

Fitting In

by flaminia_x

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Chapter 1 of 1

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The Floo whooshed, and in a flash of green light, Ginny Potter and her eldest son emerged. James hurriedly wrenched his hand out of his mum's with an impatient glare and hollered, "Uncle Ron! Aunt 'Mione! We're here!"

"James, shh!" Ginny laughed. "No need to be quite so loud about it." James grinned sheepishly, but scowled as she ruffled his thick black hair.

"Muuuum!" he hissed, embarrassed.

"Gin? That you?" Ron called from the next room. "Come on in; we're just setting the table."

"Oh, Ron, it's your special night; let us do that," Ginny shouted back. "Come on, James, your father and the others will be right behind us. Besides, I bet Grammy and Grampa are here already."

James smiled widely and ran for the kitchen. Ginny chuckled and followed him, shaking her head at how quickly he was growing up. He'd be off to Hogwarts before they could blink.

The Floo coughed green dust again and out tumbled Harry Potter, clutching Lily and Albus by the hands.

Lily immediately freed her hand from Harry's and ran for the kitchen, hearing James happily chattering with her cousins, Rose and Hugo. From the living room, Harry could hear Arthur's deep chuckle as Lily bounded into the room, shouting her greetings. He shook his head; his youngest had all the energy and enthusiasm of a typical four year old, but she was also a born leader and quite a ham to boot. Maybe she'd grow up to be an actress, or a barrister, or a Ministry official ...

Albus tugged on his hand, distracting him. "Daddy, are we staying long?"

"Well, it's your Aunt Hermione's and Uncle Ron's anniversary, so we're here to spend some time with them," Harry explained again. "We're going to have dinner, and you can play with your cousins, and..."

"But I don't want to," Albus said, scrunching up his face.

"We talked about this already, Al," Harry said, kneeling down to face his son. "Anniversaries only happen once a year, and it's very important to celebrate with your relatives and loved ones. Besides, you love playing with Rose and Hugo! Remember how much fun you had last time?"

"I guess," Albus sniffled, scuffing the toe of his trainer on the wood floor.

Harry smiled and gave his son a hug. "Don't worry, okay?"

Albus looked up at his father doubtfully. "I just want..."

Just then, Lily gave a particularly loud squeal.

"Uh-oh! Sounds like your sister is up to something in there," Harry said. "Let's go say hello to everyone, okay?"

Albus nodded sullenly and trudged along behind his father.

Hugs and greetings flew as quickly as Molly's magicked kitchen utensils, and in less than an hour, a meal fit for a Weasley King was on the enlarged dining room table.

"Mum, you've outdone yourself," Ron said, his eyes gleaming at the heaps of mashed potatoes, the roast swimming in juice, the vegetables, and the freshly baked dinner rolls.

"Seriously, Molly, this is beautiful," Hermione said sincerely. "Thank you all so much! We're so glad you could celebrate our anniversary with us!"

"Don't we do that every year?" Harry joked, carving the roast and sending the plates spinning around the table so that everyone could serve themselves.

Hermione rolled her eyes, but laughed, spooning some peas onto Hugo's plate. "Yes, it has become a bit of a tradition, hasn't it?"

"I like traditions!" James said loudly, tossing a dinner roll into the air and catching it in one hand. "That's why I'm going to be in Gryffindor when I go to Hogwarts!"

Harry laughed and patted his son on the back. "If you want it, you'll have it," he said.

Albus looked down at his plate and shrunk down in his seat a little bit, swirling the tip of his spoon around the gravy pudding to the side of his potatoes.

"What do you think, Rose?" Ginny said, smiling down at her niece.

"Um," Rose said, swallowing down a mouthful of peas, "I think Gryffindor's nice. It has red, like my hair."

Ginny laughed. "Perfectly reasonable. Al, what about you?"

Albus gulped and said, "Well..."

"Yay, Fiffindooooor!" Lily yelled loudly, slamming her fist down onto her spoon and sending a hunk of potatoes hurtling directly onto Molly's cheek.

Molly gasped in surprise, then immediately burst into good-natured laughter, looking lovingly at Arthur. Ginny and Hermione shared fond, exasperated glances, shaking their heads in mirth. Harry smiled and apologized, which Molly brushed off with a wave of her hand. Ron merely handed her a fresh serviette and shoveled in another mouthful of roast.

"Well, looks like we'll have a third generation of Gryffindors, eh?" Harry said, looking proudly around the table.

"Yep!" James announced. Rose nodded vigorously, and Lily, now being helped along by Ginny, shrieked in glee.

Albus merely stabbed his roast and sighed.

After dinner, Molly and Arthur had all but shoved everyone out of the kitchen so that they could clean up, and Harry proffered a bottle of red wine for the four of them to share. Passing around the glasses, he curled up on the couch with Ginny, while Ron settled in next to Hermione in their favorite armchairs. They shooed the kids off to play, smiling wryly at the sounds of hide-and-seek echoing down the hallway. Lily's squeals and Hugo's attempts to count were readily audible, and everyone barely stifled their laughter when they all heard "one, two, fwee, fwee, six, seven, eight, TEN!" followed by Rose's bossy demands that he do it right.

"Rose, honey, remind him of his numbers, don't yell at him," Hermione admonished kindly and smiled when she heard her daughter coaching Hugo patiently.

"She's good with him," Ginny noted, reaching for her glass.

"Yeah, she's got a real knack for handling him, that one. When she remembers to be patient," Ron laughed.

"Patient? What's that?" Harry chuckled.

"No idea," Ginny agreed, smiling over at her husband.

"You lot certainly have your hands full with that Lily," Hermione said. "She's quite ... uh ..."

"She sure is," Ginny sighed, causing everyone to burst out laughing again.

"Eh, she'll grow out of it," Ron said assuredly. "Rose did."

"Rose was never quite that loud," Harry said, wincing as another of Lily's piercing shrieks flew down the hallway.

"Lily, honey, inside voice, please," Ginny called sternly, smiling when Lily piped back with a cheerful "Okay, Mummy."

"Okay, you're right," Ron said, sipping his wine. "Rose was never quite that loud."

"And neither were James or Albus," Harry said.

"Oh, come on, Harry," Hermione said, giving him a look over her wine glass. "James was pretty rambunctious as a toddler, remember?"

Harry winced, remembering how James had once accidentally broken Hermione's favorite vase during a nasty temper tantrum when he was three. It had been easily repaired with a simple charm, but that had been the first time they'd had to punish James. He'd settled down a bit, though, by the time he was Lily's age, especially once Ginny had gotten him his first training broom. He hadn't had a single tantrum since, as all Harry or Ginny had to say was that they'd take away his broom if he didn't behave. Over the years he'd become a decent Quidditch player, able to keep up against Harry and Ginny if they limited themselves to children's brooms on the pitch outside the Burrow. Maybe he'd even play for Gryffindor one day.

Harry smiled. "He was, indeed. Still sorry about that vase, by the way." He chuckled as Hermione rolled her eyes at him in pretend anger, then laughed.

"Don't worry, Lily will grow out of it," she said. "Maybe she also needs a training broom?"

"We got her one of her own, actually, as James refuses to part with his," Ginny said. "But she's more inclined to use it as a prop in one of the plays she puts on. She likes

to putter around on it when we're outside playing Quidditch, but she's just as happy teaching her stuffed animals how to read or playing dress-up."

"Or digging in the dirt," Harry supplemented. "She does love dirt."

"She probably just likes the fuss you make when she gets dirty," Hermione observed wryly.

"Well, that too," Ginny laughed. "Gives her a chance to change clothes."

"Again," Harry and Ginny said in tandem, chuckling.

"Hugo's just about at that stage, too," Ron said, topping off everyone's wine. "Not the changing clothes bit, the trying out all sorts of activities bit."

"He's starting to really get the knack of reading," Hermione said enthusiastically. "He still likes playing with Bucky, though."

"He still has that hippogriff doll?" Harry asked in surprise.

"Won't part with it, mate," Ron said with a smile. "He sleeps with it every night."

"Anyway, he's definitely going through a phase where he wants to try everything out, do what everyone else is doing, so he'll read with me, or play floor Quidditch with Ron, or play whatever game Rosie's come up with," Hermione continued.

"How's Al doing?" Ron asked.

"Oh, you know Albus," Harry smiled. "Always with his nose in a book, that one. Can't ever seem to get him out of his room."

"He was awfully quiet at dinner tonight," Hermione observed, sipping her wine and putting her feet up onto Ron's lap, smiling as he gave them a gentle squeeze.

"He's always been quiet," Ginny said. "It's just his nature, I suppose. He was never quite like either James or Lily, all full of energy and noise."

"That's true enough," Harry agreed. "He's our little bookworm."

Just then, James ran in, breathless. "Dad, make her stop," he pouted.

Lily ran in after him, yelling, "Dadmakeherstop!" She burst into a fit of giggles and fell to the floor.

"Daaaad!" James said, crossing his arms in annoyance.

"Daaaad!" Lily said, banging her heels on the floor.

"Alright, you two. Lily, give it a rest, okay?" Ginny said. "Why don't you go find Hugo and play with him?"

"Okay, Mummy!" Lily said, and a second later, she was gone, her feet pounding heavily down the hallway.

"How's that, Jamie?" Harry said.

"Dad. My name is James," James huffed, staring at his father.

"Yes, sir!" Harry said, saluting his son and giving him a wink. "Now, why don't you show Rosie some of your Quidditch moves? You can use the brooms in the play room as long as you're not more than two feet off the ground, alright?"

James's eyes lit up. "Okay!"

The adults laughed to themselves as James ran out of the room with almost as much excitement as Lily had a minute before.

"I'm off to the loo," Ron said, standing and stretching. "Anyone need anything?"

Amid a chorus of nos, he walked down the hallway toward the bathroom and quickly relieved himself. But when he emerged, he was surprised to see a shadowy figure crouched on the stairs. As he walked closer, he realized it was Albus, sitting with his back to the hallway, hunched into a ball.

Not wishing to startle him, Ron coughed, wincing when Albus jumped.

"Sorry, Al, didn't mean to scare you," Ron apologized.

"S okay," Albus mumbled, ducking his head.

Ron looked at him quizzically. "Hey, champ, you alright?" he asked softly.

"M fine," the boy answered gruffly, not meeting Ron's eyes.

Ron stood there silently for a moment, weighing the scene in front of him. "Well, I don't know about you, but I was getting a bit tired of being in there with all the adults. I was going to come in here and sit on the stairs myself. Do you mind if I join you?"

Albus said nothing, but shuffled over silently, giving Ron room enough to sit on the stair below his.

Ron looked at him shrewdly, then said, "It's a lot, huh?"

Albus looked up at him swiftly. "Wh-whaddya mean?"

"Oh, nothing," Ron said nonchalantly. "It's just that James is going off to Hogwarts next year. That must be exciting, right?"

Albus's face darkened and he kicked his heel against the stair Ron was sitting on. "Yeah. Exciting."

Ron nodded, then said, "And Lily! Boy, she's getting big, isn't she?"

Al said nothing, just continued to kick his heel aimlessly, his head bowed.

"Must be hard, huh?" Ron asked quietly.

His eyes softened as he looked on his nephew. Albus's eyes had filled with tears that he was hastily trying to blink away and hide. How this brought back memories!

"Y'know," Ron said slowly, "I remember when I was about your age. Your Uncle Bill and Uncle Charlie and Uncle Percy were all off at Hogwarts already. That left me stuck at home with Fred and George and your mum."

Albus sniffled, blinking, but his heels had stilled, so Ron knew he was listening.

He continued. "You think James is crazy about his broom? You should have seen your Uncle George. Your Grammy tried so hard to keep his feet on the floor, she even charmed his shoes. Too bad your Uncle Fred told him to just fly barefoot. The two of them took off for the Quidditch pitch in broad daylight, no supervision, not a word to anyone about where they were going, and the next thing you know, there they were, running back to the house. Your Grampa found the pieces of a broken broom the next day, hidden in the compost heap."

Ron caught the flicker of an interested eye, but Albus still said nothing.

"Oh, the yelling your Grammy did when she found out," Ron chuckled. "Have you ever heard a Howler? I'm telling you, your Grammy doesn't need them to get her point across."

Leaning in toward his nephew, he said conspiratorially, "Don't ever tell her I said so, but I think that's where your sister Lily gets her lungs from."

Albus grimaced and turned his face away from Ron, his hands gripping the stair tightly.

Ron sighed inwardly. Even more softly, he said, "Al, you know how much your parents love you, right?"

A small, quiet voice said, "No, they don't."

"Oh, Albus," Ron said. "Yes, they do. So, so much."

Albus burst into heaving sobs. "Then why did they have to have *her*?" he said brokenly, shoulders shaking.

"Because they loved you and your brother so much that they wanted to have that much love for another child, too," Ron said firmly.

"It's ... not ... true," Albus said between shudders, tears flowing down his cheeks. "They weren't ... happy ... with ... me!"

"Now, why on earth would you think they weren't happy with you?" Ron asked quietly.

"Because I'm different," Albus stated. "I'm not like James."

"Well, no, you're not," Ron said. "But I'm not like any of my brothers either."

Albus didn't respond, his small shoulders bowed and tears dropping from his cheeks onto his balled-up fists.

"I used to think the same thing, you know," Ron confided. "I was convinced for the longest time that Grammy and Grampa had been waiting for your mum, and that they hadn't really wanted me, either. They'd only wanted a girl and kept trying til she came along."

Albus gasped in a big, shuddering breath.

"But," Ron continued carefully, "it wasn't true. It took me a long time to realize it, though. But eventually I figured out that Grammy and Grampa just have an extra large amount of love in their hearts, and they wanted to keep sharing that love with all of us. Your mum just happened to arrive last, that's all. And it's the same with you three. Just because your mum and dad had Lily last, it doesn't mean that they didn't want you. That'd be like saying because your mum and dad had you second, it meant they didn't want James."

Albus's sobs stilled, and his hands unclenched. "But ... they love James," he said uncertainly.

"They sure do," Ron said. "And they love you too. Just as much as they love James, and just as much as they love Lily."

"I don't think so," Albus said quietly, wiping tears off his cheeks with the back of one hand.

"Well, now, look," Ron said. "I happen to be Rose's and Hugo's dad, right? I love them both equally, but I don't love them in the same way."

"What do you mean?" Albus asked suspiciously.

"I mean that I love Rose because she's my first born, and because she's smart, and because she's patient with her younger brother, and because she has ginger hair like me, and because when she smiles she looks like her mum," Ron said. "And I love Hugo because he's my little boy, and because he's learning to count, and because he likes his broom, and because he loves to eat, like me. And for tons of other reasons. What I mean," he continued, "is that your parents see special things in each of you, and those are the things they love the most."

"I don't think I have any special things," Albus said morosely, his head drooping.

Ron looked at his nephew sharply. "You can't think of anything that makes you special?"

"No," Albus said decisively. "Just things that make me different."

Ron chuckled softly. "But Al, those are the things that make you special!"

"But Mummy and Dad don't like those things as much as the things that make James and Lily special," Albus said, doubt creeping back into his small voice again.

"Like what?" Ron asked.

"Daddy and Mummy love that James is good at Quidditch. They keep talking about whether he'll make the house team as a first year like Daddy did. They always talk about how he looks just like Daddy," Albus said, a tear rolling back down his cheek unbidden. "And Lily has Mummy's red hair, and she likes her broom too, and she's a girl ..."

"And everyone pays attention to her, because she's loud, and because she's five and still needs help doing a lot of the stuff that you and James already can do on your own, right?" Ron asked.

Albus nodded, sniffing. "I don't look like Mummy. Or Daddy. And ..." His eyes darted nervously up toward Ron, and his fists balled back up. "And ... I don't like Quidditch!"

His eyes squinched shut, and he turned his face away from Ron.

Ron exhaled softly. Poor Albus! At eight years old, that must have seemed like the biggest burden in the world, especially knowing how encouraging Harry and Ginny were with James.

"Albus, look at me," he said gently. "Come on, look at me. It's okay."

Albus looked up at him, small face damp and twisted.

"Albus, it's absolutely, totally, one hundred percent fine that you don't like Quidditch," Ron said firmly.

"Not to Mummy and Daddy. They don't understand," he said, sounding defeated.

"Well, now, I wouldn't be too sure of that," Ron said, wrapping his arm around the young boy. "Your Auntie Hermione doesn't like Quidditch either, you know, and somehow she gets along with me and your mum and dad."

"She doesn't?" Albus snuffled, smearing tears across his face.

"Not one bit," Ron said, rubbing Al's arm gently. "Come to think of it, I can't remember the last time she's even been on a broom. Doesn't like heights, you know, but don't tell her I told you, okay? That's just between you and me," he said.

Albus nodded glumly. "But that's just Auntie 'Mione," he protested. "They like her fine. But they'd probably like me more if I could fly better, or if I had ginger hair like Lily or green eyes like James."

"Oh, Al," Ron sighed, hugging the boy to him. "You might not have green eyes like your dad, but you have your mum's brown eyes, and her nose, and you have your dad's chin. And your hair never does lie flat, does it?" he joked, trying unsuccessfully to coax a smile out of his nephew.

When it didn't work, he sighed and continued. "Look, I promise you, your mum and dad love you, regardless of whether you like Quidditch or not. They love you for who you are, no matter what you decide you like."

"It's not true!" Albus protested, another sob wracking his small body. "They're always making me go flying with them, when I don't want to! I just want ..."

"Want what, Al? Whatever it is, it's alright," Ron said reassuringly.

"I just want to keep reading, that's all," Albus confessed through his tears.

"Ah, I see," Ron said. "And they don't let you?"

"No!" Albus said angrily. "They're always making me stop and making me get on my broom, even when I don't want to!"

"Have you tried telling them you'd rather read?" Ron asked.

"Yes! But they say I have to come out of my room and be part of the family," Albus said in a perfect imitation of his father. "And Mum always agrees, and then they try to get me to go flying with them, but I hate it!"

"Do they always make you fly whenever you'd rather be reading?" Ron asked.

"Well, no, sometimes they want to do other stuff, like going to see people or having dinner or something," Albus said.

Ron stifled a laugh at the indignant tone in Albus's voice, thinking fondly back on Hermione as a young girl. "That doesn't seem too unreasonable, I think, yeah? That maybe you'd eat dinner with them without having a book with you?"

"I guess ...," Albus replied. "But every time I say I want to keep reading, Daddy gets a look on his face, like I'm doing something wrong or something. Like I'm disappointing him."

Ron could very well imagine the look that Albus was describing; he was sure he and Harry had both cast that look at Hermione many times over the years every time she'd beg off time at the lake or the pitch to study. It gave him a whole new perspective on just how strong a woman he'd married that she would have put up with that for so many years. He hugged Albus to him and said, "Well, that's your Daddy's fault, then."

That certainly caught Al by surprise because he gasped and looked up at Ron, eyes wide. "What?" he asked, confused.

"You see, Al, your dad just doesn't understand books the way you do. He's never been a big fan of studying. Your Auntie Hermione had to help him a lot with his schoolwork ... alright, she helped both of us. A lot. He likes being outdoors, being active, more than he likes reading. But that's just what he likes to do, just like reading is what you like to do. There's nothing wrong with that. And if your dad doesn't appreciate books the way you do, that's not your fault, see? You might just have to help him understand why you like them so much. Do you understand?"

"I dunno," Albus said. "I never thought about it like that. I don't know how to make him understand."

"Well, can you try to explain to me why you like books better than other things?" Ron asked.

"I just ... feel happy when I read. Like I'm having adventures, and seeing new things. It's like I'm a part of the story too," Albus stated.

Ron smiled. "Well, I think your dad can understand a thing or two about having some adventures."

"And ... I like learning about new things. I like being able to figure out the answers to things, and I can always figure out who did the crimes in the Auror Holmes mysteries, and I really really like dinosaurs," Albus said a bit more enthusiastically. "And hippogriffs, and acromantulas, and *Hogwarts: A History*, and goblins, and -"

"See?" Ron said. "You can explain it! You're doing a great job telling me about it, anyway."

"I just don't think Daddy and Mummy will understand. They hate it when I read in my room," Albus said, his face falling again.

"Do you always read in your room?" Ron asked.

Albus nodded, his small face wistful.

"Maybe it's just that they miss you when you're not with them, and they wish you spent more time together. Do you think maybe you all could compromise?" Ron asked.

"You mean like I do something different and they do too?" Albus asked.

"Yeah," Ron explained. "How about you bring your books out into the kitchen, or the living room, and read there? That way you're with the family, but you can still read. And maybe sometimes you can show them what you're reading, and why you like it so much."

"Maybe ..." Albus said doubtfully.

"And I bet they just worry that you might not spend enough time with kids your own age," Ron mused. "But you know what? Not only does your Auntie Hermione love books, but Rosie's a great reader. Maybe you guys could swap books sometime, or talk about your favorites together."

Albus made a face. "I bet she doesn't like acromantulas and Auror Holmes mysteries," he scoffed.

"Are you kidding? She all but begged me to buy her the latest one, just last week. She's hooked!" Ron said.

Albus's jaw dropped. "But ... but she's a girl!" he exclaimed.

Ron chuckled. "You just wait for Lily to grow up a bit more. She'll be nicking your books before you can say Bob's your uncle."

"She better not," Albus muttered.

"Anyway, I bet you and Rosie could have some really interesting talks about the kinds of books you like," Ron continued, pretending he hadn't heard. "And maybe, just maybe, your mum and dad would be okay with you bringing some books to the Quidditch pitch and reading while they flew with your brother and sister, hmm?"

Albus looked up, eyes hopeful. "Do you think so, Uncle Ron?" he asked.

"Why don't you ask them and see what they say?" Ron questioned.

Albus looked down, suddenly nervous.

"I ... I ..." he stuttered.

"What, champ?" Ron asked softly.

"It's just ... there's one more thing," Albus said quietly. "D'you ... d'you think Mummy and Dad would be mad at James if he didn't get into Gryffindor?"

"Your mum and dad love James, and they want what's best for him," Ron said. "And what's best for him is to be true to himself. If that makes him a Gryffindor, so be it, but if that makes him a Slytherin, or a Ravenclaw, or a Pygmy puff, then that's fine too."

Albus actually smiled at his uncle's bad joke. "Do you really think so?" he asked.

"I know so," Ron said firmly. "You can count on it. And the same goes for you and your sister, and for Rosie and Hugo, too. Now, do you want me to help you talk to your mum and dad?"

Albus sniffled and wiped an already damp hand across his face, but stood up resolutely. "I ... I don't think so. I can do it," he said.

"I know you can," Ron said, standing with him and casting a quick *Scourgify* to clean up Albus's face. "And hey, Albus. Any time you want to come over here and read, or talk, you know where to find us, you know. Your Auntie Hermione has a bigger collection of books than your mum and dad put together, too, just in case you want something new."

Albus looked up at him with a small, grateful smile, then walked off toward the living room, Ron following him.

"Hey there, Al," Harry said with a smile, looking up at Ron with a question in his eyes.

Hermione slipped her hand into Ron's and squeezed, mouthing "Everything alright?"

Ron nodded slightly, then sat back down in his chair, winking at Albus.

Albus walked over to the couch where his parents sat. Casting a quick glance over at Ron for security, he took a deep breath and said, "Mummy, Dad, I ... I want to be a Ravenclaw!"

He bit his lip nervously, looking up at them as though he expected a scolding. But Ginny and Harry both smiled widely at him.

"Yeah? How come?" Harry said warmly, scooting over and patting the couch between him and his wife.

Albus looked stunned for a second, then climbed up onto the couch between his mum and dad.

"Well, I just ... really like books. I like learning about new things and having adventures in my mind. That's okay, right?" he asked anxiously, looking up at Harry and Ginny.

"Absolutely," Ginny said, without a second's hesitation.

"You bet," Harry agreed. "Tell us some more, hmm?"

Albus grinned widely and launched into a detailed explanation of the latest book he was reading at home.

Across the room, Hermione pressed a small kiss to Ron's hand and whispered, "Did you have something to do with this?"

"Maybe," Ron smiled. "I just listened, that's all. Besides, you've got me too well trained to say a bad word about reading."

Hermione smiled, her eyes suspiciously bright, and whispered, "I love you."

"Love you, too, bookworm."