed something was wrong, and you checked on him and called his Healer. You may very well have saved his life, you realise.”

Albus found that hard to believe. He was sure, somehow that he could have - should have - done something else. Something better, sooner.

“You have good instincts,” Pomfrey went on. “I admit I hadn’t considered another allergy.”

“I… I’ve been studying diagnostics,” Albus said, very low. He hadn’t told anyone yet about his extra reading, not even his best friends, though he wasn’t sure why. “And training with Knox, at St. Mungo’s… I started to think I could really be a Healer. Stupid,” he muttered. What made him think he would ever be able to really help people? When it really came to it, like tonight, he was useless.

“Not at all,” Pomfrey said, surprised. “I think you would be an excellent Healer.”

Albus sat up, and looked between her and Scorpius’ prone form. “But -”
“Mr Potter, you can’t expect to be the one to single-handedly heal your friend. What is wrong with him is complex and unique, it’s a challenge even to experts like Knox, and would take years of training and study to truly understand it. But you could get there one day. You have the instinct, like I said. That’s something that can’t be learned.”

Albus rubbed his eyes and shook his head. Pomfrey patted him on the shoulder and stood up, quite straight, no longer showing any signs of age despite her neatly-pinned grey hair. “So much like your father,” she said. “Well, not quite like. None of you have yet to beat his record for visits to the Hospital Wing, for which I am grateful.”

He only shrugged. In his own mind he couldn’t be any less like his father. His father, the famous hero, wouldn’t have let Scorpius get hurt in the first place.

She sighed. “Perhaps you should try and get some sleep?” she suggested. “I’ll watch over him until Healer Knox returns.”

Albus shook his head. “No,” he said. “He’s my friend.” He got up and went back to his chair by Scorpius’ side. “I’m staying with him.”

~

People came and went over the next few hours. Pomfrey went out for a bit, leaving Albus with an emergency potion in case Scorpius woke up again. Peter and Gaius, who were clearly only pretending to be asleep, eventually got up and slipped out of the dormitory, pausing only to ask whether Albus wanted them to fetch anything, or anyone.

Albus was too preoccupied to think of an answer, but after they’d left he wondered if he shouldn’t have told them to fetch Neville. He was after all still Scorp’s legal guardian. He needn’t have worried, though, since Pomfrey had apparently already thought of this. When she came back, Neville was right behind her, looking as though he had just thrown on robes over his pyjamas. His hair was sticking up all over the place, but his eyes were wide awake. When he saw Scorpius, his face fell.

“Knox?” he asked Pomfrey, a little hoarsely.

“Coming back once he has the right resources,” she replied.

Neville ran a hand over his face and nodded. “Hannah will be here as soon as she can get our youngest to her grandfather’s,” he said. “Thank you for calling me, Poppy.”

As Madam Pomfrey did her checks, Neville sat beside Albus. “All right, lad?” he asked, softly.

Albus glared at him. “I’m fine,” he snapped in a low whisper. It didn’t seem right to speak loudly, even though Scorpius was unconscious and the sleeping potion probably wouldn’t wear off still for hours. “People have to stop worrying about me, I’m not the one who’s lying there.”

Neville nodded. He didn’t seem hurt or surprised by this outburst. He put a hand on Al’s arm. “No, you’re the one sitting here,” he said. “Sometimes that’s harder.”

Albus pulled his arm away. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Pomfrey shot them a warning look. Neville stood up and beckoned Albus towards him. Reluctantly, Al left Scorpius’ side and followed him to the other end of the dormitory. Suddenly and completely irrationally, he remembered that just over twenty four hours ago he’d been hooking up with the Professor’s eldest daughter. He found himself quite unable to meet the man’s eyes.
“I’ve been sitting beside hospital beds my whole life,” Neville said. “Believe me, I understand what it feels like. You feel helpless, you feel trapped, and most of all you feel guilty because you’re not the one who’s in pain.” Albus felt a wave of emotion come over him. He hugged his arms to his chest, biting his lip and holding it in as best he could. “But guilt isn’t what he needs from you right now,” Neville went on. He put a hand on Al’s shoulder and squeezed gently. “He doesn’t need you to solve this, either, he has trained Healers for that. He just needs you to be his friend. That’s all.”

This time Albus didn’t dare look away. Suddenly he missed his mother very much. It was stupid, he was an adult now, but all he wanted was to curl up in his mum’s lap and cry. Instead he nodded stiffly. “I can do that,” he said.

“Good. Does Rose know?”

Al shook his head. “No… I… I didn’t want to have to wake her whole dormitory…”

“No, that’s best. Someone should at least get a full night’s sleep. Then she can take over from us when we need a rest, eh?”

Albus frankly didn’t intend on doing any such thing, not until Scorpius was better, but he thought better of making an issue of it. He nodded, looking over Neville’s shoulder at the wheelchair tucked neatly into the corner of the room. He was already starting to miss the days when the chair had been the biggest obstacle they had to face.

~*-R-*~

~*-R-*~

“Rose?”

Rose opened bleary eyes. She’d cried herself to sleep, and it seemed like only minutes ago. Her face felt as though it were covered in snot and tears, and her hair was a tangled mess and stuck to her cheeks in places. She pulled the covers over her head. “I’m not going,” she muttered. “Tell them I’m sick.” It would be the first time she’d ever skipped class at Hogwarts, unless she was really ill, but she didn’t care. She just wanted to wallow in her own misery for a while. And maybe take a shower at some point.

“Rose.” Janey’s voice sounded uncharacteristically serious. “It’s Scorpius.”

~

He looked like he was only sleeping. She didn’t understand how he could have gotten so much worse overnight.

“Knox said, it could be the feeling in his spine coming back,” Albus said grimly. “Something connecting where it didn’t, before.” He was still in his pyjamas, although he clearly hadn’t slept for several hours. He was sitting in one of three armchairs that had been brought up from the common room. No one was questioning the missing furniture - the whole tower was in a hush, the news being exchanged in whispers as people left for breakfast.

“But that’s good, isn’t it?” Rose asked with a rush of hope.

Albus shook his head. “Not if it hurts him that much.” His voice cracked a little on the words as he said, “you didn’t see him, Rosie. No way he could live like that. He… he looked like he was…” He
put his head in his hands, covering his face. Rose didn’t know what to make of it. When Scorpius
had been in the hospital with a hole through his chest, Albus had dealt with it by being almost jovial.
Seeing him so depressed now was frightening. It was as though he had given up hope.

Rose sat beside him, looking at Scorpius’ still, pale face. Was this because of her? Had what she had
done with Jian sent him into some kind of spiral? “You should have woken me up,” she said. How
long had he been like this? Hours? While she’d just been sleeping, oblivious to his pain?

“There wasn’t any point,” Al said, wiping his eyes and lowering his hands to stare into his lap. “We
can’t do anything. Just wait.”

“This is wrong,” she said, furiously. “Why does this keep happening? It’s not fair!”

Al only shook his head again.

Rose walked around the bed and knelt beside Scorpius’ pillow. She reached out and brushed a look
of his hair away from his forehead. It was just now starting to get back to what she thought of as its
proper length. His cheeks were very pale, and there were dark circles under his eyes. “I’m sorry,”
she said, very softly, and kissed him lightly just over his brow. His forehead was clammy. “What are
we going to do?” she asked softly.

Al looked up at her. They were the only two left in the dormitory. Hannah and Neville had been
there for a while, but had apparently taken a break in order to take care of some things that would
have to be managed in their respective absences. Pomfrey had gone back to work in the hospital
wing, and Knox, after making several visits, seemed to have left Albus in charge for the time being.
Rose might have argued about this - she loved her cousin, but he wasn’t a Healer. Except Knox
wasn’t there to argue with, so she would have to wait.

“We can’t - ” Albus started.

“No, I mean… if - when, when he comes out of this…. then what do we do?” she said, emotion
building in her throat. “We can’t just keep on like we have been.”

“What else can we do?” he demanded.

“We’re not doing enough,” she said, slamming her fist on her knees. “I’m not doing enough.”

“Yeah, well, not cheating on him might be a good start,” Al muttered.

Rose flinched and turned away, forcing back tears.

He sat back with a sigh. He looked exhausted. “Sorry. I didn’t mean that.”

She sniffed, and managed to get a hold of herself. This wasn’t the time for tears - they wouldn’t do
any good. “No, you’re right,” she sighed. “That was wrong, and I… I haven’t been patient
enough… I can do better.”

She took Scorpius’ hand and let her eyes wander until they landed on the guitar case, sticking out
from under the side of the bed. “We have to get him playing again,” she said. “He’s not the same if
he can’t play music. I’m sure it would help.”

But Albus was looking at her doubtfully. “Rose…”

“What?” she demanded.
“I think… look, I know we all just sort of expected that he’d get better, eventually, but after this… I
dunno. Maybe we have to accept that he’s not going to get out of the chair.”

Rose stared at him. She wanted to refuse to believe it, to say that they shouldn’t give up hope, but…
it had been months, now, and there hadn’t been any signs of improvement. And now this. “Even so,”
she said instead, very low. “Even if… he can still play. He needs that, Alby, I know he does. It’d
make him whole again. Or at least, it’d be a start. It’d be something.”

Albus rubbed at his forehead tiredly. “So? How are you going to get him playing? You heard him,
he’s not interested anymore. Cleo gave up asking him to come back to the band. And I don’t really
blame him,” he added in a low mutter. “If I were him I wouldn’t much feel like singing either.”

Rose’s expression deepened into a determined frown. “I’ll think of something,” she said firmly.

~*-S-*~

~*-S-*~

He saw mistletoe hanging above the bed, and heard singing, as if from far away.

Ding dong merrily on high…. the angel bells are ringing…

He sat there for a moment, watching her sleep. She was truly beautiful, even when lying still in a
hospital bed. Her bushy hair shone redder than usual in the dim light, spread out over the crisp
white pillows. She was quite pale, and there was sweat beading on her forehead. As he watched, her
expression twisted from one of peace into one of pain.

Ding dong verily the sky… is riddl’d with angles singing...

He tried to move towards her, but someone grabbed his arm. And then, as he tried to pull away, the
dream-Rose opened her eyes, and began to scream.

“Come away, lad.”

“No!”

The assailant dragged him out of the room as people rushed past them. He looked up in the hated
face of Rose’s father. Why was he keeping him away, when Rose was in pain? “You can’t do any
good,” the man said seriously. Behind him he could still hear the screaming.

“I should be there with her!”

“You’ll only be in the way.”

Gloooo-o0000-oooooo-ooooooo-ooooooria, Hosanna in Excelsis!

Rose’s dad pulled him further away and into a chair.

“This is all my fault,” Scorpius muttered, putting his head in his hands.

“Yes,” Ron said grimly.
When Scorpius woke again, it was daylight and he was very comfortable and warm. And numb, he realised as he tested his fingers, which only moved very slowly. In fact he felt very strange all over. He opened his eyes and blinked until the view came into focus. Rose was sitting there, but she was staring past him to a spot on the opposite wall. She was wearing what he thought of as her thinking face.

“Hey,” he said. The word came out very hoarse; he had to make an effort to be heard at all.

She jumped and looked down at him. “Hey,” she said, a relieved smile breaking out on her face. She took his hand and threaded her fingers between his, which tingled as feeling gradually returned to them. “How do you feel?”

“Weird,” Scorpius said honestly. He felt very light, but at the same time weighed down, like a balloon tied to a stone. And he felt dizzy, but he was lying down. That was weird, wasn’t it?

Rose looked worried for a minute, then she said: “well, you are on a lot of potions. You aren’t in pain?”

Memory flooded back like a tidal wave of razorblades. He’d been stuck, paralysed with pain, for how long he wasn’t sure, and then Albus had come, and then Knox, and then, blackness. He gasped and shut his eyes tight for a moment against the memory.

“Scorp?” Rose said quickly, and he felt her start to get up. “What is it, does it -”

“No,” he muttered, giving her hand a squeeze. “No, I… I’m okay. No pain, not now.” He opened his eyes to see her sitting back slowly into the chair, watching him carefully.

“Are you sure?” she asked, looking searchingly into his eyes as though trying to work out if he was lying to make her feel better.

“Yeah. I was just… remembering.” He shuddered. “It was awful. How long was I out?”

“Two days,” Rose said, making him start.

“What? But - crap, how much class did I miss?”

“About two days worth,” she said, with a half-hearted smile. “Don’t worry, you’ll catch up.”

“Like I’m not already behind,” Scorpius groaned. He looked around. He was in the hospital wing. “How’d I get here?”

“Madam Pomfrey and Knox brought you down from the dormitory last night,” she explained. “As soon as they were sure it wouldn’t hurt you more. Al’s been here the whole time,” she said. “I made him go get something to eat, but he hasn’t left your side, otherwise. He even slept here last night.”

Scorpius blinked, noticing that the bed beside his was looking a little rumpled. Before he could comment however, he realised that Rose was still speaking.

“He told me about your dreams,” she went on, her hand loosening a little in his as though she expected him to pull away. “I don’t know why you wouldn’t tell us… but… well, I think I understand better now, what’s been bothering you.” She bit her lip. “I’m sorry about Jian, Scorp. Really, I… I swear it didn’t mean anything at all, I was just angry, and stupid… and I thought you were pushing me away, so I… I’m sorry.”

He stared at her. He’d forgotten about the incident entirely until she’d brought it up, and now it
seemed so long ago and far away. It took him a second to catch up. “No, I was wrong,” he said, when he finally felt like he was grounded enough in the conversation. “I don’t know why I thought… because the dreams have always been about the future. I should have realised if I just told you about it, it wouldn’t happen. But of course I go and make it so it does happen. It’s like a bad time travel novel.”

Her face was hard to read. “So… you’re not angry with me?”

Scorpius considered. Maybe he should be, he thought. He had been, last night - or two nights ago, or whenever it was. He looked up at her face and remembered how he had clawed himself back from what felt like the brink of death, thinking about how he didn’t want to leave her with words of anger. He thought about the dream he’d had just now, the one he’d had several times now but seemed to grow sharper every time. How far away was it? How was he going to stop it happening? She - she and Albus - they were all that was keeping him sane. If he lost that…

“I love you,” he said finally. He didn’t miss the way her eyes widened and her fingers tightened on his. When was the last time he had said it? Too long, probably. He wished he could move properly, he wanted to reach up and touch her face, to sit up and kiss her… “I love you,” he said again, his eyes filling with hot tears that threatened to fall and make a fool of him. “I don’t… please don’t…”


“Me too.” He took a deep breath. “Kiss me? Please?”

She smiled and a soft laugh escaped. “You really are on a lot of potions.”

“Rose…”

“Shh.” She closed the distance between them and touched her lips softly to his. “It’s going to be okay. You’ll see. Just rest.”

“Not yet. I’ve been asleep for ages.” He looked up at her, suddenly feeling lightheaded. Maybe the potions really were affecting him.

“Hey, what -” They looked over to see Albus standing still in the doorway with a half-eaten sandwich in his hand. “Oh no,” he moaned. “I just went out for five minutes…”

“It’s okay,” Scorpius said, smiling at him. “I know you were here.”

“No but seriously, I really meant to be here when you woke up. How are you?”

“No but seriously, I really meant to be here when you woke up. How are you?”

“On some pretty hard potions, apparently. I feel high as a kite and I can’t move anything.”

Albus pulled up a chair on the same side as Rose, so he didn’t have to turn his head to look between them. “Yeah, we’re going to take you off the numbing draughts bit by bit. Mate, you really scared the crap out of me.”

Scorpius winced. “Sorry.”

“Al’s been helping Knox look after you - and Neville and Hannah were here too,” Rose explained. “We were all so worried.”

He swallowed. He felt guilty for dragging Hannah away from the pub, and Neville from lessons. But at the same time it was nice, knowing that someone cared that much. “I’m lucky to have all you guys,” he said, feeling his eyelids try to close and forcing them open. “Really. I’m sorry I’m such a
“You aren’t,” Albus said firmly.

“Yeah, I am. It’s just… you know… everything.”

“We know.” Rose leaned over and hugged him as best she could. “We can’t imagine how hard it must be, Scorp. But we’re here for you, okay? Just… please don’t hold it all back. We want to know if you’re in pain, or you’re having weird Seer dreams, or if you need help with schoolwork, okay? You don’t have to do this alone.”

“Yeah, okay.” He yawned. “Hey, did Al tell you about him and Lizzie?”

“What?”

Albus glared at him. “Oi, tattletale, don’t think I won’t thump you as soon as you’re well enough.”

“What happened with Lizzie?” Rose demanded.

Scorpius closed his eyes, letting the sound of their bickering lull him into a doze. It was funny how it made him feel safe. Just knowing they were there.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks everyone so much for your continued encouragement and support. I know update times have been ridiculous. Hopefully they will improve over the next few months as I'm determined to get this finished before the end of the year!
Chapter Summary

*Every time he woke up from a nightmare - real or imagined, it was hard to tell - she would be there, with her mane of red hair spread over the pillow, breathing lightly, and he would drift off again.*

Chapter Notes

Music Chapter: Finally! The new video is up on the music page at misssaigonfic.tumblr.com/musicpost.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

2024-25

~*-R-*~

~*-R-*~

Even though Rose wished it could have happened in a less terrifying and life-threatening way, once Scorpius got out of the hospital wing several days later, the three of them did seem to be a team again. Even if they did tip-toe a little around each other, not wanting to set off any unnecessary fighting.

Rose knew that Scorpius was still in pain, but he put a brave face on it. It might have been different, she thought, even encouraging, if whatever it was that had happened had caused some improvement. But he was still unable to do anything more than magic himself in and out of the chair. Privately she wondered if he wasn’t starting to see the chair as his safety net, if he wasn’t too afraid of the pain to push himself - not that she could blame him, and she wouldn’t have dared say anything of the sort to his face unless she saw something convincing enough to warrant such a comment. Or if he said anything to her, of course, but that seemed more unlikely than ever. She tried not to think about that too much. Instead she spent all her time helping him catch up on his schoolwork, until he had picked up on everything he’d missed during his half term at Durmstrang. She told Jian that he was good enough at Transfiguration now to continue on without her. He seemed to accept this rather flimsy excuse politely and without complaint, and he said nothing at all about the incident in the library - which made her wonder if maybe Albus had had a word with him. She decided not to pursue it.

Scorpius spent all *his* free time reading, when he wasn’t studying, or working on his NEWT projects. The projects were starting to weigh on all the seventh years - a couple of the Hufflepuffs had already had to see Madam Pomfrey for calming potions. Scorpius seemed to have his in hand, though, and he even let Rose look at his work, so that she didn’t have to nag him. If anything it was Albus who worried her more. He was doing longer and longer hours at the hospital, when he wasn’t at Quidditch practice or with Lizzie. The rest of his time seemed to be spent making sure Scorpius took
all the right potions at all the right times.

“Oughtn’t Madam Pomfrey be taking care of that?” she asked him once, as inquisitively as she dared. “She is the school nurse…”

“I’m closer,” was all he said, in a tone that suggested the subject was not to be debated. “Pomfrey can’t come up to the dormitory every night or find us at meals, or do you want Scorp rolling down to the hospital wing every three hours?”

She sighed inwardly. Knox trusted him to do everything right, and Scorpius didn’t seem to mind at all, so she had to trust her cousin as well. But she did worry that he wasn’t getting all his schoolwork done, especially when his ‘study sessions’ with Lizzie tended to result in him coming back to Ravenclaw Tower looking rather dishevelled.

There was a Quidditch game in the middle of November, against Slytherin, and neither Rose nor Albus were on their best form. It was a close call, but Ravenclaw finally managed to claw their way to victory, Albus stealing the game at the last minute by catching the snitch, bringing the score to 280-270.

“I don’t suppose you want to be captain?” Albus sighed as they trudged back up to the common room for a victory party that neither of them much wanted to attend. Rose mainly wanted a shower and a long sleep.

She looked at him in surprise. “You’re not quitting?”

“No the team,” he clarified quickly, “just... being captain. I don’t feel like I’m doing the best job. Only I don’t think anyone else could take over. The others are too young, other than Janey - ”

“No thank you,” Rose said, just as quickly. The thought of her dormmate being her captain was less than galling; Janey was nice, and responsible enough to be a prefect, but she could be irritatingly neurotic.

“Yeah, well. That’s what I thought.”

“Well, I don’t want to do it either. You knew it would be like this, at the start of the year.”

He sighed again. “Yeah, I know.”

In the end, he didn’t quit the captaincy, but their practices shifted into the evenings instead of weekends, so they didn’t get in the way of daytime study. This wasn’t hard to schedule, since no one ever wanted the pitch in the evenings in winter, but it was not a popular decision with the Ravenclaw players. It was icy cold, and dark, and the team muttered darkly to each other when their captain wasn’t around. Rose didn’t complain, although quitting the team would have given her a lot more time to do her own work. If she quit, it would be on more problem that Albus had to deal with.

As November turned into December, and the snow on the tops of the surrounding mountains started to creep down towards the castle, Rose remembered her promise to get Scorpius playing again. Unfortunately Albus had been accurate in his pessimism; every suggestion she made that he might like to pick up the guitar was met with excuses that he had no time, or he just didn’t feel like it, and she didn’t want to push the issue. She had a feeling it wouldn’t do any good, and might even make him more determined to avoid the subject. Instead, she began to come up with an alternative plan. She didn’t have much time to pull it off, but if it worked, she reasoned, it would be worth it.
The Christmas holidays could not have come too soon. For the first time, Scorpius was going to be spending his whole holiday away from the castle - now that Neville was his legal guardian, he was free to go to the Leaky Cauldron for the whole holiday. In fact, when he finally got up the courage to bring it up in casual conversation, Neville seemed surprised that he would even question it. Rose and Albus were also invited, and they both accepted, which triggered Scorpius’ conscience a little.

“Won’t your parents mind?” he asked as they discussed plans for the Potter and Weasley families to come to the Leaky Cauldron for Christmas dinner.

“They’ll be busy,” Albus said, shrugging. “I talked to Mum, she gets it.”

“And I’m not ready to go home yet,” Rose said, quietly, stroking Midnight curled up in her lap. Privately Scorpius thought that the rift between her and her dad was unlikely to heal if she kept avoiding him, but he wasn’t about to point that out. He’d done enough damage there already.

“Anyway I think we should all, y’know, stick together,” she added, innocently, but not quite looking Scorpius in the face.

Scorpius rolled his eyes. “I really don’t need the two of you babysitting me,” he said.

“Did we say that’s what this was?” Albus asked, raising an incongruous eyebrow. He was getting harder to argue with, Scorpius thought. He was starting to develop a distinctly Knox-like stubborn side that didn’t seem to care what people thought. “People stay over at people’s houses all the time, y’know. This is a thing that happens in real life.”

“Yes, my mum stayed at dad’s house all the time when they were growing up,” Rose pointed out, triumphant.

“It’s not *my* house though,” Scorpius pointed out. Really, it was bad enough that *he’d* intruded on the Longbottom’s Christmas for the last five years, no matter how much Hannah insisted they were happy to have him. Bringing a whole entourage for the holiday seemed like it was trespassing excessively on their hospitality.

“All right, fine. We’re not staying with you, we’re staying with Lizzie. You know, my girlfriend? Rose’s friend, your… friend, sister, person…”

Scorpius gave up. They were coming, and there wasn’t anything he could do about it. Anyway, it *would* be nice to have one of those supposedly ‘normal’ childhood experiences before he really aged out of them, he thought ruefully.

They couldn’t take the Floo through Neville’s office, because of the chair, so they took the train back to King’s Cross and the underground to Charing Cross Road, again. Hannah hugged them all when they arrived, saving Scorpius for last, and he breathed in the warm, comforting smell of baking, Butterbeer and pub food that lingered in her hair and on her clothes. It was ‘home’ to him, in a way that he couldn’t put into words. “You look so much better,” she said, taking his face between her hands. “I’ve been worried sick. But you’re much too thin, have you been eating properly?”

“Course I have,” Scorpius promised, flushing. It wasn’t his fault he wasn’t gaining weight. It wasn’t as though he did a lot of exercise.

Hannah gave him a doubtful look, but she ushered them all into the kitchen for dinner anyway. A blur of pink ran past her and launched itself into Scorpius’ lap. It hurt, but he was used to things
hurting by now, so he bit back a wince as Alice threw her arms around his neck. “Scorp!”

“Hey, Ally-pally” Scorpius grinned, squeezing her just as tight around her small frame while she did her best to smother him with kisses.

“Alice Longbottom, you are not to jump on Scorpius like that,” Hannah scolded. “You’ll hurt him.”

“I don’t mind.” Scorpius promised, cuddling the girl on his lap while the chair drove itself up to the table. “You’ve gotten so big!” he said.

“I’m nearly six,” she said proudly.

“Not for another four months you’re not,” Lizzie said, rolling her eyes as she helped her mother set the table.

“Shut up Lizzie!” Alice turned her head and blew a loud raspberry.

“Alice, that’s enough,” Hannah said, exasperated. “Honestly, that girl is twice the trouble of the other two put together.”

“Thanks Mum.” Lizzie made a face towards the others where her mother wouldn’t see.

It was a relief to be back at the Leaky Cauldron, and the days were quiet. They all felt as though they had earned a real break. There were a lot of early nights and late mornings while the boys, at least, caught up on sleep. Rose went back to her old routine of sneaking into Scorpius’ room at night, though neither of them discussed it. He didn’t mind - quite the opposite. He might not admit it, but not having Albus there in case something went wrong during the night made him nervous. Every time he woke up from a nightmare - real or imagined, it was hard to tell - she would be there, with her mane of red hair spread over the pillow, breathing lightly, and he would drift off again. She was nearly always gone by the time he woke up, back to Lizzie’s room to allay suspicion.

Not that anyone would believe there was much more than sleeping going on, Scorpius reflected to himself on Christmas morning as he washed and dressed, using the spells that had by now become so much second nature that he could do them non-verbally. He and Rose might as well be brother and sister for how far their relationship had progressed over the last year. It was Al and Lizzie they had to watch out for, he thought. He smirked a little to himself as he wondered whether Lizzie’s room was actually entirely vacant at night. He wouldn’t put it past the girls to have worked that out between them.

He didn’t begrudge Al, not really. It was obvious that Lizzie made him happy, and Merlin knew they all needed a bit of an escape, lately. It just bothered him that he couldn’t share that kind of closeness with Rose. Physically, he thought he could still do it - he hoped he could still do it - but he knew he would never have the strength, and when he couldn’t even get in and out of bed without pain, the idea of anything more was enough to send a chill of discomfort through him. The lack of intimacy didn’t seem to bother Rose, but he knew there were a lot of things that bothered her that she wouldn’t talk about, for his sake. He would have asked her, but he had no idea how to broach the subject, and other than nights, when one or other of them was usually sleeping, they hardly had any time alone together anyway. She seemed to be spending an inordinate amount of time Christmas shopping. She went out for hours at a time, sometimes two days in a row - it seemed excessive, but then he supposed she had a lot of cousins to buy for.

He did his best to put those thoughts aside. It was Christmas, and he was determined to at least try to
enjoy it. Of course, it was also a special day for another reason, which made it rather hard to forget.

“Happy Anniversary,” Rose said quietly to him, after he’d come into the dining room to a chorus of
“Merry Christmas!” from everyone.

“You too,” he said, while she leant down and kissed him. He couldn’t even kiss her if he wanted, he complained to himself, trying not to let his thoughts show on his face. He had to wait for her, or ask for her to get close enough, which kind of sucked all the spontaneity out of any romantic gesture.

“I can’t believe its been a year,” she said, sitting in a chair beside him and squeezing his hand under the table.

“Yeah well,” he said, making his voice as light and jovial as he dared. “There’ve been a lot of bloody interruptions.”

Breakfast was served in the form of ham, jams and marmalade with hot buttered rolls, and then it was time for presents. Scorpius had never been there for this ritual before. The Longbottom family followed a tradition of youngest to oldest, so they all got to watch while Alice tore into packages containing books and toys. One package turned out to be a set of dull-looking, navy-blue balls. Scorpius recognised them instantly; he’d actually had a set as a child. He smiled as the girl inspected them with doubtful curiosity. “Throw them up,” he prompted. “You have to try and get them to stay in the air.”

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Neville give him a surprised look, but he stayed focused on Alice as she experimented with trying to get her balls to stick to the ceiling. None of them went much higher than her head. “Come on, you can do better than that,” he said. He had an odd sense of deja vu as he watched her fix her brow determinedly, and use both hands to throw the ball. It stopped just short of the ceiling, and clung to the air, spinning in place and breaking out in spots of light. As it spun, the lights whirled around the room like a storm of stars, and she laughed excitedly as everyone whooped and applauded.

Funny, Scorpius thought, Neville and Hannah giving their daughter a magic testing device. Had they been worried that she might be a Squib? He watched them, Neville clapping enthusiastically and Hannah drawing the girl into her lap and kissing her all over. It wouldn’t matter to them, he told himself. Probably they just meant it to be a toy. But he couldn’t help thinking the looks they exchanged looked rather relieved.

Rose was next, going by age, and she had quite a sizable pile of gifts, some of which having been sent by her parents. Scorpius hadn’t been able to scrounge up money for anything other than a new charm for her bracelet, which she nevertheless thanked him for enthusiastically.

It felt very weird to open his own gifts in front of a room of people. Usually he got to do it alone in the dormitory. The pile was also bigger than he was used to. By the end of what was a very embarrassing ten minutes, he had a whole satchel full of new school supplies, three new Muggle novels and a gaming device - Hannah’s inspired contribution - a new wand sheath, some dragonhide gloves and - from Albus, with no trace of embarrassment whatsoever - a package full of new socks and underwear. He flushed a little, but clearly people had been paying attention to what he really needed, and he could hardly argue because there was too much.

After presents, they packed away the dining table and communed in the sitting room while Hannah went to help open the pub for the Christmas crowd. “I got you another gift, too,” Rose said, when Albus was enthusiastically showing Lizzie the anti-disguise glasses that Teddy had sent him. “You’ll see later.”
“I wish you wouldn’t,” he said, wincing. “I’ve already got more stuff than I can carry home.”

“You won’t have to carry it,” she said, rolling her eyes, which peaked his curiosity a little. “Let me see the game thing. I hope it doesn’t distract you from lessons.”

“No mother. Homework first, I promise,” he said, holding up his hands in surrender. She glared at him, but really, she’d deserved it.

All in all, by dinnertime he was in an unusually good mood. He’d almost forgotten about the combined Potter-Weasley families descending on them, until they made their way down to the pub to find the big table laid out and a host of variously redheaded people waiting for them.

“Mum!” Albus hugged his mother hard, and Scorpius saw a surprised expression on Mrs Potter’s face as she put her arms around him and stroked his hair. He was taller than her by half a head, but it didn’t seem to matter; the hug seemed to go on just a second too long, even by Scorpius’ limited understanding of such things.

“All right, love?” he heard her say quietly, but he was distracted from hearing Albus’ answer by Mr Potter coming up to shake his hand.

“How are you?” he asked, in his serious way. “You look…”

“I look like crap,” Scorpius finished for him, raising an eyebrow. “I’m fine, though.”

Harry seemed to smile despite his better judgement. “Good lad.”

“Is there any progress on the trial?” Scorpius asked, unable to resist the temptation. “The papers aren’t saying anything.”

Harry shook his head slowly. “No, I’m sorry. I would let you know right away if there were.”

“I know… it’s just…”

Mr Potter patted him gently on the shoulder. “I know. I want it to be over as much as you do.” Scorpius rather doubted that, but he let the subject drop.

Rose’s parents came over, and he steeled himself, but Mr Weasley was polite in his greeting, and Mrs Weasley was very concerned. “You would let us know if there were anything we could do for you, wouldn’t you?” she asked. Over her shoulder, he saw Rose’s cheeks go red.

“I’m really okay, Minister,” he said politely. “Especially after today - I think I have socks to last me about ten years.”

“Oi!” Albus butted in. “Socks are important. Do you want cold feet?” He was clearly determined that his gift be regarded as genius despite its obvious necessity.

“Call me Hermione, please, Scorpius,” Mrs Weasley said kindly.

“Oh, I wouldn’t dream of it,” Scorpius said quickly. Mr Weasley snorted, much to his surprise, and it might have been his imagination, but he could have sworn that Mrs Weasley elbowed him in the ribs as they went to sit down.

The large table could only be accommodated in the biggest open space in the pub, meaning that people were constantly moving in and amongst them, and the crowds only grew as the afternoon went on. Scorpius watched enviously as the pub staff whizzed around the tables, delivering the
Leaky Cauldron’s famous Christmas dinner, refilling tankards and whisking away empty plates. He knew that he wouldn’t be expected to help even if he could walk, but it didn’t stop him remembering sadly how carefree and happy he’d been, the summer before last when he’d been one of them…

Rose had sat herself strategically between him and her parents, and encouraged him in conversation with the adults. He did his best. It wasn’t that he was shy of them - not anymore, anyway - but he just got the feeling that they’d be more comfortable if he wasn't around, not matter how carefully polite they were. Luckily, Lily and Hugo quite made up for his lack of sparkling conversation by complaining loudly about their OWLs to anyone who would listen.

“I wish I didn’t have to take Potions to be an Auror,” Lily sighed, cutting up her Yorkshire pudding a little too savagely. “Or I’d drop it first chance I get. It’s so dull.”

“I don’t think it’s dull,” Hugo countered. Scorpius took the opportunity to regard Rose’s brother properly. They had only spent a little time together over the last few years, and he sometimes wondered if he ought to get to know the boy better. He drew a sharp contrast to Lily, who was tall and slender with a sheet of red hair to her waist, and was, not that Scorpius would ever dare say so out loud, very beautiful. Hugo was stout, leaning towards pudgy, and had more freckles than skin. Where Rose’s hair was thick and wavy on a good day, and frazzled on a bad day, Hugo had tight reddish-brown curls. He also had a natural rosiness to his cheeks that made him look permanently red-faced.

Not that you’re any great beauty, Scorpius Malfoy, he chided himself. And he’s top of his year in nearly all his classes, which is a lot more than can be said for you.

“You’re just saying that because you’re in love with Professor Patil,” Lily smirked.

Scorpius half expected Hugo to blush and back off, but he came back with a sharp retort without hesitation. “Speak for yourself, Mrs Davies.”

Albus groaned. “Oh, not you too,” he sighed, giving his sister a grossed-out look. “Is every girl at Hogwarts in love with Davies?”

“I know one or two boys who are in love with him too,” Lily giggled. James snorted unattractively into his wineglass.

“This is making me very uncomfortable,” Neville sighed.

“I’m sure some of them are in love with you too, dear,” Hannah teased.

“You know that’s not what I meant.”

“Gross,” Lizzie grimaced. ”Can we change the subject?”

“Delicious dinner as usual, Hannah,” Ginny said, overly-loud and grinning widely.

You know that’s not what I meant.”

“Yes, lovely,” Harry agreed, looking similarly amused, so that Scorpius couldn’t help laughing along with the others. It was strange, he thought, seeing the man so relaxed. When he wasn’t arresting or interrogating you, the wizarding hero looked positively normal. Other than the interested looks he got occasionally from people at the surrounding tables, you wouldn’t have guessed at all that he had defeated a Dark Lord in single combat.

Dessert was a large pudding with butterscotch ice cream. Scorpius was enjoying it so much that he didn’t notice the disturbance going on behind him at first until people around them starting looking a round and muttering to each other excitedly.
He looked over his shoulder, and frowned. The stage area, where he had used to play guitar in the
summer, had been cleared. Two people were setting up a drum set - not just any two people, he
realised, as his heart leapt into his throat. It was Trevor and Dave.

He turned back so fast that the motion triggered a spike of pain in his chest - he ignored it. “What’s
going on?” he hissed, looking between his friends.

Albus swore softly to himself, shifting down in his seat and running his fingers through his hair so
that his hand hid his face. Cleo had just hopped onto the stage and was helping Trevor with his
keyboard. The volume of the crowd increased, the excitement level building.

“Rose?” Scorpius prompted. She was the only one out of all of them - except perhaps Hannah - who
didn’t look surprised by this development. If anything she looked a little worried. “What’s going
on?”

Her eyes met his, and she smiled at him despite the hesitation on her face. “It’s your surprise,” she
said.

His heart sank. Go up there? When he hadn’t played in months? When he wasn’t even sure if he
could play, with the damn chair in the way? He imagined sitting there in front of all these people and
he felt like throwing up. “Rosie, I… I can’t…”

“Oh, no,” she said quickly. Behind them Cleo tuned a guitar, not her bass, and Dave warmed up the
drums while the crowd calmed a little in anticipation of the expected performance. “It’s okay.” She
put her hand on his shoulder and kissed him lightly on the cheek. “You don’t have to do anything.”

He frowned at her in confusion. He’d been certain that was her plan. “But…”

“It’s okay,” she said again. She got up from her chair, just as Cleo came over to them.

“Ready?” she asked cheerfully, flicking her dark hair and ignoring Albus while he all but tried to
hide under the table.

“Yeah,” said Rose, looking slightly worried again, and followed her back to the stage.

No, it’s nerves, Scorpius realised, like a jolt to the heart. The look on her face was exactly how he
always felt before he performed, even in front of people he knew. She’s nervous.

Cleo and Rose ascended the stage, and Rose stood in the center with her hands clasped loosely in
front of her. Without her saying anything, the crowd went very quiet.

Scorpius looked around, trying to figure out what on earth was going on, but most of the people at
the table were looking about as clueless as he felt. The only exceptions perhaps were Hannah and
Lizzie. Hannah, he realised, would have to have been asked for use of the stage. It was hard to tell
what Albus thought, while he tried to hide his face and watch at the same time.

When the room was silent, Rose gave Trevor a little nod over her shoulder. He played a few, simple
chords, and then she took a breath, looked Scorpius right in the eye, and while he stared open-
mouthed, she began to sing.

Follow my hands

I'll teach you how to play
I'll be patient with you

Someone was patient with me...

He’d heard her sing before, but only in casual fun, and in the brief, wonderful couple of months they’d had together before he’d been carted off to Durmstrang, they’d sung together once or twice on quiet evenings in the common room. This was different though, he had never heard her sing for an audience. She was clearly uncomfortable with the attention, but though she began a little hesitantly, her confidence soon picked up, and her voice rang out loud and clear.

There always be a chance that you could hit the wrong note

Everybody could laugh and make you think you won't grow

You don't ever give up, it's not the end of the world

He swallowed hard, but otherwise he was totally unaware of his own body, focused only on the sight and sound of Rose’s song. The song was all hers - the band providing only the lightest of accompaniments. Later he would have the epiphany that this must have been where she’d been during those extended shopping expeditions, practicing, preparing, but right now all he could do was let her words wash over him.

You live and you learn

Even when you think that times get hard

It's temporary hard

All you got to do is make that call

I'll be there

Don't be scared

You don't got to lose it

Remember the music

He bit his lip hard, feeling hot tears prickle at the corners of his eyes. The words went straight to his heart. Suddenly he wanted more than anything else to stand up, climb onto that stage and sing with her. He wanted it more than anything he’d ever wanted. Rose’s voice lifted again, and his breath rose and fell with her.

In the past it's been hard as hell
You’ll never know how much pain I felt
But everybody's got a story to tell
Sometimes you got to face the music and play by yourself

But there always be a chance that you could hit the wrong note
Everyone could laugh and they don't want to hear no more
You don't ever give up, it's not the end of the world

You live and you learn
Even when you think times get hard
It's temporary hard
All you gotta do is make that call
I'll be there
Don't be scared
You don't got to lose it
Remember the music...*

The song ended with a single piano note, and the pub suddenly erupted in a storm of applause. Belatedly, shocked back to his senses, Scorpius put his own hands together, until he realised that there was a small circle of silence around him. Neville, Rose’s parents and Albus were all staring at him. Albus’ face was practically white - he didn’t seem to care about Cleo seeing him anymore.


“You… you were….” Albus swallowed. “Mate, you were tapping your foot.”

“What? Don’t be - “ Scorpius looked down. His right foot was on the floor, not on the foot-rest of his chair. When he looked up again, Rose was standing in front of him. She looked at him with so much hope in her eyes, his heart seemed to turn over in his chest.

He looked down, and with more concentration than he’d ever used in his whole life, he moved his left foot, stiffly and with agonising slowness, onto the floor.

~*-A-*~

~*-A-*~
“Albus, take note.”

Albus shook himself out of a daydream, and picked up his quill, shaking out his wrist where his fingers had started to go numb.

“Raise the foot and aim to bring the knee to its furthest extension. Lean forward and attempt to touch chest to knee…”

Albus dutifully wrote this down, but the pained expression on Scorpius face as he bent under Knox’s hands was enough to make him wince. “Maybe we should take a break,” he said, using the proverbial ‘we’ like a shield. “You’ve been at this over an hour.”

Scorpius sat up, breathing hard, and shook his head. “I don’t want to stop.”

“It’s not like you’ll go backwards if you take a ten minute break, Scorp.”

His friend looked at him sternly, which was counteracted a little by the sweat beading on his brow and upper lip. In his rush to get to the hospital that morning he’d forgotten to shave, and there was the slightest suggestion of pale downy hair under his nose and along his jaw. “School starts again tomorrow,” he said, unnecessarily. “I won’t be able to come here every day, anymore.”

“Oh, don’t you worry about that,” Knox broke in, waving a hand in dismission. “Albus will carry on the exercises with you, and you’ll be standing on your own before too long, I imagine.”

Scorpius sighed, and Albus could tell by the look on his face that he already wanted to get a lot further than standing.

After the performance at the Leaky Cauldron on Christmas Day, things had moved very quickly. Neville had taken Scorpius straight to St Mungo’s - even though he protested that it wasn’t as though he was ill, and it could wait until tomorrow - and Knox had been dragged away from his own Christmas dinner to watch him move his feet up and down. It was clear that even this much required a great deal of effort, but Knox seemed to forget all about his Christmas pudding at the sight and went into a great flurry of testing, recording and planning. They’d gone back to the hospital every day since, despite the holidays and even on New Year’s Day, for Knox and his assistants to push and pull him into different positions and getting him to do repeated movements, over and over again. He got a little further every day. Albus went with him, because Knox was putting him in charge of Scorpius’ care when they got back to Hogwarts.

“But he’s just a boy, himself,” Hannah had said, looking concerned. Albus thought this was unfair; he had after all been of age for a whole year, now. She exchanged worried glances with Neville. “Surely a qualified Healer would be better? I’m sure we could pay someone, for a while…”

Scorpius opened his mouth instantly to protest, but Knox had got there first. “Ridiculous,” he said, in that tone that meant he had much more important things to do than get into a debate. Albus was used to it, by now, but Hannah looked highly displeased by his rudeness. “It would be a complete waste of time for a qualified Healer, when you have an apprentice right there in the same dormitory. I can assure you Albus is more than capable of this simple treatment.”

Albus had felt all eyes on him, and had done his best not to panic. As much as he was desperate to help, to be doing something instead of just watching helplessly like he had been since August, the prospect of being so responsible for his friend being able to walk again was understandably daunting. It was all very well for Knox to call it simple, when Albus would only have a week and a half of proper training before school began again.
He took a deep breath. “I can do it,” he assured the Longbottoms and Knox both. “I want to do it.”

Scorpius had given him a grateful look, but Hannah still looked doubtful, and Neville wasn’t exactly completely sanguine either. Both boys were insistent over the next few days however, and they could hardly disobey Knox’s orders directly. Now though, Albus’ nerves were starting to fray a little. He wondered how he was going to keep up with his NEWTs, Quidditch, a steady girlfriend and his hours at the hospital on top of an hour of physiotherapy a day. Maybe more, at the rate they were going.

When it was time to leave, at last, Albus’ head hurt from concentrating, and Scorpius was so tired he was almost dozing in the chair. “You okay?” Al asked him as they made their way back to the pub.

“Who, me?” Scorpius blinked and shrugged. It might have been his imagination, but Albus thought it was an easier, looser movement than it might have been a week ago. “Yeah, fine.”

“Right,” Al said, shaking his head dubiously. “How much do you hurt right now, honestly?”

His face twisted a little as he finally let at least some of his pain show on his face. “A lot,” he sighed. “Don’t tell Rose, okay?”

“Like she can’t tell.” Al reached out to stop the chair, and looked his friend in the eye. “This is gonna be hard work, Scorp. For all of us.”

“You think I don’t know that?” Scorpius demanded. “I’m the one who has to do it.”

“Yeah, course you do.” Al sighed. “But listen. I know you can do this, and I’m going to be there to help, the whole time. But I’m not enough. We need Rose.”

Scorpius looked for a moment as though he might argue, but then his face turned thoughtful. “She’ll be there too,” he said defensively.

“But she needs to know what you feel,” Al countered, impatiently. “She needs to really know, Scorp. We have to be a team, instead of keeping secrets and pretending everything’s fine, every day. That’s how it all went wrong last time.”

They didn’t say much, after that, but he thought that Scorpius looked more thoughtful than usual, for the rest of the journey home.

~*-R-*~

~*-R-*~

When she slipped into Scorpius’ bed late that night, he shifted under the covers and one warm hand slipped into hers. She drew a sharp breath, but didn’t pull away. “I thought you were asleep,” she said, flushing even though he couldn’t see. She’d wondered if he was even aware of her night-time visits. He always seemed to be fully unconscious by the time she snuggled in beside him, especially since Christmas, when the days at the hospital made him bone-tired even before he took his night-time potion.

“You’re very sneaky,” he said, ignoring her. “I didn’t even hear footsteps.”

She pressed herself a little closer, daring to rest her head beside his on the pillow. He smelled of soap and the shaving cream Neville had given him for Christmas. Apparently he hadn’t been able to go to
bed while looking like he’d been camping in the woods for three days. “You should be asleep,” she scolded. “Why didn’t your potion put you out?”

“I didn’t take it,” he admitted, keeping his voice low

“What?” she demanded. “But you –”

“Shhh,” he interrupted her, and she had to try to remember that Neville and Hannah were asleep just across the hall, with the door slightly ajar in case of emergencies. “I haven’t taken it yet. I’ll take it, I just… wanted to talk to you first.”

Rose’s heart did a little skip-jump. “Can’t we talk during the day?” she asked, as mildly as she could manage.

“No,” he said flatly. “There’s always someone else around. This is the only time we’re ever alone, and I’m always too drugged up to do anything about it.”

She shifted guiltily. Well, if he put it that way. She raised herself a little on her elbow so that he could see her properly while lying on his back. She wasn’t sure what to expect, but just the sheer fact that he wanted to talk was somehow encouraging. It seemed that, lately, although there hadn’t been any fighting or arguments, something was lying under the surface that neither of them were willing to delve into. “Okay,” she said slowly. “What do you want to talk about?”

He took a deep breath. “You know how you keep asking me if I’m okay, and I keep saying I am?”

She hesitated. “Yes,” she said finally, in a mild tone as she tried to anticipate what he would say next. She realised her heart was beating a little quicker, and squeezed his hand, just slightly, encouraging.

“Well… the thing is…” he coughed. “I’m not sure how fine I am. Some days are good, like today, even though it hurts like hell whenever I try and move.” She saw his face twist a little even in the darkness, and tightened her grip on his hand. “And other days…” he went on, slowly, as though deciding on each word before it left his mouth. “It’s not been as bad as that night we had to call Knox to school, but sometimes it feels like it might get that bad, if it goes on any longer.” He bit his lip for a second. She waited for him to continue, though her heart was pounding impatiently and she wanted badly to just… to hug him, to kiss him, to do anything that might make it better even for a second.

“It’s like… being stabbed, and burned, and skinned, inside… it’s like… it’s not as bad as the Crucius Curse, but sometimes it’s almost as bad because it never stops. It hurts, all the time. And I want more than anything to… to get better, to be able to walk again, and I can - I’m going to do the work, it’s just…” He swallowed. “I’m scared. I’m scared it won’t work, or it’ll be too hard, or it’ll hurt too much… and I’ll be stuck like this forever.”

“Oh, Scorp,” she whispered. She gripped his hand and raised it so that it was between them. Tears started to bead in her eyes, but she didn’t let them fall, not yet. He’d been so brave, and so strong, and right now he needed her to be the strong one. “You won’t,” she promised, with only determination in her tone.

“You don’t know,” he said, his own voice shaking. We don’t know... if I can ever walk, and even if I do… what if the pain never goes away? What if…” he shuddered and she saw the tears in his own eyes glinting in the dim light, though he was obviously doing his best to keep them dry. “I don’t think I can live like that, Rosie. I can’t do this forever, I just can’t…”
“You won’t have to,” she said, lifting a hand and running her fingers carefully through his hair. His shoulders lifted and fell again as though he were trying to sit up, but he wasn’t ready for that yet. “Shh,” she said, soothingly. “You’re tired, Scorp. But you’re going to do this, and you will get better, just like I’ve been telling you from the start of all this. Because we’re going to help you. I want to help, if you let me. Okay?”

Tears fell down his cheeks, and he closed his eyes and nodded. She felt a rush of emotion that was somehow hope and relief and fear and grief all at once, and she kissed him and put her arms around him. “I’m scared too,” she whispered. “But it’s okay. We’ll make it.”

Chapter End Notes

*Remember the Music, from the Empire OST, Performed by Jennifer Hudson*
Chapter Summary

"You wish," his brother laughed, nudging him none-too-gently in the back with an elbow. Albus grit his teeth, privately thinking his mother was right. Certain people really needed to grow up. Then he wondered where that thought had come from. Since when was he such a stuffy adult?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

2024

~*-S-*~

~*-S-*~

He was going to be able to walk by his birthday.

That single thought was his strongest motivation. It got him out of bed in the morning, got him through all the exercises Albus made him do, and even caused him on occasion to insist on doing some extra work. It reminded him to do the sitting exercises even while he was in class or at dinner, and, as the weeks passed and he began to improve, to try and do more things without the help of the chair, and more often. He had less than two months before he turned eighteen, but he was determined. Rose had been right in the end, he thought, all that time ago, when she'd said that in order to get better, he had to really and truly believe that he could. Up until now he'd been labouring under a sort of resigned half-hopelessness. Now he was sure he could make it happen, so it was just a case of doing the work.

Also, things with his friends, and Rose in particular, were a lot easier now that they were being open with each other. If he was having a good day, Albus and Rose were there to enjoy it with him, and to help him forget about the pain by doing homework together, or just sitting with him while he scribbled in his notebook. If it was a bad day, and there were plenty of those, he would go to Albus if the problem were medical, and Rose if it were psychological. Not that the two were mutually exclusive. He didn't know how he would manage without either one of them.

With Rose's continued - and frankly nagging - encouragement, he got back in touch with Cleo, and officially rejoined the band. He still wasn't sure he was ready, but Rose's surprise performance at Christmas had lit the fire in him again, and now that he was determined to get back on his feet either way, there didn't seem to be any point in avoiding music anymore. They started up rehearsals in Hogsmeade again, on Saturday afternoons. After dusting off the cobwebs, he found that he could in fact play just as well as before, although not for as long; no matter how he sat, his back and chest started to ache unbearably after an hour or so of holding the guitar.

"Baby steps," Cleo said, unconcerned. "It's better than nothing."

He still felt as though he were highly inadequate, but they all wanted him to stay. He supposed he should have expected this, after they'd all agreed to help Rose with her surprise. They were eager to
show him the new songs they'd been working on; many of them were worked out from the notes and scribbles Cleo had copied out of his notebook. In these, Scorpius recognised the feelings he'd had while stuck at Durmstrang, when writing had been his only escape from the endless monotony, but he felt oddly removed from them now, as though the words had been written by someone else entirely. In this frame of mind, he made suggestions, and changes, and even started working on a new song or two. There had been plenty to write about, these last few months. He couldn't wait for it to be over. For things to go back to normal. At least he wasn't having the weird prophecy dreams nearly so often, though now that they were almost gone, he couldn't help wishing they would come back just long enough to give him some kind of hint about when he'd be on his feet again.

He tried to make things as easy on Albus as he could, but it was difficult. Grateful as he was for his friend's help, he wasn't blind; he knew Albus went to bed late and woke up dead tired, didn't sleep well when he did sleep, and was struggling to keep up with all his homework on top of the piles of research that Knox had apparently assigned him. Even the study sessions with Lizzie now seemed to be spent actually studying, not that that, Scorpius told himself, was really any of his business.

"I can do it myself," he said one night when they began the exercises they usually did before bed. "You need more sleep."

Albus raised an eyebrow at him. "And let you hurt yourself, pushing too hard?" he said stubbornly. "No fear."

Scorpius sighed and submitted. He hadn't really expected his friend to pack it in and go to bed, but he'd felt like he needed to say something. "You're starting to get very Knox-like, you know," he pointed out as he hauled himself out of the chair and onto the edge of his bed. This in itself was huge progress. The first time he'd managed it he'd almost thrown up from the pain, but now he could get himself in and out without using magic, unless he was really tired.

"Sorry," Albus smiled, not sorry at all. "What do you expect? He is my…" he paused, frowning as he searched for an appropriate word.

"Master?" Scorpius suggested, dryly. "Liege? Dark overlord?"

"Mentor," Albus corrected, rolling his eyes as he knelt beside Scorpius' right leg and helped him bend it in and out, using his wand to measure the extension.

"I think I was closer," Scorpius replied, wincing. Talking helped distract him from the pain, though he thought that was getting less, the more he practiced. "Does he not realise you have NEWTs this year? What's with all the extra reading?"

For a second, Albus looked guilty. "The Healing books? Um… well. He didn't assign them, exactly. I bought them myself. I figure I can't learn that much from just watching, one day a week."

Scorpius stared at him. He'd just assumed all the extra work was required; why else would anyone do it? "But… you have exams," he pointed out. "Can't you wait until they're over before you start reading every wizarding medical book in existence?"

Al snorted. "You sound like Rose. Honestly? I'd drop the subjects I didn't need, now, if I could. What does it matter if I fail Care of Magical Creatures? Other than upsetting Hagrid, which is frankly the only reason I bother showing up anymore. I'd quit Defence Against the Dark Arts if my dad wouldn't have an apoplexy, and I'd switch Transfiguration for Herbology, if it wasn't far too late, but Lizzie's been helping me there. Potions is the most important subject I'm doing, and I'm keeping on top of that, and Charms obviously. Otherwise… I dunno, I feel like reading those books is more important."
Scorpius shook his head. "So you're failing deliberately? You're the worst Ravenclaw ever. Better not tell Flitwick, at his age he wouldn't survive the heart attack."

"I'm not failing," Albus countered. "I'm just not worried about coming top of the year - if there were ever any chance of that with Rose in the running. I still want to pass, obviously. You need good marks to train in Healing." He grabbed a quill and scribbled the results down. "Two degrees more than last night," he said triumphantly. "You're doing great."

Scorpius still felt uncomfortable, but he wasn't sure how to express it without upsetting his friend. Albus wasn't typically an angry person, but Scorpius hadn't forgotten the time, last year, when he'd pretended Scorpius didn't exist for several weeks. He didn't want to repeat the experience. "Look, this..." he murmured, "the healing stuff, it's not just because of me, is it? I mean, I know it all started because of me... but..." he trailed off, helplessly.

Albus hesitated, thinking about it. "It's not just you," he said finally. "I mean, maybe it is a bit. It's still partly my fault you got hurt - and don't argue, you know it's true - and I do still want to make up for it. But since I started helping at the hospital... I dunno. I like it. I like helping people. I think - no, I know it's what I want to do, eventually. Blood and vomit and all," he added, with a slightly pained expression.

"What about Quidditch?" Scorpius asked, a last-ditch effort. His voice came out rather smaller than he'd intended. He could just imagine Albus resenting him for it, later on. *If it wasn't for you I could have been a star Quidditch player...*

Albus only shrugged. "I grew up," he said. "I love Quidditch, but let's face it, most players only have short careers as players before they end up coaching, or having to find something else. Look at my mum, and Victor Krum, and Liam Ryan's dad. I mean that's fine for some people, but not for me. And anyway, there's James in the league now. Having to compete against my brother for the next ten years? No thanks. I'll settle for weekend games at my grandparents' house. I want to be a Healer. In spell damage." He shot Scorpius a warning look. "And before you start moaning about how I'm giving up my dreams because of you, you can shut up. I just have a new dream now, and if you think about it, I should really be thanking you for helping me figure it all out."

Scorpius sighed. "Fine," he said. "You're welcome. Whenever I get horribly cursed in future, you'll be my first point of call."

Al glowered at him, but Scorpius could tell he was secretly pleased. "Don't even joke," he scolded. "Now. Other leg."

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To Rose, it seemed as though time was passing incredibly slowly. Every day seemed to last an age. Contrarily, there also were never enough hours in the day for all the work she had to do. Unlike some people she could name, she *was* determined on living up to both her status as a Ravenclaw and her mother's perfect school record. She had already gotten one 'E' on one of her OWLs. She was going to have to do better this year.

Like Albus she was doing five NEWTs, one more than Scorpius or Lizzie, and most of the other students in their year. It was hard work. With the threat of exams looming over them as the days passed, the seventh year girls' dormitory took on an uncharacteristically somber atmosphere, as all the girls spent their evenings revising, or working on their course projects. Rose at least, made sure she spent a couple of evenings a week in the common room or the library with the boys. She would have
liked more alone time with Scorpius, but he also had a lot to do, and he always came and found her if there was something really bothering him, so she could hardly complain.

Scorpius was still, despite all her best efforts, the best in their year at non-verbal spells. Sometimes he seemed to do it without even thinking. Rose, who was instinctively uncomfortable with unlearning everything she had studied when it came to incantations, still had to work at it.

Scorpius did his best to help. "Remember how you told me that working the chair should be like riding a broom?" he tried to explain, as they studied together one day in the first week of February. The snow had finally melted off the grounds, but there was still a hard chill in the air, and the fire was piled so high that the heat left visible spots of red on his pale cheeks. "It's the same as with any spell you want to do. You just have to 
\textit{will} it. It's not about how you say the incantation in your head."

He lifted one hand theatrically and brought it down, like a conductor, and she flinched with surprise as the music started, coming out of thin air to the beat of his hand. It seemed effortless. It sounded like a piano, with a guitar strumming along in the background and a cello, or something, providing a deep resonant undertone.

"Show off," she muttered, though she couldn't help being a little impressed.

He grinned, and the music faded. "You think I have to think an incantation for every note?" he tapped his head with two fingers. "It's all up here."

She gave him a doubtful look, and turned back to the practice items; a pile of rubbish she was trying to vanish, with as much determination as she could manage. She waved her wand at it, and one of the empty bottles toppled over, apologetically. She blew out a frustrated breath, causing locks of red hair to fly over her face. "Oh stop smiling," she muttered, slapping at her boyfriend.

He bit his lip, but it didn't really help. He was obviously highly amused by her continual failure, and unaffected by her glaring at him. "Okay," he said, after a second's thought. "I've got a plan."

He pushed the chair over to the big sofa next to her, and gingerly lifted himself onto it, while she watched anxiously. While it was great that he could do those things now, it didn't stop her fretting that he would hurt himself.

"Should you be doing that without Al here?" she asked nervously.

"Get in the chair," he ordered, ignoring her and settling into the cushions, crossing his arms over his chest.

"What?" she blinked in confusion.

"In the chair, go on. Trust me."

She frowned at him dubiously for a moment, but finally got up and sat down in the chair. She knew quite a lot about the chair by now, from her research for her Study of Ancient Runes NEWT. But she had never sat in it before. It was surprisingly comfortable for such a cumbersome wooden frame. She'd have to look into how that was done. "Okay," he said, "now move it with your mind."

She made a face. "Scorp -"

"Don't argue. Just try it, go on. And no cheating."

She sighed deeply, but straightened her back and put her arms on the armrests. She'd seen him do
this a thousand times, although since he'd stopped using the verbal commands it was easy to forget
that he had any control over the thing at all; as though it moved of its own accord. Portadus, she
thought, without much hope. Nothing happened. She let out a harrumph of annoyance.

"Calm down," he said, and she had to resist the urge to glare at him again. "Deep breaths. Focus.
You have to want it."

She clenched her fists for a second, but forced herself to take him seriously. She breathed in deeply
through her nose and let it out in a slow stream from her mouth. Her eyes closed, and she willed her
body to relax. Portadus, she thought, with all the determination and will she could muster. She
gasped and let out an embarrassingly high-pitched noise as the chair lurched forward, her eyes
snapping open to see herself hurtling towards the window.

"Whoa," Scorpius said, putting out a hand to stop it. It halted immediately at his touch, like an
obedient dog. "Nice one. Just er… a little gentler, maybe."

She rolled her eyes, pretending she wasn't rattled. "That's what I tried the first time and it didn't do
anything. How can I want something gently?"

He smiled, not unkindly. "Just… practice a bit," he said. "You'll get the hang of it. Maybe don't close
your eyes though. It helps if you can see where you're going."

She hesitated. "You sure?" she asked.

He shrugged, and winced, settling back into the sofa. "Yeah, go on. I'm fine here. Um… just hand
me 21st Century Technology for the Modern Wizard, will you?"

After an hour or so of jolting and skidding around the common room - during which several other
Ravenclaws gave up on studying in the vicinity and retreated to the relative safety of the library - and
under Scorpius' patient and careful tutelage, Rose thought she was getting the hang of it. She had a
headache from all the thinking, but she was finally able to make the chair move in a straight line or a
circle, without any awkward stops or nearly tipping the thing over.

She really should have tried it earlier, she thought as she successfully rolled the chair to a stop. She
already had a lot more ideas for her Ancient Runes project. Understanding how it was driven by
doing it herself made a lot more sense than just watching and doing a lot of reading. It was much
harder than she'd imagined; she felt as though she'd been riding a broom in a high wind all afternoon.

"Ugh, how do you do that all the time?" she asked, standing up and stretching before she realised
how unsympathetic that sounded. When she looked at him guiltily, however, he didn't seem to
notice.

"Lots of practice," he said simply, looking up from his book at her with a challenge in his expression.
"Now, try the vanishing spell again."

She sighed and pouted. "But I'm tired," she complained, flopping down onto the sofa beside him,
careful not to jostle him too much.

"Good," he said, with no sympathy whatsoever. "It'll stop you thinking so hard. Go on."

She grit her teeth and glared at the pile of the rubbish on the table. Evanesco, she thought.
The pile vanished. She blinked in surprise. Had she done that? It had been so easy.

"Nice," Scorpius said, completely unfazed and nodding with satisfaction. "Wandless, too, good job."
Apparently unaware of how much he had stunned her, he went back to reading his book. He was then thoroughly distracted when she grabbed it from him and, brimming over with excitement and triumph, kissed him hard on the mouth.

~*-S-*~

"Are you sure you're ready for this?" Albus was looking at him so doubtfully that Scorpius was rather annoyed.

"Yes, I'm sure," he said, in a tone that he hoped would brook no further argument. "I turn eighteen next week, I have to do this today." His words rather belied his own nerves. He had one hand clenched in a fist, the other closed over it.

"If you rush it and end up hurting yourself I will never forgive you," Al muttered, tapping his fingers on his notes. They were in St. Mungo's again. It was the last weekend in February. Scorpius thought he was as strong as he could be. He could move both his legs independently, and all but one of the paralysing charms on his back had been removed, so that he could turn his torso and bend some of the way forward without restriction. Today he was going to walk, and then Rose could have the damn chair, since she loved playing with it so much.

To his annoyance, Knox, who was usually as unrestrained as a runaway steam engine, also expressed doubts. Apparently unwilling to have all the long months of his hard work reversed by Scorpius' impatience, he suggested they wait another few weeks before attempting the manoeuvre.

"I can do this," Scorpius told him, firmly. "I don't care how much it hurts. I have to do it."

Albus groaned. "It's only a few more weeks, mate. Why's this so important to you, to do it now?"

Scorpius couldn't explain why it was important. He'd set himself a goal and he wanted to reach it, that was all. He had already come of age, by most standards, but this birthday was arguably more important than the last one. He would be of age in the Muggle world, and in France, and by any possible measure. He would, at last, be his own man, with no need for a parent or guardian.

And his father would have no control over him anymore. Not that he would have, seeing that he was in prison, but it was still important, somehow. He wanted to be able to stand, when that day came. He wanted to stand up and shake Neville by the hand and thank him for taking him in when no one else would, not even his own family. He wanted to be the sort of man Rose deserved, whole and healthy. He would not be held back from that, not now, when he had already come so far. "Let's do it," was all he said.

~*-R-*~

She could tell something was wrong when her boys came back to school that night. They came into the Great Hall with expressions very odd, and difficult to read. She had already been worrying about them for the last half an hour, as it was very late, and they were usually back before the dinner appeared on the tables. Most people were by now halfway through their meals.

She got up and hurried over to them as they made their way to their usual spot at the head of the table, the only place where Scorpius' chair would fit. "What's the matter?" she asked, when neither of them offered an explanation.
They exchanged glances, and her heart sank. She had a horrible feeling that something bad had happened. But then Scorpius screwed up his face in concentration, shifted forward until his feet were firmly on the floor, and taking her hand, stood up in front of her and took one, slow step.

Her mouth fell open as she stared at him. Silence radiated out from around them, first the Ravenclaws, then the other House tables, then finally even the staff table went quiet, voices and the clattering of knives and forks petering out as though silenced by a spell. "Oh," she said, very softly, and he grinned shakily, but widely.

"All right Scorp!" Gaius shouted, standing up also, and then all the Ravenclaws started cheering and applauding, and then everyone, even Warren and the Gryffindors, were on their feet, and the whole Hall was roaring. Scorpius' pale skin went red, and he hid her face in her hair as she threw her arms - carefully - around his neck. Tears filled her eyes and rolled down her cheeks as they stood together, holding each other properly for the first time in what seemed like an eternity. "You did it," she gasped, hardly able to breathe for the way her heart was suddenly pounding. "You did it!"

Over his shoulder, she saw Jian and the other Slytherins, not standing up but clapping politely along with everyone else. She smiled widely through her tears and buried her face in Scorpius' shoulder, as a rush of some other, unnamable emotion went through her. She was sure now, that everything would be okay.

~*-S-*~

~*-S-*~

Walking a few steps was one thing. Getting around the way he used to was quite another. At the beginning he was only able to walk very short distances - the bathroom to his bed, the Entrance Hall to a seat in the Great Hall - and climbing stairs was entirely out of the question. But he knew he would get there eventually, just as soon as he had enough strength. It was amazing how quickly the simple act of walking tired him. But at band practice, he was able to sit on a stool and play instead of cramped in the chair. After classes, he could go down to the lake and take his daily steps by its edge, his arm on Albus' or Rose's shoulder for support. And every day he got a little stronger.

His birthday came and went, and he had the satisfaction of knowing that he'd reached his goal ahead of time, even if there was still a long way to go. He almost lost the nerve in the end to make a gesture to Neville, nervous about making a fool of himself, but the man tracked him down just after dinner that day and hugged him, anyway. It was odd - Scorpius couldn't recall ever being hugged by an adult man, not even as a child - but not unpleasant, so that when Neville went a bit red and apologised, he only smiled and shook his head. "It's okay," he said. "I - look - thank you. For everything." It wasn't the big speech he had planned, but it was something.

"Don't even mention it," Neville said, and Scorpius, shocked, saw tears in the older man's eyes. "You don't get rid of us now that you're eighteen, kiddo. You're one of the family now, all right? Christmas, birthdays… we better hear from you or Han will track you down and force feed you."

Scorpius grinned. His face hurt from all the smiling he'd been doing lately.

"And you'll come home with us when your exams are over," Neville insisted, raising his eyebrows in expectation.

Scorpius sighed. He had expected this offer, and wanted badly to accept it. He had nowhere else to go once school was over, after all, and no money to pursue alternative options. As much as he knew the Longbottoms wanted him to stay, however, it did seem a bit much like taking charity, to be the resident squatter, when he was perfectly capable of looking after himself, and not otherwise seeking
asylum. Perhaps that sort of pride was a part of his father's influence he would never really be able to
shake off. "Okay," he said, after a moment's hesitation. "I mean, yes - I'd love to - but I'm going to
earn my keep, though. I'll work in the pub like before."

Neville hesitated as well, but finally nodded his head, apparently realising it was fruitless to protest.
"If you must," he said, with resignation. "But you get board and a wage above it - no arguments, lad.
Merlin knows you've earned it."

Scorpius wasn't sure how this was so, but he knew Hannah would back Neville up, and there would
be fighting the both of them. Anyway, he couldn't help his heart lift a little when he thought of it. He
would have a real home to go to when school was over, and a new family, even if a rather strange,
mismatched one, and he could earn money until he had enough to do things for himself. "Thanks,"
he said, getting a little choked up himself as Neville patted him on the shoulder. "Thank you."

There was still no word on the trial. Through March and April, Scorpius got a few letters, signed
personally by Mr Potter, with small updates on the very slow progress of the department. There were
problems it seemed, with gathering enough evidence to go to trial. After the preliminary hearing
where Scorpius' father had pleaded 'not guilty' to the charges of grand conspiracy, smuggling, the
attempted murders of both Kingsley Shacklebolt and Harry Potter himself, and various other small
crimes, there had been evidently very little progress. The only good news, which arrived in late
April, was that the hearing had finally been held on the charges of kidnapping, and the attempted
murder of Rose. Draco plead guilty to the attempted murder, which surprised Scorpius immensely,
though he denied the kidnapping charge.

'I think on this point the Wizengamot is in some indecision,' Mr Potter wrote, 'as the kidnapping of
one's own son is a difficult charge to stick, though in this case you were of course under our charge
and not his, and frankly he is lucky we decided it wasn't worth our time to hit him with charges of
impeding our case regarding you; not to mention conduct endangering life; although on the other
hand we have quite enough to be going on with for the time being. But the good news is, he will be
sentenced for what he did to you - in a roundabout way - and neither you or Rose will have to testify
about it in court.'

"Well, that's a relief," Albus said, rolling his eyes, when Scorpius reluctantly read this aloud to the
two of them. Rose only tucked her head into his neck and squeezed his hand for comfort. "It's not
like he could get away with it anyway."

"Yeah, but why not just deny everything?" Scorpius muttered. "He didn't admit to anything else."

It wasn't until later, when he was sitting with Rose in the common room, so late that everyone else
had gone to bed, that she offered her opinion. "You didn't see his face when he thought he'd killed
you," she said, very low. Scorpius opened his mouth to say he didn't want to talk about it, but for
some reason the words just wouldn't come. "He didn't even fight the Aurors when they came to
arrest him."

"You were the one he tried to kill," Scorpius protested, forcing the words through gritted teeth.

'Yes, but you were the one he actually hurt," she said calmly, not arguing, just stating the facts. "I
think he agreed to that charge because he feels guilty. He thinks he deserves to be punished for what
happened to you."

Scorpius shrugged. "But he did all that other stuff too," he said. "He should go to prison for all of it.
And if he really cared about me he wouldn't bother going through with a trial."

"Maybe he thinks it's the only way he'll get to see you," she said, with remarkable perception that
made him pause. After Christmas, the letters had finally stopped coming. He hadn't read or returned any of them, and hadn't missed their absence, either.

"That's ridiculous," he said finally. She only shrugged, and kissed him, and then made him go to bed.

The second of May seemed to come around very fast. It was, much to the annoyance of those who knew no better than to complain about it, on a Monday, which meant most people were cranky and irritable when they all trudged down to the wet, windy grounds before sunrise. Scorpius took the chair most of the way, but insisted on walking from the bottom of the castle steps down to the memorial. He was very tired by the time he got there, and limping badly. Hannah, waiting with a very sleepy-looking Alice, looked as though she was torn between admonishment and delight at seeing him on his feet, but since no one was allowed to speak, simply put one arm around him and squeezed very gently.

Professor McGonagall stood up to make her speech, seeming even older than ever as Neville helped her up and down the dais. As they all echoed her words, "We will remember them," the rain started to fall harder, so that everyone hurried back to the castle much quicker than they usually would. The Longbottoms, Potters and Weasleys were left at the far rear, much to Scorpius' embarrassment, as he stumbled back through the grounds with Albus supporting him.

"You all don't have to wait for me," he mumbled, flushing, rain dripping off his hair and into his eyes. Rose's mother, who was wearing official Ministry robes and a very official-looking hat, pulled out her wand and cast a charm that encircled them all in a protective bubble, the rain streaming away from them in a dome as they walked.

"Nice, Mum," Hugo said, appreciatively.

"Don't worry old man," Teddy said cheerfully, slipping his shoulder under Scorpius' other arm. "We're not going to leave you to battle on alone. Not really in the spirit of the day, y'know."

Scorpius shivered. He had been half expecting something awful to happen, and he wasn't completely convinced yet that it wouldn't. It had after all been a year ago today that his father had come and whisked him off to Durmstrang against his will. He had seen the extra security; two HitWizards on the main gates, and Hagrid had arranged for a line of centaurs on the Forest's edge. McGonagall hadn't shown any signs of discomfort, but she had obviously been prepared for the unexpected, as well, this time.

"You're doing so well, love," Hannah said, loud enough only for him and his helpers to hear. He smiled at her; from anyone else it might have sounded patronising, from her, it boosted his determination, and somehow he managed to get back to the steps without falling over. He collapsed into the chair with great relief, and no one one said anything. He guided the chair without much conscious thought. His chest burned, and he worried that he might for once have actually done himself some damage, but once they got into the Great Hall his breathing was a little easier.

"No, I'm okay," he said, when Albus would have made them all sit at the head of the table again so that the chair could fit. "I'll get up." So they sat on the benches in the middle, and for a moment it almost seemed as though nothing at all had changed in a year, though of course everything was entirely different. He hadn't even made it to the feast last year.

The rain looked rather dramatic in the enchanted ceiling, and Scorpius was so drawn into the sight that for a moment he didn't realise that someone was talking to him. "Huh?" he said, blinking, and Teddy grinned at him from across the table.

"I said, you'll be playing Pro Quidditch next if you keep this up."
Scorpius smiled. "I doubt it, but thanks." He looked around, realising for the first time that Andromeda hadn’t come to the ceremony. When he asked, Teddy shook his head.

"Sorry. She might have come if it hadn't started chucking down rain. But maybe not. She really just came before to meet you, y'know." Scorpius shifted awkwardly. "Anyway, you'll see her at the wedding."

"Oh, right," Scorpius immediately felt guilty for forgetting. "How's the planning going?"

Teddy rolled his eyes, and lowered his voice slightly to avoid being overheard by his fiancee, who was sitting nearby and chatting amiably to her cousins. "Two weeks out? You should see the pile of charts that Fleur and Victoire have been slaving over. I'm in charge of nothing. Which is best, really. I'm sure I'd make a cock up of it if they let me organise anything." They chuckled together conspiratorially for a moment.

"I've been meaning to talk to you actually," Teddy went on. "I know it's short notice, but our band backed out - some kind of pregnancy scandal, I think… anyway. Would you and your group be up for the gig? Paid, obviously."

Scorpius gaped. "You… seriously?" he asked, not sure whether to be excited or terrified.

Teddy laughed. "Yeah, seriously. You'll have to liaise with Vic about the set list, but she's pretty flexible. Tone deaf," he added in an undertone. "I swear to Merlin, you'd think she'd have an ear for music, but no."

"That'd be brilliant," Scorpius said, once he'd found his voice. "I mean - I'll have to check with the others… but, yeah. I'm sure they'll be into it. Thanks!"

"Thank you," Teddy countered. "This'll win me some major points. What's your band called again?"

Scorpius hesitated. "Er…. well. We still don't really have a name." Which was embarrassing really, considered how long they'd been looking for one.

"Well, better figure one out quick," Teddy said, leaving Scorpius both tense with anticipation, and yet one more thing to keep him awake at night.

~*~A*~*

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It was nice to get the weekend off from studying for NEWTs, anyway, Al thought as he watched Ginny fuss over James' dress robes. James was actually in the wedding party, as one of the groomsmen, but Al did his best not to be jealous. Teddy couldn't choose all of his adopted cousins, he'd always been closest with James, and anyway Al didn't much fancy the idea of standing up there in front of everyone. Knowing him, he'd do something to make a fool of himself.

It was a big wedding. Quite apart from the extended Potter and Weasley families, and the Delacours, and Teddy's gran, both Teddy and Victoire had a lot of friends, from school and from work. And with nearly everyone bringing a plus-one, there were easily two hundred people gathered together in the giant marquee set up on the cliff up from Shell Cottage.

Albus' robes were a rich black with silver trimming. They made him look a bit severe, but he liked them. Rose was lovely in a deep forest green. Scorpius didn't have dress robes, and there hadn't been a chance for him to buy any, but Hannah had given him a set of Tony's which had only been worn once to a dance. They were light blue, and had to be altered to fit as they were much too big for him.
at first. They looked okay now, although in the wrong light they tended to leach what little colour was to be found in his skin, making him look even paler than usual. Albus kept having to look at him to make sure he wasn't going to fall over. He had gotten much stronger even over the intervening weeks since the memorial, but stairs and steep inclines still tired him, and he walked with a visible limp that Knox, with uncharacteristic pessimism, had doubted would ever heal entirely. Rose had promised to look after him today, though, and Al didn't think his friend would appreciate his coming up to grab him every time he had a little wobble, when there were so many strangers around.

The main problem he was having was that Cleo, along with Dave and Trevor, were going to be there in a couple of hours and he hadn't so much as spoken three words to Cleo since their very awkward break up. Lizzie, who was an evil mind-reader, told him to get over it before he could even explain what was bothering him. "It's not like she'll be here to socialise," she pointed out, sweetly. "She'll be on stage. You won't need to talk to her. Though it would probably be polite to at least say hello, and not pretend like you didn't have your tongue in her mouth all summer."

"Lizzie!" he protested, looking around to make sure his mother hadn't overheard.

"Well, didn't you?"

He glared at her, but she only stuck her tongue out at him. "Come on," she said. "Just try to enjoy the wedding, will you?"

The ceremony wasn't too long, and Albus amused himself by noting how many of his relatives started crying when Teddy and Victoire recited their vows. The number of handkerchiefs pulled out when Teddy spoke solemnly about how much it meant to him to be officially part of the Weasley family, and then when Victoire in her turn told him that he always had been, was really quite astonishing. At one point, Al found his eyes drawn to Scorpius, sitting with Andromeda, and the look on his face was almost one of longing. He also noticed that none of Andromeda's family had been invited. He wondered if they'd sat Scorpius with her for that reason. Rose pinched him at that point, and he turned his attention back to the exchange of rings, and joined in the applause when they sealed the new marriage with a kiss. Teddy's hair flared briefly blond to match his new wife as he pulled her close, and then fireworks were suddenly going off inside the marquee. While most people laughed and clapped, he saw his mother giving James a suspicious, if somewhat teary, look. James grinned innocently back from where he stood behind the happy couple.

"Really," Ginny sighed, wiping her eyes one more time. "Some boys never grow up."

"What?" Harry said, jolted out of his own thoughts. He'd been rather quiet all day, Al thought.

Ginny smiled at him. "Nothing, dear. That's it then, isn't it? The first one sorted. One down, three to go."

"Mum," Albus groaned.

"Only joking, dear."

Scorpius seemed to disappear then, and Albus did his best not to worry about it. He was supposed to be spending time with his family after all. He said a quick hello to Ben Washington, the best man, who had helped them with books for Scorpius' mobility spells, before he followed the others to the next marquee that had been set up for the reception area. Everyone wanted to talk to him and Rose about NEWTs, and he answered questions with rather less enthusiasm than when someone asked about his work at the hospital. By now it seemed to have gotten out that he was taking it seriously and intended to pursue it after Hogwarts.
"I'd never have picked you as a healer," his aunt Angelina said, smiling. "I was sure you'd be up against Fred and James in the new season. Oh - and Roxie got her reserve position with the Harpies, did you hear?"

"Yeah," he said, nodding while trying not to let a sudden flash of jealousy cross his face. "I thought about it, but you know… I can always beat James in home games, no need to humiliate him in front of the world, right?"

"You wish," his brother laughed, nudging him none-too-gently in the back with an elbow as he passed. Albus grit his teeth, privately thinking his mother was right. Certain people really needed to grow up. Then he wondered where that thought had come from. Since when was he such a stuffy adult?

"Oh, there he is," Rose sighed with audible relief. Albus couldn't resist looking. Scorpius was helping Dave set up his drums on the stage that had been set up on the flattest bit of ground near the house. He'd changed out of his blue dress robes and was wearing his jeans and old black T-shirt. His guitar, with its Ravenclaw-motif strap, was already there on its stand. "Should he be doing that?"

"Lifting things?" Al cocked his head to one side as though considering deeply. "No, probably not," he said finally. "You can tell him." Rose glared at him. "Let him have some fun, Rosie," he said. "He'll be fine."

Privately he would have liked to tell his friend off as well, but he was determined not to be that guy, at least for today. It was good to see him smiling and moving without many visible signs of pain. Also Cleo had just come onto the stage as well, so maybe it was better if he stayed out of it. He busied himself by dragging Lizzie to the buffet table instead while people bustled around them and the sun started to set over the ocean. "You know, you look really good in those robes," Lizzie whispered to him as she bit grapes off their stems.

"Thanks," he said, flushing. "You look… really nice too." She did. She'd done something with her usually-so-practical hair so that it sat in a bundle on the top of her head with little wisps coming down behind her ears. For some reason those little wisps made his heart flutter.

"Good," she said, and kissed him. "We can work on your compliments later. Oh look, they're starting."

The band was warming up. After a minute or two, it was Cleo who came forward, her voice magically amplified by some unseen spell, and announced. "Ladies and Gentleman, we're so honoured to get to play for you on this happy occasion. We are… Eagle's Cry!"

There was a smattering of interested applause, although a select few people in the crowd were a little more enthusiastic with whoops and cheers. Albus saw Neville nearby making sparks fly out of the tip of his wand. Alice was jumping up and down and waving. Then Scorpius picked up his guitar and stepped forward, and a sort of hush fell over everything. Albus heard Rose take in a short, sharp breath. Scorpius was looking out over the huge crowd, surely the biggest he'd ever played for, and he looked very, very pale. Al swallowed. He remembered suddenly that this crowd contained a lot of people who had never met Scorpius, who didn't know him, but nonetheless knew his father or had heard of his most recent crimes, had seen the pictures and read the stories in the _Prophet_. But that all seemed so long ago now, for the three of them. So much had happened since then.

"Come on," he heard Rose mutter under her breath. "Come on, come on… you can do it…"

Then finally, Scorpius hand moved, and the sound, his sound, the unique sound that couldn't have
come from a regular instrument, echoed out into the amplified space above the heads of the crowd. Albus could almost see his friend shift into automatic. Scorpius looked out over the people gathered on the cliff, and sang.

"It's a beautiful night... we're looking for something dumb to do...

Oh yeah baby, I think I wanna marry you..."

The beat came in, and Albus clapped his hands together as hard as he possibly could. People around him joined in, and then some people were dancing, and he looked at Rose and they breathed a joint sigh of relief.

~*-S-*~

~*-S-*~

"That was great!"

To Scorpius' surprise, it was thirteen-year-old Lucy Weasley who first greeted him when the band finally got off the stage for a break. Someone led the other band members to a table where they could eat, but of course Scorpius had his own seat nearer the family. He was, in addition to being Teddy's second cousin (or whatever) also Rose's date, which meant he got to sit with her and therefore had to endure the rest of the Weasleys' eyes on him - though he supposed it could have been worse. Lucy was certainly enthusiastic as she walked with him to the main table, peppering him with questions about the music.

"I didn't know you were interested in this," he said, in between attempts to answer as best he could.

"Oh," she said, suddenly reverting to the shy young girl he recognised. "No - I mean, I am - I love music, I just didn't know you could do those... those sorts of things."

"I'll show you if you like," he said without really thinking. "When we get back to school."

"Really?" She gasped and hugged him around the arm. He bit back a wince. He was sore and tired after standing for so long; he thought it wouldn't take much more than a strong gust of wind to blow him over. "I'd love that! I play the violin," she added, flushing red as her hair. "But I'm going to ask for a guitar for my birthday now! That was really brilliant!"

"Lucy, stop haranguing the poor boy," said a woman he recognised vaguely as Lucy's mother as they approached.

"Oh, it's really okay -" Scorpius started, but then Rose was dragging him to his seat and shoving a huge plate of food in front of him.

"Eat," she commanded. "You look white as anything, Al, doesn't he? Were you this thin yesterday? I swear you weren't. It must be the clothes, I hadn't noticed in your school robes, you look starved."

"Thank you," he said flatly. He might not have minded her berating him, but it was a bit much when it was in front of her entire family. "I love you too."

"Oh, for - I'm sorry, I just meant... when you're suddenly too small for clothes you bought when you were fifteen, it's not good, Scorp. Al, tell him."

"You were great up there, mate," Al said, resolutely ignoring his cousin. Scorpius grinned at him. The other Potters and Weasleys joined in with their congratulations. James even offered him a high
five, which he returned with some trepidation and came back with his hand stinging.

"Thanks," Scorpius said, smiling and picking up his fork. "It was really nice of Teddy and Victoire to ask us." He gave Rose a questioning look.

"Oh all right," she sighed, blowing hair out of her eyes in the way she did when she was defeated. "You were very good." She kissed his cheek. "Please eat something?"

"Yes mother."

"Stop that right now."

"Yes m-"

She stuffed a bread roll in his mouth before he could finish, to general amusement. He obediently set into his meal. He was hungry, he found, though an hour ago he would have said he'd never be able to eat again. He'd had a rush of nerves on that stage that he hadn't experienced since his first time performing. There were just so many people, and some of them had been looking at him with confusion, or anger, it was hard to tell. But once they'd started, people had been dancing and even singing along to some of the covers, and he'd settled into the rhythm. He hadn't even noticed how tired he was. Now he could have happily eaten a whole thestral, or slept for three days, it was a toss up between the two. It was nice to focus on his food for a while, listening to conversation and bickering of the family around him. No one said anything rude to him, not even George Weasley. Even Professor McGonagall smiled at him as she went past to offer the newly-married couple her congratulations.

It was a great day, he thought. He was just finishing his cake and getting ready to go back on stage for the second set when Teddy came up and asked for a word.

"You're doing brilliantly," he said, patting Scorpius - carefully - on the back.

"Cheers," Scorpius said, grinning. "Thanks for asking us. Everyone's totally excited to be here, really. And congratulations," he added, realising that he hadn't had the chance to say it himself.

"Thanks," Teddy said, smiling back. "We got there in the end."

Scorpius' eyebrows twitched a little in confusion. He wasn't sure what that meant, or if he was supposed to. He remembered that Rose had been very annoyed when they'd found out by accident about the engagement months before receiving their invitations. There had been some kind of delay, he was aware. "Everything okay?" he asked not sure what else to say.

"What? Oh, yeah, of course. Sorry, I… it's just been a long time coming, is all. I'm glad you could be here. Gran is too, you know, even if she doesn't say it. She's a bit upset no one else in her family could be here." Scorpius felt his stomach twist a little. He was beyond glad that neither of his grandparents had shown up, but he could hardly say so in front of his great aunt. "And I think the whole thing makes her think of mum," Teddy went on. "She's happy for us obviously, but… well. It's good you're here anyway."

Privately Scorpius doubted his presence would do anything to make up for the absence of Andromeda's daughter, but he didn't dare say so. He nodded. "Wouldn't miss it," he said.

Teddy nodded back at him. "Cheers cuz," he said. "Good to see you on your feet. Proud of you."

Scorpius felt a smile come to his face without warning. For some reason that meant a lot coming from Teddy. He looked up to the older man, he realised. Not just as his cousin, but as someone who
had a plan, who knew what they were doing and where they were going.

"Better get back up there," Teddy said, inclining his head towards the stage where Cleo and the others were already getting ready to start again. People were clapping in anticipation this time, ready for more. "Don't keep 'em waiting."

Scorpius grinned, forgetting for a moment how tired and sore he was. "I got this," he said. "Ready for your first dance?"

Chapter End Notes

I'm the worst. Thanks to everyone who stuck it out and encouraged me to keep going during all this time! The good news is I have another chapter done and ready to be edited which should be up soon. From there we will see, but I'm determined to finish as soon as I can. Hope you all enjoyed this chapter!
Chapter Summary

He could feel his father going still, even through the sleeve. "Please. He's family, and… and I'm begging you. Please."

Chapter Notes

This is a music chapter - probably the last one! (aw) To listen along, visit the music post on my tumblr page: http://misssaigonfic.tumblr.com/musicpost.

I've had this chapter written for a while, but it contains so many important moments that it took me a long time to be satisfied with it enough to post it. I hope you enjoy it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

2024

~*-S*-~

~*-S*-~

Ding dong merrily on high…. the angel bells are ringing…

…Not this again.

He hadn't dreamed the dream in weeks. He shook his head, trying to wake up, trying to end it before it began. No -

Screaming. Rose was screaming and they were dragging him away from her.

"Come away, lad."

"No!" Why did they always make him leave? He needed to be there with her, to help her, to save her… he had saved her before, he could do it again, he could!

"You can't do any good."

"I should be there with her!"

"You'll only be in the way."

Gloooo-ooooo-ooooo-oooooo-00000-00000-00000-ooooria, Hosanna in Excelsis!

Someone make that damn song stop, why wouldn't it stop? Why couldn't he see Rose? Why was her father always making him leave? He had never wanted them together… and it was all his fault, she was in pain because of him, again… again…
"This is all my fault."

"Yes."

He woke up, sweat beading on his forehead, heart pounding. For a brief, confused moment, he had no idea where he was.

"Scorp?"

He groaned and blinked in a flash of wandlight as he looked up into Albus' face leaning over him. "What?" he mumbled, blearily.

"The alarm went off," Albus said, his voice oddly sharp. "You okay?"

Scorpius belatedly remembered the intricate charmed alarm that they'd put on the bed to make an alert if his heart rate spiked, after the last time. They'd never needed it until now. Albus, Scorpius saw now, had his wand gripped tightly in his hand, his glasses were slightly askew and behind them his eyes were wide with panic.

"Fine," Scorpius muttered. He felt guilty for waking Albus for no reason, but he wasn't quite awake enough to be properly apologetic just yet. "Just the stupid dream again."

Albus' shoulders relaxed a little and he ran his hand through his hair, which was in an even worse state than usual. "The hospital one?"

"No, the one with the fluffy bunnies climbing all over me," he replied sarcastically. "Of course that one." He sat up stiffly and rubbed his face. He was always grouchy in the morning; the dream hadn't done anything to improve matters. "Sorry I woke you."

"S'okay. It's nearly six anyway. Want to do some last minute Charms revision?"

Scorpius groaned. "Oh, hell."

It was the first day of the NEWTs. Of all the nights to have his favourite recurring nightmare. Albus was already picking up his notes and coming to sit on the bed. For someone who said he didn't care about his NEWT results - with the exception of Charms and Potions - he had gotten rather antsy about the exams since the wedding.

They settled opposite each other, textbooks and piles of notes spread over the covers. Albus sat leaning against the opposite bedpost, his brow furrowed behind his glasses as he tried to wake up enough to read his own handwriting.

Scorpius stared down at his own notes - some of which were still in Rose's neat, loopy writing - for a minute or two without really seeing them. His thoughts were still foggy with the dim lights of the hospital corridor, and the distant sound of screaming. "You don't think it'll happen, do you?" he asked quietly after a while.

Albus looked up at him, his glasses slipping slightly down his nose. "What, the dream?" He blinked, squeezing his eyes tight shut, then open again. "I dunno, you're the one with the fortune telling dreams. Do you think it will?"

Scorpius bit the inside of his cheek, tapping at his parchment with one finger. "It happens at Christmas I think," he said. "But after last year, things were fine… am I just going to be waiting every Christmas to see if something awful happens?"
Albus shook his head. 'It's not going to happen. It doesn't make sense, right? You wouldn't do anything to hurt Rose, would you?'

Scorpius felt his stomach twist at the very thought. "No, but…"

"So, it's dumb then." Albus dismissed the idea easily. "Anyway, her dad wouldn't just drag you out, he'd punch you one. Or kill you right off."

Scorpius glared at him. "Thanks a lot."

"So, it's just a dream, mate. Don't worry about it."

Scorpius tried not to. He tried to concentrate on Charms. The alarm, which was paired to Albus' wand, hadn't woken Peter or Gaius, but they were soon awake anyway and cramming in some last minute reading as well. The theory part of all their exams would come first, followed by three days of practical exams and coursework presentations. They'd all handed in their written assignments the week before, but subjects like Charms and Divination required a live presentation of skills. Funnily enough, it was the written part that made Scorpius the most nervous, while Rose and Albus were worried about the practicals. Rose was going to be presenting on spells and runes for aided mobility for Ancient Runes, using Scorpius' chair as an example, after which it would be returned to the hospital. Scorpius would be glad to see the back of it.

He was most excited for his Charms presentation. He'd had much less time to prepare, but he was confident. It didn't even bother him that the rest of the students and even family and friends were invited to watch the presentations. He was used to standing in front of a crowd by now, which was an advantage the others admittedly didn't have.

"You'll do great," he told Rose, after the written tests were finally over and it was time to focus on their presentations. Luckily he'd slept normally for the last few nights, though Rose looked like she could have done with a few more hours. There were dark circles under her eyes and she didn't seem to be aware that there were two quills stuck in her hair in addition to the one she was using to make hasty additions to her notecards. "You know this stuff inside out. Even Knox doesn't know as much as you do about that thing."

"True," Albus grunted, from where he was putting the finishing touches on his homemade invisibility cloak. It was really just an enhanced Disillusionment charm modified to work on fabric and stick to whatever was behind it. It didn't work quite as well as a real one, but Professor Flitwick had seemed impressed during testing.

"Mum and Dad are coming," she said, sighing. "It's not Dad I mind, he won't understand half of it, he never did Ancient Runes…"

Albus snorted.

"But Mum… she got top marks in Runes and she's -"

Scorpius put what he hoped was a comforting arm around her shoulders. "Don't worry about it," he said. "She'll be impressed, I promise. No one's expecting you to be Minister for Magic next week, y'know."

"I should hope not," Al put in.

Scorpius shot him a look to let him know he was being unhelpful.

"All right," he said, reaching over and shutting Rose's notebook with a snap. "We need a break."
She looked at him as though he had just slapped her across the face.

"What?"

"A break," he repeated. "All of us. Come on, we're going out."

"But-"

"Out!"

He led them onto the sun-soaked Quidditch pitch, where they had a game of Quaffle tag that ended in some semi-violent hilarity when Scorpius and Rose teamed up on Albus, leading to his ultimate defeat as he fled the pitch with at least six charmed balls in pursuit. "That is *cheating*, you gits," he protested, once the others had stopped laughing long enough to call off the attack.

Scorpius grinned viciously. Al had deserved the thrashing, in his opinion. He'd been giving Scorpius the sort of look that said he was about to suggest slowing down 'for his health'. But he felt fine. A bit sore around the shoulders, maybe, but nothing to worry about. Incredible, really. Every time he felt sore anywhere, it felt *good*, because it was another reminder that he was better. He was free. He hadn't realised how much he'd missed flying. "Magic in Quidditch is cheating?" he asked, all innocence. "How do the brooms stay up then?"

"Do you want the detailed answer to that?" Rose asked, just as innocently.

"No," the others replied, in unison.

Albus hung around the edge of the pitch for a moment after they'd landed. Ravenclaw had lost the Quidditch cup, to Gryffindor, a few weeks earlier. Scorpius knew he was disappointed, that he'd wanted to lead the team to victory in his final year, but he thought he was also looking at it as the final sign that he wasn't meant to be a professional Quidditch player. When Rose pointed out that school Quidditch was hardly the same, he only shrugged.

"All right?" Scorpius asked him, carefully, leaning on his school broom a little for support. He wasn't in too much pain, but he wouldn't be disappointed if he got to sit down pretty soon.

"Yeah," his friend sighed, looking out over the pitch. "I was just thinking I'll miss this place."

"Me too," Scorpius said, with real feeling. Hogwarts was his home. The Leaky Cauldron was a close second of course, but he'd only really spent a few months there, added all together. He'd lived in the Ravenclaw dormitory for the better part of seven years. The big empty house in Rue Chouette was nothing to it. He barely remembered his childhood house. It would be very strange to say goodbye to the school forever. "Reckon we're ready?" he asked, in an attempt to lighten the mood.

"Hell no," Albus laughed, turning away from the pitch at last. "At least you've already got a job lined up."

Scorpius grinned. "True. Though I bet Knox will give you an apprenticeship no matter what your NEWT results are."

Al snorted, though his expression was thoughtful. "He never wanted me around even one day a week," he pointed out, doubtfully. "Anyway he never takes full-time apprentices."

"Yeah but now he knows how brilliant you are," Scorpius countered. "How could he say no? Won't know till you try, mate."
"I guess." Albus chuckled. "Weird, isn't it - now exams are here my punishment's over, so I don't have to go back to the hospital on Sundays anymore, but here I am trying to get in there every day of the week."

"What are you two talking about?" Rose asked as they drew level with her where she'd been waiting for them to catch up.

"Oh, just the future and stuff," Scorpius said, putting his arm around her shoulders.

"Yuck, it's hot," Rose complained, but she didn't shrug him off, which he took as a good sign. "And you're all sweaty."

He tugged her closer, causing a delightful little squealing noise as she tried to escape. At least, he thought triumphantly as they walked back to the castle for dinner, they'd had a couple of hours free from the stress of exams. And in a few more days, it would all be over once and for all.

~*-S-*~

~*-S-*~

"Scorpius Malfoy."

Rose kissed him quickly on the cheek. "Good luck," she said, smiling encouragement. He winked at her and got out of his seat to polite applause and some cheers from the Ravenclaw contingent. They'd all heard him practicing; they were either excited for the show, or just glad it was the last time they'd ever have to hear it.

He wasn't nervous at all, which was weird. He'd been sweating madly before the Defence Against the Dark Arts practical, and that hadn't even been in front of people. It had been a sort of organised melee, with a dozen duels taking place at any one time. He wasn't as fast at dodging as most people since the injury, but he was at least faster with nonverbal spells, which gave him a bit of an edge. He'd come out of it with only a slightly numb left hand - where he hadn't quite been quick enough - and what he hoped were decent marks. He thought he'd done all right in everything so far, and his Muggle Studies essay had been a whole foot longer than required. He just had to nail the coursework presentation in Charms, and it was done.

He limped onto the dais at the front of the Great Hall where the examiners were seated. Professor Flitwick was sitting with them; a couple of other teachers were seated in the audience, including Professor McGonagall who apparently had nowhere better to be. Rose's parents had come as promised, the Minister for Magic and her husband given the best seats just behind the rows of NEWT students who were waiting their turn to present themselves. Neville must have had his own exams to supervise, but Hannah was there, sitting with Albus' mum. Harry Potter was not present, much to the apparent disappointment of some of the Gryffindor girls who had looked around in excitement as the guests arrived. Scorpius told himself the absence was none of his business, that he didn't want to know, but… well that was it, wasn't it? He was always going to wonder. Would never forget. He was going to show right here and now that he wouldn't forget. He had a brief, heart-stopping moment, as his gaze passed over the audience, when he realised that he was going to deliberately stir up all those memories again. For what? A test? A good NEWT result?

"You may begin," said the head examiner, pushing his glasses up his nose and giving Scorpius a
look of mild interest. He hadn't brought any props on stage, which wasn't unusual for Charms, but neither did he appear to have his wand. He had rolled his sleeves up to his elbows and opened his robes as far as he could appropriately do within school rules.

No, he thought to himself sternly. It's not about the result. It's about… showing I'm still here. That I'm still me. It's my story - no one else is going to tell it but me.

Silence fell as he turned towards the hall and gathered himself, taking a breath and lifting his hands to waist height. He closed his eyes, and focused his thoughts. His hands lifted -

Audible to the entire hall, stringed instruments began to play. Some people, unfamiliar with this peculiar kind of magic, turned their heads to try and find the hidden musicians. Those who continued to watch Scorpius saw his fingers and hands move deftly, precisely through the air. Then he spoke, and his voice was just as audible from every corner of the room, magically amplified.

After all you put me through,

You think I'd despise you.

But in the end I wanna thank you,

'Cause you've made me that much stronger -

The strings suddenly gave way to a heavy beat, making most people jump, and at the same time the Enchanted ceiling went dark. When Scorpius began the song for real, areas of the room lit up in colour where he pointed, transforming the hall into a real performance venue. The floor seemed to shake with the force of the music.

Well I, I thought I knew you, thinkin' that you were true

Guess I, I couldn't trust, called your bluff, time is up

'Cause I've had enough

You were there by my side, always down for the ride

But your joy ride just came down in flames '

cause your greed sold me out in shame

After all of the stealing and cheating

You probably think that I hold resentment for you

But you're wrong

'Cause if it wasn't for all that you tried to do, I wouldn't know

Just how capable I am to pull through

So I wanna say thank you

'Cause it makes me that much stronger

Makes me work a little bit harder
It makes me that much wiser
So thanks for making me a fighter
Made me learn a little bit faster
Made my skin a little bit thicker
Makes me that much smarter
So thanks for making me a fighter
Never saw it coming, all of your backstabbing
Just so you could cash in on a good thing before I'd realise your game
I heard you're going round playing the victim now
But don't even begin feeling I'm the one to blame
'Cause you dug your own grave
After all of the fights and the lies 'cause you're wanting to haunt me
But that won't work anymore, no more,
It's over, 'Cause if it wasn't for all of your torture
I wouldn't know how to be this way now and never back down
So I wanna say thank you
'Cause it makes me that much stronger
Makes me work a little bit harder
It makes me that much wiser
So thanks for making me a fighter
Made me learn a little bit faster
Made my skin a little bit thicker
Makes me that much smarter
So thanks for making me a fighter
How could this man I thought I knew
Turn out to be unjust so cruel
Could only see the good in you
Pretended not to see the truth
You tried to hide your lies, disguise yourself
Through living in denial

But in the end you'll see

you won't stop me!*

The hall burst into thunderous applause. Scorpius lowered his arms carefully and the Enchanted ceiling became visible again. He was pleased with that effect. He hadn't entirely known it would work, since he hadn't been able to practice on the real thing.

Some of the examiners were scribbling furiously, others were looking at him with renewed curiosity. Suddenly, though he hadn't been shy at all so far, he felt very self-conscious under their stares. "Very, ah… interesting," said the head examiner. His spectacles had slid to the end of his nose again.

"Inspired!" squeaked an elderly witch at the far end of the table. She had wispy white hair in a bundle on top of her head, which bounced up and down in time with her enthusiasm. The others blinked at her in apparent surprise.

"Yes… ah. Very good, very good," tutted the examiner, with the air of dismissal rather than praise. Scorpius was left wondering whether they'd actually enjoyed it or not, although Flitwick gave him an encouraging smile as he left the stage.

~*-R-*~

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There was a big party in the Leaky Cauldron the night that the Hogwarts Express rolled into London. All the seventh years had been invited, and nearly all of them travelled by Knight Bus or Apparition from King's Cross Station to the Wizarding pub, where a huge banner wishing congratulations to them all was hung over the bar. As Head Girl, Lizzie had coordinated the whole thing with her mother. Most of the Ravenclaws found a table big enough to sit together, with Lizzie and Belinda rounding out the gathering. Gaius was now sitting very close to Yuni, the quietest of Rose's dormitory-mates, and Priya was sitting with the Gryffindors, as she'd started going out with Warren, of all people. The end of exams seemed to have sparked a few such developments.

"Who wants Firewhisky?" Gaius suggested, with uncharacteristic eagerness.

"Should we?" Belinda said dubiously.

"We're adults, aren't we?" Janey said, rolling her eyes. "Come on, a couple drinks won't hurt. We deserve it!"

"Look out, the Ravenclaws are going on a bender," said Stacey, Scorpius' Gryffindor friend, as she passed by with a bowl of crisps for their table.

"You lot have been drinking since you arrived," Lizzie countered. Stacey grinned, tossed her hair at the interruption and gave the Ravenclaw-Hufflepuff group a wave before hurrying off to join Warren and the others.

"Gryffindors," Janey said. "Anyway, drinks?"

"Good evening."

Rose looked up to see Jian Chung, who was standing beside the table, looking straight back at her. He seemed to have come out of nowhere, and looked rather strange out of uniform, in a trim
waistcoat under a dark green summer cloak. She felt Scorpius go very still beside her and looked back at him quickly. "It's okay," she whispered, giving his arm a little squeeze.

"Yeah right," he muttered back, but she thought he relaxed a little. Albus, sitting opposite next to Lizzie, looked as though he was chewing on something sour.

"Excuse the interruption," Jian said, nodding at all of them. "I wanted to thank you for the invitation."

"It's no problem," Lizzie said quickly, before Al could open his mouth. "We wanted everyone to come. Could be the last time we're all together, right?"

"Yes," Rose said softly. She couldn't quite meet Jian's eyes. They'd hardly spoken to each other since the incident before Christmas, except where necessary for schoolwork. She'd been very impressed with his Transfiguration presentation though; even if she hadn't dared to say so out loud. Apparently he'd done just fine without her tutelage.

"Indeed," Jian said, nodding in his stiff, formal way. "Well..." he turned awkwardly as if to move away, maybe to join some of the Slytherin girls nearby, but then Scorpius called out; "hold up, Chung."

Rose gave him a sharp warning look, but he only stretched his right hand out across her towards Jian. "Good luck to you," he said, low but apparently sincere. After a brief moment of surprised hesitation, Jian took his hand and shook it.

"You too," he said. He looked, Rose thought, like he might want to say something else, but then he simply gave them a little bow and disappeared into the crowd.

"That was very nice of you," she said, turning her attention back to her boyfriend, smiling at him warmly. She thought she had some idea how difficult that simple handshake had been for him. It took a lot to let go of a feud six years old, and fuelled so recently by something so personal and painful. It meant all the more to her because she carried half the guilt for that incident.

"Yeah well, he's an arse," Scorpius muttered. "But I've got enough enemies. May as well part as..." he hesitated as he tried to find and alternative to 'friends' - "semi-acquaintances," he finished, lamely.

"Want to go shake Warren's hand as well?" Albus asked, looking rather disgusted.

Scorpius shrugged. "Maybe later." Rose laughed and hugged him round the shoulders and he smiled. "Someone get me that drink, then," he said. "Since I'm already doing stuff I really ought to be drunk before I start doing."

Albus frowned. "Is that a good idea? On your potions?"

Scorpius groaned. "Oh come on, I've been clean for a week! You lot wanted me off them, remember? And I've been putting up with all the little side effects like a good boy even though half the time it feels like my head's going to fall off if I stand up too fast. Please?"

"Please?" Rose repeated, giving her cousin her most pleading look. "I think we all deserve a bit of fun."

"Yes, let the boy have some fun, Potter!" Gaius demanded, banging his fist theatrically on the table. "Fun, fun!"

At this point the conversation devolved into the chanting of 'Fun! Fun!' for about a minute until
Albus caved in with an eyeroll. Scorpius was sniggering into his sleeve as the Firewhiskey glasses were handed around, and the entire Hogwarts class of 2025 toasted each other, with much applause, hugging and laughter as the summer sun went down on the Wizarding world on one side of the building, and the Muggle world on the other.

It was a good party, and it went on quite late. A few people went home, wanting to see their families and sleep in their own beds at last, but others had booked rooms in the pub so that they didn't have to call an end to the festivities. Luckily Hannah had left the bar in the charge of one of her staff, so that she could put Alice to bed, and they didn't have to be too cautious about their behaviour. NEWTs were over, school was over, and now they only had to worry about - well, the rest of their lives, but that could wait until tomorrow, for now. Rose couldn't remember the last time she'd had this much fun.

Unfortunately, it wasn't destined to last.

Someone came into the pub long after closing time, and Rose was surprised to recognise her cousin Victoire. She waved, somewhat hesitantly, and the tall blonde woman hurried over in their direction. Rose was smiling at first, but she began to worry almost immediately; Victoire's face was somewhat red, as though she'd been crying, and her hair was a mess. It was very unusual to see her beautiful cousin so unkempt. "Something's going on," she said, so that only Albus and Scorpius, who were sitting closest, could hear. Al looked up, a little red in the face himself with drink, and frowned.

"Victoire?"

"Good, you're all here," she said, as she reached them. She was wearing a long hooded cloak, too hot for summer even in the middle of the night, the sort of thing one might wear if they didn't want to be seen on the street. "I need to talk to you," she went on. She seemed to be addressing all three of them, but she was looking at Scorpius.

Scorpius looked surprised, and Rose didn't blame him. "Okay..." he said.

"Privately," she added, looking around at the remnants of the festivities. Nearby, Janey was snogging Gary Thornton with no apparent concern for the mass of onlookers.

"Um. Right," Scorpius said, nervously. "My room?" He looked at Rose for confirmation, as though she might have some insight that he didn't. She could only shake her head in confusion. She was desperate to ask; had something happened? But why would she come to them for help, when there were so many Aurors and politicians in the family it was hard to keep them all straight sometimes?

They went quickly up the stairs, Scorpius leading the way. Rose couldn't help noticing that Albus stumbled a little over the steps. He must have gone a little overboard on the Firewhiskey as well. Not that she blamed him, but now she wished she'd been paying more attention. They might have to be alert; whatever Victoire's news was, she was sure it wasn't good.

"What's going on?" she asked as soon as they had reached Scorpius' room - which now held only his things, Tony having moved out properly to his own place during the year - and shut the door. There wasn't a great deal of space in there for all four of them, but Scorpius sat on the bed to make more standing room, and they all looked at Victoire expectantly for an explanation.

She looked at them, holding her hands clasped very tight together. "It's Teddy," she said, low. Rose's heart sank, and beside her she heard Albus take a sharp breath. "He's been..." Victoire closed her eyes for a moment and shook her head. "I really shouldn't be telling you any of this. But..." she turned to look at Scorpius, who stared back. He looked worried, but otherwise nonplussed. "He's been doing a lot of undercover work," she went on. "In France."
Comprehension dawned. Rose reached out for Scorpius' hand, but he was sitting very still, and didn't even notice her.

"It was dangerous, but he wanted to do it," Victoire sighed. "We held off announcing the engagement for months, because... well, I was worried something would happen. It was like tempting fate, or something. But then they..."

"They caught my father," Scorpius finished, in a flat, emotionless tone.

She nodded. "We thought that was the end of it. He could stop, and he was safe. So we went ahead with everything. But the Shadow - I mean, the Smugglers, they're still doing everything they did before, without... without Malfoy. So Teddy... he went back there, because of this stupid trial, and lack of evidence... he said it'd be fine." Tears started building in her already-reddened eyes, and she shook herself, trying to gather the courage to go on. Rose took her hand instead, for what comfort she could give. Victoire took a shaky breath. "He hasn't checked in in two days. Uncle Harry just came to tell me. He said it might not be anything to worry about... but he was just saying it to make me feel better, I know. They've got him, I know they have. He could be dead already."

"Oh Vic, I'm sorry," Rose breathed, as her own eyes filled with fearful tears. It felt like her heart had fallen into her stomach. Not Teddy.

"I don't understand," Scorpius said, still in that flat voice. "I don't... I can't..."

"I know you don't know anything," Victoire said, quickly. "But... your father does. He hasn't talked to the Aurors at all, that's why Teddy... why he had to go back. And now they don't know where he is. Even if they had some idea, they can't do a raid in a foreign country without the right evidence, and the French Ministry wouldn't let them even try." Her hands parted and clenched into fists as she looked at him with a desperate plea in her eyes. "I know you haven't seen your father. You don't want to, I understand that. But... I thought if I asked..."

Scorpius reached out quickly and put a hand on her arm. "Of course I will," he said, very low. "Of course. I'll do anything I can, I promise."

Victoire gasped tearfully and threw her arms around his neck. "Thank you," she breathed, holding him tight. She looked relieved, as though he had answered all her hopes already, but Rose could read Scorpius' face much better. He looked as though he'd just been told he had to go back to Durmstrang.

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"Sure about this, lad?"

Scorpius squared his shoulders and tried to look confident. He was not sure about this, in the least, except that he had to do it. For Teddy. Teddy was the only person in his family - in his blood family - to have not treated him like dirt. Even though they hardly knew each other, Teddy wasn't work, like the rest of his family was. He was just there. And he had been there for Scorpius too, at least twice, when he had no obligation to Scorpius at all. Added to this, he was Rose and Albus' cousin, not just by adoption now but by marriage. He couldn't have said no to Victoire's desperate plea if he'd tried. And he hadn't; he'd said yes before he'd even thought about it, and now there was no going back.

"Yes," he said, looking up at Al's father with as much confidence as he could muster. "I can't promise he'll tell me anything..."
"We know," Harry said, though Scorpius couldn't help noticing the slightly hopeful look in his eyes. "It's good of you to try, anyway. I know how hard it is."

Oddly enough Scorpius couldn't argue with this. He thought Harry Potter of all people probably did have some idea. He took a deep breath. It had been nearly a year since he'd last seen his father. And that encounter he barely remembered as more than a flash of blue light. He put a hand unconsciously to the place on his chest where he still had a jagged round scar. "It's fine," he said.

"I'm only sorry we've gotten nowhere in all this time," Harry added, suddenly looking somber.

"You didn't… give him truth potion?" Scorpius asked. He'd been dying to ask that for quite some time, and it seemed like an appropriate moment.

Harry sighed. "No, we were careful about that. After what happened to you. That kind of Moonsilver allergy is genetic, that's why it only really crops up in Pureblood families."

Scorpius nodded. He'd thought it must be something like that. "He has it too?"

"Yes. Big time. And as much as we personally dislike him, we don't actually go around deliberately poisoning people." He seemed to be trying to lighten the mood again, but this time Scorpius received it only with a kind of dull resignation. "But he's not under a spell, the way you were," Harry went on. "He can talk. He just won't. Not to us, anyway."

Scorpius felt the weight on his shoulders grow just that bit heavier. "I'll do my best," he said. "He'll see right through it, though - he'll know that I want something."

"So don't try to be sneaky about it," the Auror suggested, raising one eyebrow in a way that almost made Scorpius smile. Almost. "Ready? We'll be right next door."

Scorpius turned to the big heavy door, and nodded. He clenched his fists hard for a moment before forcing them to relax. He nodded. Harry opened the door to the interview room and stepped aside, out of view. Scorpius, with a growing sense of impending doom, limped slowly inside. It was the same room he remembered from his own interrogation, all that time ago. But there were no Aurors here, only one man, sitting stiffly in the single chair behind the table. He raised his eyes when the door opened, grey eyes searching, and then his head shot up in sudden, shocked recognition.

"Scorpius?"

Scorpius swallowed. "Father."

The man stood up, shakily. He looked a little thin, Scorpius thought, and a little strange in the plain grey prison robe instead of his accustomed finery, but otherwise not worse for wear. He didn't look hungry, or ill. "It is you," Draco said, as though only just now believing it. He stepped forward, hesitating for a moment as though he suspected some kind of illusion. Then his hand landed on Scorpius' shoulder. "I am so glad to see you," he said, his voice clouding a little with emotion.

Scorpius' throat caught, despite himself. He'd been avoiding this moment for so long, but now it was here… he couldn't help feeling a little sorry. The man was his father, after all. Despite everything. But then, looking at him, a deep-seated anger that had been brewing since May the previous year began to churn acid-like in the pit of his stomach. "How are you?" he asked, forcing the words through the strange conflict of emotion that threatened to choke him.

"As well as can be expected," Draco said, looking at him, perhaps trying to read his face.

Of course he was, Scorpius thought. He was fine. He hadn't been fighting to get back on his feet all this time, fighting for every step. He'd only been wiling his time away in a prison cell. "Good," he
said, unable to think of anything else to say.

"And you?" Draco asked, and Scorpius saw his eyes flicker down to his torso. He resisted the urge to touch his chest again. "You… you're standing," his father went on, still looking him up and down as though suspicious of some kind of trick. "They told me you were… that you couldn't walk…"

Scorpius swallowed. "I couldn't, for seven months," he said. It came out a little flat. "I've only been walking since March."

Draco seemed to sag at the shoulders still further, but he didn't take his hand off of Scorpius' shoulder. "I'm glad," he said hoarsely. "So glad… son. I was so sure… I thought you were dead. I was sure."

Scorpius didn't know what to say to that. He stood there for a moment, watching his father, fighting conflicting urges.

"I sent letters," Draco went on after a moment.

"I know."

"You read them?"

"No." It was only the truth.

Draco looked disappointed, but not surprised. There was a long awkward pause, during which he seemed to regain some of his former haughtiness. His shoulders lifted and he drew himself up to ask, "why are you here, then? Why now, after all this time?" His gaze flickered to the corners of the small room, clearly wondering why they were here and not in his prison cell. He surely suspected there would be people listening.

Scorpius took a deep breath. No matter what his personal feelings, he still had a job to do. For Teddy's sake. "I need your help," he said.

His father eyed him suspiciously. "I see."

"Teddy Lupin has gone missing," Scorpius said flatly. "Your aunt's grandson," he added, when the expression on the pale man's face did not change. "He was working for the Aurors undercover with your old… the smugglers."

Draco frowned, and took an almost indiscernible step back. "I see," he said, not quite meeting Scorpius' eyes. "And what has this got to do with me?"

The anger rose up in a wave of bile, and Scorpius had to fight to drag it back, or he might have punched the man. Somehow he thought Mr Potter, wherever he was watching from, would be unimpressed if he did that. "Everything!" he snapped, not bothering to hide how outraged he was by his father's indifference. "It's your fault! If you just told them everything they needed to know, Teddy wouldn't have had to go back there!"

"Any evidence he gathered would no doubt be used against me in court," Draco countered, with an ease that did nothing to soothe Scorpius' anger. Gracefully he slid back into his chair. "I have the right not to say anything that would incriminate me, no matter how many 'deals' they offer. How the Aurors choose to gather their information is not my -"

"You're incriminated already!" Scorpius almost yelled. He took a breath and tried to calm down, tried to imagine Rose there, by his side. She'd be telling him not to lose his head, that it wouldn't get
him anywhere. "He's your family too," he said, into the ringing silence. "Doesn't that mean anything?"

"A cousin who was working against me," Draco said. "In order to have me imprisoned. Such family as that I can do without. Why do you think I no longer talk to my parents?"

Scorpius glared at him. Because they're insane, he thought, but he didn't say it. He could almost feel Rose's ghostly, calming hand on his arm, just as she'd gone to stop him from lunging at Jian the night before. Instead, he sat down opposite his father, in one of the chairs where the Aurors usually sat. He leaned forward over the table, looking his father in the face, grey eyes meeting grey eyes. "What if it was me?" he asked, softly.

Draco blinked, surprised by this sudden change in tack. "What?"

Scorpius took a breath and repeated. "What if it was me? In Teddy's place."

"Don't be ridiculous," his father said dismissively

Scorpius leaned forward even further, closing most of the distance between them. He gripped the sleeve of the prison robe without breaking eye contact. "You said you thought I was dead," he said. "But what you meant was, you thought you'd killed me." His father flinched and tried to pull away, but Scorpius dragged his arm back across the table. He was surprised at his own strength, but went on, "If it wasn't for Mr Potter and the rest of the Aurors, I would be dead. And if it wasn't for me you would have killed Rose, and then you would be dead because Mr Weasley would have killed you even if it meant spending the rest of his life in prison. And you care about me, I know you care. You wouldn't have come for me at the hospital if you didn't."

Draco's cheeks were pink, with fear, hurt or anger it was hard to tell. He looked as though he might say something, but Scorpius charged on before he could have the chance. These were the words he'd been wanting to say all year. It was almost a relief to say them out loud. "You owe me, father," he said. He forgot that the Aurors were watching and listening, forgot that they weren't really alone. It didn't seem to matter, only that he spoke the words, and his father heard them. "And you owe them, too, because they saved me. So it might as well be me that's missing." He sighed. "Father… Papa, please," he said, reverting by instinct to the childhood name he'd since been forbidden to use. He could feel his father going still, even through the sleeve. "Please. He's family, and… and I'm begging you. Please."

When he came out of the room, some time later, and into the observation room, Mr Potter hugged him hard around the shoulders. "You did it," he said, voice heavy with emotion. "You might have just saved my Godson's life."

Scorpius didn't have the energy to say anything. He was exhausted. Maybe it would have been better to let the Aurors take over once Draco had agreed to talk, but he'd felt that he was the only one who would get the whole truth - or as close to the whole truth as the man was capable of speaking. He'd asked every question he could think of as pertinent, and then he'd had to hide his shock as a little voice spoke in his ear, apparently audible only to him, guiding him through the rest of the interrogation. It had seemed to take hours.

The room was busy, maps and notes spread everywhere. The places Scorpius' father had mentioned had already been pinpointed and were being poured over by the group, with the exception of Mr Potter and, to Scorpius' vague surprise, Mr Weasley. He hadn't realised he was even back at work, but then it wasn't as though he'd been paying much attention. To his further surprise, the man came over and put a hand on his shoulder, squeezing slightly, not in a menacing way. "You all right?" he asked, quietly.
"Fine," Scorpius said, too quickly. "What do we do now?"

"You can go home," Ron said. "You've done enough for one day." Beside him, Harry nodded his agreement.

"No, I want to help," Scorpius said. He'd barely slept the night before and he wasn't convinced he wasn't a bit hungover, still, but after coming this far, he couldn't imagine leaving and having to wait with everyone else to see what would happen. But mainly, he couldn't get the last part of the conversation out of his head.

"Scorpius," his father had said, as he finally got up to leave. "Listen to me. This is… these are a very dangerous group of people. I don't want you to get involved."

Scorpius had stared at him, confused. "You didn't seem to mind before," he pointed out, frowning. "You were all for it."

"That was before, when I could have protected you," Draco said, and there was an earnestness in his voice that Scorpius couldn't help but believe; it was too sincere.

"But you were their boss," Scorpius said. "Why would they want to hurt me?"

His father looked for a moment as though he wouldn't answer, but then he stood up, and faced him. "The Shadow was never just one man," he said, sending a chill down Scorpius' spine. Then he took a shaky breath. "I have told you everything I know. As repayment… promise me you will stay out of it."

Scorpius hesitated a moment. Then he took a half a step forward and closed his arms, very briefly, around his father's shoulders. "I'm sorry," he had said, quietly. "But I don't owe you anything."

Now, the two Aurors were looking at him with some concern. "There's nothing else you can do," Harry said, gently.

"Oh, really?" Scorpius asked. "How are you going to get Teddy back? Send someone after him? Has anyone been to any of these places? I have." That was true, sort of. He had been to many of the locations his father had mentioned; he just hadn't realised what they were at the time. "I can help."

"Scorpius," Harry's expression was pained. "I would no more send you into that nest of vipers than I would my own sons. You aren't even trained -"

"No, but they know me," Scorpius pointed out. "Well, Goyle does. And I've met some of the others." Again, true. He'd recognised quite a lot of the names as 'family friends' who had been round for some awkward dinners over the summers he'd been at home. Whether they would recognise him was another matter, but then he finally had a reason to be thankful for his resemblance to his father. "I wouldn't be trying to be undercover. No disguises. I'd just be me."

"They won't trust you," Ron said. Harry shot him a sharp look, as though surprised he was even considering the suggestion.

"They don't have to trust me to let me in," Scorpius countered. What are you doing? said a voice in his head. No idea, he replied. He hadn't planned any of this, hadn't thought it through. The words just said themselves, without any assistance from his brain whatsoever. "I'll just be there long enough to find out where Teddy is… maybe get whatever evidence you need. Then I'm out, and you can go in and get Teddy."

The Aurors exchanged glances. A few of the others were looking up from their maps with wary
interest. Behind them, through the one-way mirror, Scorpions could see his father being led away by the prison staff out of the corner of his eye. It only served to turn his resolve as hard as stone.

"Harry -" Ron started, but Mr Potter shook his head, causing his hair to fall aside to reveal the lightning scar on his forehead in sharp relief. Scorpions tried not to stare. There was a moment when the two men seemed to communicate without speaking; eye movements and body language carrying on a whole silent conversation that Scorpions couldn't understand. Eventually, Harry turned back to look at him, and his heart skipped a beat.

"We'll think about it," he said, and hope sagged in Scorpions' breast. "I promise," the Auror added, apparently reading the doubt in Scorpions' expression. "But you need to go home and rest. We'll keep you in the loop, I swear."

Scorpions went back to the pub very reluctantly. The others were all there, clamouring to know what had happened, why he had been gone for so long. Victoire had been waiting for him, so he gave them all a brief rundown - prudently omitting his last suggestion - and repeated Harry's promise to keep them informed. And he went to his room and fell asleep almost before his head hit the pillow.

~*-R-*~

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Scorpions was sleeping so deeply that even without the potions, he didn't stir when Rose climbed into bed beside him. It was only two in the afternoon, but he was obviously exhausted. She thought he probably hadn't slept properly in weeks, what with NEWTs, and the end of school, and the party last night… they'd only been out of school for half a day and he was already suffering. It just wasn't fair.

It was all she could do not to be angry at Victoire for asking it of him. She hadn't known after all, couldn't have known how hard it would be, and even if she had, she would have had to ask anyway. Her husband was missing, and she had to do everything she could to find him. Rose understood that, but she also knew the lengths Scorpions had gone to to distance himself from his father over the last year. All those unopened letters. The refused invitations to visit. He'd even talked about changing his name once or twice. He'd made a conscious decision to disown himself from the Malfoy family, and he'd been happy - or as happy as he could be under the circumstances - with the new family he'd built for himself, and now he was getting drawn back into the dark tangled web of the Malfoys because he was trying to do the right thing for that same family.

She closed her eyes and tried to clear her mind, but it was difficult. The last few hours had been highly tense; comforting Victoire in the publican's apartment while putting on a brave face and saying goodbyes to all their classmates who had slept at the pub overnight. Neville had wanted to go with Scorpions to the Ministry, and Rose and Albus would have gone, too, but Scorp had insisted on going alone, so they had all waited anxiously together. Rose had been relieved to see him back, whole and apparently unaffected other than tiredness, but when he told them that he had gotten the information the Aurors needed, Victoire had been overcome with emotions, and Rose had had to sit with her while Scorpions muttered to Neville for a minute before fleeing to the safety of his bedroom. They hadn't had a chance to talk, at all.

She was tired herself, after the late night the previous night, and the stress of the morning, and she must have dozed off at least for a while because when she woke again, Scorpions was awake and staring up at the ceiling. "Hey," she said, shifting her head off the pillow and onto his shoulder, curling into the curve of his arm.

"Hey," he replied, very low, still staring upwards as though there were something particularly interesting between the beams.
"You okay?" she asked.

He tensed a moment, and she expected a 'yeah' or 'fine' to follow at any second. Instead he only sighed. "Dunno," he said finally.

She reached for his hand. "I'm proud of you," she said, quietly. "That was a really brave thing you did."

He made a soft, noncommittal noise. "Might not be enough."

She shivered. "Don't say that. They'll find him. I know they will."

They lay there in silence for a while, until she heard his stomach grumbling, and dragged him to get something to eat. Victoire had apparently gone home, or to her mother's, perhaps, to await news. The others, at Rose's glare, held back their questions, but they all stuck together in the living room, as though they were also waiting. Hannah once again handed the pub over to the staff and instead made dinner for them all, which they ate in a tense semi-silence, careful to speak only about subjects such as summer plans or the expected NEWT results. The NEWTs seemed already such a long time ago. By the time the results arrived, Rose thought, they would surely know one way or the other, whether Teddy was alive.

They were just clearing the table in the dining room - Scorpius insisted on helping despite Hannah's protest that he let her take care of things - when there was a Floo call in the living room. Neville took it, and the others, exchanging half-hopeful, half-worried glances, finished the chore without speaking, all ears straining to hear any of the conversation from the other room.

Eventually Neville came back, and asked Scorpius to come back with him. Rose immediately stepped forward and took his hand, glaring at anyone who might suggest that she stay behind. Albus stepped forward as well, and Neville didn't argue, but led them back into the living room, where Rose's father and uncle were already waiting. As Neville went to close the door behind them, she caught the distant sound of Lizzie arguing with Hannah for her own inclusion, but then it was shut, and it was just the three ex-Gryffindor men, and the three Ravenclaws.

"What's happening?" Rose asked quickly, looking up at her father. He was standing by the fire, with her uncle Harry perched on the arm of an big chair near him, the one Neville usually sat in in the evenings.

"We know where he is," Harry said, and Rose felt a rush of relief, squeezing Scorpius' hand tight. "He's alive. Emmeline is sure of it."

Scorpius looked up quickly. "You called Emmeline?"

Rose stared at him, no idea what they were talking about.

"Neville did," Harry replied. "For some reason he's the only one she'll answer."

Neville's cheeks flushed a little, but he didn't say anything, only crossed his arms and nodded.

"Who's Emmeline?" Rose demanded.

"She's a Seer who can find lost people," Albus explained. "She helped find Scorp, that time."

"Oh," Rose remembered hearing about that. She'd been a bit occupied at the time, and must have forgotten the name. She wondered briefly why Scorpius was on a first-name basis with the woman. It seemed rather odd.
"She couldn't have found him before we had the information we do now," Ron clarified. "Too much dark warding magic. But she managed to narrow the new list of locations down to one."

"So what happens now?" Al asked, looking over at his father. "You go get him, right?"

The two Aurors exchanged glances. "We could raid the place," Harry sighed. "We have the warrant from the French Ministry, and they'll even give us backup. But it's risky. Very risky. They could move Teddy - or even kill him - before we get to him. They always seem to know when we're coming; and some of their alarm spells are deadly."

"Scorpius," Ron said, low, and Rose stared at him, confused and suddenly frightened. It wasn't like her father to treat Scorpius with anything like respect, but he was being, if not nice, at least not openly hostile. Beside her, Scorpius was still and calm, which only served to worry her even more. "We wouldn't ask anything else of you," Ron went on. "Not after today. But if your offer was… that is, if you meant it…"

"I did," Scorpius said. "I'll do it."

"What?" Rose gasped, and Neville uncrossed his arms and stepped forward.

"Now, hang on a minute-"

"We'll be right behind you," Harry said, seriously, ignoring the protests. "If they let you in, you'll just need to find Teddy - or if you can, get him out - without putting yourself in danger. Then we'll take the rest of them in. Whoever they are."

"No!" Rose protested, without thinking. Everyone turned to look at her. "You can't!" she cried, rounding on Scorpius. "Are you crazy? They'll get you too! You could - they could hurt you!"

"I've got a better chance than anyone," Scorpius said, with a confidence that she was sure he didn't really feel, no matter how convincing he was.

"You can't," Rose repeated, tears filling her eyes.

"This is crazy, Harry," Neville said, his voice laced with anger. "You can't send him - he's just a boy -"

"They're not sending me," Scorpius snapped suddenly, glaring at all of them. "I volunteered. I'm the only one who can do it. I'm not a boy, I've come of age, twice, and I can make my own decisions. And I'm going to find my cousin, and nothing any of you say is going to change my mind. All right?"

Rose felt frozen. It sounded like he was volunteering to throw himself off the top of Ravenclaw tower. How could he do that? Without even talking to her first?

After a significant silence, Albus was the next to speak. "I didn't say anything, mate," he said, quietly. "I think…" he looked around, taking in Rose's tears and Neville's hopeless expression, but barrelling on regardless. "If you have the best chance, and you want to go… you should do it."

"Al!" Rose gasped.

Albus ignored her and looked at his father. "I don't suppose I could…"

Harry shook his head. "They'd recognise you, even if your mother would let you go, which she definitely would not. They have all kinds of wards and spells to get through magical disguises, and
no stranger would get in, at least not after months of careful infiltration. That's why we need Scorpius. He's the only one who can walk right up to the door and stand a chance of getting in."

Albus glowered, but he must have been expecting that. "I still want to help, though," he said instead, with determination.

Harry looked as though he might argue, but maybe he decided it would make the situation worse. "I'll find something for you to do," he promised.

"When?" Scorpius asked, as Rose looked between them in disbelief. This was insane.

"As soon as possible," Harry said. "We'll start tomorrow at six, brief you, then we go."

Scorpius nodded. "Okay."

There was a little more said after that, but Rose didn't hear any of it. She wanted to scream objections. She wanted to beg him not to go. But somewhere in the back of her mind a niggling little voice was saying, no. This could be Teddy's only chance. You're being selfish.

Well why shouldn't I be selfish? she demanded of herself, as the Aurors went back through the Floo. Why can't they find someone else? Why does it ALWAYS have to be him?

Neville was turning to Scorpius, looking crushed. "I really can't talk you out of this?" he said, quietly.

Scorpius shook his head. Neville sighed and pulled him into a tight hug. "I seem to recall telling you a while ago not to be a hero," he said, his voice choking slightly. "Do you ever listen to anything I say?"

"Course I do," Scorpius mumbled, hugging him back. "I'm not, it's not… I'm just trying…"

"I know," Neville said, with a shaky breath. "I know, lad. I'm proud of you. I'll even explain things to Hannah, but she won't like it."

"None of us like it," Albus muttered.

Scorpius smiled, a small smile, and turned - finally - towards Rose. His expression was slightly pleading, even hopeful. "Rosie?"

Anger flared in her chest, and she gave him her most ferocious glare. "Oh, now you want to ask my opinion? I thought it didn't matter what any of us said. Our feelings aren't important?"

He flinched, and looked hurt. She told herself she wasn't sorry; he deserved it. Signing up for a suicide mission - no worse, suggesting it - without even considering how she would feel? He should feel bad. "Do whatever you want," she said, over her shoulder as she turned and stormed out of the room. "Since you're going to anyway."

She spent the rest of the evening in Lizzie's room, curled up on the transfigured bed with Midnight, listening to the sounds of the pub die away. There were more arguments, distant and only barely overheard, and when they were over she was sure she heard Hannah crying. Lizzie didn't come to bed; Rose assumed that she and Albus would be together, somewhere, before he went home for the night. While she was here alone. And not just that, but Scorpius…

Scorpius would be alone, on the night he was preparing to risk his life for Teddy. For her family, not just his. For Victoire, and for Andromeda, too. People Rose loved, had always loved. But she loved
him too, and she couldn't just let him go.

At least, she couldn't let him leave, thinking she didn't care.

It was past midnight when she got up and crept down the familiar corridor to Tony's old room. She'd done it so many times, over summer and last Christmas, it felt almost normal. Except that when she pushed the door gently open, she didn't find Scorpius asleep in bed as usual. He was sitting in the dark, in the chair by the desk, only slightly outlined by moonlight breaking through the crack in the curtains. He stood up when she came in, so quickly that he almost knocked the chair over. "Rose?"

"It's me," she said, quietly.

"Lumos," he said, and a ball of light appeared in the air over their heads. She looked up at it, then back at him.

"Show off," she muttered.

"Rose…"

Before he could say anything, she stepped quickly towards him and put his arms around his waist. His arms settled around her shoulders and she felt him sag a little. "You're not angry?" he asked, softly.

"Yes, I'm angry," she muttered. "I'm furious."

"Oh." He stood there for a moment, apparently considering this. "But you're hugging me."

Rose swallowed. "I'm hugging you because I'm afraid, you prat."

His hand shifted slightly over her back. She was suddenly reminded of the time, that summer she'd realised how she felt about him, when she'd gone to his room in the middle of the night and held him while he told her why he had run away from his Grandparents' house. It seemed like centuries ago.

"You don't have to be," he said, softly. "I'll be okay."

"You don't know that." She turned her face into his shoulder as tears started to run down her cheeks again. "You don't know. You could get hurt. You could get killed. I already… I thought you were dead, once. I saw you, dead. I had your blood all over me. I felt the life go out of you."

She felt his heartbeat quicken under her ear, and he took a sharp breath. "I… Rosie…"

"I can't lose you again," she said, biting back a sob as she stood back to look up at him. "I can't, Scor. You can't do that to me. Please."

He gave her a helpless look. "Rose, I have to go," he said, very low.

She took a breath. "I know," she said. "I know you do. I'm not… I'm not stopping you. Just… come back to me. Please. Promise you'll come back."

He stared at her for a moment, reaching up to curl a lock of her hair absently between his fingers as he gazed into her eyes. Then he drew her close and kissed her hard, and any breath she'd had left was quite taken away by the force of it. Her own heart immediately started beating so hard and loud that she was sure it was audible. "I promise," he whispered, his forehead pressed to hers.

"Good," she said, breathlessly. She reached for the hem of his t-shirt and he didn't protest as she tugged it up and over his head. He reached for her shirt in return, and she helped him tug it off,
letting it fall unceremoniously to the floor, and she kissed him again, fiercely, desperately.

"Wait," he said, when they broke for breath, and she felt a wave of disappointment threaten to break, but he only went to the door and locked it, finishing it off with an advanced silencing charm that would prevent any noise escaping through the doors or the walls. Then he came back to her and pulled her close, and she ran a slightly shaking hand over his chest. "Do you…?" he started, his cheeks flushing a little under the dim magical light.

"Yes, very much," she said, meeting his grey eyes with her own. "Do you?"

"I… yes," he said, after just the briefest hesitation. "Yes, please."

She might have laughed, any other time, but this was too serious, too important. He said it because he was hurting, he was scared, maybe even more than she was, and he needed her. She needed him. "I'm here," she said, pressing her body close to his. "And you're here, tonight. I want to be together while we can."

He swallowed. "Yeah. Okay."

"Just don't tell Al. He'll tell us off if you strain something."

He choked a little, but then he grinned. "Rose, I can promise you that this is the last thing I want to talk about with your cousin."

She smiled back. "Good." She stood on tiptoe. "Now kiss me again."

He kissed her. She made a soft, determined sort of sound, and a moment later, with a snap of his fingers… the light went out.

Chapter End Notes

*Fighter by Christina Anguilera - version on the music page is performed by Darren Criss
New Enemies and Old Friends

Chapter Summary

Previously: He kissed her. She made a soft, determined sort of sound, and a moment later, with a snap of his fingers… the light went out.

JUNE 2024

~*-S-*~

~*-S-*~

Scorpius arrived just before six at the Ministry the next morning, with Rose and Neville. Albus was already there, waiting with his father in a room that seemed to be some kind of operational base within the Department of Law Enforcement. It was very large and high-ceilinged, with a big round table in the centre occupied by a magical, topographically accurate map of Europe, complete with little rivers, lakes and mountains. It kept zooming in and out of places in response to requests made by the Aurors surrounding it. There were several dozen Aurors and Hit-Wizards in the room already, despite the very early hour. All of them gave Scorpius curious looks, some of them edged with suspicion.

"All right mate?" Al asked, softly, as they joined the others. Scorpius nodded, doing his best to look confident. In reality, his stomach hadn't stopped churning since he'd woken fitfully just after three, and then again at four. Each time Rose had been in his arms, and her soft, sleepy presence had lulled him back into a restless kind of doze, until it was time to get up. They hadn't said much as they dressed. They didn't need to. Now she was holding his hand as though she would never let it go.

He wasn't really afraid of what might happen to him, the way she obviously was. He was afraid of failure more than anything else. It was hard to be really afraid of personal danger when you didn't really understand it; when you didn't know what you were facing or what you would have to do. He was just afraid that whatever he did, he wouldn't be able to help Teddy. Then not only would he not have been able to help his cousin, but he would have let everyone else down. But, he had volunteered, and now they were all counting on him.

Mr Potter and Mr Weasley were talking in low tones to an older, gruffer-looking Auror with curly grey hair. Scorpius was immediately reminded of Professor Tufty - a bearded, male version, but the same stern, unyielding expression. After a minute, Harry turned to make the introductions.

"Everyone, this is Timmony Rothers," he said. The man made no move to shake hands, or even smile. His lined face appeared to be made of granite. "Timmony, this is Ron's daughter Rose, and of course, Scorpius Malfoy. And you remember Neville."

"Aye," the man grunted. Scorpius wasn't sure, but he thought he saw Neville flinch slightly out of the corner of his eye. He kept forgetting Neville had been an Auror once. He didn't seem to get on with many of them, but maybe that was why he'd gone into teaching instead.

"Sit down, all of you," Harry went on. "We've got a lot to get through in a small amount of time."
He turned to address a question to a group of Cursebreakers wearing identifying badges, who were clustered around an ancient-looking book. "How are we coming along on that thing, Faucett?"

"Any minute now, sir," one of them, a curly-haired young man, replied hastily.

Scorpius frowned at the book; it looked very familiar, and not in a pleasant way. "I've seen that thing before," he said. "Is it one of those special Portkeys?"

Rothers grunted - with amusement or dissatisfaction, it was hard to tell.

"An Ancient Key, yes," Harry replied, patiently. "We've been working out how to use them ever since they were confiscated from… from the Shadow, last year."

Scorpius remembered now the old book that had transported him, his father and the servant, Jean, from England to Norway in one journey, and then the other one that had supposedly allowed his father to kidnap him from St Mungo's Hospital. What had his father said about them? They could travel further than normal Portkeys, and they could get past all kinds of magic security, right? Beside him Rose was peering at the thing with interest, though her hand was still holding his like a vice.

"Won't they know where you've got that thing from?" he asked, rather dubiously.

"All part of the plan," Ron said. "It'll get you there. And maybe even get you out, if we can work it."

"There's a lot of ifs and maybes in this plan so far," Neville muttered. There were dark circles under his eyes and his face was set in an uncharacteristically serious expression.

"There are a lot of significant factors we can't count on," Harry replied, quietly. "Unfortunately we don't have time to come up with anything better. We just have to be so unbelievably reckless that it's actually believable, and hope to Merlin they don't have a Legilimens. As for getting out… we're sending a squad of Hit-Wizards to wait nearby. When you've found him, when we have confirmation that he's there, the French Ministry will give us the go ahead to attack. Then, if you can't get out, you just have to make sure you don't get caught in the crossfire."

There was a brief silence. "It's okay," Scorpius said softly, giving Rose's hand a little squeeze. "I know the risks."

Neville didn't look at all reassured, but he didn't say anything else. Scorpius was grateful. He knew Neville was unhappy, but it meant a lot that he wasn't doing anything else. Scorpius was grateful. He knew Neville was unhappy, but it meant a lot that he wasn't doing anything else. He didn't need anyone else making his decisions for him, anymore, even someone he loved and respected as much as his former guardian.

They sat at the table, and the Aurors began to explain their strategy. Hastily put together, even Scorpius could tell that it lacked some significant detail. A lot was going to rely on his own instincts, and his ability to navigate the minefield of the mysterious organisation. He listened with rapt concentration, knowing the smallest mistake on his part could be catastrophic.

"You realise," Ron said eventually, looking Scorpius in the eye. "This could all be for nothing. They probably won't even let you in."

Looking the man in the face still made Scorpius more than a little nervous, but he nodded. "Yeah, I know. It's worth a try though, right?"

There was another brief moment of silence as they all looked at each other. Rose was staring down at the table, and even Albus for once had nothing encouraging to say.
Right,” Harry said, turning to Scorpius with an air of reluctant finality. "Here's what you're going to tell them."

~*-A-*~

~*-A-*~

Albus stood back as Rose and Scorpius said goodbye. He could tell they would rather have a little more privacy, preferably away from Rose's dad, anyway. He looked away as they kissed, gently, and out of the corner of his eye saw his friend wipe tears away from Rose's cheeks. "You promised," she whispered to him, and he nodded. Then he shook everyone's hands - Ron, then Harry, then Neville, who pulled him into a rough hug. Then he faced Albus, his expression determined despite the lack of colour in his face.

"You can do this," Albus told him. "Bring him home, yeah?"

Scorpius swallowed and took his hand, too. "I will. Look after her, okay?"

"Shut up," Rose said, sniffing and crossing her arms over her chest. "I'll look after myself, thank you."

Scorpius smiled at her, shifted his rucksack on his shoulder, and turned to the old book on the table. He picked it up gingerly, as though expecting it to explode.

"Ten seconds," Harry said, looking at his watch, and back up again. "Ready?"

"As I'll ever be," Scorpius said, with forced bravado. He smiled shakily and offered them all a salute with his free hand. "See you all later then."

"Three," Harry counted down, as Scorpius gripped the book tightly, eyes resolutely open. "Two, one…"

There was a pop, like the sound of a jar being opened, and he was gone. Albus let out a breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding.

"Well," Rothers muttered. "He's on his own now."

Neville leaned over the table, planting both his fists by the knuckles on the hard wooden surface. His cheeks were red with emotion. "Well? What do we do now?"

"We wait," Harry said, low. "It's all we can do." He looked at Rose, a little dubiously. "I don't suppose I can convince you to go home?"

Rose gave her uncle a look that spoke volumes, and he sighed. "Very well. Ron, you're in charge for an hour. Albus, with me."

Albus blinked in surprise, and looked up at this sudden and unexpected development. "I'm not going home either," he said, protesting, but his dad was shaking his head.

"We're not going home."

Al frowned. "Where are we going then?"

"You my lad," Harry said, turning to lead him out of the conference room. "Are going to France."

~*-S-*~
Scorpius landed with a slight stumble in an ornate, but overgrown courtyard. There were vines and weeds growing all over the stained stonework; an empty fountain, an old bird-feeder, empty, swinging in the hot breeze with a squeaking sound. It was the only noise; perhaps it was still too early in the morning for much movement in the surrounding streets. The summer day's heat had the effect of having stepped into an oven.

He felt suddenly very alone. The communication devices they had given him could not be activated until he was inside, or they would be found as he passed through whatever security wards the smugglers had in place. If they were taken from him, or he was incapacitated, there was no way he could let anyone know. For a while at least, it was all up to him.

*You signed up for this,* he reminded himself firmly as he looked around. *There's no going back now.* There was a door set into the wall nearby, but it was padlocked, and cobwebbed so thickly that it clearly hadn't been used in several years. He had a moment of panic — maybe he was in the wrong place? The architecture looked sort of French, at least, but it hardly had the feel of a smuggler's den. He couldn't imagine a nest of criminals hiding here.

"Mot de passe?"

He spun around, resisting with great difficulty the urge to go for his wand. A petite, dark-haired woman dressed in Muggle clothes was standing on the other side of the courtyard, though there were still no other entrances that he could see. She was holding the book, which he must have dropped on arrival, and eyeing him very suspiciously. His heart still pounding, he reached up to push his hair aside with a sweaty hand, and her dark almond eyes widened slightly.

"Um…" He stared back, suddenly struck dumb. This seemed like the most unlikely scenario possible.

"Password?" the woman repeated, in English this time, as her hand dipped inside her jacket as though reaching for a wand.

"Espadon," he said, hurriedly, coming back to himself. This was the riskiest part; there was a significant chance the code had been changed since his father's arrest. "Sorry, I didn't expect —"

"A girl?" she said, in a thick French accent. Her hand came back empty, and she crossed her arms, regarding him. She looked him up and down. "I know you, I zink. Did your fazher give you zhat code?"

He swallowed, but replied, "Yes," with complete truthfulness, and then, with none whatsoever, added, "he said I'd be safe here."

She looked a little doubtful, but not outwardly hostile. "You 'ad better come in," she said finally, and his stomach twisted; with fear or dread it was hard to tell. "E will want to talk to you, I expect. We can always obliviate you later if you turn out to be a spy."

He blinked. "Er., thank you?" he said, shifting awkwardly. He couldn't help noticing how pretty she was. She couldn't have been much older than him; her skin was colour of milky tea, her eyes were large, and her hair was very straight, jet black, and cut just above her shoulders in a perfectly straight line. She had a small button nose that perhaps made her look younger than she actually was. She wore her Muggle clothing; jean shorts under a leather jacket, with no apparent discomfort or unease. She reminded him oddly of Cleo.
"Give me zat," she said, motioning to the rucksack he carried. It had been filled randomly with clothes and other things, as though he really were running away, and he handed it over with no real qualms. "And your wand."

He did baulk at that. "What?"

"You'll get it back," she said, although her tone was not in the least encouraging. Slowly, feeling as though it were the final nail in his coffin, he handed his wand over. She put the book and the wand in the pack and slung it easily over her shoulder.

"Who's 'he'?" he asked, nervous but genuinely curious. "And how do we get in?"

She smirked at him and offered him her hand. "Suis moi," she said, drawing him back into the vine-hung alcove behind her. Her hand was very small, smaller than Rose's, and warm, with delicate, thin fingers.

Inside the alcove was a very tight space that would have been restrictive for one person to stand in, let alone two. As they squeezed into together, her chin was practically resting on his chest, her whole body pressed against him, and she didn't appear to be bothered by that, either. He could feel beads of sweat trickling down his back, and not just from the summer heat radiating off the stone.

Suddenly though, everything was dark and cool, and the girl was standing away from him. Had they just Apparated? He'd barely felt anything. He let go of her hand quickly, looking around, and realised that it wasn't really dark, just much dimmer than it had been outside in the full sun. There were no windows, only a fluorescent strip light in the ceiling, and not much furniture to speak of except an unlit fireplace. It looked very much, he thought suddenly, like any of the several locations he'd Floo'd through to get from the townhouse to Knockturn Alley, when he'd taken the package to Borgin and Burkes. Small, simple, secret places.

"Wait 'ere," the girl said imperiously, and disappeared through a side door he hadn't noticed until she opened it. He stood obediently in the middle of the carpeted floor, looking around and trying to shake off the sensation of having swum through oil. The place had to be thick with concealing charms, he thought; but no real surprise there.

The back of his neck was sweating and his mouth was dry. After a minute or so of waiting he started pacing back and forth, a habit now grown almost naturally out of all the long months of recovery. He still limped, though he usually didn't notice it as much as he did now. His lower back ached worse than it had done in weeks; just nerves, he told himself.

It was a long time waiting. He wondered if whoever he was supposed to be meeting was making him wait on purpose, to make him more anxious. To keep himself calm, he went over his story in his mind, focusing on the details. He'd have to think quickly if there were any questions he hadn't prepared for. He stopped pacing for a moment, leaning against the wall and looking over at the door. What would happen if he went through it? Could there be a way out? Was Teddy through there, somewhere?

He shook off that temptation, and sat on the floor instead, drumming his fists on his knees. That wasn't the way. He wasn't likely to engender much trust by not staying where he had been told.

After what had to be about an hour, the door opened again, and four people came through it. One was the same girl as before. One was Goyle, instantly recognisable by his huge bulk and square jaw even before Scorpius got a good look at his face. One was a tall, imposing-looking dark-haired man he didn't recognise, and the fourth…
He frowned as he climbed awkwardly to his feet, staring at the last man. "Jean?"

The man smiled at him, apparently all friendliness. It was a bit of a shock to see his father's old servant here, suddenly, but of course he had been more than just a footman, hadn't he? He'd known about the Ancient Keys. He'd given Scorpius all the directions to London through the secret Floo systems. He'd been more like a sort of personal assistant. "Scorpius, so good to see you," he greeted him, in French. "It has been a long time, hasn't it?"

"Since you sent me through a fireplace to get arrested," Scorpius replied in the same language, without thinking. He regretted it almost as soon as he had spoken, but the man looked more amused than anything.

"Yes, most unfortunate," Jean said. "A shame you had such a bad experience your first time. Things might have gone quite differently." He coughed and switched to English, apparently effortlessly, although it took Scorpius a moment or two to keep up with what he said; since he had left Durmstrang he was out of practice. "Allow me to introduce Monsieur Dreher," Jean said, motioning to the dark-haired man. "And you remember Mr Goyle, of course."

"Malfóy," the dark-haired stranger said. His accent was not French, more Germanic in origin, almost like Headmaster Reznicek's had been. "I have heard of you. Your father is missed among us. Adalie here," he nodded towards the girl, "tells us he sent you to us."

Scorpius gathered himself. "Yes sir," he said, the address automatic. Even if he hadn't been pretending, the man's very bearing seemed to demand respect. Was this perhaps the new Shadow? Had he taken over the whole smuggling business after his father was captured? "He said -"

"And you travelled by Ancient Key," the man continued, interrupting his explanation. The girl - Adalie - handed him the scuffed old book, which he held in both hands, reverentially, like a great treasure. "Remarkable. Our information was that they had all been confiscated by the Ministry. I wonder how you came by it." His eyes, dark under dark brows, looked up at him, hard with skepticism.

Scorpius swallowed, but he was ready for this. "Not all of them sir. My father was able to hide one before he was arrested. He told me where to find it and how to use it to get here."

"I see," the man said, still dubious. "And why would he do this? We had heard you were estranged. That the two of you were no longer on speaking terms, after you all but publically renounced him. I doubt my friend Draco would do such a thing out of his heart, after so much treachery."

Scorpius flinched. Treachery was not the word he would have used, but if that was what they wanted to think... "Yes, that's true," he said, hanging his head a little for show, as though it shamed him to admit it. "He nearly killed me. It was an accident, but I hated him anyway, and for not telling me about... all this." He motioned loosely to the walls and ceiling of the now rather stuffy room. "Because if he had, I might have at least known what to expect. But he just threw me into all of it with no warning."

Goyle snorted. Scorpius looked up at him, closely for the first time. The big man's jaw was thick with a bushy brown beard which did nothing to hide his lack of neck. Strangely enough though, he no longer seemed as threatening as Scorpius remembered. The look he was giving Scorpius wasn't the one that had used to send shivers down his spine. I'm too old for him now, said a nasty voice in the back of his mind, and he shuddered inwardly away from it.

"And yet he told you all these things now," Dreher prompted. "Why?"
"Because I asked him for help." Scorpius let the disgust he felt at this suggestion show on his face. "When I left Hogwarts... when school was ending, I realised I had nowhere to go. None of my friends trust me anymore, since they arrested me. It was in the papers," he added, with perfect truthfulness. "I couldn't go to my Grandparents, they're totally insane," he went on. "And I thought and thought about it, and eventually I knew I had to go to my father for help. I remembered him saying how you - I mean, the smugglers -"

"We prefer the term, business venture," Dreher corrected him.

"Right. Um, well, how he said the business venture had paid all our debts, and got us the house in Rue Chouette. And I remembered what it was like growing up with no money, and I didn't want to go back to that. So I went to visit him when school got out, yesterday, and told him I want to join."

He waited, heart pounding, for their reaction. Adalie leaned towards Jean. "He's adorable," she said to him in French, with mock enthusiasm. "Can we keep him?"

No one else said anything. "So... so..." he went on, thinking that perhaps they expected more. "Well, at first he said no, obviously..."

"Obviously?" Dreher raised an eyebrow.

"Well, I didn't exactly pass the first test, did I?" Scorpius said, dropping his gaze once again to the floor. "If it wasn't for me they would have never known he was the Sha - um, I mean, er..."

"Very well," he was interrupted again, curtly. "You still have not explained how you come to have the Ancient Key, or the old password to our doors."

"Right," Scorpius breathed. "So like I said, he said no at first, but I told him if I came here, maybe I could help him. It's not right," he added, forcing anger into his voice. "He's in prison maybe forever, just for selling some stuff? It's not like he used any of it. He was just trying to provide for our - for my future." He stopped there, not wanting to lay it on too thick. "Anyway, he thought about that, and he said, he'd tell me how to get here, but I had to tell you everything about where he is and help you to get him out. So he told me about the book and how to find you, and I just grabbed the rest of my stuff and came here."

Another long silence.

"That's it," he said finally, not sure what they expected. Was there perhaps another code? Something his father had left out, whether by accident or design? He could hear his heartbeat. What would he do if they attacked him?

Then Dreher beckoned Adalie forward, and she handed him Scorpius' small pack of possessions. He passed it to Goyle, who rummaged around in it with his big hands. "Just some clothes and some money," he rumbled. "An' his wand. Nothin' else."

"We shall see." Dreher drew his wand. "Did you father also tell you that no spells of disguise or disillusionment can pass our wards?" he asked Scorpius, conversationally.

"No," Scorpius lied. "But I didn't do any. I'm not even that good at disguise stuff."

"Hm." Dreher muttered under his breath and performed some quick charms on Scorpius' things, then on Scorpius himself, while he stood still and tried not to squirm.

"Malfoys are men of their word," Jean said, when it finally seemed that Dreher could find nothing hiding in any of Scorpius' possessions.
"So it seems," Dreher said, coldly. He seemed disappointed not to have found anything. "So you are looking for work?"

"Yes sir," Scorpius said.

"But you are not proficient in disillusionment?"

"Er..." Scorpius wondered why this would make a difference, until he remembered their particular line of work. If only he'd brought Albus' fake invisibility cloak to show off. "Not really, but I'm good at lots of other Charms, especially non-verbal. And I can do fair illusions."

"Transfiguration?"

He blinked. He felt as though he'd gone from being interrogated for his life to being quizzed on his NEWT scores, which he didn't even have yet. "Pretty good," he said after a moment, with some confidence. "I was in the running for top of the year for Defence Against the Dark Arts as well." He decided not to mention his fourth subject. He doubted skills in Muggle Studies would be much in demand in a place like this.

"Very well." Dreher put Scorpius' wand back in the pack, and, to his surprise, returned it to him. "Adalie, find him a room." He kept the Ancient Key tucked closely under his arm, but then Scorpius hadn't hardly been expecting that back.

Torn between confusion and elation at having apparently passed whatever test they had put to him, Scorpius remembered that he was supposed to be negotiating for his father's rescue. "What about -" he began, hesitantly, reluctant to postpone his own escape from the room.

"We will talk again, later," Dreher assured him. There was the hint of a smile on his face that might have been an attempt at reassurance, but it was hard to tell. "Your father has been imprisoned for nearly a year, I'm sure he can last a week or so."

Scorpius nodded hurriedly and turned to Adalie, who was already waiting for him at the open doorway. He went after her, and the door closed behind them. He found himself in a corridor, very narrow and with a ceiling so low he kept having to look up to make sure he wasn't going to bang his head as they started walking. Everything in the place seemed to be built on a slightly-too-small scale, but it was still bigger than he had imagined. It was like a hotel, but bigger and more Muggle-like than the Leaky Cauldron, his only other point of reference. The corridor had occasional doors leading off it, and various side-corridors and stairways. By the time they had made a couple of turns, he was completely lost. "How many people live here?" he asked Adalie with interest, looking around at all the doors. They were numbered, like at the Leaky Cauldron, but without the rustic homely atmosphere. There was no decoration; only plain, white-washed walls.

She gave him a quelling look and ignored the question, leading him further on into the maze. Eventually she reached a door numbered #138. She opened it by simply pushing on the handle - no lock, he noticed - and leaned on the doorframe as he went in ahead of her. He was reminded, with a strong sense of deja vu, of his tiny bedroom at Durmstrang. The same bland colour to the walls and ceiling, the lack of decoration, the simplicity of the sparse furniture. He looked round at Adalie. "Er..."

"What, you were expecting a big castle room like your Owarts?" she asked, an edge of mockery in her voice. "We are all the same 'ere."

"No," Scorpius said, taken aback. "I'm just... I don't understand. You had this room all ready... all these rooms. What are they even for? The sm - I mean, the whole business venture doesn't live here,
do they?"

She shrugged. "If your fahzer did not give you all ze details, I don't 'ave time to explain to you. Someone will get you when it is time to work. You do good work, you get good pay. It iz really very simple."

He hesitated, wanting to ask more questions, but now that he was here, he needed to be left alone. "Very well," he said, politely and in French, in deference to her. He had no idea what her role was, here, and she seemed very young to have any real authority, but clearly she was connected to both Jean and Dreher, so it could only pay to be on her good side. "I'll ah… see you later?"

She left with no more ceremony, not even a goodbye, and the door snapped shut behind her. Letting out a deep breath, he sat on the edge of the bed and pulled his things out of the bag. Goyle had messed everything about so that it was all in a tangle, but he separated out his wand and the small money pouch the Aurors had given him. He flicked his wand silently in the air, checking for listening spells, then put it to one side and picked up the pouch.

He tipped the coins out into his hand, and separated out one Knut and one Galleon, which had markings on them only just discernable from the others. The Knut he slipped into his ear, where it turned very cold as it stuck to the skin and - although he couldn't see it - changed colour to match. He held the Galleon up to his mouth and rubbed the back of it with one thumb. When it was hot to the touch, he whispered to it. "Harry Potter."

~*-R-*~

~*-R-*~

"That's it, we're on!" Rose's dad exclaimed excitedly. The Galleon in the centre of the table had stood up and started spinning on its edge. "We have contact." He reached over to bring the companion coin closer, the better for them all to hear. When he rubbed its edge, it stopped spinning and stood still, perfectly balanced.

"Scorp?" Rose said quickly, unable to help herself. Her heart, which had been competing with her stomach all morning to see which could cause her the most discomfort from anxiety, was suddenly pounding even harder. "Are you okay?"

"Fine." His voice might have been coming from right in front of her, save for a strange echoing quality.

"I'm in."

"All right, I think," the voice came back. "But there's already a huge problem. There's at least two invisible, magical exits out of this place and I only know where one of them even is."

"Don't worry about that for now," Harry said, unbelievably optimistic. "We'll cross that bridge when we get there - the most important thing is that you got in. Do they suspect you?"

"As much as you'd suspect anyone who just waltzes into a secret lair," Scorpius replied dryly. Rose smiled, despite himself. If he was joking, he must be all right. She listened intently along with everyone else as he explained how he had talked his way into the place. No one expressed much surprise at the presence of Goyle or the servant man, Jean, though she saw some knowing glances
being exchanged at Dreher's name.

"We've heard of Dreher," Ron said darkly. "If he's in charge now it's even more important we shut it all down as soon as we can."

Rose bit her lip. There were plenty of questions she wanted to ask, but she forced herself to stay quiet, to let the professionals do their work. Across the table she could see Neville also holding himself back - their eyes met in a brief, shared moment of frustration.

"How many of these rooms are there?" Harry asked, apparently more interested in the interior design of the place rather than the smugglers themselves. Even Ron gave him a dubious look.

"Dunno. I saw maybe twenty? But the numbers go up to at least one three eight. Does that mean anything?"

"I don't know." Harry scratched his chin, thoughtful. "What are they doing in there, running some kind of business school for young white collar criminals?"

"This all seems too easy," Rothers grunted. He'd transfigured his seat into a brown monstrosity of an armchair while they waited, and was smoking a pipe as though he had a personal vendetta against it. "They didn't even torture him for information."

Rose looked over to glare at him. "How can you say that?" she demanded, angrily. She didn't care if it was only a bad joke.

"Um, still here, guys," Scorpius' voice echoed from the enchanted coins. "What do I do now? Should I sneak out? Try and find Teddy?"

"No," Harry said quickly, leaning forward to make his voice clearer. "Absolutely not. You won't find him wandering around in there with no idea where you're going or what you might run into, especially in broad daylight."

"So what?" Ron hissed, turning his head so it might not be heard through the magical connection. "He just stays there until he stumbles on where they're keeping him? They could move either of them any minute. The longer he's there the more dangerous it gets for both of them."

Rose found herself looking at her father with surprised gratitude. She too wanted Scorpius out of there as soon as possible. The idea that he might be stuck there for days, or even weeks, was enough to make her feel ill. Her nerves were already tight as harp strings; how would she even survive another day of it? How could Scorpius survive in a place like that?

"Harry's right," Neville said, and her head swung round in disbelief towards him. "He could get himself killed just as easily if he loses their trust. We need them to trust him."

"This is making me feel great," Scorpius muttered.

"No matter what happens, keep the coins on you," Harry told him. "Keep us informed just like we talked about. Keep your head down, and don't bring attention to yourself."

There was a hesitation on the other side. Rose clenched her fists in her lap. "What do I tell them about my father?" he asked finally. "If they ask?"

"Just give them the information we gave you," her uncle said calmly. "I doubt they'll actually attempt to break him out."
Ron snorted. "I'd like to see them try," he muttered dryly.

"Cut it off now," Rothers muttered. "Risky, talking this long. They could be watching."

"Good luck, Scorpius," Harry said. "Be careful."

Rose heard Scorp let out a deep breath. "I will," he said. There was a hesitation, as though he might like to say something else, and then the coin fell back to its side with a clink, the connection lost.

~*~A~*~

To Albus’ surprise, his father had taken him to a special Floo point, which led through an International station through to to a warehouse-like building apparently not far from the smuggler's den. Inside, a company of Hit-Wizards were geared up and ready for a raid, and there was also a large medical bay, currently empty of patients, but there were a couple of mediwitches waiting.

They introduced themselves, and asked him about his experience at St Mungo’s, and he gradually came to understand that he was going to be assisting them with any Healing that had to be done. He felt a rush of excitement, and not a little trepidation.

"You know much about spell damage?" the younger one, Maureen, asked him.

"Yeah," he said, shaken briefly out of his thoughts. "I mean, yes."

"We heard you've been working with the team at St Mungo's," said the older one, whose name was Gwen. "Well, Healing in the field's a lot different than in a hospital. I don't want you taking any chances. You can assist, but no hero stuff, understood?"

Albus nodded. "Yes, of course."

"Good. Now go help Maureen wrap bandages while I check the potions supply."

Albus went, and the younger witch showed him the basket of bandages and how to stain and wrap them. The 'stain' was a colourless, odourless potion that would knit flesh together and stop bleeding. "They're spelled obviously," she explained as they worked. "They'll keep most wounds in stasis until we have time to treat them magically."

Albus nodded, with real interest. He wondered if something like this had been used on Scorpius when he'd been injured. He'd been taken away so fast - and he, Albus, hadn't known anything about Healing back then anyway, so in all likelihood he wouldn't have noticed or understood.

"And don't worry about Gwen," Maureen went on, giving him an encouraging smile. "She's tough but fair. If there's a battle you'll have plenty of experience by the time it's over."

Albus swallowed, his fears for his friends rising up again in the back of his throat.

"You okay?" she asked him. "Want to be sick? It'd be a first to have someone throw up before there's even any blood, but there's a bucket somewhere."

"No," he said hastily. "It's not that. I'm just… worried about my friend, and my cousin. They could get hurt in all this."

Maureen gave him a brief look of pity, then she shook her head. "You can't think about that," she told him firmly. "My brother's a Hit-Wizard. Not here today, but he's in danger all the time. You
can't think about it, not when there's nothing you can do. Just think about what you're doing, do your job. That's all you can do."

Albus looked up at her, meeting her eyes for a moment, then nodded and went back to his bandages. She was right, of course, but it didn't quite make the feeling of dread in the pit of his stomach go away.

~*-S-*~

~*-S-*~

Scorpius woke up groggy and confused. It took him a while to remember where he was. When he checked his watch, it was almost six. He groaned, remembering all the events of the morning, and then the long hours of waiting, torn between boredom and anxiety, waiting for someone to come and either take him to whatever work he was supposed to be doing, or drag him off to be questioned some more. No one had come, and after a while, with nothing to do but fret, he must have dozed off.

What had woken him was a knock on the door. "Um.. hello?" he called out, after a moment's blurred realisation. He sat up and ran his hands through his tousled hair as Adalie opened the door again. He realised that he hadn't even checked whether it had been locked. What are you doing here? he thought to himself as Adalie looked down at him with amusement as he tried to make himself presentable in a hurry. You're no spy. You have no idea what you're doing.

She gave him a somewhat withering look, but didn't comment on his general lack of smoothness. "You are 'ungry?" she asked, raising one imperious eyebrow.

He opened his mouth to say no, but the joint realisation that he hadn't eaten since before sunrise, and that his stomach was rumbling, made him stop. "Starved," he said.

"Come." She turned and started to walk back down the long corridor. He took a second to check that he still had the two-way coin in his pocket before hurrying after her, limping a little at every other step and wishing she would slow down a little.

He wondered if there would be a dining room, or a kitchen. Even though the hallways were narrow and low-ceilinged, making him feel like Hagrid must feel in a normal-sized house, the place nevertheless had the feel being endless. Instead however, Adalie led him back through the maze of corridors to a large ornate wooden door, behind which was a large study. There was a desk, and chairs, and shelves with a few books and folders stuffed with paperwork. It was the first real-looking room he'd seen all day. But still no windows. He hadn't seen any windows since he'd come in.

He looked around, but there was no food to be seen. "Sit down," Adalie said. He turned to her, frowning.

"What's going on?"

"He wants to talk to you."

Scorpius felt his stomach drop. "He - you mean Dreher? I mean, Monseur Dreher?"

She smiled and shrugged. "Wait 'ere. You will 'ave food in un moment."

This time, he heard the door lock behind her.

To stop himself from pacing, he sat down in one of the chairs, perching right on the edge. His foot tapped on the floor. Now what was going on? He put his hand in his pocket, rolling the magical
Galleon between his fingers, feeling its comforting presence. But he didn't dare use it. What would happen if they did something to him, before he had the chance to use it? No one would know what had happened to him. Maybe they would come after him. Maybe it would be too late. The scar on his chest was burning. He tried to tell himself it was just the stress.

Teddy, he thought to himself firmly as his stomach began to churn with more nerves than hunger. *You're here for Teddy. Stay calm. It's probably nothing. They probably want me to sign a contract or something. Probably in blood, okay, but it'll be fine...*

He gathered himself and took another look around. There certainly was a lot of paperwork around the place. He even recognised some of it; the same sort of scrolls his father had used at the house to keep records. Maybe they kept records about their people. Or things that happened. Maybe there would be a mention of Teddy somewhere - or even a map of this place he could use to find him.

He stood up and, with a glance at the door, walked over to one of shelves. He put his hand up to take down one of the scrolls - and snatched it back quickly as the door opened. He turned around quickly to see Jean and Dreher once again, this time with a third young man who was... horribly, shockingly familiar.

"Ah, Monsieur Malfoy," Jean said with a beatific expression, all innocence. "I think perhaps you recognise another of our new recruits?"

It was Jian Chung.

~*-R-*~

~*-R-*~

"It's been hours," Neville said. "You should go get some sleep."

Rose looked at her watch. "It's only dinner time."

"Yes but you were up all night."

She nodded, then with a jolt, looked up at him in surprise. "How do you…"

He didn't answer, but the knowing look in his eye made her squirm with guilty awkwardness.

"Um…"

"No, I can't take any credit," Neville said lightly. "Hannah guessed. And no I'm not going to tell you off. I was young once," He grinned. "Anyway you're both adults. So long as you're careful."

Rose coloured right up to her hair, and looked around quickly to make sure her Dad hadn't caught even a hint of their conversation. Things had been awkward between them for a long time, and she was sure hearing any of this would only make things worse. "He was scared," she said finally, very low. "He kept waking up. I tried not to let him know he woke me..."

Neville smiled, a little sadly. "You were there for him, that's what matters. I know he appreciates it, that both of you stuck by him through all this. It only would have taken a small change for things to work out quite differently. Imagine if he'd never been Sorted into Ravenclaw. If you'd never become friends."

Rose sighed. "He wouldn't have gotten sucked into all this."
"Yes, he would, and probably on the other side of things. He could have become the next Shadow, for all we know." Neville stood up. "Come on. Even the Aurors are starting to take shifts. Just a little break. There'll be dinner at home, and a rest. I'll get your dad to call us if anything happens."

Rose hesitated. She looked at the communication coin, sitting still and lifeless on the table. She wanted to know where he was, what he was doing now. She wanted to help. She wanted to be there, helping him, but instead she was stuck here waiting, not able even to join in with Albus if - or when - the raid took place. Finally she sighed again, and nodded, and let Neville take her back to the pub.

~*-S-*~

~*-S-*~

The expression on Jian's face was about as shocked as Scorpius felt. I'm done, Scorpius thought. Jian would see right through his story about leaving Hogwarts. He had the inside information the smugglers did not - that Scorpius did have a place to go, that he would certainly not have left all his friends behind in England and perhaps most incriminatingly, that did not have any intention of trying to free his father from prison. Nevermind that they hardly knew each other, those things were common knowledge to nearly everyone at Hogwarts. They had seen each other at the pub only two nights before. Jian had vanished rather quickly, Scorpius remembered.

"What are you doing here?" Jian demanded. Scorpius could think of nothing to say.

Run, cried his desperate mind, but there was nowhere to run, with them standing in front of the door. And still no windows.

"Scorpius says he joins us out of need for direction, a lack of accommodation, and a desire to follow in his father's footsteps," Dreher said, looking between one boy and the other with undisguised interest. "What do you think of that?"

Scorpius stared at Jian. This was it. He was dead. He wondered if it'd be quick, a Killing Curse, maybe, or if they'd drag it out somehow. If they'd use one of their more horrible artefacts like the kind that had made Minister Shacklebolt so ill he'd eventually had to step down. He thought of Rose, and felt his knees go weak, but he forced himself to keep his feet. He would not fall to his knees and beg for his life. If he was going to die, he was going to die like... like a Malfoy.

Malfoys don't die, said a voice in his head that sounded suspiciously like his father's. They do whatever it takes to survive. They always survive.

Jian was looking at him with horrified curiosity. He cocked his head to one side, considering, then his expression smoothed out, and he said, "I suppose that makes sense."

It took all of Scorpius' power of will not to let his complete shock and bafflement show on his face.

"Does it?" said Dreher flatly, looking at Scorpius as a spider might look at a fly.

"Yes sir," Jian said, in his usual formal tone, elevated even more, perhaps, for Dreher's benefit. "I'm not surprised he came here. Everyone at ho - at Hogwarts - looked down on him ever since he got arrested. Even his friends, really. I would have helped him," he added with an air of utmost sincerity. "If he'd asked."

"I didn't know you were involved in all this," Scorpius burst out, unable to help himself. "How could I?"

"How indeed," Jean said, a flicker of amusement in his expression as he leaned back against the
"Our newcomers know very little about our work until they arrive," Dreher murmured. "But an acquaintance with Mr Chung would certainly have drawn you to our attention sooner, as a potential candidate."

"Oh, there was never much chance of that, sir," Jian said, and now even he was looking amused. "We were childhood enemies, you see, and I'm sure you know what Malfoys are like for holding a grudge."

For the first time, and even in the face of this thinly-veiled insult, Scorpius felt a flicker of hope. He could see what Jian was doing, even if he still didn't understand why, and if he played along, he got to live. At least, for now.

"Yeah, well," he said, trying to match Jian for sheer insane bravado. "You did try to kill me that time."

"I was twelve," Jian said, brushing this off as though it were nothing. "And I didn't deliberately try to kill you. You were just in the way."

Scorpius' face flushed, despite himself. "You snogged my girlfriend!" he shot back, not having to look far for another accusation.

"You made her cry," Jian said coolly. "I was just being friendly."

"Now boys," Jean said, almost laughing. "Quite enough of that. Run along then and play. Jian, you can find the dining hall from here?"

Jian nodded. "Yes sir, I think so."

Jean handed him what seemed to be a silver token. "Go then, both of you."

Scorpius hurried as best as he could after Jian, feeling as though he'd just been hung and had the noose slip from around his neck at the last second. "What is going on?" he asked, just as soon as he judged them to be out of earshot, but Jian only hissed at him to be quiet. They walked quickly down the corridors, only one or two this time, not far. Scorpius could hear the murmur of many voices up ahead, and then there was an open door, and behind that… a dining room. A dining room wide and long enough to rival the Great Hall, though not nearly so high; Scorpius could have reached up and touched the ceiling. And there were at least a hundred people eating in there.

Scorpius stopped, staring around, but Jian, after handing his token to at a man who seemed to be a guard at the door, tugged on his sleeve and dragged him to a table. A bowl of hot soup and a hunk of warm bread was put in front of each of them. The people on either side barely looked up from their plates.

"You should be careful," Jian said suddenly, and Scorpius looked quickly over at him. He looked for all the world as though he hadn't spoken a word, and was simply concentrating on his food. When his lips moved next, it was slight, and the words were barely audible. "Walls have ears."

"What are you doing here?" Scorpius hissed.

This time he did not receive a rebuke, but Jian only said "Eat your soup. You'll need it."

Scorpius looked down at his meal for a moment, but even his aching hunger was no match for his sudden wild curiosity. He looked up again, staring around the room. Most of the people seemed to be
young - only a few older faces scattered about, and even at first glance he could see several other teenagers. One yellow-haired boy looked about fifteen, swinging his legs under his chair while poking unenthusiastically at his food. They were mostly boys, he noticed, though there were a few girls sitting in a group together, and one or two more sprinkled about at random. "What are they doing here?" he wondered aloud.

Jian snorted. "You don't know?"

"No." Scorpius turned back to look at him. "You… all work here?"

Jian shrugged. "I've only done a day. Got here last night." He didn't seem to have any problem talking about that, at least. No one around them showed any interest. Many people were talking, in low murmurs, very different from the hectic buzz of conversation that was usual in the Great Hall of Hogwarts, but their conversation was still muffled by the noise.

"What are you… what sort of work?" Scorpius asked, nonplussed. He couldn't imagine it would take so many people just to do paperwork, or to transport things around, which was all smugglers did, wasn't it?

Jian smirked, though it wasn't anything like his usual superior expression. "You'll find out." He broke his bread into small pieces and dipped it in the soup - slowly, as though he were making it last.

"But..." Scorpius had so many questions and had no idea where to start. He started breaking his own bread, reasoning he may as well do something about the aching knot in his stomach. "How are you here? I mean, how did you even find out about this place?"

"My uncle," Jian said without looking up. "He always planned on me coming here."

Scorpius hesitated, taking a slow bite of his own bread. He remembered what Rose had said about Jian, when she'd started tutoring him. Something about his uncle, he was sure.

Suddenly a huge hand landed with a thump on his shoulder, and he gasped, accidentally inhaling half his mouthful of food. He choked, eyes watering, as from somewhere above him came laughter, and then someone patting him hard on the back. "No eat too fast, English!" rumbled a deep voice, as the newcomer took a seat beside him, the previous neighbours moving hastily out of his way.

"Arkady?" he exclaimed hoarsely, still trying to clear the crumbs from his throat.

The big man - it was still impossible to think of him as a boy, though Arkady was younger than him by three months - guffawed, a very loud sound in the eerily quiet room, and several people looked around at them. Jian had the look of a cat caught in a trap, and trying to figure out which way to run.

"Is good to see you English," Arkady said, grinning. "When you don't come back to school, I am thinking I maybe not see you once more again. You look like you eating more now, yes?"

Scorpius was still trying to get his head around the concept of Arkady being here, in France, let alone in the middle of all this - whatever this was. "Yes," he said blankly, not knowing what else to say.

"Who your friend?" Arkady asked, all smiles.

Scorpius blinked. "Oh. Um. This is Jian. Jian, this is Arkady, we.... were at Durmstrang together."

"But what are you doing here?" Scorpius asked, yet again, unable to help himself. "When did you -
how did you - "

"Ah, two three days," Arkady said, his mood sombering a little. "School end, I come here. Not just me. Some other from Durmstrang here."

That was another surprise. "Are there any others from Hogwarts?" Scorpius asked Jian, who shook his head.

"Not so far. Just us."

That was a relief. The less people who knew him here, the better. He hesitated, then decided to take a shot. "What about a man called Teddy Lupin?" he asked, lowering his voice as he glanced between them. "Have you seen him?"

Arkady looked blank. Jian frowned suspiciously, and Scorpius immediately regretted asking. If he told someone... "I don't know," the darker boy told him shortly. "I've only been here a day. You're the only one I've recognised since I got here. Half of them don't even speak English."

"Right," Scorpius said quickly. "Nevermind then." But he could feel Jian's eyes on him as he turned back to Arkady, filling the silence as well as he could by asking about his exams and the end of the Quidditch season. "Did you hear anything from Krum?" he asked after getting the rest of the news. "Can you try out for his team?"

Arkady looked at him in surprise. "Not now," he said, with uncharacteristic somberness. "I am here."

"Yes, but…" Realisation dawned slowly. Arkady must also be here to work, like all these others. But surely he wouldn't have wanted that. He'd been so intent on being a Quidditch player.

"Finish that," Jian said, breaking in on the conversation and nudging Scorpius' hand towards his spoon, forgotten about in the shock of seeing Arkady. "Trust me, you'll regret it later. We only eat once a day."

"What?" Scorpius blinked.

"Eat. You don't have much time left."

Scorpius would have liked to ask about a dozen more questions, but at Arkady's agreement and urgent encouragement, he swallowed down the rest of his soup. Just in time, it seemed, as a bell rang just as he was savouring the last bite. Everyone stood up together and began filing out of the room. "They count us going in and out," Jian hissed as they neared the guard. "To go anywhere outside of the group you need a permission token."

"What is this, a prison?" Scorpius muttered. The guard eyed him narrowly as they went through the door, and scribbled a note on his clipboard before waving them through.

Jian was still giving him that same suspicious look, and as they moved through the corridor in the wake of the crowd, Scorpius couldn't help asking. "Listen, why did you do that? Help me, I mean. You didn't have to. " He kept his voice low enough that it wouldn't be heard over the murmurs of those around them.

"You'd be dead otherwise," Jian said simply. He looked as though he was struggling with something for a moment, as though he wanted to say more, but the guard was drawing near, and he went silent. As they entered what Scorpius now recognised as the living quarters of the building, the people all started siphoning off into their rooms. Some were single rooms, like his own, but others, he noticed
as the doors opened and closed around him, others were more like dormitories, with several people in each - narrow bunkbeds with the same plain blankets and thin pillows, somehow military-looking, nothing at all like the comfortable dormitories at Hogwarts.

One room turned out to be a bathroom, and Scorpius followed Jian's example, going in to relieve himself and wash his face. Some more enterprising of the group had brought toothbrushes, but all Scorpius could do was wait until the turn of the tide saw him back out into the corridor again.

"Be careful," Jian hissed beside him, and ducked away. Scorpius saw him go into his own room, and took note of the number - 124. Arkady squeezed his shoulder briefly, his crushing grip making Scorpius wince, and then disappeared himself.

The guard caught him when he'd gone a step too far, and nodded towards 132. He must have gone right past it without realising. "Sorry," he said quickly, and went back into the room, breathing heavily. This was all a lot to take in. He had to try and explain it all to the Aurors. What would he even say? You can't just storm the place, it's full of apparently innocent people? Of course, he didn't know whether they were all innocent, but he knew Arkady, and he knew the big teenager would never have willingly lent himself to this enterprise, if he knew all the facts. Arkady wouldn't hurt a fly. Jian, he wasn't nearly so sure of.

He sat down heavily on the bed, running his hands through his hair. If only someone would explain properly, what was going on. He'd find out, Jian had said, and probably he would, if he stuck around long enough, but he was supposed to be finding Teddy. Though how he was going to do that with guards and all these other people around… The walls have ears, Jian had said. Scorpius wondered if he'd done the right thing by asking about Teddy. Would Jian tell? He'd lied to Dreher once already, but maybe he'd only wanted to get Scorpius in his own pocket. For what good that would do him.

He put his hand in his pocket for the two-way Galleon. It was still there, cool and comforting. He was desperate to talk to someone, but now he wasn't sure he could trust that no one was listening. On the other hand, if they'd overheard his conversation earlier he'd be caught by now. Maybe they didn't bother spying on the rooms, if they didn't think there was anyone for him to be talking to.

He decided to wait at least until the bustle outside had calmed down. He was still hungry, and the hunger pains were an uncomfortable counterpoint to the ache of his curse scar. He wished Albus were there. He'd know a spell or something to help.

He sighed and laid down. With no windows, no light to help set his body's internal clock, it was hard to reconcile the time. His watch showed half past seven. Early to be sent to bed. Having slept for most of the day he felt wide awake now, and his mind raced, trying to piece together everything that had happened into something even remotely coherent.

After about an hour, he got carefully out of bed and tried the door. It was locked. He wasn't surprised. It also had a peephole in it he hadn't noticed before, but it didn't work when he looked through it. He pulled out his wand and considered. Chances were the door was alarmed. But what if he had to go to the bathroom? Tough luck, hold it til morning? They'd left him his wand, so they either didn't expect him to try and escape, or they didn't think he could, even with magic. An advanced locking spell then.

Of course, he'd spent a whole term in sixth year learning advanced locking spells.

~*-A-*~

~*-A-*~
"The shift are standing down," Maureen said, shaking Albus out of an unpleasant daydream.

"Huh?"

She smiled. "The Hit-Wizards on standby. They're going to bed."

"What?" Albus sat up quickly. He'd spent the last few hours doing every kind of menial task imaginable, all his nerves jangling as they waited for the order to start the raid, but it hadn't come. "They're giving up? What if something happens?"

"There'll be a new shift, silly," she said, coming to sit on a bed next to him. "They'll keep rotating until something happens. You should get some sleep, too."

"But -" Albus swallowed. "How long is this going to go on for?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. We just follow orders, y'know. Not up to us when things happen. Could be middle of the night, could be tomorrow, could be next week. So, get some sleep."

Albus shuddered. Next week? "I dunno if I can," he muttered. He felt as though his hair was standing permanently on end. His stomach felt like it had been invaded by maggots. What was going on in there? He was starting to regret asking to help. If he was back at Headquarters with Rose, he might have some idea. Where was Scorpius? Was he okay? What was he doing? Had he found Teddy? Was he hurt?

As he lay on one of the medical beds, listening to the distant sound of the new squad of Hit-Wizards coming on duty, questions with no answers continued to pound at him until he felt like he'd been flying his Phoenixer through a gale.

~*-S-*~

~*-S-*~

So far so good, Scorpius thought. The next problem was going to be making sure he didn't get lost, or at least, so lost that he couldn't find his way back to his room before morning. He'd made it past the rows of bedroom doors, seeing no one along the way, though muffled sounds could be heard from some of the rooms. From behind more than one door, there had been sobbing.

With the closing of the doors the temperature seemed to have dropped. He could see his own breath, misty on the air, lit by the same ugly flourescent strip lights in the ceiling, now a dim orange glow. He'd left his shoes in the room, and his feet were cold on the wood floors even through his socks. At the same time they made very little sound. It only added to the sensation that the place was not quite real, amplified even more by the eerie silence and the windowless dimness.

He stopped halfway down yet another unmarked corridor, and put one hand to the whitewashed wall. For a moment his hand seemed to go right through it, but then he was staring at his hand on solid plaster.

"Wizardspace may exhibit bizarre characteristics, such as rapid changes in temperature, dimensions, gravity, or even the density of the air," Professor Flitwick had said, to a class only half
paying attention. "Wizardspace, in fact, is somewhat of a misnomer, as the most common occurrences tend to arise on their own, in areas of high magical saturation, such as Hogwarts, and are merely harnessed by enterprising wizards. Those instances which are deliberately orchestrated by wizards or witches, whether for commercial profit, experimentation or some other practical use, are under much stricter control by those wizards strong enough to maintain them."

It had all sounded rather like theoretical nonsense at the time, although they all liked the idea of being able to create something that was two places at once. Now, though…

*There might not be a way out,* Scorpions thought, swallowing. *You might need Dreher or someone to take you.* He certainly hadn't seen anything that looked like it might lead to an exit. The place really was a rat run. He could go round in circles all night and never find Teddy.

Maybe just wandering around wasn't the best plan.

He pulled another coin out of his pocket - a Sickle this time. This one was specially linked to Teddy - or at least, members of Andromeda's blood family, since she was his closest living relation. They'd used her hair to make a spell that might lead to her blood relatives, if they were close enough. Of course, if Wizardspace was involved… if Teddy was even still here… the chances it would work seemed abominably slim.

He found a point where several corridors met at once. He put the coin down on the floor, on its edge, and gave it a little encouraging nudge with his wand. It spun around a few times, then, after a long, long hesitation which made his heart pound... started rolling off down one of the corridors.

He hurried after it, trying to keep his footsteps light while fighting his limp. His chest started to hurt, though he wasn't sure that wasn't just his heart beating. He didn't dare stop.

Suddenly the coin seemed to disappear into a bare wall. Scorpions stared after it. Then he went to the wall and touched it, like he had before. This time the plaster was slightly warm under his touch, but there were no cracks or secret passageways he could see. *Wizardspace,* he told himself firmly. *None of it is really real, right? None of this could really fit into a little French house somewhere. Everything's condensed - no wonder the ceilings are so low. It's a wall that's not really a wall. Like King's Cross.*

He took his hand off the wall, closed his eyes, and stepped forward.

When he opened them again he was in another corridor, and this one was stone and lit by torches. This was somehow comforting - much more like home than the passageways lit by unreal electricity. He felt a stab of guilt for thinking that, as though he were betraying all his love for Muggle Studies, but in the end, he was a wizard. He no longer felt as though his brain were being slowly crushed by an invisible pressure.

*Maybe this part is real,* he thought as he moved slowly along the passage. *Feels like the Hogwarts dungeons. Underground, maybe.*

He'd been walking along only a few minutes when he heard voices coming towards him, a low murmur. He looked around in panic. Just ahead was a niche set into the wall, very narrow and towards the voices, but in the other direction were several hundred metres of open space, and he was sure to be seen. He hurled himself forward - just in time - the voices and footsteps were now distinguishable, and he saw the shadows lengthen on the wall as they came into the light.

"... worth the risk," Dreher was saying, in his germanic, clipped English.
"My friend, you worry too much." That was Jean. "Sometimes a little risk is worth it for the right money."

Dreher muttered something in his own language, and Scorpius held his breath as the two moved past him. He could see their backs moving away from him, back towards the secret entrance. Then he distinctly heard Dreher say something that made his blood run cold. "Three thousand Galleons for a single vial is one thing. How long can a Metamorphmagus live, at this rate?"

"As long as any other human," Jean said dismissively. "And we'll rest him occasionally. If we do it right we could have an endless supply for the next hundred years."

Dreher snorted, doubtfully. "And when they come for him? You know who his Godfather is?"

"Potter is nothing to worry about." The voices were growing distant, and Scorpius fought the urge to follow them, to hear more. Distantly he heard Dreher's words, and his heart leapt a little at the sound of his own name.

"What about the Malfoy boy?"

"Probably not worth as much."

"That is not what I meant."

Scorpius strained to hear, but the voices had become distant mumbles, and he didn't dare follow. He let out the breath he'd been holding and fell back against the wall of the alcove. It thudded oddly under his back, and he froze. Wood, he realised, not stone. He fumbled against it until he found a handle, and turned it. The door opened into a study, much smaller and darker than the one upstairs. He stepped inside and pulled the door closed behind him as quietly as he could, breathing hard.

They'd been talking about Teddy, he thought as he looked around. Even if they hadn't mentioned Harry Potter, how many metamorphmagi could there be here? The study was full of books, and more scrolls. There was a big old desk like the one in the Headmaster's office at Hogwarts...

*The Key*. The Ancient Key was sitting on the desk, looking no more remarkable than any of the other volumes surrounding it. Scorpius recognised it instantly, and took a half step towards it. He could get out of here right now, he could take it, go back to the Aurors, tell them what he'd found...

But they'd been talking about Teddy. They'd been talking about Teddy dying.

They'd been coming from up the corridor. If he went up there, maybe if he went far enough....

He turned his back on the book and opened the door again, slipping back into the alcove. The coin he'd sent in search of Teddy was long gone - he'd probably never find it again, and he knew he was lucky the two men hadn't notice it pass them.

He looked up ahead to where the men had come from. He just had to go that way...

Suddenly, heart-stoppingly, a hand grabbed his arm, and he whirled round, a curse forming on his lips as he brought his wand up automatically. It was Jian, a look of mingled fury and fear on his face, just visible in the torchlight. "What the hell are you doing down here, Malfoy?" he hissed.
The Shadow

Chapter Summary

Previously: Suddenly, heart-stoppingly, a hand grabbed his arm, and he whirled round, a curse forming on his lips as he brought his wand up automatically. It was Jian, a look of mingled fury and fear on his face, just visible in the torchlight. "What the hell are you doing down here, Malfoy?" he hissed.

~*-S-*-~

~*-S-*-~

"Me? What are you -" Scorpius dragged his arm out of Jian's grasp, keeping his wand cautiously raised. A stunning spell, that's all it would take. No reason anyone should get hurt. A stunning spell, maybe a memory charm, though he wasn't great at those… then go find Teddy.

"I followed you. I knew you'd be out here getting in trouble. I knew you weren't just…" Jian took a short breath, cutting himself short suddenly. "You're looking for a way out," he said, eyes wide and dark in the dull torchlight.

"No," Scorpius said, with some truthfulness.

Do it now!

His brain demanded, but his wand arm stayed steady and unmoving. His heart felt like it was trying to leap out of his chest. "I..."


Scorpius' grip tightened, his knuckles going white-pale on the wand hilt. "You helped me get in," he pointed out, keeping his voice low, but a growl crept into his tone nonetheless. "Why do that if you reckon I'm a spy?"

"I don't think you're a spy," Jian scoffed. "I know you're a spy." He took a step forward, towards Scorpius' wand so that it was poking him in the chest. "And I helped you get in because now you owe me one. And I want you to get me out."

Scorpius blinked. "What?"

"You're escaping, right? Take me with you."

The wand waivered, dipping a little as Scorpius hesitated. "You're a prisoner? But you said your Uncle sent you here. Why would -"

"It's none of your business," Jian snapped, and looked away. There was a long silence, in which Scorpius wondered if he dared press the issue, but he didn't understand, and didn't know why he should trust the former Slytherin in the least. Now was his chance. Stunning spell. Memory charm. Get Teddy. But his wand hand still refused to move, and for some reason he couldn't bring himself to say the words.

Then, just as he was about to give up, Jian said, very low, "they killed my father."
Scorpius' heart dropped. "What?"

"You heard me. He couldn't pay his debt and they killed him. The debt passed to my uncle, he promised them me instead. Why do you think any of us are here?"

Scorpius felt a growing horror at the very thought. His wand arm faltered and dropped to his side. "I... I don't... well, money?" he guessed desperately. "Dreher made it sound like..."

"Oh some of them are being paid, I'm sure," Jian said, rolling his eyes. "But most of us are here to repay what our parents couldn't. We're the lucky ones - the ones who are good at magic, especially Transfiguration or Ancient Runes. Or Charms, perhaps."

"Transfiguration," Scorpius repeated, realisation dawning like a lead weight in his stomach. "Your uncle made you do the NEWT, that's why you needed tutoring."

"I'm touched you remember," Jian muttered.

"But that's... it's... that's like *slavery,*" Scorpius breathed. "That's way worse than just smuggling!"

Jian shrugged, a quick, angry movement. "Depends on your point of view, I guess. Murder is another crime, if you like." Scorpius could hear his teeth grinding together. "If I ever find out who did it," he hissed. "They're just as dead."

"You wouldn't."

"Wouldn't I?" Jian gave him a look. "I loved my father, Malfoy. Just because he was mixed up in all this doesn't change that. Not all of us have such great options otherwise that we can afford to look past our own family."

Scorpius felt a rush of anger, but he was inclined to let that slide, under the circumstances. "All right," he said quickly. "I believe you. But look... okay. If you must know, I didn't just walk in here to find a way out. I'm looking for someone."

Jian frowned. "You did say something about that. Lupin, right?"

"Yes." It felt a strange relief to tell the truth for once, even if it was to his old enemy. "I think he must be down here somewhere."

"Are you insane?" Jian demanded. "You got yourself in this place, to find someone? If they found out they could have killed you!"

"Yeah, I know," Scorpius said, flatly. He gave the other boy a pointed look.

Jian grimaced and sighed. "Don't make me regret saving your life. Anyway, listen - I stopped you now because you can't stay here. We have to go back. They do checks on the rooms, every hour on the hour."

Scorpius' heart leapt again, and he fumbled for his watch as he cursed aloud. "How long do we have?" he asked.

"About seven minutes. Just enough to get back if we hurry." Jian half turned, beckoning. "Come on."

Scorpius hesitated, looking back towards the unexplored end of the passage. If he left now, he might not get another chance. He might not be able to find his way back without the silver seeking coin.

"Come on." Jian looked like he might start dragging him along at any second. "I'm not getting
disappeared in here because of you."

Scorpius tore his eyes away and turned. "Fine," he said reluctantly. "Let's go."

They hurried back down the corridor and through the stone wall, back into the unreal wooden corridor. As he ran - hampered by his limp and the sharp pain in his chest when he tried to breathe - Scorpius wondered if Jian had come to the same conclusions about the place. He at least seemed to know where he was going. He led them back to the dormitory corridor without hesitation.

"Wait," Scorpius panted, when Jian would have retreated to his room without another word.

"Wait? They'll be here any second."

"But what -"

"Go! We'll talk tomorrow. They wake us for work at six. Just try and blend in, will you? I'll let you know when it's safe." And with that, he was gone.

Scorpius blinked stupidly, but distant footsteps shook him back to his senses. He nearly twisted his ankle as he hurtled back towards his door and shut it as quickly and quietly as he could behind him. He fell onto the bed, trying to hide the sound of his panting in his thin pillow. The peephole in the door, he realised belatedly, must look inside the room, not out of it.

Don't check the lock, he thought desperately. Please don't check the lock.

The footsteps stopped momentarily outside his door, and he thought his heart might burst out of his chest. But then there was a mumbled word, and a chuckle of laughter, and the sound moved away.

~*-R-*~

~*-R-*~

Rose woke the next morning to be told that Scorpius had made another report during the night. Furious that she had missed it, she insisted on being told every detail. "Jian?" she repeated, several times in disbelief. "Are you sure?"

"That's what he said," her dad said, watching her face. He had taken her aside as soon as she had come in, so she wouldn't disturb the work going on around them. What they were all working on, she couldn't guess. "It's much worse than we thought. There's some kind of... they're holding people there against their will. Some of them, anyway. Scorpius said some of his Durmstrang friends are there as well."

Rose stared blankly ahead. "When are you going to get him out?" she asked finally.

"It's not as simple as that, Rosie."

"Why not?" she glared at him.

"Now we know there are innocent people in there. Innocent kids. We can't just go in there wands firing. People could get hurt."

"But if he stays there, he will get hurt!"

"He thinks he knows where Teddy might be. We're giving him one more night to try and get him out. Then, if he can't, we'll come up with something."
This was not reassuring, but he didn't look as though he were trying to be reassuring. He was just being honest, and as much as she wanted to shout at him for it, it hadn't been his idea. He didn't even have to tell her any of it, she realised with reluctant gratitude. She bit her lip and brushed her hair back out of her face. "Thanks Dad," she said, softly.

He reached for her shoulder and squeezed it gently. "He'll be okay," he said. "I'll do everything I can. Okay, Monkey?"

She smiled at him despite herself. No one had called her Monkey in years. "Yeah. I know. Thanks."

Behind them there was a bustle as another fresh squad of Hit-Wizards made their way through the Floo. She wondered how Al was doing, and wished he was there, so she had someone else to talk to. Neville at least was there, though he looked as though he hadn't slept at all.

"Sweetheart?"

She blinked and looked back at her father. "I'm okay, Dad."

He smiled weakly. "I know. Listen… we've been thinking, your mum and me. When all this is over, what do you think about coming home for a while? We miss you, y'know. Barely seen you in over a year."

"I miss you guys too." Rose hesitated. It would be nice, she thought, to sleep in her old bed, in her old room, with her things around her. To have dinner at their family table, her parents making joking jabs at each other as usual, to share eyerolls with her brother. To be together again. But…

"And," her dad said, his shoulders lifting as though he were preparing himself for something he wasn't quite sure he was ready for. "If you want… Scorpius could stay too. For a while."

Her eyes widened. "Seriously?"

His smile twisted somewhat. "Yes, seriously. I know when to admit I'm wrong. He's a good kid."

Rose threw her arms around him then, and he chuckled softly and gave her a tight squeeze. "Thank you thank you," she said, burying her face in his shoulder. He sighed happily and held her close, until she pulled back a little to beam up at him. "In my room?" she asked, giving him a cheeky smile.

"Don't push it," he said, warningly. "He can bunk with your brother."

"Dad…"

"You're still my little girl, Rosie." He kissed her forehead and let her go. "I love you."

She smiled. "I love you too Dad." The relief in his face was noticeable. "Can I do anything to help?"

He looked around uncertainly. "Well… you could get us some breakfast. I'm pretty sure Harry hasn't eaten since lunchtime yesterday, and that was only when I made him."

She nodded. It wasn't really what she'd meant, but at least it was something to do. "Okay. I'll be back with bacon."

He grinned. "Love you even more."

She stuck her tongue out at him. The tension between her and her father had been a weight on her shoulders that she hadn't consciously noticed until it was lifted. For just that moment, she felt as light as a feather.
The alarm that went off at six o'clock was ear-splittingly, painfully loud. Scorpius was glad he hadn't been sleeping for it to wake him. He'd tried to sleep, but after making his report to the Aurors, lying awake with his mind buzzing for hours, and trying his trick of mumbling songs under his breath, he'd given up. The fact that he'd slept half the previous day probably didn't help; but mainly he was thinking about all the ways the next day could go wrong. He was supposed to find Teddy. He had an idea of where to look. But how did he get him out? How did he get both of them out, and Jian as well, when he didn't even know where the exits were? When he couldn't even tell what parts of the place were real?

The Aurors had seemed surprised and dubious at his claim that the building was made up almost entirely of Wizardspace. Rother's view was that a space that size would be impossible to maintain; or at least require an incredible amount of power; much more than a trunk, or a single room. And even if it was possible, the fact that Scorpius couldn't explain how exactly he knew that it wasn't real. That seemed difficult to accept, and even Harry, who admitted that he knew next to nothing about Wizardspace, seemed doubtful. Anyway, it didn't matter much. Either way it was going to be next to impossible to find a way out, even with Jian's help. He'd only been there a day longer than Scorpius had.

And the task itself wasn't even until nighttime. He was going to have to get through whatever the rest of the day held before he even got the chance to look for Teddy. And he still had no idea what to expect. And he was very hungry again.

He rolled off the bed, and taking his wand, went to open the door. It probably would have opened anyway, given that he'd undone the locking spell the night before, but everyone else was also coming out, most people going to the bathrooms. A guard stood at the end of the corridor, not uniformed but easily recognisable by his stillness, and being significantly older than most of the residents. Scorpius saw a dark head in the distance and thought it might be Jian, but he was carried along by the tide into another nearby bathroom. Some other boys chivvied him into washing, though it seemed to be more out of anxious need to be done rather than any kind of real concern for his hygiene.

Once out of the bathroom they trudged down the hallway where the guard led them out into the rat run of corridors. Looking around for Jian, Scorpius saw the unmistakable form of Arkady, towering head and shoulders over nearly everyone, and shoved his way over to him instead. "Hey," he said, a little breathlessly. "You okay?"

Arkady looked around and gave him a grin. "English! Still here, still got all the fingers, very good!"

Scorpius couldn't help a small smile back. He'd forgotten about Arkady's unshakable optimism. "Am I likely to lose any fingers?" he asked.

Arkady stuck out his bottom lip and rocked his head from side to side, playful, but didn't deny the possibility. Before Scorpius could ask anything else, however, the group was led into another large room, lined with tables and benches. The florescent lights in here were very bright, despite the low ceiling, and they lit up the various objects on the tables. People around them went to sit at the benches, apparently in no particular order, and Scorpius looked around, unsure, until Arkady took him by the sleeve and led him to a space. Seconds later, Jian slid into the seat beside him. Scorpius had never thought he'd be so relieved to see him. "What do we -" he began, reaching for the thing on the table in front of him, but Jian grabbed his wrist, and Arkady hissed a warning.
"Don't touch anything," Jian whispered sharply. Scorpius blinked and looked at the thing. It seemed to be a kind of statue, a woman with long hair holding a vase, but it was strangely misshapen, as though it were wax left for too long in a warm room. Except that it was clearly made out of marble. Remembering what Arkady had said about losing fingers, he put his hands firmly in his lap and resisted the urge to test the feel of its mushy-looking surface. Looking down the table, everyone else had the same statue, but all disfigured in slightly different ways.

Silence gradually fell. At the head of the room, a man was stepping onto a small dais where there was a small desk. He was dark haired and olive skinned, thin, with narrow, Asian features. Scorpius glanced at Jian, but the other boy had his head down, lips curled slightly in a grimace.

"Bonjour, madames et messieurs," the man said, with a strange accent, casting his eye over all of them. Scorpius hoped he only imagined that the gaze lingered over him for an extra half a second. Continuing in French, the man said, "Today you will be correcting the objects in front of you. Do not touch them. You will use wands only. Here are the originals, in perfect condition." He motioned to the desk, which held several different objects, including the statue. "You may come up to view it as often as you wish. You will Transfigure your items until they match perfectly, and bring them to me for review. You will then be given another. There will be a short break at twelve o'clock. Begin." He then sat down at the desk, with no further ceremony, and opened a book.

Around them, wands were drawn, and the muttering of spells began a low buzz of sound.

"We can talk now," Jian said, low, much to Scorpius' surprise. He hadn't looked up from his statue, but as Scorpius looked at him he spoke again in that queer way he'd done the day before, out of the corner of his mouth. "They don't really spy on us in here as far as I know, as long as we do the work."

Scorpius didn't much like the sound of 'as far as I know', but he figured he couldn't get in much trouble simply for talking. "Is that your uncle?" He whispered back.

Jian glanced up at him, then back at his statue. "Yes, if you must know."

"You did this yesterday too?"

"Pretty much."

"This is it?"

"Pretty much."

Scorpius stared at the little statue. On his other side, Arkady was doing his best to repair a sad dimple in the middle of his statue's face. How hard could that be? Why did they need dozens of people repairing dozens of statues? And, as he looked at the ugly things, the more important question became, "What's wrong with them?"

"They put some kind of curses on them, I think," Jian said, flatly. "That's why you're not supposed to touch them."

"But…" Scorpius turned his wand over in his hand as realisation, yet again, dawned. "So they're not just finding stuff and selling it… they're copying things? Making more dodgy artefacts?"

"Faking, more like," Jian muttered. "These things aren't exactly antique."

"Bloody hell." Scorpius stared around. He didn't know why it had taken him so long to figure it out, except that… well… it all seemed so ridiculous. Was there really such a demand for these things?
"Apparently there is," he muttered to himself.

"What?"

"Oh… nothing."

Arkady looked up at them, frowning. "Do your work, Englishes," he said, his deep voice rumbling louder than either of theirs, so that he had to whisper.

Jian glared. "Your friend is bossy."

"I don't even know where to start with this," Scorpius said. He poked at the thing with his wand and tried a simple Transfiguration spell. The marble shifted a little, but not in the way it probably ought to have. The shoulder slipped down even further so that the entire left side sloped away.

"Don't worry," Jian said. "It took me all day yesterday to do one. You get the hang of it after a while, though. Go look at the original; it helps."

Arkady nodded, and quickly and quietly went back to his own project.

Scorpius hesitated. He didn't want to work on the thing. Not only was it ugly, it was apparently dangerous enough that touching it was a risk. He got a sick feeling in his stomach as he remembered the package that had injured Minister Shacklebolt so severely he'd been eventually forced to resign. And the thing he himself had carried to Borgin & Burkes, the package whose contents he still didn't know for sure. If it were those sorts of seriously Dark curses on these things, no wonder they had half melted. Whatever he worked on would be sold, and perhaps hurt more people.

A guard looked over at him as he stared around, and he turned his face quickly back to the bench. On the other hand, the Aurors had told him to keep his head down, which presumably meant doing whatever he was told when they were watching him.

He got up carefully and went to look at the original. Jian's uncle didn't spare him much of a glance; several others had got up at the same time and were examining the various artefacts - a miniature painting, a peacock feather quill, a bulky emerald necklace. The statue, the original one, was actually quite delicate and beautiful. The marble was so pure, smooth and pale it almost seemed clear. It could almost certainly have only been made with magic, the kind of artistic Transfiguration they didn't really teach at Hogwarts. He doubted they taught it at Durmstrang either, but maybe they did at Beauxbatons.

He obediently didn't try to touch the thing, although there was nothing really menacing about any of the items. He'd been expecting some kind of odd feeling; some instinct that they were wrong in some way. But there wasn't anything. He reminded himself that the secrets box that had sat untouched in his dormitory for most of two years, hadn't felt 'wrong' either, despite definitely being cursed.

When he thought he had the look of the thing memorised, he went back to the bench. Jian was doing a lot of little charms, trying to make small changes bit by bit to get his statue back to the original. Arkady was not having any luck at all.

Scorpius considered. In the end, he raised one hand to one side of the statue - not quite touching - and aimed his wand with the other. He closed his eyes and imagined the original in his mind, willing the statue to look just like that, and imagined his hands shaping it. He muttered a generic Transfiguration spell, concentrated for a minute or two, and when he opened his eyes, he had what he thought was a passable result. He smiled triumphantly to himself.

Jian was gaping at him. "What did you just do?" he demanded.
"Magic," Scorpius said, simply.

"But… you…"

"I couldn't walk for most of the year, remember? I had to learn to do a lot of things by feel. It's just a different way of doing things."

Jian blinked a little, then shook his head. "Well, do more of it then. The more you work the more they'll like you."

Scorpius raised his hand and his statue was conveyed carefully up to the dais. Jian's uncle seemed genuinely surprised, but he nodded and allowed the guard, who was wearing thick gloves, to take another misshapen statue down in its place. "Slow down a bit though," Jian said when the guard had retreated. "You'll make the rest of us look bad."

"Right," Scorpius said, and pretended to poke at the statue with his wand again, doing ineffectual charms for the look of the thing. After a few minutes he said, low, "so, tonight..."

Jian nodded without looking up.

"I'm going back to that secret corridor. If you want to come. And then we're all getting out of here."

Beside him he felt Arkady go still. He'd deliberately made his voice just loud enough for his big friend to hear. "You making trouble for us, English?" Arkady rumbled, as softly as he could.

"No, the opposite. Or do you want to stay here and do this forever?" Scorpius asked him, not unkindly. Arkady didn't immediately answer.

"I'm in," Jian said, low. "It's that or stay here for the next five years. I think I'd rather die, if it comes to that. You sure you want this great lummox along? He doesn't look particularly stealthy."

"I want him along," Scorpius said flatly. "He can help if we get stuck."

"How, as a human shield?" Jian muttered.

Scorpius thought Arkady probably didn't understand most of what Jian said, but clearly he gathered enough that his big brow furrowed and the next spell he used made his statue's head dissolve entirely.

A guard walked past the table just then, and as they put their heads down, trying to look busy, the man stopped beside them and looked down with disgust at Arkady's attempt.

"What do you think you are trying to do?" He demanded in French. He was a small man, easily two-thirds Arkady's size, but his sharp demand made all three of them jump.

Arkady mumbled an apology, in passable French, and the man dealt him a sharp slap to the back of the head. Scorpius's shoulders hunched involuntarily. Beside him, Arkady half rose out of his chair, face red with uncharacteristic anger, but the room had gone suddenly deathly silent, and all the guards had their wands in their hands. They weren't aiming them, but they hardly needed to. The big Russian slowly sank back into his chair. The guard pronounced his statue 'ruined', and motioned for another one to be brought forward while the first was disposed of.

Scorpius waited until the fuss had died down and they had been left alone, before he mumbled to his friend out of the corner of his mouth. "Arkady, you want to get out of here?"

"There are a lot more of us," Scorpius pointed out, switching to French so it was easier for Arkady to understand. "Anyway I'm not talking about a fight. I'm going to get you out," he said, very, very softly, but with the utmost confidence. No way was he leaving his friend alone here. "No matter what happens. Okay? You don't have to help."

Arkady shrugged. After a minute of working - more carefully - on his statue, he muttered; "I will help."

~*-A-*~

~*-A-*~

Tonight. The news spread through the warehouse with wary excitement. Whatever was going to happen, it would happen that night. There was nothing left to do, nothing left to organise. Albus sat on one of the empty patient beds, fidgeting with nerves. He felt oddly alone. Nearly two days without seeing any of his friends or family. That had to be some kind of a record. It had always been Hogwarts, to home, or to the Leaky Cauldron, and back to Hogwarts. He'd never been anywhere on his own.

"Doing okay, rookie?" Maureen asked, from where she was reading a book on the bed opposite.

"Yeah," Albus muttered. "Just thinking how this wasn't how I imagined my first solo trip abroad."

She peeked with amusement over the top of her book. "Nervous?"

"A bit."

"You'll do fine. You have any questions or problems, just ask one of us. And don't try any major spellwork on your own, right? Not that you don't know what you're doing. But they have some seriously old, Dark Arts on their side. Your first instinct might not always be the right one."

"Okay." Albus fiddled with his sleeve for a minute before asking, "what kinds of Dark Arts? You mean curses? Have you seen any of them?"

Maureen didn't quite meet his eyes. "I've seen some of the results."

"Like what happened to Shacklebolt?"

"Similar, yes. Nasty stuff. That's not nearly the worst of it though. It's not just physical injuries, though those are bad enough - incurable injuries, people half turned into animals, people with organs outside their bodies. People with no faces."

Albus mouth dropped open. "No faces?"

"No eyes or mouths. The noses usually stay, for some reason, but not always. Those ones tend to live a bit longer, until they starve to death. The ones who can't breathe at all… well, they go pretty quick, as you can guess. Horrible to watch."

Albus shuddered. His imagination was running horribly wild. "It gets worse than that?"

"Probably the worst one we've heard of so far was a witch who seemed perfectly fine. This was in Russia, so you probably didn't hear about it. Their Ministry is good at hushing things up - anyway. About a year after her exposure she suddenly goes and murders her entire family. Parents, husband.
Three kids. And didn't understand when they asked her why."

He swallowed. "That's... horrible."

"That's what I mean when I say you can't trust your instincts. There are advanced diagnostic spells now to check for that kind of deep-rooted curse, and we'll use them on everyone involved, later. But it's still no real guarantee."

Albus put his hands between his knees, so she wouldn't see them shaking slightly. "Will you show me?"

She looked surprised. "Now? It's very advanced. You'd have to study a couple years of Spell Damage at the Academy before you're qualified to perform it."

"I still want to see."

She shrugged and closed the book. "Well, it'll pass the time, I guess. Just don't worry if most of it goes over your head."

~*-S-*~

~*-S-*~

Scorpius lay awake, watching the hands go round on his watch, until he heard the footsteps of the midnight guard go past. As planned, he waited another five minutes before unlocking the door again and slipping into the corridor. He could see Jian ahead in the ugly yellow light, waiting for him.

In silence they moved down the corridor until they reached door 103. Arkady had asked that they let him out from the outside, since he didn't know the unlocking spell. When they got it open, he stepped out immediately, and just visible behind him before the door closed were several pale faces staring out from several bunkbeds. Arkady apparently didn't rate highly enough to have his own room.

"They won't tell?" Scorpius hissed when the door was closed.

Arkady shook his head. "I tell them you get us out, they say okay," he said. "This place, bad work, bad people. Bad food," he added, with a small grin. "They all from Durmstrang, I know them. We go?"

Scorpius took a breath. "We go," he said.

"Follow me," Jian whispered. Scorpius willingly set in behind him while Arkady brought up the rear. Jian clearly had a better memory of the route, luckily - Scorpius wasn't sure he himself would have remembered it all, since he'd been more focussed on watching the seeking coin, the previous night, than taking notice of where he was going.

Before long they reached the false wall, and they all ran through it into the dark, dungeon-like corridor. Arkady shivered, and Scorpius took a thankful breath of real air. He'd spent the whole day feeling like he was suffocating in a space that seemed so much larger than it actually was. Jian didn't seem to notice any difference, so perhaps he wasn't quite as observant as Scorpius had guessed.

Scorpius took the lead then, and they hurried down as far as where they had got before, where the alcove was that lead to the study. "Arkady, you stay here," Scorpius said, low. "We need you to warn us if anyone's coming. If we don't come back before ten to one, you go back, all right? Don't wait for us."

Arkady hesitated, but nodded reluctantly. He squeezed into the alcove, just barely, and
they ran on.

It wasn't a fast run. As Jian tried to speed up, Scorpius felt painful twinges in his back, and his limp became more pronounced as his leg refused to answer. He had to pause for a moment, leaning against the stone wall, to ease the burn in his chest.

"We're on a schedule here," Jian said, nervousness audible in his voice despite his attempts at sarcasm.

"I'm trying," Scorpius hissed, shoving himself away from the wall. He could hardly argue; time was everything, and he was the one slowing them down, even though all his willpower was necessary to stop him kicking Jian in the shins to see how he liked it. "Come on. It can't be much further."

It wasn't. At the end of the corridor were several heavy doors, made of the same kind of stone as the walls surrounding it. "Those things must weigh a ton," Jian muttered, staring as they slowed to a walk. "Look, there are Runes carved on them. They must be magically locked. How do we know which one it is?"

Scorpius looked frantically between the doors. Then he knelt down, wincing at the pain in his back, and held his cheek to the floor, searching.

"What the hell are you doing?" Jian hissed.

"Looking for this," Scorpius said triumphantly, picking up the silver Sickle from the floor in front of the door second from the left, and heaving himself to his feet. "It's this one."

Jian stared at him for a moment then blinked. "Great, if you say so. How do we open it?"

Scorpius peered at the door. "Runes," he muttered. "They must tell us how to get in." He touched one of the carvings, rubbing it with his fingers as though it might reveal some secret.

"Well," Jian prompted. "What do we do now?"

By the time night fell, Rose was starting to wonder if anything was really going to happen. She'd spent the day obediently fetching and carrying, trying to be helpful in any way she could. There was not a great deal else to do, however, and the interminable waiting was exhausting. At midnight, she was having to banish daydreams - well, awake dreams, anyway - of Apparating to France herself and going on a solo rescue mission.

She was in a half-doze, curled up in her chair with people sitting or moving slowly around her, when the coin finally lit up and started spinning. The room instantly went silent, everyone crowding around as Harry reached over and activated the connection. "Scorpius?"

"It's me."

Rose's heart leapt, and she put her hands quickly to her mouth to stifle an exclamation of delight. He was okay. He sounded out of breath, but otherwise okay.

"Everything all right?" Harry asked, quickly. "Have you found him?"

"We're stuck. There's a door... there are all kinds of runes on it."
Harry waved a hurried hand at the Cursebreakers, who all went into immediate action, pulling out notepads and books and reference guides. "Do you recognise any of them?"

"From the one term I took of Ancient Runes, four years ago? Er… no."

"I know some of them." Jian's voice. Rose clenched her fists hard in her lap.

"Am I speaking with Jian Chung?" Her uncle sounded wary, but no less anxious.

"Yes… sir. I can't read what they say, but I know most of them."

"Then tell us. We'll help with the translation."

Eyes wide, staring at the coin as though she could see through it to the other side, Rose listened as Jian recited. "Egreda. Turo. Yan. Grewa. Pero." The Cursebreakers scribbled manically and compared textbooks as he went on, down what sounded like several lines of script, describing any Runes he didn't know. "Then there's a space and then some different Runes… some other language maybe. I don't recognise them. There's something that looks like a horse…?"

"It's a unicorn," Scorpius' voice broke in. "See the horn?"

"That's a mane. It's a horse."

"Looks like a unicorn to me."

"Do you want to do this?"

"Boys, focus," Harry said sharply. "Forget the horse for now. What's next?"

A pause from the coin. Then Jian said, "I'm not sure. I… there's a wave, a half moon… basic shapes, really, but I don't know them."

"It's a sequence," Rose burst out, unable to help herself. Everyone in the room turned to stare at her, except the Cursebreakers, who were too busy muttering and arguing with each other.

"Rose?" Jian sounded surprised.

"It's a sequence," she said again, ignoring the confused frowns from everyone around her. "Tara, Era, Luna."

"Great, so it's Aritraeic?" Jian sounded slightly panicked. "I can't read Aritraeic."

"Hold on a bloody second," Rothers grunted, leaning forward and glaring in Rose's eyes. "A mistake could cost lives here, girlie. Let the Cursebreakers do their job - they are experts. Let's get the first part translated before we start on schoolgirl theories."

Rose's nostrils flared - girlie? "The first part doesn't matter," she said, coldly, placing her fists firmly on the table.

Rothers' huge bushy eyebrows lifted until they practically touched his hairline. "I beg your pardon?"

"It doesn't matter!" she insisted. If only they would listen!

"Young lady, you are wasting valuable time that is going to get your boyfriend killed, if you don't -"

"Rothers, enough." Ron's sharp words, though they came from a man several decades his junior, cut
Rothers off in mid-sentence. "Rose, what do you mean it doesn't matter?"

"Of course it matters," snapped one of the Cursebreakers, from where he was frantically scribbling and flipping through a guidebook simultaneously. "It's some kind of code."

"It's a poem," Rose said, ignoring Rothers and looking her father square in the eye. "It's just an old poem about opening spells; medieval. It's the sequence that matters."

Rothers spluttered. "Of all the ridiculous -"

"Somone get that guy to shut up," Scorpius' voice demanded from the coin. "Rose, say it again. What's the sequence?"

Rose looked pleadingly at her father. After only a split second, in which he gave her a searching look, he nodded.

"Tara Era Luna," she repeated, turning quickly to the coin so they could hear her voice. Behind her, all the Cursebreakers' muttering was dying away as their calculations gradually confirmed what she had said, and then it all went quiet. All eyes were on her, but she kept her focus on the coin, on the runes. She didn't need paper; they drew themselves for her in her head; she could practically see them written on the table in front of her. "Is there any more?"

"After the moon there's a goat, or a ram," Scorpius said. "Then - what's that?"

"An articulation, I think," Jian said. "Like the Ancient Egyptian."

"A circle with three dots?" Rose asked, impatiently.

"Yeah," Scorpius said quickly. "Then a hand, then another hand. That's it. What do we do?"

"We're running out of time." Jian's voice was just audible, as though he were speaking away from the coin.

"Shut up," Scorpius could be heard muttering. "Let her think."

Rose took a breath. "The hands are two separate runes? Not a single rune for two hands?"

"No, they're separate," Jian said, after a moment's hesitation. "Is that important?"

"Very. You need two hands, two different people. Put one hand each on the door."

"Which hand?" Scorpius asked, without hesitation. Harry looked up sharply at Ron, but the taller man waved off any argument, his eyes fixed on his daughter.

"My left, your right," Jian said, after a brief pause which suggested he was studying the Runes. "Good thing you brought me along, then."

Rose could practically hear Scorpius preparing for a retort. "Listen," she said. "This is the incantation. You have to say it together. Ready?"

A pause. "We're ready," Scorpius said.

"Hold on a minute," Rothers interrupted, again. "This is insane, they are children -"

"You really want to raise that argument with me, Rogers?"
Rose looked up in surprise at her uncle. Harry was glaring fiercely at the grizzled old Auror, and, under his gaze, he finally subsided. She didn't wait to be told once again to continue. "Okay. The incantation is…"

~*-S-*~

~*-S-*~

The stone door was, as Jian had so pessimistically predicted, extremely heavy. It took both of them heaving on it - one of them with a recently regrown spine, and neither very much in the way of upper body strength - to open it wide enough for them to slip inside.

Once they did, it was clear why the door had been so well protected.

"We found him," Scorpius said quickly into the coin. "Send them in." The connection cut off, he stuffed the coin back into his pocket and hurried to kneel by Teddy's side.

"Send who in?" Jian hissed. Scorpius ignored him.

Teddy was lying on a bare mattress, naked except for a pair of undershorts. He was pale and clearly unconscious, his hair dirty brown and untidy. His arms were bound with leather, straight at his sides with his hands palm up, and there were a half a dozen narrow tubes hooked up to a number of hanging bottles and vials. One of them was very clearly drawing blood from his arm into a large vial where it pooled, and several more vials filled with dark red liquid were lined up on a nearby table, corked and labelled. "Teddy?" Scorpius hissed, reaching for a pulse. It was there, just barely. He understood now what Jean and Dreher had been talking about. Three thousand Galleons for a single vial. They were draining his blood, to sell.

"The hell is this…?" Jian was saying, looking around in horror.

"He's a Metamorphmagus," Scorpius explained, fighting the urge to throw up as he gingerly reached for the tubes where they narrowed to a needle that pierced the flesh, and started pulling them out one by one as gently as he could. "His blood must be worth thousands on the black market. Help me, will you?"

Jian came over and between the two of them they managed to disconnect Teddy from the tubes and the leather bindings. "Teddy?" Scorpius tried again, shaking his cousin gently. "Teddy, can you hear me?"

Jian was examining the other potions that had been administered intravenously. "Dreamless sleep," he said, reading one of the labels. "No wonder he's so out of it." He checked his watch.

"How long do we have?" Scorpius asked, looking up.

"About twenty minutes."

Scorpius swore. "C'mon Teddy," he repeated. He drew his wand and used it to conjure a splash of water into Teddy's face. "Come on, we have to go."

"We'll have to - " Jian began, and Scorpius whirled round on one knee to glare at him.

"We're not leaving him behind," he snapped. He had not come this far, and done all this, to run when he was this close. "No way."

Jian raised one eyebrow. "I was going to say, we'll have to carry him," he said. "But good to know
There was a cough, and Scorpius turned quickly to see Teddy struggling to lift himself on his elbows. "What - where -" he croaked, his eyes slitting open with what was clearly a great effort.

"Teddy," Scorpius breathed with relief. "It's me - look, we have to get out of here, there's no time to explain - can you stand?"

Teddy blinked up at both of them with bleary, half-seeing eyes. His arms were already shaking with the effort of holding himself up. "Scorpius?" he said, sounding almost hopeful, then his expression went blank, and he shrank away. "This is a trick," he croaked. "You're not… you can't be. You can't fool me. I… I'm… I'm…"

"Teddy…” Scorpius stared helplessly into Teddy's suspicious eyes. "C'mon Teddy, it's me. Your cousin. I'm here to get you out."

"Liar." Teddy coughed again, weakly, and tried to sit up, but he was too weak, and fell back.

"Teddy…” Scorpius could practically feel the seconds ticking away. Eighteen, seventeen minutes until the alarm was raised? This far down the tunnel they wouldn't even get back to their rooms in time even if they wanted to. He had to say something only he, Scorpius, would know, or at least something that would convince Teddy he was on his side, that he came from the Aurors…

"Badger," he said suddenly, almost simultaneously with the strike of inspiration. "Your Godfather sent me. You have to come with us."

Slowly, Teddy's expression changed, from suspicion, to confusion, and then relief. "Scorpius? It's really…"

"Yes, it really is, but listen, we have to go," Scorpius insisted, inwardly rejoicing. "The Hit-Wizards are coming, but it'll take time - we have to get you out of here before they catch us." Calling Jian over to help him, he managed to get Teddy sitting up, though he still couldn't quite hold his head up straight.

"No way he'll make it on his own," Jian said, meeting Scorpius' eyes. He pulled one of Teddy's arms over his shoulders and waited for Scorpius to do the same; together they managed to lift the taller man up with them as they stood. It was a much greater weight than Scorpius had expected, and he nearly buckled under the strain, until Teddy got his feet under him and stood shakily with the two of them supporting him, head lolling.

"Where're we going?" he asked, dizzily, as though someone had woken him in the middle of the night for a surprise holiday.

"Just stay with us," Scorpius told him, as he and Jian stumbled over to the open door. Getting through it was very difficult; they had to turn sideways and squeeze themselves through the opening, one at a time. Jian took the lead and Scorpius nearly tripped over the threshold as they came back out into the corridor. It already seemed like an interminably long way back to the study. "We're going to go get an old book that'll take us home," he said, trying to sound much more confident than he felt.

The Cursebreakers had been working since the previous night on a way to get the Ancient Key to work in reverse, but there was no guarantee it would succeed. He could only hope Rose got her eyes on whatever they worked up. He felt a rush of warm pride when he remembered the way she'd interrupted their chatter to give the answer. Her obsession with deciphering code like the one engraved on his wheelchair had finally turned out to be good for something, and he wasn't going to
deny her the opportunity to gloat if - *when* - they got out of here.

"Badger?" Jian grunted as they plodded on, apparently for something to fill the oppressive silence.

"His codename. It's a Hufflepuff reference… I think," Scorpius said, distractedly.

"Oh, excellent. A Slytherin, a Ravenclaw and a Hufflepuff. We're a shining example of House Unity. Your big Russian friend can be our token Gryffindor."

After that, conversation became almost impossible. Teddy's almost dead weight not only slowed them down, it put a lot of painful pressure on Scorpius' back, which seemed to resonate internally along the old injury and sent stabs of pain to his chest and his weak leg. Before long Teddy was listing to one side as Scorpius fought to stay upright, but Jian didn't even complain; he was panting with the effort as he did his best to hold up his side while keeping the pace.

"Nearly there," Scorpius gasped, pushing through his own pain in an attempt to keep Teddy awake and moving. "Just a bit further and we can go home. Victoire's waiting for you, and Andromeda, and the Potters and the Weasleys, they're all waiting. You can do it."

Teddy didn't say anything, perhaps he was too weak to speak anymore, but his head came up a little, and his next footsteps were more sure.

*We're going to make it, Scorpius thought triumphantly. We're actually going to make it.*

When they turned the next corner, however, they all stopped dead.

"Young Mr Malfoy," Jean sighed, from where he stood leaning against the wall of the corridor. "You do disappoint me. Though I suppose I should have expected it, considering how badly you disappointed your own father."

Scorpius felt frozen in place. Teddy was standing stiffly, clearly focussing everything he had to stay upright, and on the other side he could feel Jian shaking. Standing behind Jean were Adalie, and four guards armed with wands. One of them was Goyle, and he had his wand pointed at Arkady, who was on his knees at their feet, swaying slightly and bleeding from an ugly-looking wound on his brow.

Scorpius tore his eyes away from his friend to glare at Jean. "Your boss kidnapped my cousin," he said. "He enslaved my friends, and all those others…"

Jean made an imperious hand gesture, which struck Scorpius suddenly as uncharacteristic. In fact, he seemed to be standing quite differently than usual, somehow. Even his accent was less pronounced.

"*Enslaved,*" Jean repeated the word with an added helping of sarcasm. "It can hardly be called that, when they're being paid, or paying off their parents' debts…" he gave Jian a narrow look. "Of course it may take a few years to accrue loyalty enough to be permitted to *spend* their wages. That is the nature of my business."

*My business?* Scorpius opened his mouth, and felt a shock go through him as his father's voice came out. "You're a servant." He wasn't even sure why he had said it. Jian laughed.

"I suppose I can't blame you for that assumption. In fact I will thank you for the compliment at my talent for subterfuge. The servile disguise is a convenient if occasionally tiresome one. I love when I get to have these conversations. The look on your face makes it all worth it, if I may say so."

It was Jian who spoke next. "It's you," he said, with a note of terror in his voice. "You're the real Shadow. You were all along."
"Give that boy a gold star," Jean said, his thin features twisting into a grin.

Scorpius still found himself several steps behind. *Jean?* "But… my father was…" he began, fighting confusion. "I mean…"

"The only people who know who the true Shadow is are here at this very moment," Jian said, "with the exception of your father, of course. And Dreher, but I suppose now I shall have to let him take the fall for this… unfortunate incident. Really, Scorpius, you are causing me to have to go through Senior Management at an unacceptable rate. Dreher's going to be really upset when I have to get him convicted for your murder."

Scorpius' head was spinning, so that the threat barely registered. He had stopped listening as soon as Jean had said that his father had *known*. But of course. He must have known.

Memory flooded in; when his father had told him he could go back to Hogwarts, and Jean had said… "Your deception angered him considerably. I have since convinced him that crippling you academically might not be in his best interests."

It had seemed strange then. Now it made perfect, but terrible, sense.

"The package for Borgin & Burkes," he said, his stomach dropping as the established facts of the events of the last year were turned on their head as his mind raced through them. "He said that wasn't his idea. You made him send me."

"Ah yes, one of my less good ideas," Jean said, his smile wavering. "If you'd come back, I'd have had you trained to be a proper courier. Of course, I had a feeling the Aurors were catching onto us, and it was about time I had a new cover, anyway. So, it was just as well."

"No," his father had said, nearly a year ago now when Scorpius had demanded answers. "Oh, you couldn't have run, they would have set anti-Apparition wards. No, they had been getting close to us for months. The Aurors would have taken someone that day whether you were there or not. That it was you was just..."

"A coincidence?" he'd said.

"Did you kill my father?" Jian was demanding, his voice trembling with anger.

Jean's expression didn't change. "I had Goyle do it. I don't much like getting my hands dirty. Were there any other questions?"

*Not a coincidence*, Draco had said. And then, three days ago… "The Shadow was never just one man."

"You can't kill us," Jian said, breaking through Scorpius' haze of horrified realisation. "There are people coming for us."

"Coming for them, I imagine," Jean said, nodding towards Scorpius and Teddy.

"Whatever," Jian growled. "You're going to be under attack any second." Scorpius shot him a look. He was guessing, he *had* to be guessing - but he was right. They just had to keep Jean talking long enough for the Hit-Wizards to break in. Maybe...

Jean sighed. "Pity. I spent such a lot of time setting this place up, as well. Don't worry, I have a way out from down here, thanks to you. I happen to know a lot about the Ancient Keys. It shouldn't be too hard to get my loyal servants and I as far from here as possible. And of course I'm not leaving
"And Dreher?" Scorpius demanded, his grip tightening around Teddy's back. "And the others? You're just going to leave everyone else here to get arrested or killed?"

"You aren't leaving me with much of a choice, are you Scorpius?" Jean snapped, showing anger for the first time. Teddy's legs shook and nearly buckled, and Scorpius gasped as he had to take the extra weight for a moment. "It won't be the first time I've had to make sacrifices," Jean continued, watching the three of them struggle with hard, dark eyes. "And it probably won't be the last. But I can always build it up again, you see. There is a reason I am called the Shadow. Shadows cannot ever really be destroyed. You three, on the other hand..." He sighed and shook his head. "I'm losing patience for this. Goyle, take Lupin. Kill the others. We can send apologies to Hua Chung later, if he doesn't get himself caught."

Scorpius' wand was in his pocket, and he didn't have time to reach for it. Instead he reached instinctively for the easiest wandless magic he knew.

He might not be the greatest dueller, and he might not be as clever as Rose or as strong as Arkady, but there was one thing he could always make out of nothing, and that was music.

It was a cacophony, and it was deafening. A thousand instruments played at their loudest, all at once, so that combined it almost sounded like the earth itself was screaming. The guards had only taken one step forward before they clapped their hands to their ears and doubled over. Adalie, her pretty face contorted in pain, fell to her knees with her arms over her head.

The physical force caused by the magical blast of sound aimed at them caused Jean to stumble back. He didn't reach for a wand, but slapped the face of one of the guards until that man was able to aim a spell in their direction. Beside him Scorpius felt Jian go down, bringing Teddy down with him, and Scorpius had no choice but to let them fall, staggering away himself to stay upright, and reached clumsily for his wand. The next spell hit him in the shoulder, sending him careening back into the wall with a blow that knocked all the air out of him.

Then Arkady rose up with a roar that was inaudible over the noise. Fists flailing he set about the other guards, knocking them down one by one. Goyle was his only real opponent for size and weight - the two began grappling, wrestling, neither one able to get enough room for a real blow in the tight space. Jean was unprotected, and Scorpius, half doubled over himself as he fought to regain his breath, saw his opening. "Stupify!" he gasped, bringing his wand up and around despite the stabbing pain in his shoulder, and Jean hit the floor, blood trickling out of his ears. The noise stopped.

Scorpius aimed another stunning spell at Goyle, staggering forward to get a good shot where Arkady wasn't in the way. It hit the small of Goyle's back, but he didn't go down, only shook a little with the impact. He lost his grip on Arkady enough for the younger man to shove him away and deal him a brutal punch to the side of the mouth. Then he staggered back, several feet down the corridor, and ran for it.

"Trus," Arkady spat. The bleeding from his head wound seemed to have stopped, but he was still unsteady on his feet - he put up a hand to support himself against the wall. "Jalky trus... what now? Scorp?"

Scorpius blinked in surprise at Arkady using his actual name, but there was no time to think about that now. Holding his bleeding shoulder, he turned to see where they had ended up. Jian was dragging himself to his feet, his expression twisted with pain as he held a bloody hand to a wound in his side. Teddy had hauled himself to a sitting position but had his eyes closed. Of the others, Adalie...
was the only one still conscious. Her ears were also bleeding, but she was kneeling over Jian's still form, and - Scorpius realised with a shock to the stomach - she was crying.

"Adalie?" he called her name softly, limping towards her. She looked up quickly, covering Jean protectively with her hands. "You do not 'urt my fahzer," she said, tears streaming down her face as she glared up at him. "You do not 'urt 'im."

"Your father?" Scorpius repeated, shocked.

Somewhere above them there was the sound of shouting - something was happening. Scorpius found himself looking up at the ceiling, as though he could see through it to whatever was going on, then, realising what he was doing, quickly looked back at Adalie, raising his wand against what he was sure would be an attack. But she hadn't moved. "Wake 'im up!" she shouted out him. "What did you do to 'im?"

"Why don't you?" Scorpius asked, non-plussed. "You must know how…"

She didn't have a wand, he realised as she turned her tear-stained face away. He'd never seen her with a wand in her hand. She couldn't reverse a Stunning spell, a fourth year spell, because she couldn't do magic. He felt a surge of pity that he knew was wrong; pity for Muggles and Squibs was just as bad as his father's type of prejudice, and he knew better, but he couldn't help it.

"Adalie… you should come with us," he said, low. "The people coming, they're going to arrest everyone. People could get hurt. You could get hurt."

She looked back at him, and then she was on her feet and lunging at him. Surprised, and unwilling to fight her, Scorpius found himself shoved backwards, and she hit him hard across the face. Before he could think to do anything, Arkady was dragging her back with one arm as though she weighed nothing. She spat and swore at him in French, scratching at him with her nails until he bled.

"Stupify!"

As the girl went limp in Arkady's arms, Scorpius looked round. Jian lowered his wand. "What?" he hissed. "She'd only slow us down."

"We can't just leave her here!" Scorpius turned back to the girl's limp form as Arkady laid her carefully down beside her father.

"Why not?"

"She's a Squib!"

"And? So's he."

Scorpius blinked at him, confused. "What?"

Jian, wincing as he tried to put pressure on his own wound, gestured with his head towards Jean. "You ever see him do any magic? Why do you think he was unarmed down here?"

Scorpius felt as though his head was about to explode. "The Shadow is a Muggle?"

"Either that or his wand just didn't go with his outfit today."

"But... my father was afraid of him."

That was clear now. When Draco had come for Scorpius at St Mungo's, he hadn't just been on the
run from the Ministry. He'd been afraid of something else, much closer, and more dangerous.

"Well, I'm a little afraid of him too, to be honest," Jian said, breathing heavily with poorly-concealed pain. "Some Muggles are scary. Honestly, you're the one with the NEWT in Muggle studies. Even I've heard of Hitler. Our own royalty weren't always sweet hundred year old ladies either, y'know. Power isn't all about magic."

Scorpius stared down at Jean and his daughter. Was it possible? Jean knew about the Ancient Keys. He knew about... about Portkeys, and Floo Powder, and magic...

Well, so did Dave, and Dave was a Squib.

*The Shadow,* he thought, his mind buzzing as all the final pieces fell into place. *The Aurors knew my father, they know about Dreher. They'd never suspect a Muggle was making or selling illegal magical products. Because he's not. He's just organising it all. Getting Wizards to do the dirty work while he collects. And every time it falls apart, he and his daughter take whoever they can trust and all the money he's made, go somewhere else and start again. He's probably not even on any Ministry records. Just a servant. A Muggle servant. He's invisible."

"We should go," Jian said through gritted teeth, now staring up at the ceiling himself as the noise got louder. "Preferably before I bleed out." He looked down at the casualties - the three guards, Jean, Adalie and Teddy. "I don't think I can carry anyone anymore."

"You should go," Teddy grunted, to Scorpius' surprise - he'd thought his cousin had passed out. He was sitting limply against the wall and his eyes were still closed. "Go, get help. I... I won't make it."

"Yes you will," Scorpius said firmly. "Arkady? You okay?"

Arkady grunted, and wiped blood off of his face. "Not bad. They come up behind, I don't see them, then, boof! Big bang, then take my wand. Sorry."

"It's okay. Can you help us with Teddy? We'll have to leave the others here."

They spent several minutes picking wands up off the floor and rifling through pockets until they found Arkady's. Then Arkady lifted Teddy in both arms and slung him over one shoulder.

Jian was limping badly as they started moving up the corridor past the study, and Scorpius went to sling his good shoulder under the taller boy's arm. "You're hurt too," Jian breathed, gasping a little with each painful step.

"It's not bad," he replied, shortly. He didn't even feel the pain, though he had a feeling he'd pay for it later; adrenaline was all that was keeping him on his feet as they limped together back towards the hidden door. The noise was much louder from here - they could hear screaming and things exploding in the distance.

"Us first," Scorpius said, bringing Jian forward. "Ready?"

Jian nodded. Scorpius kept his eyes open this time - he felt he needed all his senses on alert. Passing through the false wall was like stepping into a very short tunnel, and then they were back in the unreal corridor. Scorpius immediately regretted not going back for the Ancient Key instead. The corridor was thick with smoke; some of the lights were smashed and hanging from their fittings.

"Another guard was lying unconscious - or worse - only a few feet away."

Just as Arkady was coming through the wall behind them, there was a shout from up ahead and Scorpius and Jian both wearily raised their wands. A group of wizards wearing combat robes and
masks came running down the corridor towards them, shouting. The smoke and the noise was overwhelming. "Who are you?" one of them shouted. "Identify yourselves!"

Scorpius dropped his wand hurriedly and held up his hands, nudging Jian to do the same. "Don't fire! We're… I'm with the Ministry…" he said lamely. "My friends are hurt… we have Teddy Lupin, he needs a Healer…"

The advance slowed, and a couple of masks were removed as though to get a better look. Scorpius didn't recognise any of the men. "Come with us," one of them said, just as Jian let out a little moan and swayed. Scorpius only just caught him, and then his own head started to swim as he realised just how much pain he was really in. Blood was running down his arm from his injured shoulder, his curse scar was sending lancing pain up and down his spine, and he could no longer hold his own weight. The two of them went down in what felt like slow motion, and Scorpius saw - or thought he saw, the end of the corridor in the distance leading out into open sky, indigo blue and dotted with stars.
Almost as soon as they got the word that the raid was starting, the casualties started pouring in. The anxious wait, with its awkward juxtaposition between worry and mind-numbing boredom, was turned instantly into near-chaotic business, made all the stranger for it being the middle of the night. Albus ran between the narrow beds, delivering potions and charmed bandages, as Maureen and Gwen patched up both Hit-Wizards and injured smugglers alike. When the numbers became too much for the two Healers to handle, they began sending the least badly hurt to one side to wait for treatment, attending only to those who needed immediate care.

"You're on," Maureen told him when he came back with his next armload of bandages, nodding to the expectant row of injured men, some of whom were being guarded by other Hit-Wizards and a couple of Aurors who had just arrived, apparently straight from the control room back in London. Albus eagerly went over and started using every bit of knowledge he’d gleaned from working in St. Mungo’s that year. He healed cuts and abrasions, broken bones, even a punctured lung - though he asked Gwen over to make sure he’d got it right, afterwards. No one was allowed to leave yet, for the reason Maureen had explained to him earlier - they had to be checked thoroughly for long-lasting curses that could strike even years down the track.

In the chaos, and the excitement of actually doing something, he almost forgot the reason he was even there, until a big group of men came in all at once, causing a commotion that couldn't be ignored. One of them was very tall and broad, but not wearing a uniform, and he was helping a masked Hit-Wizard carry - yes, it was Teddy, half naked and apparently asleep, laid out on a stretcher. Albus made an involuntary move towards him, but Maureen gave him a sharp look, and he obediently hung back, watching as they lowered him into a hospital bed.

"Is he okay?" a familiar voice called out, panicky, and Albus looked around to see his best friend being supported into the room too, blood all down one arm and limping badly."He needs blood," Scorpius said urgently, "he's been drained, he needs…"

"You need to lie down," Albus hissed, going to help the man who was trying to force Scorpius to sit on a bed. No one stopped him from helping this time.

"Al?" Scorpius stared in surprise and stopped fighting to get to Teddy, allowing Albus to cut through the material of his T-shirt to get to the wound in his shoulder. He winced. "Merlin, that hurts… Al, I need to talk to your Dad, he's got it all wrong, it's not Dreher, it's - ow!"
"Stay still," Albus said, the part of his brain that was constantly channelling Knox taking over while he worked. The potion he wiped over the wound cleaned it instantly, and he put his weight behind his arm, holding Scorpius still against the bed rails. "Still as you can, okay?" he said, much more calmly than he currently felt. His heart was pounding. "Just for a minute."

Scorpius bit his lip and let out a little moan as Albus focused, flicking his wand and whispering the sequence of charms that would knit the wound back together, bone, muscle and tissue, and finally the skin. "Not even a scar," he said, reaching for one of the many pain relief potions he'd distributed earlier. "Don't tell Knox I gave you this," he said. They'd so far managed to avoid getting Scorpius hooked on the pain potions he'd had to take regularly for nearly a year, and he doubted the old Healer would approve of giving him another, now, when the wound was already healed. But his friend's face was still white with pain and exhaustion, and it was all he could think of to do.

"Wouldn't dream of it," Scorp croaked. He downed the bottle and swallowed, grimacing. "Al," he said as soon as the vial was empty. "I really have to -"

"Talk to my dad. Yes, I heard you," Al said, trying to keep his voice level. "He's around here somewhere, probably. When he shows up, I'll tell him. What happened?"

"I don't know, I… must have passed out. Is Jian okay? Where's Arkady"

"What?" Al frowned under this assault of new and confusing questions. "Who?"

"And the others," Scorpius said, apparently not hearing him, "they have to get them out… they're all locked up, they won't be able to get out, and they won't understand what's going on… they'll panic…" Scorpius hauled himself to the edge of the bed and stood up, despite Albus dragging on his arm. He took a half step before the huge man who'd been helping with Teddy came forward and blocked his way. He was bleeding from somewhere on his head, and, now that Albus saw him properly, was clearly too young to be a Hit-Wizard, despite his size. Scorpius protested. "Arkady -"

"Sit," the big man commanded, in a rumbling Russian accent. "You want fall down and die?"

"It's not that bad…"

"No, he's right," Albus said firmly, and took a breath. "Scorp, if you keep pushing like this you could undo all your recovery. If you won't lie down, at least sit down, or I'll call Knox down here and he'll paralyse you again."

Scorpius looked at him with wide, shocked eyes. For a moment Albus wondered if he'd gone too far. Then his friend sank back down onto the bed, clutching at the edge of the mattress with his fingers, and breathing hard.

"Thanks," Albus said, with relief, looking up at the stranger.

"Not problem," the man said, crossing his arms grimly.

"Albus, this is my friend Arkady," Scorpius muttered, "Arkady, Albus."

"Arkady from Durmstrang?" Albus felt like he was several steps behind. He peered at the blood coming down in front of the boy's ear. "Er… is your head all right?"

Arkady snorted. "Just a scratch."

"They knocked him out; he probably has a concussion," Scorpius said, with poorly-veiled vindictiveness. "Arkady, did you tell them about Jean and the others?"
"Yes yes, I tell them, I tell them," Arkady said, as Albus got up to check the head wound by standing on tiptoe. "I don't know if they listen, but I tell them."

This didn't seem to relax Scorpius much. "Great," he sighed. He managed a small smile apparently for Arkady's benefit. "You were brilliant, by the way."

"Ah, well. One of those guards was man who hit me in face. So I hit him in face. This is, what do you say… repercussion."

"Your English has gotten better," Scorpius said. His fingers were still gripping the edge of the bed as though he were afraid he might fall off, otherwise.

"You should sit down too," Albus said, handing Arkady a damp cloth to wipe the blood off his face.

"Have you seen Jian?" Scorpius asked, looking over at him. "Chung, I mean. He was hurt."

Albus blinked at him, nonplussed. "Chung? What on earth was he doing in… you know what, tell me later. No, I haven't seen him. It's just manic in here at the moment. Promise me you'll sit still until I get back? I have to get back to work."

Scorpius' look was one of frustration, but he didn't argue, for which Al was grateful. "I promise," he sighed.

Albus hurried back to the line of waiting wizards and witches, which seemed to be getting shorter at last. He could hear an alarm bell ringing somewhere, and distant shouting. As he made his way along the line he glanced over at Teddy, who was being carefully tended to by Maureen. He'd be okay. So would Scorpius. He only wished he had time to be relieved.

~*-R-*~

~*-R-*~

This time, no one argued when Rose insisted on going along with them. Word had eventually come through that Scorpius and Teddy were both safe, found inside the building - which from the outside had turned out to look like an innocent farmhouse on a stretch of empty land - but she knew she wouldn't be able to breathe properly until she saw them.

Since she still didn't have her Apparition test - various events over the last year having made it less of a priority - her dad volunteered to take her by Floo to the warehouse base camp while Harry led through the rest of the team, which included Cursebreakers, Obliviation-specialists, Muggle liaisons, more Healers and still more Aurors. Neville, after being assured that they would bring Scorpius home to the Leaky Cauldron, had gone to deliver the good news to Victoire and Andromeda. Before the rest of them could leave however, and to her surprise, Rose's mother showed up and also insisted on coming along.

"Hermione," Harry sighed. "You're the Minister for Magic. I can't take you into an active raid."

"Oh I see, but taking my daughter is a different matter?" Hermione glared at him furiously. "Imply one more time that I can't take care of myself Harry, I dare you."

"I wasn't saying that at all! I just meant -"

Hermione held up a hand, stalling him. "I'm coming and that's final. Consider it an order if you have to."
"Ooh, don't pull rank on him," Ron said, grinning. Now that they knew Teddy was alive, he was more cheerful than Rose could remember seeing him for over a year. "He'll sulk for the rest of the night."

"Shut up, Ron," Hermione snapped.

Her husband ignored her. "Anyway, Rose earned it. She worked out those Runes faster than anyone on the team. Like mother like daughter."

Rose flushed. "Can we just go?" she begged.

Hermione gave her a hesitant look, but seemed to decide, as the others had, that there was little point in trying to argue with her. "Come on then," she said. "I'll take you. Ron, you can stop all those Cursebreakers from getting lost, since they're all so apparently useless."

Rose couldn't help giggling a little to herself as she took her mother's hand and they stepped together into the fireplace. Practically anything could seem funny, after two days of anxious waiting with practically no sleep.

They had to travel first to an International Floo Port, and from there to another place in France where special clearance was needed in order to get to the warehouse. By the time they got there Rose was fizzing with nerves, practically bouncing on the balls of her feet. They came through on the other end into a wide open space full of people. Some of them were clearly more Hit-Wizards, but the majority of them were frightened-looking young people, most of them boys, some of them still in their pyjamas. They stood around looking very uncertain of what was going on as the Aurors herded them into groups.

"Mr Potter!" one of the passing Aurors stopped and stood to attention, as the reinforcements continued to come through the Floo point and sped off to do their respective tasks.

"How many of these prisoners so far, Jackson?" Harry asked, looking around in unconcealed surprise as the streams of people flowed around them.

"About two hundred, sir," the man replied. "Poor devils. It'll take all night and all day to process them all. They were all pretty terrified when we started letting them out - some of 'em even tried to fight."

"Any hurt?"

"One or two sir, but not badly."

Harry sighed. "All right. Let's try and get them back to their families as soon as possible."

"Yessir."

"Dreher?"

"No sign of him yet, sir, sorry."

"Damnit." Harry ran a hand through his hair, making it stick up at the back, the way Albus' always did. "The French Minister will have me strung up if we do all this and don't even get our main man."

"Actually there's a bit of contention about that, sir..." The man looked over his shoulder to where - and Rose's heart leapt in her chest - another Auror was standing with his arms folded impatiently while Scorpius, his T-shirt hanging off, one arm covered in blood but otherwise apparently no more..."
the worse for wear, made insistent hand gestures, his voice inaudible from this distance over the
noise of the crowd. "Bring him over here Eric, will you?" Jackson called loudly, waving in their
direction.

Scorpius brightened immediately when he looked up and saw them, and hurried over without having
to be led, the Auror having to jog for a minute to catch up with him despite Scorpius' heavy reliance
on his good leg. "There you are," he said, breathless but no less eager. Now that he was close, Rose
could see he was sweating, and though she couldn't see any wounds, his face and hands were also
streaked with blood. He only spared her a quick look before turning to her uncle. "Mr Potter, I've
been trying to explain, but no one will listen…"

"All right lad," Harry said, just as intently. "Tell me."

"Dreher isn't the Shadow," Scorpius said, with a sigh that seemed half frustration and half relief. "It's
not a title that gets passed on - well, not really - sort of - it's one man, but no one knows who he is
because he uses other people as covers, like my… like Dreher. He's the one behind it, he's the one
who wanted to hurt Teddy. If he gets away he'll just start this all over again."

Rose stood there through the rest of the explanation, and the story about the fight in the underground
tunnel, before she realised her mouth was hanging open, and shut it quickly. The Shadow, a
millionaire masquerading as a servant? The Shadow, a Muggle?

"I know it sounds mad, but you have to believe me," Scorpius finished, with a pleading look at the
two Aurors. "We left him and the others underground with the stupid Key book, and he could wake
up any second. If he gets to it…"

Harry looked hesitant for a moment, but then he nodded. "We'll take care of it." He moved away
quickly, waving for a number of nearby Aurors to go with him.

"Go," Hermione sighed at Ron's questioning look. "I'll take care of Rose. Go on."

Ron kissed her quickly on the cheek, then hugged Rose, and they were both gone.

Scorpius watched them go, sagging a little, then turned to smile at her. "Hey."

She bit her lip and stepped forward. "You're bleeding."

"Nah, not anymore," he said, shrugging. "Al fixed it up. I'm just tired."

"Scorp…" she put a hand on his shoulder, where his t-shirt was torn, and then she couldn't hold back
any longer. She put her arms around him and buried her face in his chest.

"Hey," he said again, stroking her hair with a slightly shaking hand. "S'okay. Told you I'd make it."

She crossed her wrists behind his back, unwilling to let go even a little bit. "How's Teddy?" she
asked, her voice muffled a little by his shirt and from holding back tears.

"Still in with the Healers." He nodded towards a door nearby. "I think he'll be okay. He was talking
when I went past, but I didn't want to get in the way."

"Thank Merlin," Hermione sighed from behind them. Rose had completely forgotten she was even
there.

"And you're okay?" Rose asked, pulling back just enough to be able to look at his face.
"Just tired, I told you."

She breathed a sigh of relief and kissed him, touching his cheek with one hand, her thumb brushing over skin slightly rough with two days of growth. "You're all bristly," she said, giggling through her tears as she came away. "You couldn't shave while you were undercover?"

"I was very busy. Don't suppose you have any food?"

"It's four in the morning," she said, while guilty that she hadn't thought of it.

"I'm starving. You know all these people have only been fed once a day since they got here? I think they do it to keep them quiet."

"Did someone say food?"

They looked around to see Jian approaching with Albus by his side. It was Jian who had spoken; he was limping a little and also covered in blood, but he was smiling faintly.

"What on earth happened to the two of you?" Rose asked, fighting back a wave of nausea at the sight. Scorpius and Jian exchanged unreadable looks.

"What are you doing out here?" Albus demanded of Scorpius. "I told you to stay put!"

"They kicked me out; they needed the bed," Scorpius countered. "I'm fine. Just need some sleep and some food."

"Me too." Jian winced as he rubbed an apparently sore spot on his side. "Arkady?"

"Went to find his friends from Durmstrang, I think. This is insane." Scorpius looked around at the chaos of the room, in which it would have been very difficult to find any one person, no matter how you tried. "Where've you been, anyway?"

"Hell if I know. I woke up in a bed in there with Potter looming over me. Thought he was going to strangle me for a minute. Turned out he's not a half-bad Healer."

Albus snorted and reached up to wipe blood and dirt off his glasses. "Good thing they brought in reinforcements. I'm knackered," he yawned. He did indeed look an absolute mess. Doing her best to put aside her squeamishness, Rose went over and hugged him and then, after only a brief hesitation, Jian as well. He had been helpful with the Runes, and she couldn't help but be relieved that he was all right, too. He responded by patting her on the back rather awkwardly. When she looked at Scorpius, daring him to comment, he only rolled his eyes.

"We should get all of you home," said Hermione, frowning at the four of them. "You could all do with some proper rest."

"But we can't leave without Teddy, Mum!" Rose protested.

"And I need to find out what's happened to my uncle," Jian said, in a sort of low growl.

Rose looked up at Scorpius, who had, she saw now, dark circles under his eyes. He shrugged. "I should stay too," he said. "I need to make sure they get him. And I dropped my wand somewhere. Maybe we could find the Aurors who found us and ask if they have it? I feel naked."

"I don't have mine either," Jian complained.

"Hey, guys..." Albus was staring off towards the large door which led into the warehouse, to which
dozens of people were suddenly flocking. "Something's going on."

Together they made their way through the crowd and out into the warm summer air, where people were murmuring and pointing, scattering apart to get a better look but not straying too far from the safety of the warehouse. It was still very dark, but in the distance, something magical was definitely happening. The farmhouse was lit up, glowing as though the walls were made of light rather than brick and mortar, and various parts of it were shimmering, twisting, flickering in and out of vision. To Rose it looked alive, but horribly so, like a creature writhing and shuddering in pain.

"What the hell is that?" Albus asked, wide-eyed.

"Wizardspace," Hermione said, sounding fascinated. When Rose looked up at her, her expression was alive with a combination of curiosity and concern. "It's breaking down. Or up, or apart, depending on your viewpoint."

"I saw the stars," Scorpius said from Rose's side, almost dreamily. "I forgot… just before I blacked out I thought I saw the stars through the walls. What does that mean?"

"Whatever was maintaining the magic of that place must have been destroyed, or disabled," Hermione answered him, solemnly. "It's no longer possible for it to be two places at once."

"Or bigger on the inside," Rose breathed. "What about the people?"

"No one could survive that," Scorpius said. "They must have all gotten out. Right?"

No one dared venture an answer. Even Jian looked as though he might be ill, and turned away.

"Stay here," Hermione said finally, and Rose looked to see her with her wand in her hand. "I'm going to find your father."

Rose gaped at her. "But Mum…"

"Stay here, Rose. Look after the boys, make sure no one gets separated. I'll be right back."

Rose stared at the space where she had been after she Apparated away, her heart suddenly pounding hard and a sick feeling growing in her stomach. Her dad would be okay, right? He wasn't inside that mess, was he?

"I can't believe she left you in charge," Albus said. "You're the youngest."

"We should go back in," Rose said, ignoring him. "We shouldn't be out here."

"No, I want to see," Scorpius said, shielding his eyes against the light as it intensified. "Think there's anything we can do to help?"

"You can't do anything," Albus put in quickly. "You should be resting."

"Al, I'm fine."

"We left them unconscious down there," Jian muttered. Everyone turned to look at him; he turned his face up to meet Scorpius' eyes. "Think they made it out?"

"They're fine," Scorpius said. "I told you, that underground tunnel was real, not Wizardspace. So long as they didn't try to come through the wall, they'll live."

Rose swallowed. "But our dads just went after them."
Al shook his head. "They wouldn't get stuck in something like that. They're smarter than that, Rosie."

Rose wished she had his confidence. It seemed like just the sort of thing Harry and Ron would do. She kept imagining her dad getting torn apart by warring magical energies, like a terrible splinching accident. She did her best to shut that image away, and watched helplessly as the magical construction in the distance began to disintegrate.

~*-A-*~

~*-A-*~

They stood there waiting for what felt like an hour. The farmhouse continued to distort the air around it, undulating and bulging, the brightness of the flickering glow gradually dying away. From where they stood they could hear creaking and rumbling, even over the noise of the crowd around them. Despite Albus' reassuring words to Rose, he could feel his own anxiety growing. Every second that went past felt like an eternity, every person who Apparated into the crowd the subject of their intense scrutiny as they looked for familiar faces.

Then Albus saw it. "There!" he yelled, pointing.

About halfway between them and the farmhouse, there was a disturbance in the earth. People seemed to be crawling directly out of the ground, one after the other, falling over each other in their hurry. It was hard to see, in the dark with only the distorted wavering light of the imploding Wizardspace, but Albus thought it seems as though some of the people were holding the others, dragging them along. Once they were out of the ground they started running, away from the danger zone across the semi-illuminated field.

As the distant figures grew larger he could just recognise his father, in the lead, and felt a rush of relief. As Rose let out a gasp beside him, a smile broke over his face and he waved enthusiastically. He saw Harry raise a hand to wave back, hesitate, and then he yelled something. Al couldn't make out the words, but he was gesturing and pointing at them. No, not at them. Behind them.

He turned. Less than a hundred feet away there was a large man lumbering towards them, holding a wand in a huge fist that was raised and held out to one side, as though he were brandishing a sword. He was aiming it right at them.

Instinctively Albus threw his wand arm up. "Expelliarmus!" he yelled, as beside him the others turned to see what he was looking at. The spell hit the man's wrist - he let out a roar as his wand went flying, but it didn't slow him down.

"MALFOY!" he bellowed.

"Goyle," Scorpius gasped.

"Run!" he heard Rose shout, and with a rush of anger Al remembered that neither Scorpius or Jian had wands - they were both unarmed, and they were almost certainly the targets of Goyle's mad rush, as he came to within metres of them.

From behind them someone screamed, but there was no chance to look around. Al raised his wand again and blurted the first spell that came into his head while people around them started yelling and falling over each other in the confusion.

"Stupify!"
The spell glanced off Goyle's shoulder; it had practically no effect, and the man came at them like a caged animal suddenly released, his eyes practically red with mad anger. For the next, terrifying moment Albus felt himself nearly frozen with fear. It was happening again. He had to protect his friends, just like before, and yet again he was going to fail.

Scorpius hadn't run. He was still standing beside him, helpless but unyielding. Albus wished his friend would run. He knew now that he would never be a fighter like his father. Albus was a Healer, not a hero.

~*-R-*~

~*-R-*~

What happened next was over in seconds, but it felt like it was happening in slow motion. Rose raised her wand towards Goyle to try her own Stunning spell, but another scream from behind made her turn her head to look around, despite the impending danger. The Aurors were struggling. Some of the prisoners they were escorting had used Goyle's attack as a distraction to try and escape, and were fighting tooth and nail to get out of the Aurors' grip. One, a girl surely no older than Rose herself, with dark hair, managed to worm her way free of the group entirely, and none of the men had a hand free to stop her. Maybe they didn't consider her enough of a threat to try.

She was close enough that Rose could see tear tracks running down her grimy face. She reached inside her jacket and pulled out - not a wand, but something black and metallic, pointing it at them. Scorpius had turned to look as well, and Rose realised the girl was looking right at him.

She screamed again, something intelligible, or perhaps in another language, it was hard to tell.

"No!" Scorpius yelled, and went to grab Rose's shoulder, as if to pull her out of the way. In the same moment the girl took aim at him with the thing - and Rose realised what it was.

Then in the next split second, there was a shout, and a sound like a single deadly firework.

~*-S-*~

~*-S-*~

Scorpius shut his eyes and held up his hands, all he could do, expecting at any moment either to feel the impact of a bullet in his chest or be set upon by Goyle's gorilla arms from behind. Surrounded on all sides by a hundreds of people, half of them trained Hit-Wizards, he had never felt more vulnerable, or certain of his own fate. There wasn't even any time to be truly afraid.

He'd recognised the gun as soon as he'd seen it. He'd seen pictures, read stories in Muggle newspapers and, most memorably, seen them in the film they'd all been to together, so long ago now. He knew all too well what happened to you if you got shot. He didn't think even Healer Knox could patch up a bullet to the brain.

But more than anything, as the shot rang out, he was surprised that Adalie hated him that much.

After a second, he realised he was still alive, and opened his eyes again. Directly in front of them was a magical shield, silver tinged with blue and very bright in the darkness, so that he had to shield his eyes from it. Beside him Rose was panting, her hand raised.

"That's not your wand hand," he heard himself saying. She looked at him, and the shield fell. Beyond it, between them and the Aurors now hurrying towards them, Adalie was lying collapsed on the ground.
"It rebounded," Rose said, staring at him. "I didn't mean…"

"It's okay," he said, his heart suddenly beating madly with blatant adrenaline. "It's okay." He pulled her towards him and turned around.

Goyle was also prostrate, and being surrounded by Hit-Wizards. Albus was still holding his wand at chest height, staring.

"Nice shot," Jian said, sounding just as breathless as Scorpius felt.

"Bloody hell," Albus moaned. "Did I kill him?"

"I hope so," Jian replied. "He killed my father." He laughed then, bizarrely, Scorpius couldn't ever remember hearing the Slytherin laugh before, and it was eerie hearing it now.

"She's alive," someone called out from beside Adalie's body. "Get her to medical!"

"Adalie!" Scorpius looked to see Jean, struggling in the grip of two Aurors who were restraining him as he tried to get to his daughter. "ADALIE!"

Scorpius looked away, and held Rose close. She was shivering. "Was that a wandless shield charm?" he whispered to her. "A *non-verbal* wandless shield charm?"

"There was no time," she gasped, hugging her arms around his chest so tightly he thought she stood a good chance of cracking some ribs.

"You're brilliant," he told her, gasping a little. "Just brilliant."

"Is everyone okay?" Harry Potter demanded, running towards them.

Rose let go of him, looking up at her uncle, and Scorpius looked down at himself. He was still half expecting to see blood coming from somewhere, but he remained, incredibly but undeniably, whole. "I… think so," he said.

"Those two just both saved your life at once," Jian put in. "Does everyone around here want you dead?"

"Is she going to be okay?" Rose asked, watching the Healers come and tend to Adalie. She was bleeding from somewhere in her side, but seemed to still be conscious. Scorpius could hear her, crying and cursing as they carried her away.

"Doesn't look too bad," Harry said.

Rose's shoulders sagged, and she reached for Scorpius' hand. "What did she say?" she asked, looking up into his eyes with curiosity. "What was she shouting at you?"

Scorpius swallowed. "That… that it's my fault," he said. He could still hear the words echoing in his head in the girl's anguished voice. "That I ruined everything."

"Well, don't take all the credit," Jian scoffed. He looked back to where Goyle - still unconscious but apparently still alive - was being taken into custody by the Aurors, and muttered a curse of disappointment.

Rose squeezed Scorp's hand, but before he could say anything else, Mr and Mrs Weasley were back, and both he and Jian had to stand back a little to let the families reunite with hurried explanations.
"I'm not hungry anymore," Jian said, watching the light in the distance finally die as the farmhouse collapsed on itself, becoming a grey mass of rising dust that blocked out some of the stars. "You?"

"Not really," Scorpius said, all truthfulness. His appetite was completely gone, but in his mind a picture was forming, a picture that was both memory and a deep, almost painful longing. The bedroom with piles of Muggle novels stacked in various corners alongside schoolbooks, the guitar proudly on display on its stand in the corner. The living room with its large fireplace and well-loved sofas, the kitchen with its fires roaring. The sound of laughter.

He watched Rose's mother stroking her daughter's hair in comfort, and he sighed.

"I just want to go home."

one week later

~*-H-*~

~*-H-*~

The trouble with closing a case that had been highly active for the last six years was the mountain of paperwork it generated. Harry looked with tired irritation at the pile on his desk which never seemed to be getting any smaller. If things kept going like this he was going to set fire to the lot and see if anyone even noticed. It would certainly move things along a bit quicker.

It was Friday afternoon and, for once, he was planning not on working all weekend, but spending some well-earned time with his family. They were all going to the Leaky Cauldron for dinner that night, now that Teddy was finally recovered enough to join them. Paperwork be damned.

He let his gaze wander around the glass walls - anything but stare at that accusing pile a moment longer - and found his eye caught by a familiar figure, sitting in a chair just outside and looking rather lost. Cursing himself, he stood up and made his way to the door, letting it swing open easily as he nudged it with one hand. "Scorpius. So sorry, I completely forgot we had a meeting - must be getting old. Come in, come in."

The boy stood up and made his way nervously into the office. Harry did his best not to look intimidating as they sat down. It was hard to believe that he could present any kind of comparable threat to everything the lad had been through recently, and yet the tension in the air was already palpable. The boy wore his heart on his sleeve; it was easy enough to read him.

"How are you, lad?" Harry asked, as gently as he could without sounding patronising.

"Oh," Scorpius said, looking up as if surprised to be asked. "Fine, I guess."

"We were a little worried when we heard how long you'd been in bed."

Scorpius grimaced. "I know. It wasn't on purpose. I still say Albus put something in my pumpkin juice to keep me out."

Harry smiled. Not long ago he might not have considered the possibility of his middle child doing any such thing, but then, Healer Knox was a terribly bad influence. It worried Ginny sometimes, he knew, but the man was after all the very best in his field. They could hardly insist on Albus being apprentice to anyone less qualified, even if their son hadn't been so obviously thrilled by the honour of being asked. The man hardly ever took any students, as Harry understood it. "Well, you look somewhat recovered at any rate," he said. "What can I do for you? Questions about the debriefing?"
"No," the boy said, shaking his head. "That was all fine." He hesitated. "They're not going to charge Adalie with anything, are they?"

Harry shook his head. "Since she tried to murder you, I might have insisted on it," he said. "But I do understand such things as mitigating circumstances. If you're sure…"

"Yes."

"Then she'll be sent home to her family. She has a Muggle aunt somewhere in France, I think."

Scorpius nodded, apparently satisfied. "What about Jean?"

"He'll be charged of course, once we've finished compiling the list of crimes. It's a long one. Prosecuting Muggles, even Squibs, is pretty unheard of under current Ministry law, but Hermione's going to make sure the trial goes ahead. And Dreher, Goyle, and Hua Chung too. Don't worry yourself on that score."

"Oh. Good." Scorpius nodded, but there was clearly something still bothering him. He was looking down at his lap, his hands folded awkwardly on his knees.

"You did us all a great service, you know," Harry told him, watching his face. "We owe you a great deal - and by we I mean me, especially, but everyone knows it. The Wizengamot is talking about giving you the Order of Merlin, third, maybe even second class."

The look on the boy's face was priceless. It _almost_ made him laugh. "No? Well, I don't blame you. Just a bit of metal to sit around and gather dust, really. Mine's in the back of some drawer somewhere, I think... Ginny would probably know. And the ceremony's a bit of a bore, too. Not something you fancy?"

Scorpius saw the twinkle in his eye and apparently realised that he was being playfully ribbed. The corner of his lips curled up slightly into a smile. "No sir."

Harry folded his hands on the desk in front of him. "But you do want something?"

The smile vanished. "Um. Well…"

Harry couldn't help but feel sympathetic. "Go on, lad," he said gently.

Scorpius took a deep breath, and his back straightened a little. His grey eyes, so familiar in some ways, met Harry's own, emerald green. "Well… it's about my father."

Harry let himself sit slowly back in his chair. He'd expected something like this, and dreaded it at the same time. "I see."

"I don't…" Scorpius seemed unsure for a minute of what to say, then barrelled on. "I don't want you to let him off or anything. I know he did all that stuff. But it's not what you all thought. Right? He didn't start any of it. He's not the Shadow. He never was."

"Yes, I'm aware of that," Harry said. He'd been sort of right about that, but then, he had a pretty turbulent history when it came to being right about Draco Malfoy. It had been hard to trust his instincts. He wished now he had done so; maybe if he had, Teddy would never have had to be rescued in the first place. The thought of what they had done to his Godson made his blood boil, but he made sure to keep his face calm and impassive in the face of Scorpius' intent gaze. "We're reducing the charges in your father's case."
"He's still going to prison, though." It wasn't a question.

Harry steeled himself. "Yes," he said, watching the boy's face. "Even if we couldn't make anything else stick, he pled guilty to the attempted murder charge last year. Even with all the good behaviour in the world - "

"What if we dropped the murder charge?"

Harry stared. "Scorpius… that's not up to you…"

Scorpius stared back, unwavering. "No, but… it could be up to you."

Harry frowned deeply and sat back. "The man nearly killed you, and he wasn't even aiming for you," he pointed out. "I thought you wanted the trial hurried up so that he could be punished."

Scorpius sighed. "I did... but I didn't understand it then. Now I do. He was scared. I think he's always been scared, really. It's not an excuse. I do think he should be punished. But he was only doing it because it was afraid of losing me. He lost his parents, and then he lost my mum, and then Jean turned on him and basically handed him over to the Ministry. I'm all he's got left, and he thought you were all trying to take me away from him, too. He was trying to protect me, even if he went about it in all the wrong way."

Harry couldn't really argue with that. But he still railed against the idea. The man had tried to kill his niece. Ron would never stand for it, even if he could convince Hermione to help with the legal side of things.

"Rose would have to agree…” he began, trying a different tack.

"Oh, she does," Scorpius said, without hesitation. "It was her idea."

Harry put a hand over his face.

"Mr Potter?" Scorpius prompted, after a minute.

Harry coughed and did his best to pull himself together. He could feel six years of work collapsing under him like a pile of cards. "Even if," he said, forcing the words out with the sure knowledge that he would regret them later. "Even if we can get that charge dropped, he's still going to go trial. He's still going to be sent up for illegal commerce, for misuse of Muggle artefacts, for breaking all kinds of international trade laws… Scorpius, there's nothing I can do about that. He's going to go to prison, probably for years if not decades."

"But not for life. Right?"

Harry looked at him, at the face staring back at him that could have been his arch-nemesis from thirty years ago, and sighed. "No. Without attempted murder, probably not for life."

There was a pause, then Scorpius said. "My grandfather went mad in prison."

Harry's heart sank. He did know, and there was nothing he could have done about that either, more than he had already tried.

"I don't want my father to end up like that. I know he did a lot of bad things and hurt a lot of people. But he's still… he's… my family. It doesn't make any sense, maybe, but… I want him to get a chance. Just a chance. To maybe make things better, one day. That's all I want."
Well, Harry had asked. If he went ahead with this, Ron was going to be livid, and Hermione none too pleased either, probably, and the poor boy was supposed to be going to stay at the Weasleys' house in a few weeks. Maybe Rose could talk her father down before it came to that.

Then again, maybe it wouldn't be so bad. It had taken seven years, but it seemed that Ron was finally recognising in the boy what Neville had seen from practically the very start.

Harry met Scorpius' eyes. Merlin knew, the boy had earned it. And maybe he should never have needed to. "I'll see what I can do," he promised.

~*-S-*~
~*-S-*~

It was a small party, perhaps, by the Leaky Cauldron's standards. While the pub itself bustled along under the capable stewardship of Hannah's best staff, the Longbottoms' living room was decked out for a celebration. A casual buffet table had been set up, from which anyone could help themselves whenever they liked, and a mismatched gathering of chairs and cushions were dotted about to make up for the lack of general seating. There were certainly more people crammed into the room than there had ever been before.

"I wonder if we shouldn't have set up in the pub after all," Scorpius heard Hannah wondering aloud to her husband as she squeezed past some of the chairs to put more sliced ham on the table.

"This is just fine, love," Neville assured her. Scorpius had to agree. It might be cramped, but it was private, which seemed right for what, if not for a few stray outliers, might be called a family gathering. Lizzie and Alice were there, of course. And the Potters, the Weasleys. Teddy and Victoire were there; Teddy looking perfectly well despite Victoire's insistence that he stay seated and let her fetch his food for him. Whenever this happened, Scorpius caught his cousin's eye and they exchanged pained looks. Rose wasn't being quite as anxious over him, but since he'd woken up from a three day hibernation, people seemed to expect him to keel over at any second.

Scorpius sat to one side, mostly playing with Alice or talking quietly to his friends, unless someone came over specifically to speak to them. There had been thanks from Victoire, of course, and Andromeda as well. The older witch had been entirely lost for words, and could only manage to enclose him in a tight hug; too tight for an old lady to be able to manage, he couldn't help thinking.

"Well," Rose said, coming to sit beside him with a sigh. "Now at least all we have to worry about are NEWT results."

"You've got nothing to worry about," Scorpius told her. "None of us do, really. You'll pass everything you need to get into Cursebreaking, Albus has already got his apprenticeship and I don't even need NEWTs for what I want to do."

"Bet you wish you'd realised that two years ago," Lizzie teased, as she and Albus came hand-in-hand to sit with them. They were sharing a second helping of Hannah's delicious lemon drizzle cake. Scorpius grinned wryly. "Not really."

"So the future's bright for Eagle's Cry?" she asked, nibbling at her side of the slice. "You guys gonna start rehearsing again?"

"Yeah, I think so," Scorpius said, but he couldn't help a twinge of guilt. After a moment he added. "I just feel bad for them, I guess. I've been so in and out, with Durmstrang and exams and all this... I'm not exactly reliable."
"You'll figure it out," Rose said, resting her head on his shoulder.

"Did you hear from Chung?" Al asked. "I saw you got a letter."

Rose gave him a sharp look. "Nosy. It was addressed to all of us, if you must know. Anyway yes, he's back home with his mother. He's going to do his NEWT in Alchemy by owl post."

"Thrilling," Al said, rolling his eyes. "And your friend Arkady?" he asked, looking at Scorpius.

"Doing Quidditch tryouts for Bulgaria next week," Scorpius said, smiling as he recalled the letter. "He's going to visit when he gets a chance, he wants to see London."

"I want to meet him," Lizzie said. "Is he really bigger than Warren?"

"Yes, but much cleverer."

"Well, that's not hard to do."

"Hey guys," Teddy said, leaning over Albus' shoulder. "We're out."

"Your wife taking you home?" Albus asked.

"Yeah, I tried to convince her to carry me but she's not having it." Teddy grinned. "I think she just wants to take full advantage of the Healer-prescribed bedrest." He reached out his hand towards Scorpius and, after a moment of hesitation, he took it. "Thanks again, cuz. Seriously."

"Oh," Scorpius said, abashed. "It's… I mean, yeah, anytime."

Teddy snorted. "I hope not. Listen, you should know that Gran's been writing to your grandmother back and forth for a while. She's going to try and get her out of that house, maybe to come live with her for a while, or somewhere else. What d'you think?"

Scorpius blinked, taken aback. He hadn't thought about his grandmother for a while. "That'd be… I mean, if she'll go, it'd be good for her, I guess. Last time I saw her there was no way she was gonna leave."

"I know my sister," Andromeda said. She had put on her coat, and looked regal as ever, though she was clutching the handle of her handbag a little tight. "I believe she's ready to move on. She needs to get out of that house and away from that man for her own safety."

"But wasn't she awful to you?" Scorpius asked.

"That was a long time ago," Andromeda said, smiling softly. "I've held onto resentment for far too long. Perhaps something has inspired me to build some bridges in my family."

"So you're okay with it?" Teddy asked, standing back and putting his arm around Victoire.

"Yeah, of course," Scorp said. It was strange, but it felt as though a weight had been lifted off his shoulders, a weight that he hadn't realised was there until it was gone. "Let me know if I can help?"

Andromeda nodded, and the three of them waved goodbye as they picked their way out of the crowded room.

"Scorp?"

Scorpius looked down, and grinned. "Hey you," he said, lifting Alice onto his lap with some
difficulty. "Boy, you're getting big. What's up?"

Alice made a face. "Mummy says I have to go to bed."

"Yeah? Well, it probably is bedtime for most of us. I'm tired too." He yawned extravagantly, and she giggled.

"You 'sposed to cover your mouth," she told him, sternly.

"Oops, sorry," he whispered, while Rose laughed and Lizzie rolled her eyes. Albus took advantage of the distraction to steal the last piece of cake. "So, did you come to say goodnight?"

Alice drew her legs up into his lap and looked up at him with large, innocent eyes. "Will you sing me a lullaby?"

"Oh," Scorpius hesitated. "Um…"

Rose looked up at him, a slight frown creasing her forehead. Those nearby had looked up, whether in expectation or curiosity at the request, and gradually an awkward silence fell around them. "Well…" he said. "I'd love to, but, well… I don't really know any…"

"Pleeease?" she begged, pouting in the anticipation of disappointment.

Hannah took a step towards them, catching Scorpius' eye in brief moment of understanding before looking away. "Sweetheart, come on, it's bedtime," she said to her daughter.

"Please, Scorp?" Alice asked again, eyes shining.

"Ignore her, she knows she can get whatever she wants with that face," Lizzie warned.

Scorpius was tired of being pitied. It felt as though everyone was staring him with sympathy and he couldn't bear it. No one had ever sung him to sleep, and everyone there knew it. What did that matter?

"It's okay," he told Hannah. Turning back to Alice, he smiled. "I'll make something up, okay?"

She put her head to one side, considering. "Okay," she said finally, settling against his chest with her head under her chin. For a moment he put his arm around her, holding her close, closing his eyes. It felt safe. It felt, like nothing else had for a long time, like home.

The last time he'd used his magic to make music, he'd used it as a weapon. Now he reached for it as though reaching for an old friend, and sang softly.

*Lay by my side, and we'll sail away*

*Off to the shores of another day*

*All set to go, once I hear you say*

*Goodnight my friend, until the morning*

*Up we will float as we close our eyes*

*Stars all around us like fireflies*

*Just me and you drifting through the skies*
Goodnight my friend
Not a thought
Not a care
Resting safe and sound
With each other there
And so we'll rock on a nighttime ride
Cozy and warm on the rolling tide
Till we arrive on the morning side
Our journey's end
Goodnight
Sleep tight
We're going to be all right
Goodnight my friend.*

THE END

Chapter End Notes

*Goodnight My Friend, from Galavant, performed by Timothy Omundson
Christmas Day 2026

(18 months later)

"Ding dong merrily on high.... the angel bells are ringing... ding dong verily the sky... is riv'n with angels singing...."

For maybe the first time in his life, Scorpius wished the damn music would stop. The song, playing over some kind of magical loudspeaker, seemed to be taunting him, swinging up and down the scale over and over and rattling his already frayed nerves. It was probably supposed to be cheery, but all it did was remind him where they were on Christmas.

Rose was sleeping now. He was glad. They'd been in the small, plain hospital room for hours, and she was exhausted, her arms lying limply by her sides, palms half-turned toward the ceiling, a lock of hair half-covering her face. He was tired too, but it expressed itself as pain rather than fatigue; a sharp ache in his temples and a slow burn in the centre of his chest where he still bore the jagged round curse scar. It bothered him now only when he was very tired or very stressed. He hadn't noticed it creeping up on him until Rose's eyes had closed, and he'd had a moment to self-evaluate.

"Glooooooooria...."

He reached out and pushed the curl of auburn hair out of Rose's face, where it was sticking slightly. Her forehead and upper lip were damp with sweat. He thought about wiping it away, but he didn't dare wake her now. She looked so very pale. Freckles that were usually nearly invisible were showing up starkly over her nose and cheeks.

"It's going to be okay," he told her, very low. "You'll be okay. I promise."

Her nose twitched, and her brow furrowed in her sleep, shifting on the bed. He pulled his hand back quickly, cursing himself, but too late; her eyes snapped open and she gasped, whimpering.

"It's just me," he told her, reaching for her hand. "You're okay..."

"It hurts," she gasped hoarsely, her breathing hot and ragged against his arm.

"I know," he said, utterly helpless. "Just breathe..."

"No, it's too much!" she cried, making him flinch. "It's - oh - help, someone help me -!"

Scorpius staggered over to the door and yanked it open. "Help!" he yelled into the corridor. "Someone -!"

A Mediwitch in a green robe hurried over to him, but before she could get past him into the room the air was pierced by an earsplitting scream. Scorpius tried to go back, but another Mediwitch came past him and blocked the door. "Stay here," she told him firmly.
"What?" Scorpius stared over the woman's shoulder into the room, where two, now three Healers and Mediwitches were surrounding Rose as she screamed again, sending white-hot daggers right into his heart. "No," he protested. "She needs me." He tried to push his way back inside, but the Mediwitch put up a surprisingly strong hand to stop him. She was a large, round woman and there was no way around her without getting physical.

"Sir! I must insist." The woman crossed her arms and glared at him. He stared at her helplessly. Then someone took him by the shoulders from behind and started dragging him away from the door. Rose screamed again and his knees nearly gave out as he tried to get loose. "Let me go!" he cried. His vision was blurry, swimming. His head was spinning and he didn't know if he was going to break down or pass out.

"Come away lad." A familiar voice from over his shoulder, soft but shaky. "Come away. Let the Healers work."

"No!" He needed to be there. He couldn't bear the thought of leaving her behind like that.

"You can't do any good." The man drew him away and forced him into a plastic chair in the hallway. There were other people there, but in his panic he barely recognised them.

"I should be there with her!" he choked. All he could see was a blur of red hair through a veil of tears. He didn't know when they'd started. He couldn't breathe.

"You'll only be in the way." The voice sounded like it might break, but the hand on Scorpius' shoulder was firm and steady. The door closed, and they could no longer hear the screaming. Silencing charm on the door, probably, he thought through the haze and the fight for air.

"Glooo-ooo-ooo-ooo-ooo-ooo-o0000-o00oo-0000-00ooria, Hosanna in excelsis!"

A gentle pat on his back reminded him how to breathe. Gradually pure blind panic faded into just plain awfulness. Shaky breaths and pounding heart. "Someone make them turn the damn music off," he growled, wiping his eyes and putting his hands over his head. Someone got up and moved away, then another hand landed on his shoulder.

"It'll be all right." A soft, female voice this time.

Rose's parents. He was falling apart in front of Rose's parents. Their daughter was in pain and there was nothing he could do.

"I'm sorry," he said. It came out as a sob. "I'm so sorry. This is all my fault."

"Yes."

"Ron!" Hermione snapped.

Scorpius looked up to see the Minister giving her husband a sharp look.

"What?" he said, innocently. "I thought we were meant to agree to that."

"Yes, when we say it." Hermione sighed and patted Scorpius' shoulder for comfort. She was scared too, he could see it in the crease in her brow and the tremble of her lips as she tried to smile. He knew both of them well enough now, to know they were both being calm for his sake. "If anything it's Ron's fault," Hermione told him, her voice lifting as she attempted to lighten the mood. "This sort of thing runs in his family. It certainly doesn't in mine."
"Mine either," Scorpius said, hiccupsing a little as he wiped his face with the back of his sleeve. He didn't even have the energy to be embarrassed.

"There you are then." She gave his shoulder a little squeeze of comfort.

The music had stopped, Scorpius realised. He looked up and, and wasn't surprised to see Albus jogging back down the corridor. He was wearing Muggle clothes, only a narrow green pin on his collar to mark him as a trainee. Smaller wizarding hospitals like this one didn't like people from St Mungo's showing up in their uniforms. "Better?" he asked, coming to sit with them.

"Yeah." Scorpius took a breath. "I used to have dreams about this," he said softly. All day he'd been trying to avoid the thought, but now it crept its way through the cracks in his defences.

"Everyone does," Ron told him, gripping his shoulder. "They're usually shorter and much less awful than real life, but it's natural..."

"No, I mean... about this. This moment. It was the last Seer dream I ever had, before we left school. I thought... well, when nothing happened last year I passed it off as a recurring nightmare."

"That's probably what it was," Hermione said, ever pragmatic. "Dreams can be funny sometimes."

"I got a Floo to Gran," Albus said, sliding awkwardly into his own chair. "She said she'd bring some of the dinner for us later. And Mum and Dad and Hugo all said they'd swap out with us, if we need it. And to let them know if anything happens, though personally I think we should hold off. We hardly need the entire clan in here blocking up the corridors."

"You don't have to stay," Scorpius said, guiltily. "It's Christmas - you should be with your family."

Albus gave him a pointed, exasperated look and spread his hands. "What do you think I'm doing here, you idiot? Anyway Lizzie promised to bring me pudding. I'm not going to risk missing out on pudding. And..." he turned suddenly serious. "Well, if anything does happen... I know they've got some of the best Mediwitches in the country here, but... I want to be here. In case."

"That means a lot, dear." Hermione put her arm around her nephew and squeezed. "I know she feels safer knowing you're here."

"What are they doing in there?" Ron muttered, glaring at the closed door.

"Don't you start," Hermione sighed.

"They really are the best, Uncle Ron," Albus said.

Scorpius swallowed. His lungs were starting to strain again. "I need some air."

"I'm not surprised, you've been stuck in here all day." Hermione put a little pressure between his shoulder-blades, nudging. "Go on, take a break. We'll be here."

"You'll call me, if...?"

"We'll call you."

He went out. The hospital was hidden behind an old ice-cream shop, now permanently boarded up, despite the popularity of the seaside street it stood on. As Scorpius stepped out into the fresh air, indistinguishable from the crowd in his Muggle clothes, he could smell the ocean, though it was hidden from view by nearby buildings - shops, and restaurants and bars, closed for the holiday. It
was very cold, but the cold was welcome; the icy sea breeze cut through the loose wool of his knitted jumper and brought life into his lungs. The jumper was a present from Hannah. He’d only just put it on that morning, years ago it seemed now, before Rose had gasped and reached for his hand. Now it was late evening. The street was quiet, with only the faint sounds of carols playing from distant houses drifting towards him on the wind.

He was reminded of another Christmas, three years ago today. He’d been sixteen, and feeling once again that he didn’t belong anywhere. Rose had followed him out into the snow. They’d kissed for the first time. He’d been in a row with Albus over something, he remembered… but he’d come around after that.

Even so, everything had been so turbulent, from that point, through having to leave Hogwarts, from being arrested and injured and recovered again, up until Teddy’s rescue. It had seemed sometimes as though his whole life revolved around his fractured relationships with his family, as much as he wanted to try to be normal, in spite of it. It had felt like he had had to try, every day, to show he was better than them. It had been the most important, driving force in his life, but now… well, now he had Rose. And Rose’s family. And the Longbottoms, and even the Potters, to some extent. Life had seemed, despite some unexpected curveballs, more or less perfect. He felt as though he were teetering on the edge of a collapse, trying to snatch with his hands a breeze that was about to topple a house of cards. Impossible.

He stood outside, mulling over the past and the present and the so-uncertain future, until the cold had numbed him all over and his teeth were chattering. It wasn’t easy to find the way back in, but he had a pretty good eye for that sort of thing, now. This hospital, like St Mungo’s, was made of Wizardspace. No wonder he’d felt like he was suffocating. He wondered how Al did it on a daily basis, but then, he probably didn't notice it. No one else ever really seemed to notice.

He made his way slowly back to the ward where Rose was - only to see, as he came around the corner, the door to her room opening and Albus and the Weasleys standing up hurriedly.

"What happened?" he demanded, running up to the Mediwitch who had come out. It was the same one who'd told him to stay out before, so he might have glared at her a little more than was necessary. "What happened, is she okay?" he asked, his voice cracking a little as her face gave him no indication of what to expect. "Is she…"

"Rose is fine," the woman said, clasping her hands in front of her ample bosum. "There were some difficulties, but we had prepared for them. She's resting now."

Scorpius felt like his heart had been held in a vice and was now released. He could hardly breathe again, but then he hardly cared. "Can I see her?" he asked, hoarsely.

"Let her rest, son," Ron said. Scorpius looked over at him, shocked. What did he just call me?

"Well," the Mediwitch said, a smile finally breaking over her stern face. "Perhaps, instead, you would like to meet your daughters?"

July 2031

(five years later)

~*-A-*~
Albus stared at himself in the mirror. He looked, in his opinion, like a boy dressed up in his father's clothing. And no matter what he did, he could not get the collar on the damn dress robes to sit straight. "You can do this..." he told the mirror, fiddling with the layers to try and get them flat, with zero success. "You can do this."

"You certainly can, dearie!" the mirror replied, with irritating cheerfulness.

"Giving yourself a pep talk?" Rose closed the door carefully behind her and came over, picking up the hem of her own dress robes to keep from tripping over the rug. "Is it working?"

"Not really." Albus scrubbed roughly at his face with both hands, turning his cheeks pink. "I cannot get this thing to look right!"

"Well, that's not helping," she scolded, pulling his hands away. "You'll make yourself all red. That look doesn't suit you."

"Very funny," he sighed. He let her take over, focusing on a dark spot on the ceiling just over her left ear and trying not to fidget. "So er... what are you doing here?" he asked, to distract himself from the churning nausea in his stomach. "Isn't Scorp supposed to give me the pre-game speech?"

"It's not Quidditch, Al."

He gave her a look. "I was being metaphorical."

She grinned. "Scorpius is herding all the relatives. I think he might actually enjoy that sort of thing. I said I'd check on you since he can't even dress himself, let alone anyone else. Anyway, I needed some peace and quiet - there are children everywhere. When did everyone we know suddenly become parents?"

He grinned. "You can talk, you started it."

She poked him hard in the collarbone, making him wince. "Oh and he said to tell you he's got his dinner speech all worked out."

Albus sighed and made a face. "If he bursts into song," he said, "I swear to Merlin I'm going to strangle him."

She laughed at that. "Would he do that? This is your day, after all."

He groaned. "I'm starting to regret this decision. Is it too late to make you my best man?"

"Not in the slightest," she said, smiling with amusement as she reached up to tidy his mop of unruly hair into some kind of order. "I'd be honoured. Your best friend might be a bit put out if you do that, though."

"Yes, I suppose." He rolled his eyes. "I guess we were lucky to get him to come. Seems like he's out of the country half the time these days."

"Well." He looked back at her, and there was a slightly wistful look in her eyes. "Yes, he's busy. But he'd drop anything for you, you know that. We both would." Her last tweak of the collar was gentle and probably unnecessary, as though she didn't quite want to let go. "Okay." She stood back and admired her handiwork.

"How do I look?" he spread his arms for her.
"Perfectly dashing. Lizzie is a lucky girl."

Albus felt his face heat up and he smiled. "Could you tell her that? Because she keeps telling everyone she settled way too early."

Rose carefully slipped his glasses off and, peering at the lenses critically, performing a quick cleaning charm before letting him put them back on. "There," she said. "Now you're all set. My big grown up cousin."

"Hey." He reached out and pulled her into a hug. She buried her face in his shoulder for a moment.

"You're going to muss your clothes," she sniffed, her voice a little muffled.

"Oh well." He gave her a little squeeze before she wriggled out of his arms.

"You're going to muss Imy/I clothes," she protested, running one finger under her eye and straightening her dress robes.

"Are you two quite done in here? It's nearly time." Scorpius' blond head was poking through the door. "Hey have you ever met Lizzie's great great uncle? He's bonkers. Also I had to pry your granddad and Hannah's dad away from each other. You won't get them to stop talking through the whole evening, just so you know."

"You're so helpful," Al muttered.

"Alice looks so cute," Scorpius told them earnestly, ignoring him. "She's in this bridesmaid's dress with a little cloak -"

"Scorp, she's thirteen," Rose said, going to take his arm. "You can't call her 'cute' anymore."

"I can't?"

She sighed patiently. "No, love."

He frowned. "Maybe that's why she looked at me weird."

Albus' stomach was starting to make him feel very uncomfortable. His throat was threatening to close up, but at the same time, he realised, he wanted to get out there. And not just because he wanted it to be over. "You said something about it being time?"

"Oh right." Scorpius grinned. "Sorry mate."

"I'll see you later," Rose said, and after a moment leaned up to kiss Albus lightly on the cheek. She dashed off to the pavilion where Lizzie was waiting.

"Ready?" Scorp asked. "Looking sharp, by the way."

"Mm." Albus glancing back at the mirror. "I look like my Dad." Was that what was really bothering him? It seemed like there were so many other things he should be thinking about right now.

"Could be worse."

Al turned back to Scorp, who shrugged. "Al, everyone knows who you are. You're a brilliant Healer. You can kick practically everyone's butt at Quidditch. You're my best friend, and Rose's best friend. You're going to be Lizzie's husband. You think anyone cares if you also happen to be Harry Potter's son?"
Albus took one look back at the mirror, and pushed a wayward lock of hair back down where it had started to stick up at the back. "I guess you're right," he said. His reflection smiled back at him.

September 2038

(seven years later)

The Hogwarts express seemed redder and brighter than ever, as the family entered onto Platform Nine and Three Quarters on the morning of September the first. Rose, pushing a laden baggage trolley, felt a wave of nostalgia as she saw the smoke issuing from its funnel, and heard the enthusiastic *toot toot* of the giant steam engine. The Wizarding world had changed significantly over the last forty years, but some things, it seemed, would never change.

"Mum!" A small, strawberry-blond child gripped her hand, wide-eyed and awestruck. "It's huge."

"Isn't it though?" Rose smiled and stopped the trolley. There was a lot of luggage to unload onto the train, and they'd arrived early in anticipation of a crowd, which was already growing around them as more and more Hogwarts students came through the barrier with their families. "Where has your dad got to?"

The girl pointed with her thumb back over her shoulder, to where Rose could just see Scorpius attempting to help push two trollies at once. His limp was scarcely noticeable, but he didn't have a great deal of control, despite being helped on either side by two more small blonde girls. "What on earth are you doing?" she asked him, as the three of them approached, panting, the two little girls giggling madly.

"Seemed like a good idea at the time," he said, grinning innocently.

"Inky didn't want to ride on the trolley, Mum," one of the girls said, holding up a frightened-looking black-and-white kitten.

"Do be careful with him, Lyra," Rose warned. The kitten looked as though the trip through the barrier had been a particularly unpleasant experience.

"I had to hold Tiggles too," the other girl explained, just as the ginger kitten she was holding disappeared into the pocket of her new school robes. "So we only had one hand each."

The child holding Rose's hand muttered something under her breath. Rose didn't quite get the words, but she could guess them. She decided to ignore it in the interest of time and sanity, however. "All right, the three of you," she said, in the voice that meant she had better be listened to, or else. "Go and find your seats and we'll get your trunks onto the train. Go, hurry."

The two girls with the kittens ran off immediately, but the third stayed, clinging to Rose's hand in hesitation.

"Go on," Rose said, pushing past her own qualms. She'd forgotten how very small the first years were in comparison to so many older, larger children. It would only take one to knock one of the girls over and they'd be crushed or trampled. But her parents had managed to let her and her brother go on the same platform, all those years ago. She had to do the same now, no matter how much she
wanted to hold all their hands at once.

Reluctantly the third child let go of her hand and hurried after her sisters, leaving her parents guarding the trunks. "This is mad," Scorpius said as he looked around. "It's all the same."

"I was just thinking that." Rose put a hand on one of the trunks. "You ever wish you could go back?"

"To Hogwarts?" Scorpius smiled wistfully. "All the time. Wasn't life so much simpler?" Rose gave him a look. "Well," he conceded. "Most of the time, anyway."

"Um… um… scuse me?"

They looked around to see a girl, maybe a second or third year, staring at Scorpius with very wide, dark eyes. "Yes?" Scorpius said gently, ducking a little to be on a better eye level. The girl was clutching a piece of parchment to her chest, and was bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet. Looking behind her, Rose could see a couple of heads peering out of one of the train windows, listening in.

"Are you… are you Scorpius Malfoy?" the girl asked, stammering a little in her nervousness.

"Gosh, that's a funny thing," Scorpius said, looking down at himself in apparent amazement. "I do believe I am. Isn't that amazing."

"Oh my god." The girl bit her lip and bounced even harder. "I love you so much. All your songs. I went to your concert last year, in London. My Mum even loves you! She won't believe you were here, she already left! She's a Muggle. She nearly died when I told her you were a wizard too!"

Scorpius grinned. "Well, great. Thanks. Tell your Mum I said hi."

The girl put a hand to her mouth, as if to stifle a giggle, then shyly offered the piece of parchment. "Could I… maybe could I… have your autograph?"

"To show your Mum, eh?"

The heads at the train window laughed loudly, and the girl blushed. Scorpius smiled at her and pulled a quill out of midair, which always seemed to impress people, and took the offered parchment. "What's your name?"

Rose waited patiently until the girl had gone practically skipping back to her friends to admire the message. "Really?" she said quietly to her husband once the child was out of earshot.

Scorpius shrugged at her helplessly. "She asked, what was I supposed to do? Tell her no?"

"Well…" Rose sighed. "No, I suppose not. But we're here for our girls. It's a big day for them. Can we just be normal people for one morning, please?"

He put an arm around her shoulders and squeezed her arm lightly. "Course we can. I'm sorry, you're right. No more autographs on the platform, I promise."

"Thank you." She kissed his cheek.

"Mum, we found a compartment!" Lyra was waving from one of the train windows. After a moment the three of them came tumbling out, Lyra and Daisy - now sans kittens - and trailing a little behind as usual, Melody. Her girls. Their girls. The day they had been born, Christmas day, nearly twelve
years ago, had been one of the most terrifying and yet most wonderful days she could remember, and now they were starting Hogwarts. She had to pause a moment to swallow an emotion she wasn't quite ready to deal with, and force a smile onto her face. She went to help her husband levitate the trunks into the chosen compartment, and then it was time for goodbyes. Lyra and Daisy were beaming, and gave her hugs and kisses in return before going to be lifted and spun around by their father, and then more hugs. Melody put her arms around her mother's neck and clung on as if for dear life.

"Do I have to go, Mum?" she asked, and Rose's heart very nearly broke. "I want to stay with you and Dad."

"After two weeks at Hogwarts you'll forget Dad and I even exist," Rose assured her, holding back the tears she felt gathering in her own eyes. "Trust me. Anyway we're going on holiday, remember? You'd have to stay in the house on your own."

"Dad's going on tour," Melody said, sniffling and wiping her nose on the back of her sleeve. "That's not a holiday."

"Well, it will be a holiday for me," Rose said, taking a handkerchief out of her pocket to wipe her daughter's face. "You'll see. You're going to have the absolute best time. You will. And we'll see you at Christmas, all right?"

Melody nodded bravely.

"And you just let us know if you change your mind about having a kitten," Rose said. "We'll figure out how to send you one."

"I don't want a stupid kitten," the girl said firmly. "I don't need one. I'm gonna be an… Ananimagus."

Rose smiled at the brave attempt at pronunciation. "I bet you are. Just make sure you do it legally and get registered," she added, with mock severity. "And don't do any dangerous magic without supervision."

Melody smiled. "Yeah Mum, okay."

"I mean it. Just because your grandma is the Minister for Magic, and your mum is a brilliant Cursebreaker, don't think you'll get any special treatment."

"Okay, Mum."

"Go hug your dad now." Rose kissed her on the forehead and gave her one more hug. Then she forced herself to walk down the steps back onto the station platform. Scorpius followed her moments later, and took her hand.

"You okay?" he asked, in a tone that suggested he knew exactly how she was feeling.

She turned to him with a shaky smile. "Do we have to lose all of them at once?" she asked.

He tilted his head to one side. "That's the disadvantage of having triplets, I suppose," he said lightly. "Damn, we finally found one."

She smacked him on the arm and wiped her face with the handkerchief. She was about to tell him not to be so stupidly smart all the time, when another voice spoke from behind them.
"Excuse me… are you Scorpius Malfoy?"

Scorpius winced a little, so that only she could see. He gave her a helpless look, and she rolled her eyes in silent assent, in a *you'll pay for this later* sort of way. She supposed she should be used to it by now. It had taken him hardly any time at all, even while balancing three children, to make a name for himself not only in the Wizarding and the Muggle world, but on an international scale. He was recognised wherever they went, something not even her Uncle Harry dealt with when he chose to venture into Muggle areas.

She had prepared herself for another wide-eyed young fan, but was surprised to see, as they turned to face the voice that had spoken, an older boy, perhaps in his sixth or seventh year. He wasn't a Prefect at least, and neither did he seem to have any sign of House affiliation - not that that was particularly unusual. The strangest thing was that there was something oddly familiar about him. He had dark hair, a long, straight nose, and handsome, narrow features, in contrast with a gangly adolescence to his build, a boy on the verge of becoming a man. She was sure she had never seen him before, and yet…

She looked up at her husband, and was surprised to see him staring, in apparent shock. "I know you," he said to the boy, and his voice shook slightly.

The boy's eyes did widen then, in surprise. "Oh," he said, and when he spoke again Rose noticed his voice was slightly accented. "I didn't know if maybe you had seen pictures… mother never said."

"I'm sorry," Rose said, interrupting, frightened by Scorpius' suddenly pale face and unreadable expression. "Who are you?"

"Oh," the boy said again, clearly flustered. "I'm sorry, you must be… Ms Weasley?"

She nodded. Scorpius had insisted on her keeping her name, and all the girls were Weasleys, too. She saw the sense in it. Scorpius had always said the name might as well end with him, and anyway, Malfoy might have less of a dangerous association these days, but it still attracted attention of a different kind. Not that Weasley was much better these days, though there were a lot more of them, so the attention was spread out. The Wizarding World was an especially small one, sometimes. "And you?" she prompted again.

"I'm… my name is… Emeric Belanger," the boy said, pronouncing the name with a marked French accent, and his eyes flickered back to meet Scorpius' with some anxiety. "I'm your half-brother." It almost sounded like a question.

Scorpius swallowed, and seemed to get a hold of himself. Rose, looking between them, realised why she had thought he was familiar. If you ignored the dark hair, certain features were alike, despite the age gap. As far as she knew however, Scorpius had never met nor seen any photos of his mother's younger son.

"You go to Hogwarts?" Scorpius asked, a little hoarsely.

"Yes - no - I went to Beauxbatons," Emeric explained. "My family moved to England this summer, and mother wanted me to do my last year at Hogwarts. I… didn't realise I would see you here."

"Well, you have three nieces," Scorpius said. He was standing somewhat stiffly; Rose put a hand on the small of his back, and after a moment felt him loosen up a little. "They're starting this year."

"Oh… I know," the boy said, somewhat abashed. "You're… sort of famous. No one ever believes me when I say you're my brother. I thought about writing to you a lot. But mother… "
Scorpius hesitated, then nodded. "I understand," he said, low. "It's a shame, I… would have liked to meet you earlier. But I'm glad we have, now."

"Me too." The boy's lips curved upwards in a nervous sort of smile that was very familiar. Rose had to cover her mouth so that he wouldn't think she was laughing at him. "Maybe I could write to you from Hogwarts? I'd like to get to know you, you know, and your daughters… there's this whole part of my family I don't even know about."

Rose felt Scorpius shoulders sag a little, and suddenly he was himself again. "Course," he said, smiling in return. "I'd like that too. Emeric." He offered his hand, and the boy shook it, clearly somewhat awed. "Now you should get on the train. Wouldn't want to be late for your final year."

"Right." Emeric grinned and waved, and hurried back towards the train.

"Mum, mum!" The girls were waving from their own compartment window. "Is it going to leave soon?"

"Any minute," Rose said, shifting her attention with some difficulty away from her brother-in-law's retreating back. "Now, you all have everything? You will be good, now, won't you? And make sure you're polite to your teachers, and oh - don't forget to give Neville our love - "

"Mum," Daisy complained. "We can't give the Headmaster love. That's weird."

"He'll be very upset if you ignore him on purpose," Scorpius said, clearly amused. "We'll see you all at Christmas."

"Are you going to see Grandfather later, Dad?" Melody asked, her voice nearly drowned out by the chaos of the platform.

"Yes," Scorpius said, "And you'll see him at Christmas too, remember."

"Oh good!" she said, smiling.

"All right, bunch up you lot," Scorpius said, taking a camera out of his robes. "Let's get a picture for me to show him so he knows what you all look like now."

Lyra rolled her eyes, but the three girls obediently smiled for a picture. Then the train let out a loud screech and a hiss of steam. The girls jumped, then started bouncing excitedly as the train began to move. "Bye!" they called out, waving frantically.

Scorpius and Rose stood together, waving, until the train was out of sight. Rose realised her vision was blurry, and took out a handkerchief to wipe her eyes. "Oh," she sighed. "It's all so fast."

"Yes. I know. But they'll be brilliant. Hogwarts won't know what hit it."

Rose smiled and took his hand. Her thoughts drifted back to the encounter on the platform as they wheeled the empty trolleys back into a trolley park, and made their way back towards the barrier to Kings Cross. "We'll have to owl them and explain," she said, half to herself.

"Hm?" Scorpius murmured, as though he'd been lost in his thoughts as well.

"Emeric. We'll have to send an owl to the girls explaining they have another uncle, before they run into him at school."

Scorpius nodded slowly. "Right. We should probably tell Neville too, just in case. You do that then,
while I go and see father."

She squeezed his hand. "How many more days?"

"Ninety-two and counting. He can't wait to meet the girls."

"Are you sure it's a good idea?" Rose prompted. It wasn't the first time she had asked, but it seemed important right now, to make absolutely sure. She had chosen to forgive the elder Malfoy a long time ago, for trying to kill her, but she knew her husband had battled for a long time with mixed feelings on the subject.

"He's changed, you know," her husband said, softly. "I mean really. He hasn't stopped asking about the girls since they were born. He can come over on Christmas Eve, we'll celebrate their birthday then. And we can spend Christmas Day at the Burrow like always."

"All right." Rose linked her fingers with his. "Though maybe its best we don't mention Emeric to him just yet."

He hesitated, staring off into the distance for a moment. "No," he said finally. "Probably best."

"How did you recognise Emeric?" Rose asked, finally daring to address her curiosity. "You haven't seen any pictures, I know that much."

"No," Scorpius said, and frowned. "I didn't know who he was really, only that I'd seen him before. In a dream, I think. A long time ago. But then I knew, as soon as I saw him."

Rose laughed. "Oh, you and your prophetic dreams. I'd forgotten about those."

"So had I, till now," Scorpius said thoughtfully. "It was the very first one I had, when the Veritaserum knocked me out. When I saw the future, and you were dead. And he was the one who warned me what would happen, so I knew to change it."

Rose stopped laughing. She didn't like to think about those few days. Her hand tightened a little in his.

"He told me I'd meet him one day," Scorpius went on. "So I suppose it's full circle."

"And yet you failed your Divination OWL," she said, gently teasing in the hopes of lightening the mood.

"And you never let me live it down," he shot back.

Once they were in Muggle King's Cross, they found a lift from which to Apparate in privacy, and within moments they were back in their own home. They went down the hall and into the living room, feeling that strange sensation of something being different, an absence - of noise, of chaos, of girlish laughter - that wasn't so much a loss as a shift of circumstances. Still, Rose felt her heart sink again as she realised how empty it all was. The girls had been the centre of her life for so long, she felt oddly adrift.

"Hey," Scorpius said, and his arms slid gently around her waist. "Don't be too sad. We're having dinner with Al and Lizzie tonight, and then tomorrow it's off to travel the world, like we always wanted."

"You'll be working the whole time," Rose pointed out, sighing a little. "Will I even see you?"
"Course you will," he said, and turned her to face him, kissing her softly on the forehead. "But look. If you'd rather, I'll cancel the whole thing. It could just be you and me for three months, till I have to come pick my dad up from prison." He rolled his eyes, and she couldn't help a soft laugh at his poor attempt at humour.

"Separate you from your music?" she said, with mock horror. "What do you take me for? What sort of person would I be if I forced you to give up your favourite thing?"

"Music?" Scorpius made a face as though he was considering, then he shrugged. "It's a living. And I love it, of course. But it's not my favourite thing."

"No?" Rose stood on tiptoe in the silent emptiness of the living room and rested her elbows on his shoulders. "It's not?"

"Of course not. If I had to, I'd give it all up in a second. For you?" He kissed her; soft and tender, the way that still made her heart melt. "You, and the girls, and our family, Rose." He pressed his forehead against hers, and she closed her eyes, content. "Those are my very favourite things."

Chapter End Notes

Well, there it is.

I wrote the first 1000 words of this story in about 2009. Those words sat patiently waiting on the hard-drive for about two years. When I finally decided to add a bit more, I wasn't planning on letting anyone read it; it was just for me, a way for me to continue to enjoy the characters I have loved so much for two thirds of my life. In 2012, having reached the fourth year of Scorpius, Albus and Rose's story, I decided I wanted others to be able to enjoy them too. Scorpius' innocence, Albus' enthusiasm and Rose's generosity and cleverness deserved to be shared.

It has taken me another four years to finish the story, and I have to thank everyone who left reviews, comments & kudos on both sites where it is hosted, and on my tumblr. You guys pushed me through some of the most difficult places, where I would spend months occasionally opening up the current document, staring at it for a while, and closing it again. You helped me fill in the middle where I already had a beginning and an end. You continuously reignited my love for and interest in these characters and the story I built around them. I hope both its ending and its Epilogue (you didn't think I could shamelessly plagiarise the seven-year structure and then not do an Epilogue did you? Shame!) were satisfying enough to make your devotion worth it. It only took 44 chapters for the title to pay off. No one can say I don't play the long game.

It is the end of the story, but not necessarily the end of these characters. I will no doubt be inspired eventually to write some short stories or one-shots in the ROR universe. Obviously I wasn't able to wrap up everyone's story in a nice neat bow, though I hope I answered all of the important questions. But I would love you guys to tell me who or what you would like me to feature in any future works.

Thank you once again to anyone who has made it all the way, particularly anyone who was reading right from the beginning. This monster turned out to be much longer (both in word count and actual time taken to write) and bigger in its world and cast of characters than was ever anticipated, and you guys are its true heroes.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!