

A Credit to Their Houses

by dracontia

Two little wizards and one little witch meet in the Hogwarts Express on their way to their first school term. This story can stand alone, with no reference to any other fanfiction; however, it has acquired a bit of a universe of its own :)

One Little Wizard

Chapter 1 of 7

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Chapter 1: One Little Wizard

Characters: Scorpius Malfoy, Albus Severus Potter, Rose Weasley, James Sirius Potter, Louis Weasley, Lysander Scamander, Lorcan Scamander, Draco Malfoy, Asteria Greengrass-Malfoy, assorted canon & original characters

Rating: G

Summary: Two little wizards and one little witch meet in the Hogwarts Express on their way to their first school term.

Disclaimer: J.K. Rowling's characters are on completely unpaid leave in my imagination.

Scorpius tried to ignore the oddly constrictive feel of the Muggle clothes he was wearing and pay attention to Father.

"Our family name is not quite held in the same regard as it once was," Father had said as they made their way from Diagon Alley to the old Muggle automobile that Great-Uncle Crius provided for the purpose of getting to the station. "There are those who still judge us for things that happened before you were born."

Scorpius didn't like the too-sad tone of Father's voice as he said it; still, this was not news. He had heard and overheard snippets of conversation to this effect before. Everything seemed to come down to the War for grownups. He gathered that their family had been on rather the wrong side of it, particularly Grandfather.

"Don't forget your manners. If someone will insist on disliking you, let it be for completely irrational reasons," Father said.

Scorpius understood this was a joke, but he managed only a wan smile. He wasn't worried about that... much. Nothing *bad* ever happened to them if Father was recognized. Some people crossed to the other side of the street, or gave them nasty looks. That was all. If Mum was with them, she made a funny face back. Father would roll his eyes at her and Scorpius would laugh, and it was all fine again.

It was almost weirder when some stranger would stand in front of Mum and Father, wringing their hands and stammering out some form of 'Thank you.' This, Scorpius knew, had to do with a potion for werewolves that Mum and Father had made. It puzzled Scorpius more than hushed talk of the war and nasty looks. After all, werewolves were just old people who had to take medicine once a year, sort of like Great Aunt Andromeda did for her aches.

Grownups were quite incomprehensible to Scorpius. He rather hoped that children his own age would make more sense.

Admittedly, Cousin Phoebe and Cousin Laurel were not precisely reassuring in that regard. Scorpius chalked that up to equal parts Aunt Daphne's and Beauxbatons' influence. He couldn't see why she never allowed them over to play when the Manor was so much more fun than their house.

Outdoors were the gardens...the ancient Rose Garden whose blooms never faded unless they chose to allow it to change with the seasons; the kitchen garden which Father and Mum had carved out of a neglected maze, where the odd surviving topiary or statue still oversaw the vegetables or contemplated the fruit trees; Grandmother's herb garden, where she and Great-Aunt Andromeda spent most of their time together; the long, shady, walk to the dilapidated Summer House; the great lawns, long gone to wildflowers but still capital for flying over as asserted by no less authority than Cousin Teddy; and the chance of spotting one of the last surviving white peacocks roosting in the wild tangle that lurked beyond the gardens, which could only be explored with Mum, Father, or Grandmother.

Indoors were miles of empty (and a few not-so-empty) rooms to explore. Old portraits might quiz you about who you were and ask after people you never heard of. Mysterious curiosities left over from the old days hid amidst the new furniture that Father made, like so many stone-still rabbits trying to evade notice. The Ballroom tiles were still mostly shiny enough for sliding...if one was careful not to giggle too loudly and get caught at it...and the Solarium offered welcome greenery on rainy days. Father and Mum discouraged poking about their Potions laboratory, but Father's workshop might be visited if one took care not to touch the things being built. Loneliness aside, the Manor was something approaching Paradise in Scorpius' eyes.

Scorpius would miss watching a piece of furniture or bit of replacement molding or whatnot emerge from the long, beautiful shavings that curled away under the spells from Father's wand. With Christmas approaching, Father would begin to make toys again. Why Grandmother wanted Father to go back to his old, boring, job Scorpius could never guess. Who would want to write other people's paperwork all day when they could make wonderful things instead?

Unthinkingly, he touched the wand holstered in the sleeve of his funny Muggle garment, a sort of short robe with a hood. Grandmother said he ought to have a new wand that was just his own, but Scorpius reasoned that every Galleon that they saved might go to buy him an owl for Christmas. This old wand that Father never used any more suited him right down to the ground. It seemed almost as if there was a live thing strapped to his arm, a little friend made of hawthorn whose mere presence reassured him. He had been able to effortlessly perform the simple Levitation Charm that Mum taught him (and that was all the magic she would teach him before school, no matter how he pleaded.) Grandmother tried to teach him a Patronus Charm, but all he managed was a trail of silver sparks.

Maybe I'll make some friends at school who will want to stay over, Scorpius' thoughts wandered hopefully. Now that some of the spare bedrooms had furniture...made by Father, so it was really nicer than anything that might have been there before...and most of the bathrooms worked, surely they could have guests? Mum's friend Gus visited sometimes but never stayed. Father had mentioned his friend Theo might come back from Toronto someday, but in Scorpius' experience 'someday' was a measure of time that was as solid as jelly; it might mean anytime between tomorrow and never.

Scorpius conceded that Grandfather might be something of a bar to having guests over. He would likely have to be kept out of the way since one never quite knew how he would behave around visitors, even though Grandmother insisted that his turning into a peacock had done wonders for his disposition.

Yes, grownups were indeed inexplicable.

Father was talking, and Scorpius realized guiltily that he'd no idea when he'd begun again. "Just to be safe, avoid any gingers you may see on the train. I have little doubt that Weasley memory..."

"...oh, leave it. You sound like a fraud fortune-teller," Mum interrupted. "'Beware the red-haired man!'" she said in an ominous tone. Father pulled a subtle face at her. She made a blatantly silly one in reply.

Scorpius smiled a little more and tried not to sick up at the smells inside The Leaky Cauldron. He supposed that the food didn't actually smell bad, but his nervous stomach would have failed to appreciate pine shavings or lavender, his favorite scents from home, at the moment. Just because he hoped that children his own age would be more comprehensible didn't mean that he wouldn't miss Mummy, Father, and Grandmother terribly. Even Grandfather, last seen moulting dispiritedly in the parlor, was a bit of the familiar he was loath to relinquish.

He had mixed feelings at seeing Uncle Crius waiting for them by his automobile and trying to look at ease in Muggle London. Scorpius supposed that technically, he ought to call him Great-Uncle Crius, but Mum liked to say 'he isn't all that great.'

"No Grandmum to see him off?" Uncle Crius asked Mum while Father got the trunk sorted.

"She was feeling poorly," Mum answered. In fact, Father gave Grandmother a potion before they left and Floo-called Great Aunt Andromeda to look after her. She was quite beside herself at the thought of Scorpius leaving. Mum had left muttering about excessive drama and Father made her involuntarily snort with amusement by saying something about marrying into the wrong family. Scorpius was torn between missing Grandmother and relief that she wouldn't be present to cause a scene.

Oblivious to Mum's 'I do not care to speak of this' expression and stiff tone, Uncle Crius plowed on. "Too bad, that. You ought to talk to your mum about giving equal time to Scorpius, you know? She needn't go with Daphne's lot every time they pounce off to France."

Scorpius stifled a giggle at Uncle Crius' language. Mum's friend Gus said that Crius was 'born with a silver foot in his mouth.'

"Let her," Mum said dryly, and Scorpius could tell by the way Father's lips twitched that he was glad she had been the one to say it.

"So, Scorpius," Uncle Crius asked once they were all inside, "how do you think you'll Sort?"

"Um, sorry?" Scorpius was fascinated by the interior of the automobile and wasn't sure he'd heard correctly.

"What House do you think you'll be in?" he clarified.

"Oh... Well, we've always been Slytherins, haven't we, Father?" Several of the older portraits that Father recalled from the attic were quite adamant on that point. Scorpius looked to his father for reassurance, but found him staring intently out the window. Scorpius thought of the delicate wooden snakes that Father carved from twigs, their painted eyes bright as they glided across the floor at a word of command. They were such agile, elegant things, and real ones were so useful. Scorpius loved them quite as much as he did owls.

"Not on both sides," Uncle Crius said. "Your mother was a Ravenclaw, as was I. Most Greengrasses are Ravenclaws." He said it with the air of someone offering consolation.

"Daphne was in Slytherin," Mum said as if it was a challenge, "and she wasn't the only one."

"Yes, well, it was a viable option in those days. If you want a career with the Ministry, better be in any other House. Of course, to get the real plum positions, you need to be a Gryffindor."

"Speaking of the Ministry, how are things in Magical Games and Sports?" Mum asked, deftly distracting Uncle Crius and shutting him up on the subject of Houses.

That didn't necessarily mean that he was wrong.

"Father?" Scorpius whispered.

"Hmm?"

"Is it true... about Slytherin?"

Father was silent for a while. Finally, he sighed heavily.

"They're right, Scorpius," he said, keeping his voice low to sneak under the conversation Mum was having with Uncle Crius. "It's no longer quite the thing to be in Slytherin." He hesitated a long while, looking down at his hands. "I can't really recommend it if you are interested in a political career. It's not the House of heroes. Even so..." Father drew his wand. Scorpius knew it well; Ebony and Dragon Heartstring, eleven inches and a quarter. "Slytherin did have Severus Snape, and most count him a hero of the War. He is a hero to us...to our family. This was his wand."

Scorpius gazed at it in some awe. "He gave it to you?"

"He left it to me," Father said sadly. "I don't suppose that he would be very pleased to know that I use it mostly for putting tables together. It's not very... ambitious." Father put the wand away and sighed again. "Do what you must, Scorpius."

Despite that, Scorpius had the feeling that Father would very much like it if he was in Slytherin.

"Uncle Crius, what sort of Automobile is this?" Scorpius asked in a lull. Mum had taught him the art of deflection well. The question kept Uncle Crius off the topic of Sorting the rest of the way to the station. Scorpius was almost interested in his answers. Muggle automobiles were as great a curiosity as their binding clothes were a mild annoyance. He wished he were not too nervous to appreciate the novelty of either.

The station was something of a madhouse outside. Uncle Crius shook his head. "I'll have to drop you off. I'll get to the platform if I can find a place to park."

While Father and Mum were handling the trunk, Uncle Crius caught Scorpius by the sleeve. "Here, lad...a little something for the long trip." He pressed a tiny, heavy, bag that jingled slightly into Scorpius' hand. He offered a kindly smile, and Scorpius remembered how Uncle Crius always had a smile when no one else could manage one. "I'm sure that the tea trolley lady will have something that catches your fancy."

"Th-thanks," Scorpius managed before being ushered out the door. He waved after the antique Citroen even while Mum and Father hustled him into the station.

Maybe Uncle Crius isn't all that 'great,' but he's still pretty good.

Mum walked in front of them, clearing a path with the weight of her glare. Father liked to joke that she was the real dragon in the family. Scorpius, for his part, didn't think it was a joke. He always felt safe between Father and Mum as if they were both real dragons and he was their one egg. He never hesitated to follow her into an apparent pillar; he never doubted that Father was immediately behind him with the trunk.

The platform was utter chaos. Scorpius' eyes fairly bulged at the sight of so many children...tall, short, thin, plump, boys and girls, hair a rainbow of colors, his age to nearly grown; all in Muggle clothes but clearly wizards by the owls, wands, and jingling purses. He had never realized how many children there were in the world. He couldn't decide if it was more exciting or frightening. It took the full weight of everything that Grandmother and Father had told him about his duty as a Malfoy to keep him from asking if he couldn't just go home.

Then he caught sight of a little girl nearly crying. "But I want to go, too!" she wailed to her parents, who were quite occupied putting her older siblings on the train. Scorpius felt embarrassed for her.

Still... if she wants that badly to go to Hogwarts... that bodes well. Doesn't it?

Now Father and Mum were pressing last words of advice on him, but he scarcely marked it amid the whirl. His luggage was dealt with; Mum whispered 'I love you;' Father clasped him quickly in one last hug that was so tight he didn't think that he would be able to escape it and wasn't sure that he wanted to. They helped him onto the train like they were packing away fragile Christmas ornaments just as the whistle blew.

The whistle meant he was really going. A little tremor of excitement edged out the fear.

Maybe I'll find a friend. Maybe... maybe we'll be in Slytherin, and that will make Father really smile. Politics sound awfully boring.

"I'll write," he said over his shoulder just as the door to the carriage closed behind him. He watched them through the small window in the door until the train pulled away. He spared a moment to wish that he had an owl of his own with which to send letters.

There's always Christmas, he thought. He gently petted the toy owl in his pocket.

Two Little Cousins

Chapter 2 of 7

Scorpius would dearly love to fit in somewhere.

Disclaimer: Characters property of wealthy and powerful entities who just left them lying about for the destitute fanfiction writer to play with.

Scorpius struggled through the corridors of the Hogwarts Express, unwilling to leave his trunk unattended in the luggage area. He clung to its handle and thought of his teddy bear and plush jarvey tucked away inside. It wasn't a very large trunk, and Father had cast a good Featherweight Charm on it. Scorpius saw no need to leave Mr. Mouse and Rudy alone somewhere.

Of course, that didn't make the item any easier to maneuver, nor did it free up any space in a compartment. Every window he looked into either revealed benches crowded with children his own age or an assortment of older students. He supposed that it was theoretically possible to squeeze into one of the latter, but he quailed at the idea of trying to introduce himself to a bunch of teenagers...or to anyone, really.

If only they hadn't given me such an old-fashioned name, Scorpius thought miserably. *How did Cousin Teddy dodge that hex?* He spent a few useless seconds wishing that Cousin Teddy were not so old and done with school already. *Granted, he wasn't any fun anymore once he turned thirteen, but at least he wouldn't let anyone hex me.*

Scorpius backed slowly into the next carriage, trying to make sure that his trunk would follow him through both sets of doors. He felt somewhat a traitor to his future owl for

thinking so, but it occurred to him that it might be just as well he didn't have an owl cage to deal with.

Suddenly, something struck him between the shoulder blades. He yelped in surprise and a minor amount of pain.

"Oi, what's this?"

Scorpius spun to find himself face-to-elbow with an older boy...a boy with ominously flame-colored hair. Scorpius held his breath and braced himself for imminent doom, but the other boy merely looked down at him with mild irritation before sticking his head back through an open compartment door.

"Come ON, James, let's go. Bloody train is crawling with firsties. I'm tripping over them out here. Literally."

"Mum and Dad said I can't leave Rosie and Al by themselves," came a complaining voice from inside the compartment.

A third male voice chimed in with, "They're not by themselves..."

"...they're together," a fourth boy finished. Scorpius glanced around the sharp-elbowed redhead to see identical boys with long, brown, straggly-looking hair and off-puttingly-huge gray eyes. They blinked said eyes and studied Scorpius with apparent curiosity. It gave him the odd feeling of being a tiny creature under one of Mum's micro-ocular devices.

"Well..." The voice of the unseen boy wavered.

Still another male voice, this one younger and if possible, even more disgruntled than the one that presumably belonged to James, issued from the compartment. "We aren't babies that need a minder. Take him with you, Louis...and keep him."

"He's got to leave the compartment first. NOW would be a great time." The redhead, possibly named Louis (and possibly one of the Weasleys about whom Scorpius had been vaguely warned) crossed his arms and tapped his wand against his shoulder. A couple of sparks hissed from the end.

"Sorry, but m-may...may I j-just get through? The other c-carriage is full," Scorpius asked.*Oh, God. I thought I wasn't going to stutter any more. Can I go home? There's no shame in being a Squib...right?*

Another head of red hair belonging to a boy who was shorter and somehow more rambunctious-looking than the first, popped out of the compartment. He fixated on Scorpius. "Hey, I think it's that Malfoy kid." The boy grinned in a way that wasn't exactly mean, but which Scorpius nonetheless disliked. "Why don't you get in our compartment and give my runty brother Slytherin lessons?"

An angry female voice shouted, "JAMES! Uncle Harry SAID..." at the same time as the young male voice shouted, "SOD OFF you vast git!"

Before Scorpius could properly assimilate this, he was shoved unceremoniously into the compartment by the aforementioned James, who instantly took off with Louis and a protesting owl flapping about in its bouncing cage.

"I say..." Scorpius began, but by the time he turned there was no one to address save his trunk, which the twins pushed in behind him (slightly more gently than James had treated his person) before likewise escaping. With considerable trepidation, Scorpius turned to discover the other occupants of the compartment.

The first thing that Scorpius noticed, to his mixed consternation and relief, was that there was only one redhead. Her hair wasn't even that red compared to Louis and James. He recalled Grandmother and Aunt Andromeda going on once about a shade called auburn being popular and decided this must be it. However, she looked quite agitated, which he was beginning to think was the default emotional state for people of that hair color range. He supposed she was of about his own age; he didn't have much contact with witches younger than Mum to compare.

The compartment's other occupant was a boy of Scorpius' own size and build...remarkably so...with (mercifully) black hair that rather resembled the aftermath of a whirlwind. His eyes were a startling shade of green, and there was something familiar about him. Neither of them acknowledged Scorpius' presence.

"I ought to go after James and give him a piece of my mind," the girl said. Her arms were crossed and her tone of voice matched.

"Give over, Rosie," the boy said. He seemed to have used up his ire on the boy named James. He rubbed his hair, exacerbating the chaos. "Did you really want James stinking up our compartment all the way to school?"

"Well, no," she admitted reluctantly, "but he was given a responsibility. It's the principle of the thing."

Scorpius thought that he should say something. He simply couldn't figure out whether to attempt to introduce himself or to excuse himself, or whether it would be rude to interrupt them to do either.

The black-haired boy seemed to notice Scorpius for the first time. "Oh. Hello," he said. He tilted his head to one side as if trying to see Scorpius better. "Sorry, but... you seem familiar. Have I met you?"

That so closely echoed Scorpius' thought upon seeing the other boy that he was surprised out of his attempt to speak.

"Where are your manners, Al?" Rosie scolded. "You're *supposed* to introduce yourself."

Al rolled his eyes at her. "Yes, *Mum*," he said. She narrowed sapphire-colored eyes at him and he sighed. "Best get this over with." The boy stood and offered his hand. "Albus Severus Potter... and no, I don't know what I did to get stuck with two bloody old-fashioned names, and could you please just call me Al?" he finished sheepishly.

Potter. No mystery why he seemed familiar, then. Scorpius' mind flashed tea at Aunt Andromeda's house and images in the newspaper of a man who definitely bore more than a passing resemblance to the boy standing before him. Mr. Potter was terribly important by Grandmother's reckoning. Father and Mum never really spoke of him except to echo Grandmother's opinion that he was quite well-placed and consequently powerful, and Great-Aunt Andromeda's assertion that he was a fine godfather to Teddy.

Scorpius couldn't help but think that it boded well that the first person he properly met was a Potter. Of all Aunt Andromeda's friends, Mr. Potter was both the youngest and the nicest. Just like Mum and Father, he was quite happy to play Gobstones with Scorpius and listen to whatever he had to say.

Scorpius took the offered hand and was pleasantly surprised at its firm warmth. He belatedly hoped that his own hand was thoroughly dry. "Pleased to m-meet you, Al," *Damn it, stop stuttering! After all Mum and Dad went through to cure you of it...*"I'm Scorpius Hyperion Malfoy... and I feel your pain, and a bit more, since no one's figured out how to shorten it," he dared to joke. For the first time that day he felt a real smile cautiously quirk his lips.

Albus Severus actually laughed, a surprised little hiccup of a sound. Maybe the other boy was nervous, too. Scorpius relaxed a fraction more. "I was afraid Lysander and Lorcan were the only other two who had the old sort of name, and they don't care." He pumped Scorpius' hand once for good measure before letting go. "Though come to that, your name sounds familiar, too."

"Hm-HRMM," Scorpius turned to find Rosie frowning at them...though perhaps a little more at Albus. She'd even re-folded her arms for maximum cranky effect.

"Oh, sorry. Um, Scorpius, this is my cousin, Rose," Albus said, pointing a thumb in the girl's direction.

"You're hopeless," Rose shook her head. "Rose *Weasley*," she said primly, standing and offering her own hand.

Oh, dear. The first person I meet and actually might like, and they've a Weasley cousin. What to do...

'Be polite. If people are going to dislike you, let it be for utterly irrational reasons.'

Right.

"Pleased to meet you, Rose," he said, and hoping that 'laying it on thick,' as Mum liked to call it would suffice to stave off impending doom, he quickly lifted her hand and dusted a kiss across the back of it. He dropped it just as quickly and stepped back towards the door...just in case. He looked up to find her face pinking, which actually did make her look a bit like a rose...one with blue dew-drop eyes.

It wasn't until Rose said, "Thank you," in a curiously small voice that Scorpius realized that he'd actually made that observation out loud. He felt heat rise in his own cheeks at having inadvertently complimented a girl. Fortunately, Great-Aunt Andromeda had quite firmly impressed upon him the idea that being silent rarely drew hexes, so he had better sense than to let on that it was an accident.

"I didn't know anyone did that hand-kissing thing anymore," Al remarked. He used the same bemused tone that Mr. Finch-Fletchly did when discovering some antique heretofore unknown, by which Scorpius understood that he'd probably caused some embarrassment with his old-fashioned manners.

In the few awkward moments of silence, Rose recovered well enough to commence correcting her cousin again. Scorpius guessed it was a bit of a hobby with her, rather like Grandmother reading the paper aloud and offering elaborately insulting commentary on either the subjects or the writers of the articles (or both). "Al, you know very well that Daddy mentioned him on the platform."

Al stilled at this, and exchanged glances with Rose that Scorpius couldn't interpret. His heart twinged enviously under his hand-me-down Muggle robe. They had the sort of bond that shut him out, even though he was ostensibly in the conversation. Al bounced back onto the bench seat and hesitated, as if considering something. He gave Scorpius a searching look that hinted at all sorts of thoughts running through his busy-looking head. All he said out loud, however, was, "You can sit down...if you want to, anyway. You coming in here is probably the best idea my brother will have all term." He shot an almost challenging look in Rose's direction as he indicated the space beside him.

"Thank you, I'd like that," Scorpius said, terribly relieved. He began to think that he might survive the trip to school after all.

"Let's get your trunk out of the way, then" Rose said with a hint of resignation. She drew her wand. *Wingardium Leviosa!*

The trunk bobbed, bounced up, and ricocheted off the ceiling into the luggage rack.

"Oops," Rose said, turning quite red.

"Well... it didn't leave too much of a dent in the ceiling," Scorpius said diplomatically. He, Al, and Rose studied the damage to the molded tin with varying degrees of consternation.

"Supposedly Uncle George and Uncle Fred once set a compartment on fire on the way to school." Al made his own attempt at consolation. "Does anyone know for certain how to cast 'Reparo'?" Scorpius shook his head. Rose re-crossed her arms and looked at the floor with a decidedly sulky expression.

"I don't know why they don't let us practice at home," Rose said. "It isn't as if we'd have to worry about Aurors poking into our home magic use." The speed with which her mood shifted rivaled Grandfather during molting time, and that was really saying something.

"Yeah we do--difference is we call 'em Dad," Al said, as dry as dry could be.

Scorpius had meant to ask about their wands and what spells they already knew but judged this was not an opportune moment. He felt he ought to say something to keep them from brooding guiltily over the ceiling, though.

Hm. Grownups often talk about mutual acquaintances...

"I met your father at Great-Aunt Andromeda's house. His eyes were just like yours, except for the glasses," he said to Al. *As was his hair*, Scorpius thought, but he knew grown-ups could be sensitive about hair and decided it would be wiser not to mention it. He wondered why Mr. Potter wore glasses. Thanks to the continuing cleverness of Mum's friend Gus, Scorpius and most other wizards with vision problems had their eyes fixed easily with a combination of spells and Muggle machines.

"Andromeda?" The exclamation came from Al and Rose simultaneously. They both hastened to speak over each other in excitement.

"Wait... then you must be..." Al started.

"...Our Teddy's cousin!" Rose interrupted. She studied Scorpius again, this time with a little less aloofness. Curiosity sparkled in her eyes.

Scorpius stole another glance at Al to find the other boy fairly bouncing in his seat, looking terribly pleased. He evidently didn't mind that Rose had interrupted him. "Dad visits Aunt Andie and Our Teddy often. We used to come along...James and our sister Lily and me, I mean...but not so much since Our Teddy decided he was too old to have fun," Al said the last with a frown. He kicked his heels against the seat.

Rose made a sort of 'Hah!' sound and said, low, "He finds Victoire fun enough." Al wrinkled his nose at this, and Scorpius was once again left in the dark. He rather wished that he had someone...a cousin, a sibling, a best friend...with whom to share inside jokes.

"If only he wasn't so much older," Scorpius said with a sigh. He twiddled the cuff of his short Muggle robe, wondering how old Teddy had been when he had worn it. The sleeves fit Scorpius tolerably well in length, but it was a little wide. And trousers! Well, they were just a trial of modern times according to Father, and must be borne with the best grace one could manage. "I did wish for some family on the train. He's my only cousin who wasn't shipped off to Beauxbatons."

"That's the opposite of me...I kind of wish I wasn't related to everyone at Hogwarts who has red hair," Al said. "No offense, Rosie," he added hastily.

Rose closed her eyes and shook her head at him. At least the crossed arms didn't make another appearance.

Scorpius cast about for a change of subject. A soft rustling from the other side of the seat caught his attention. "Oh! Is that your owl?" he asked Al. He couldn't quite keep the envy from his voice. Father had said he might have an owl for Christmas if Mr. Finch-Fletchly sold more of Father's work and the manor didn't need too many repairs. Even without the 'ifs,' Christmas seemed a long way off.

Al positively beamed. "Yeah, she's mine." He picked up the cage and set it on the seat between them so that Scorpius could see the smallish, speckled-gray owl inside. "She's a screech owl." Scorpius refrained from mentioning that he knew nearly everything there was to know about owls and simply nodded, admiring the ear-tufts that quirked towards him curiously. Screech owls were one of his second choices of owl, after the beautifully mottled Barred Owl with its gentle brown eyes and about equal to the stout, talkative, little Tawny Owl. "I call her Agate 'coz she looks kind of like one."

"She's beautiful," Scorpius said. The owl blinked sleepily at him and made a pleased sound.

"I would have named her Kitty. She has whiskers like a cat," Rose pointed out the feature in question. Scorpius almost laughed at the bird's offended expression.

"Told you she doesn't like that name," Al said. "When you have your own owl, you get to name it."

"Not bloody likely," Rose said, back to sulking. "Mum and Dad say we have to *earn* a pet. We mustn't become spoiled rotten little Ma... um...mad things... like Cousin Freddy and Cousin Roxy who get whatever they ask for and treat it like rubbish." Rose stumbled over the last bit, looking awkward. Al looked out the window and twiddled his thumbs. He seemed almost as if he was embarrassed about something.

"Father said I might have an owl for Christmas if he makes enough sales and I get good marks," Scorpius said. He wasn't certain that he was holding up his end of the conversation. It all still felt a bit awkward and he hoped that he wasn't to blame.

Rose looked a bit squirmy again, but all she said was, "I think they expect me to get good marks anyway. I've no idea how I'm supposed to earn an owl."

"What sort of things does your dad sell?" Al asked Scorpius. He clearly wanted to change the subject. Scorpius was happy to oblige, though he found it odd to hear Father referred to as 'dad.'

"Oh, he doesn't do the selling...he makes things. Furniture, anything from wood, really. And toys." Scorpius smiled proudly as he pulled the tiny Tawny Owl model from his pocket. At a touch to the activation point, the wooden bird gave a little 'ke-wick' cry and flapped its wings, rising a few inches above Scorpius' palm before landing again.

"I love those! Been collecting them for absolute ages...I brought my favorite...hang on..." Al rummaged in his pocket and pulled out a little wooden Barred Owl that turned its head all the way around and blinked its dark, painted eyes. "Your dad *makes* these?" Scorpius nodded. "That's wicked cool." Scorpius took this to mean 'very, very good' and tucked the colorful phrase away to use at the first opportunity.

"Hugo and I have the whole set between us," Rose boasted. "But I left them all with Hugo because he was unhappy about being youngest and not going to school yet." She suddenly scowled. "Now I don't even have a *toy* owl."

"At least you have new clothes and school robes," Al pointed out. "I'm stuck with James' manky old things. It sucks to be the little brother. Lily always gets all new things just 'coz she's the only girl."

"Language, Al! First off, none of the clothes in your trunk are 'manky;' they're clean and tidied up as good as new. Second, I know for a fact that some of your robes are new, since your Dad has a funny thing about hand-me-downs even though Grandmum thinks it's wasteful to buy robes that you'll just outgrow in a year. Third, Lily will probably get my school robes when I'm done with them if Grandmum has anything at all to say about it. And finally, at least you have a bloody owl."

Al rolled his eyes. "NOW whose language needs minding?"

Rose ignored this. "Have you any brothers or sisters, Scorpius?" she asked politely.

Ah, this was the sort of thing Scorpius knew how to deal with: the standard Polite Questions. The sparring between cousins made him uncomfortable. No one argued at home...at least, not where they thought that Scorpius could overhear. "No, I am quite alone here and at home. I've two cousins on my mother's side of the family, but they attend Beauxbatons. You know about my father's cousin Teddy." He thought of the Muggle clothes and the school robes in his trunk, all Teddy's hand-me-downs, fragrant with the unfamiliar scent of Muggle cleaning potions. He had a few new things of his own; grownups considered clothing an eminently suitable gift for a small boy, much to Scorpius' disappointment. Though for all of Aunt Daphne's faults, at least she had the sense to marry the Montrose Maggies' Assistant Manager. This always yielded some interesting Quidditch-related gifts, the most recent being a quite handsome Maggies cloak for Scorpius' last birthday.

Come to think of it, Grandmother hadn't seemed happy about Teddy's clothes. It didn't seem to matter that they had all been made nice as new under Great Aunt Andromeda's spells and needle, or that Auntie had spoken cheerily all the time she was fitting Scorpius about how even the Royal Family re-used clothes. *Is there something wrong with old clothes?*

He shook off his uneasy thoughts to finish with the correct reply. "And yourself?"

"I've one younger brother, Hugo." She bit her lip. "Daddy will go spare once we're both away at school."

This was the sort of thing that worried Scorpius, too...among others. "I hope my parents are all right. It's only the two of them and Grandmother at home now." He wasn't sure how, or if, to broach the subject of Grandfather. Grandmother made it clear that, while not quite in the same category of baseness as bodily functions, discussing the involuntary species changes of family members was generally not done. Even Mum practicing to be an Animagus wasn't to be discussed. Scorpius thought it rather a shame since Mum made such a beautiful wolf when she did manage to change. Having a grandfather who was a peacock and a mum practicing to be a wolf might even rate as 'wicked cool,' though Scorpius didn't quite dare take the chance to discover if it was the opposite.

"Well, when we get to school, you can write them straight away," Al put a comforting hand on Scorpius' arm. "There's an owlery, and..." He stopped. "You know, maybe your Dad'll sell loads of toys, and you can have an owl sooner! Maybe for your birthday?"

Scorpius appreciated Al's attempt to cheer him. "My birthday isn't until April."

Al grinned. "So is mine! What day is yours?"

"Mine is, too," Rose began to say, but Scorpius focused on answering Al's question.

"Twenty-fifth April," Scorpius said.

"But that's *my* birthday!" Al positively beamed now, all hesitancy gone from his manner. Scorpius was surprised at how strongly he felt it...as if everything was suddenly warmer and brighter, as if he had somehow been 'let in' where before he could only look in from outside. "I'll tell you what: when you want to write, if the school owls are busy, you can borrow Agate. After all... you're family!" Al said this last with the air of someone who has made a discovery of great import.

"Albus Severus Potter, have you gone completely mental?" Rose stared at her cousin with both hands on her hips and nicely echoed Scorpius' level of incredulity.

"No, listen...since we're birthday twins..."

"There's no such thing," Rose interrupted, but Al plowed on, ignoring her.

"...and since James and me..."

"James and I," Rose corrected.

"...are Our Teddy's God-brothers and you're Our Teddy's God-cousin," he jerked his thumb in Rose's direction again, compounding her exasperation, "then Scorpius is our cousin, too. At the very least!" Albus Severus explained.

Scorpius' head was spinning slightly from the possible abuse of possessive pronouns, but he thought he perhaps got the gist of it.

"You're not even making sense," Rose argued. "There's no such thing as a God-brother or God-cousin, in the first place."

"Why shouldn't there be? There are step-children to go with step-fathers and step-mothers. Besides, Agate likes him better than she likes James. That should count for something," Al rebutted. Agate whistled softly in apparent agreement.

"Step-' is a legal term. 'Godfather' is an honorific. It doesn't carry..." Rose tried to explain, but Al was already tuning her out.

"I'll put it to Scorpius: Would you like to be a cousin?" He turned his excited green eyes on Scorpius.

It was very hard to resist the enthusiasm of that face. It was even harder to resist the idea of having family, of any sort, around. It had been quite firmly put into Scorpius' head that only family could truly be trusted.

I wouldn't be alone.

Scorpius felt a little tear-lump rise in his throat and blinked quickly to fight it off. "...yeah." Acorpius cleared his throat. A certain amount of formal language seemed called for here. "Yes, I would like that very much."

"See? Cousins!" Al said triumphantly. Much to Scorpius' surprise (and Agate's dismay, given that her cage was stuck between them), Al hugged him. After a second's hesitation, Scorpius hugged back. It was a curious thing...to be hugged suddenly...and by someone one's own size, no less. Yet it was also someone who shared the same faint scent of Muggle cleaning potions, like the scent on Teddy's clothes. The smell no longer seemed quite so foreign.

Rose' voice cut through the fuzzy warmth of the moment. "We're not cousins, and no amount of pretending will make us so," she said. Al broke away, his mouth open and his face clearly poised to make some sort of rebuttal. Rose hastened to cut him off. "However, I don't see any reason why we can't be friends," she said and extended a hand toward Scorpius with a prim sort of politeness.

"Except that you're being a vast git about it," Al pointed out. Scorpius was beginning to quite like that expression, too, and resolved to use it at the first opportunity. *He's very quotable*, he thought fondly, already imagining how he would describe Al to Mum and Father.

"No, b-being friends is good, too," Scorpius said, hoping to head off an argument. He hesitated a moment. Perhaps the modern thing was to shake hands? It seemed a very foreign thing to do when the one offering was a girl, but he managed to refrain from kissing Rose's hand and tried to remember to keep his grip firm without squeezing. He mustn't call any negative attention to himself, even for so small a thing as failing to keep up with current manners.

"Well, there. It's settled." Rose looked pleased with herself, but Scorpius hardly noticed. He was practically giddy with excitement. If he had an owl of his own, he didn't think he could have resisted starting a letter right then and there.

Dear Mum, Father, and Grandmother,

Please don't worry about me. I'm not yet to school and I've already made two friends...

Note: By all means, feel free to imagine Miss Piggy clearing her throat when Rose does so in the story. I certainly did.

Three Little Purses

Chapter 3 of 7

Two little wizards and one little witch meet in the Hogwarts Express on their way to their first school term.

Chapter 3: Three Little Purses

Disclaimer: J.K. Rowling's characters are on completely unpaid leave in my imagination.

Scorpius was jarred out of mentally composing his letter home...literally...by Al bouncing in the seat. Both Scorpius and Agate were in some danger of being upended. He tried to steady her cage with one hand while bracing himself against the wall with the other, wondering what sort of etiquette governed asking a friend or God-cousin to cease and desist.

This was evidently Rose's area of expertise. "Al, settle down or go find the loo or SOMETHING, but quit fidgeting!" Her voice rose to a yell by the end of the sentence.

Agate fluttered in distress. Scorpius tried to make soothing sounds at her but she only hunkered down in the bottom of the cage and looked unhappy.

"You say Scorpius can't be a God-cousin but you don't have any trouble pretending to be Mum," Al complained. He did grip the edge of the seat, though, as if to try to stop himself bouncing.

"What are you so worked up about, anyway?" Rose asked, a little calmer now herself.

"How'm I supposed to settle down when I don't know what House I'll be in?" Al drummed his heels against the bench. The noise and vibration easily rivaled anything that the train did when going over points. Scorpius almost wished that he would go back to bouncing.

"I'm not worried. Weasleys are Gryffindors. We sort into Gryffindor, we marry other Gryffindors, and our children are in Gryffindor." Scorpius thought that Rose sounded remarkably like Father holding forth on what Malfoys Did and Did Not Do. "You're part Weasley, so quit fretting."

"Except that Uncle Bill married Aunt Fleur, who went to Beauxbatons, and only Louis sorted into Gryffindor. Nicky and Vicky are both Ravenclaws," Al pointed out. "And Molly's a Hufflepuff, however that happened."

"If Aunt Fleur hears you calling Victoire and Dominique 'Vicky' and 'Nicky,' she's going to pitch a fit," Rose warned.

Albus looked around the compartment in an exaggerated manner. "I don't see her about. I think you're dodging the issue."

Scorpius clutched nervously at the insides of his pockets. Al was articulating one of his very concerns. "I don't know if there's any way to tell what house we'll be in," he said, just barely managing to keep from hunching over with anxiety. *Speaking of things Malfoys Do Not Do...* "I wish there was. All I really have to go by is that Father says we've always been Slytherins." He decided not to mention Mum having been in Ravenclaw. Scorpius liked to read well enough, but he loathed all the studying that Grandmother set for him in his daily lessons. Somehow, he doubted that Ravenclaw was the place for him.

"I've heard something to that effect." Rose's tone was rather cool.

"Maybe you also heard Dad when he said that one of the bravest men he ever knew was a Slytherin," Al fired back at her. "He was good enough for Dad to name me after him, any rate."

Scorpius had the uncomfortable feeling that they were somehow arguing about him as much as they were discussing houses. "I... I don't know much about Slytherin except that Malfoys have always been Sorted there. Father did say that Severus Snape was one of the heroes of..." He trailed off. "So you're named after *him*," he said. He turned to Al with renewed interest. *Should I mention Father's wand?*

Al looked self-conscious and rubbed his hair into yet more chaos. "Yeah," he said awkwardly. "I'm named after two Headmasters of Hogwarts; and, well, they also did all the War stuff. It seems like a lot to live up to, but... I reckon I have to try."

"Everything comes back to the War for grownups," Scorpius said. This time he spoke aloud, though barely. "But nobody will ever say *why*."

Rose spoke up with sudden vehemence. "Exactly! All you hear is 'the *Wathis*' and 'back in the War so,' but they don't tell us anything about it," she said. "You overhear a name here, something about Houses there; you can read *Hogwarts: A History* until you're blue but they only give the barest outlines. You may as well depend on bloody Chocolate Frog Cards!" Her volume rose with her frustration, leaving the compartment uncomfortably silent when she was done speaking.

They all spent a few moments not quite looking at each other. Agate made a sound like a 4-inch-tall pony whinnying and tucked her head under her wing to hide from the tension. Scorpius wished for a wing of his own to hide under.

This time Al tried to re-start the conversation. "Speaking of Chocolate Frogs, where's that tea-trolley?" He stared wistfully at the door to the compartment.

"You have to eat proper food first," Rose said.

"Except that James ran off with mine as well as his," Al pointed out. He didn't seem unhappy about it but patted his pockets, which jingled much more heavily than Scorpius' little pouch. "I reckon I'll just see what the Tea Trolley Lady has," he said cheerfully.

"You'll have some of mine rather than stuff yourself with sweets," Rose said in clear warning. She peered into the pouch at her side. "Oh, joy. Must Mum always pack Muggle peanut butter, like we're making some kind of statement or something?"

"Peanutbutter? Really?" Scorpius gazed at the bag in fascination. "I've heard of Peanutbutter from Cousin Teddy but never tried it." Aunt Andromeda always seemed to be trying to impress them or some such when they came over. She never offered any Muggle food, not that he knew of. He looked into his pocket and tried to contain his disappointment. "I have quince paste from our garden, on wholemeal." He liked quince well enough but the Quince tree had overproduced the last two years. He was frankly rather weary of the stuff.

"Quince?" Rose almost seemed to prick up her ears. "I've read about that in books. Mum won't buy it because it's too sweet."

They gazed wistfully back and forth between their respective lunches.

"Blimey, why don't you two just trade?" Al said. Clearly, Rose hadn't cornered the market on exasperation.

"You sound like Dad when you say that," Rose laughed at her cousin.

"Would you? Trade, I mean," Scorpius said. He spared a moment to worry about his grammar.

Rose hesitated. "But what about Al's lunch? I... I mean it...you have to eat something besides sweets," she directed the last bit at Al directly, though she sounded a lot less certain than before.

"I'll be fine," Al insisted. "Besides, it's not just sweets from the cart. Pumpkin Pasties are a... vegetable."

Before Rose could jump all over that, Scorpius intervened in. "He can have some of mine, too," Scorpius said.

"Salright, I've got enough for a *feast*," Al said, clearly unwilling to give up his dreams of sugar-coated oblivion. He hefted his fat little coin pouch again. Scorpius tried not to feel a pang of envy. Even if the contents were all Knuts, Al was probably a lot better funded than Scorpius was.

You're not supposed to be jealous of friends. Father had been quite firm on that point when Scorpius had asked if he minded Mum spending so much time with her friend Gus.

"Albus Severus Potter! How much money are you thinking of spending on CANDY?" Rose sounded absolutely scandalized. Scorpius was a little too, if he was perfectly honest with himself. It did seem wasteful, if rather glorious.

"Not sure. Depends on how much I have," Al said, carelessly dumping the contents of the pouch into his lap. Scorpius goggled at the preponderance of Sickles and Galleons, and the careless way that Al let the Knuts roll over the edge of his leg and onto the floor and seat. "Looks like everything from the cart will be my treat!" he said, smiling bemusedly at the pile.

"You've got to get organized." Rose was the picture of fretfulness as she gathered rolling coins. "Stack them in fives so we can get a count."

"Do they even have eight galleons, eleven sickles, five knuts worth of candy on the tea trolley?" Scorpius asked in astonishment. His head fairly spun. That was more than his entire school kit had cost, allowing for the fact that he had hand-me-down robes and Potions equipment and used books to stretch resources.

Rose stopped cold in the middle of helping Al gather the coins into piles. Her eyes flickered across the assembled coinage. She tapped each pile quickly with one finger, mouthing as she silently counted, and when she was done she gaped. "But that's completely accurate!" Rose spluttered. "Unstacked, no rounding, all the Sickles combined into Galleons and the Knuts into sickles!" She stared at Scorpius with a look that was half-admiring, half-envious.

"Wow. Can you be my accountant?" Al asked.

"It's rude to take the mickey like that," Rose scolded as she scooped coins back into the pouch.

"I'm serious," Al said. "Even Uncle Bill can't count money that accurately without actually touching it."

Scorpius preened a little. "Well, my father used to work for Gringotts. Though only with documents, not money," he hastened to add. Al seemed pretty easygoing, but he was unwilling to take the chance that Rose would see an honest ambiguity as a lie. "It's much easier since they simplified the money, even if it was devalued a bit. Grandmother seems to think that money isn't to be discussed, but Father says I need to learn it well if I'm to look after it."

"Very sensible," Rose said. For the first time she sounded approving. "I remember how Daddy howled when they simplified the money...said we lost a good two months' pay without a coin ever leaving the bank. I'm a little surprised that he gave me anything for the trolley, especially since Mum didn't want me buying sweets at all." She patted her own money pouch...smaller than Al's stash, to be sure, but still generous...almost guiltily.

The Devaluation was a memorable occasion for Scorpius as well. Mum and Father had stayed up late in tense, whispered discussions. The next day, Grandmother had

taken over Scorpius' lessons so that Father could work longer hours.

"Lucky for us I guess that Dad took most of ours out of Gringotts," Al said. "I don't understand it all myself. Just looking at money makes my head ache."

"I can explain it if you like," Scorpius offered eagerly. "It would be only fair, since you're letting me borrow Agate." He felt of the little pouch in his pocket, keenly aware that he hadn't much money of his own to count. *About eleven sickles, seven knuts* she thought, evaluating the weight and shape of it. He smiled despite himself. Never had such a fortune been under his control, no matter that it was a pittance compared to Al's resources. *Someday, I'll have enough money that I won't have to worry anymore. Then the sweets will be my treat.*

"Have you given any thought to how you're going to share an owl and a budget and whatnot if you're sorted into different Houses?" Rose asked.

"And here we are come round to that again," Al said with a huge sigh.

"Oh, Al..."

Whatever Rose had been about to say was interrupted by the compartment door popping open. Sadly, it was not the Tea Trolley Lady but the twin boys who had left with James earlier.

"Just wanted to see if you lot were all right," one said, his bulging gray eyes taking in the three occupants of the compartment.

"Thank you, Lysander. As you can see, we're quite well," Rose said, sounding a bit lofty. Albus shook his head at her. Scorpius didn't mind; Father and Grandmother sometimes talked like that. Mum always found it funny.

"To be exact, I'm Lysander, that's Lorcan," the other boy said. "James was worried about you," he added.

"Actually, I think he was worried about the amount of grief he'd catch if something happened to you," the one identified as Lorcan said.

"You're probably right," Lysander conceded.

"You can tell the wanker that we were eaten by dragons," Albus Severus said sulkily.

"Language, Al!" Rose admonished. Scorpius just giggled.

"You were the one taught it to me," Al reminded her.

Rose muttered something that contained the word 'Dad,' though it was drowned out by Lorcan speaking over her. "That's highly implausible. The only dragon that might actually fit in a train compartment is a Peruvian Vipertooth, though only just," he said thoughtfully.

Scorpius thought it might be educational to listen to Rose's father some time. It seemed likely he had a good grasp of all the sort of words that Rudy had been charmed to say until Grandmother had cast a very durable Silencing Spell on him.

Father had never really forgiven Gus for the gift of Rudy.

"But you might plausibly be eaten by a Blood-Sucking Bugbear," Lysander said. "Would it suit if we told him that..."

"Just tell him we're FINE, no thanks to him," Rose said.

"Really? Because you look a bit anxious to me." Evidently it was Lorcan's turn to speak.

"We're worried about where we're going to be sorted," Albus Severus admitted. Scorpius nodded.

"I'm not worried," Rose repeated, though her frown belied her words. "Mum and Dad were both Gryffindors, so I'm sure I will be as well. And your mum, dad, and brother are all Gryffindors, Al, so I really don't know what you are so fussed about."

"I hate to contradict a lady..." Lorcan began.

"No, you don't, brother," Lysander corrected.

"You're right, I was just being polite," Lorcan admitted, "but still, I meant to say...that doesn't mean very much."

"Everyone is an individual," Lysander continued.

"Even twins," they finished in unison.

"Mum was a Ravenclaw, and so was Dad in his time," Lysander explained.

"Yet, look at us," Lorcan continued. "Hufflepuffs both."

"Fits us like a glove," Lysander said.

"Loyalty is our pride," Lorcan asserted.

"See, that's the problem," Albus Severus said, frustrated. "It's the Aunt Fleur and Uncle Bill thing all over again. I don't know how you can tell."

"You can always ask the Hat," Lorcan said.

"It worked for us," Lysander added.

"What? You can't tell the Hat where to sort you," Scorpius said, aghast.

"Sure you can," Lysander said. "Lorcan went to Hufflepuff. The Hat asked if I wanted to stay with my brother and I said I did."

"And here we are," Lorcan said.

"Maybe it was just because you're twins," Al said doubtfully.

"No," Rose said, slowly. "I mean, it might have made a difference in their case... but the Hat doesn't have to do it that way. I overheard Mum talking to Aunt Ginny. She had joked that Mum should have been in Ravenclaw, and Mum admitted that the Hat gave her a choice of Gryffindor or Ravenclaw, and she chose Gryffindor. I think there were some twins in their year who were in different houses from each other, as well."

"You see," Lysander said placidly, "the Hat will let you have a say. Why do you think the Hat sings a song before the first years are sorted?"

"The hat sings?"

"Certainly."

"A different song every year,"

"Our Mum taught us all the songs from her years there."

"She has a phenomenal memory."

"It's like watching table tennis," Al murmured. Scorpius' eyes flickered back and forth between twins and decided that, whatever Table Tenners was, it was dizzying.

"And we remember the songs from our years, too."

"Would you like to hear one?"

"Or maybe all of them?"

"I think one representative song will do," Rose interrupted hastily.

The twins took a deep breath. One (Scorpius thought it was Lysander) hummed a note to start, and suddenly both began to sing:

A thousand years or more ago

when I was newly sewn,

there lived four wizards of renown,

whose names are still well known:

bold Gryffindor, from wild moor,

fair Ravenclaw, from glen,

sweet Hufflepuff, from valley broad,

shrewd Slytherin, from fen.

They shared a wish, a hope, a dream,

they hatched a daring plan

to educate young sorcerers

thus Hogwarts School began.

Now each of these four founders

formed their own house, for each

did value different virtues

in the ones they had to teach.

By Gryffindor, the bravest were

Prized far beyond the rest;

For Ravenclaw, the cleverest

would always be the best;

For Hufflepuff, hard workers were

Most worthy of admission;

And power-hungry Slytherin

*loved those of great ambition.**

Scorpius felt a prickle of excitement at the word 'ambition.' It was almost enough to overcome his internal cringing at what passed for a tune. Either the Hat was at best a modest composer, or the twins were no particular singers, or both.

"So, think about the Hat's song; does being brave make you less industrious? Can't you be both ambitious and wise? Or hard-working and clever?" Lysander asked.

"Courage, ambition, loyalty, intelligence; none of these are mutually exclusive. Everyone has qualities of every house in them," Lorcan said.

"Well, we'll leave you with that," Lysander said.

"Yes, time we were back to our compartment," Lorcan added. "We don't want to miss the tea trolley."

"You just have to decide which ones you value most," they finished in unison before leaving the compartment.

Scorpius blinked at the place they'd been, wondering for a moment if they'd Apparated. "They don't stand on ceremony, do they?"

"Nope," Al said with a grin. "They take after their Mum. She's my sister Lily's Godmother, you know." He frowned. "I wonder if Godparents have anything to do with what House you're in..."

"Right. Well, no sense worrying about Houses when there's lunch that needs eating," Rose said. Scorpius' stomach applauded her practicality. "Let's divide the sandwiches between us and each put in... four sickles for the tea trolley," she said. Before Al could protest, she added, "and I think I hear it now."

Scorpius shot her a look of pure gratitude. Four sickles he could spare. Rose gave him a sort of half-smile in return. He carefully counted out four little silver coins, noting with satisfaction that he had, indeed, correctly judged the amount of money that Uncle Carius had given him. He and Rose helped Al to count up twenty Knuts in place of one of Al's sickles to help use up some of the mass of tiny coins.

"Will you be having anything, dearies?" A kindly witch who looked like precisely as Scorpius imagined a baker should peeked in the door.

Soon they were happily picking out candy. Al warned them away from the Fizzing Whizbees, and they generally agreed that Jelly Slugs did not look at all appealing; but they stocked up on Cauldron Cakes and Chocolate Frogs, with a couple of Pumpkin Pasties each for good measure. Rose declared that it was tradition to buy at least one bag of Bertie Bott's Every-Flavored Beans so they did, resolving to save any dodgy-looking ones for James and Louis. In a burst of daring, Scorpius chose Fizzy Strawberry Cream, a drink with Muggle antecedents, rather than Pumpkin Juice to drink. Al selected a handful of Sugar Mice, only to find that the squeaking drove Agate to distraction.

Rose found them rather distracting as well. "What did you buy those for?"

"To eat, I'm guessing," Scorpius shocked himself by saying. He hadn't made jokes around anyone but family before and he was temporarily embarrassed.

If the heat that Scorpius felt in his cheeks showed, Al didn't seem to notice. "Good one, mate," he chuckled. Agate fluttered in her cage, and Al's amusement abated. "Might have a point there, Rosie; Agate sure doesn't like them. Can I change them for..."

"Once you touch it, you've bought it," the Tea Trolley Lady said quite firmly.

"Hide them in the lunch sack till we can eat them?" Al turned beseeching eyes on Rose.

"Honestly," Rose said, the very epitome of exasperation. However, she snatched the offending sweets from Al and began muffling them under the sandwiches. "Daddy had the wrong end of the stick; I think you're going to be a bad influence on *Scorpius*."

Scorpius had no time to process the implications of that muttered remark. Quick as a wink, Al had a couple more sickles out and rapidly chose two more handfuls of goodies. He winked at Scorpius and shoved one handful of sugary loot into his pocket while he passed the other to Scorpius. It took him a second, but he darted a glance of realization at Rose and hastened to stow his share away as well. Al shot him a quick conspirator's grin at him before schooling his expression to pretend interest in Rose's choice of drink. Scorpius answered with a little grin of his own, slightly guilty but mostly excited. Even being a relatively well-behaved small boy, Scorpius had his share of Things He Had Got Away with, predominately of the reading-past-bedtime-, sneaking-extra-biscuits-, and sliding- down-forbidden-bannisters- variety. He hadn't realized how much more satisfying it was to have an accomplice.

Once Rose settled up for her own fizzy drink, the Tea Trolley was considerably lighter...as was Scorpius' heart. The compartment was silent, save for the sounds of eating, drinking, and wrappers crinkling, for a good while. They picked over the Bertie Bott's Beans carefully, saving out more for James and Louis than they ate. Scorpius cautiously sniffed at a red bean. While it didn't prove to be blood-flavored, as Al had warned it might be, Scorpius was still not at all prepared for the taste of pickled ginger.

Al washed down a Cauldron Cake with a swig of pumpkin juice. He made quick work of his share of the sandwiches despite his protestations. "This is the life," he said with a contented sigh.

Scorpius heartily agreed. "I wonder if they serve peanutbutter at school," he said with a longing look at the last crust in his hand. He finished it slowly, savoring the toasty, sticky, nuttiness.

Rose lingered over the quince. "I don't suppose... if I asked Mum to send along some peanutbutter... you might ask your mum to send quince? You know... so we could trade again?"

"Oh, surely," Scorpius hastened to assert. There were jars of it in the pantry. He couldn't imagine any reason not to spare one or two. For the first time in their limited acquaintance, Rose smiled...properly smiled...at him. Her face lit brightly with the blue twinkle in her eyes and the gleam of her shining clean (if slightly large) teeth; Scorpius revised his opinion of Flossing Stringments upward. He was also suitably impressed with the magical powers of food in general, which seemed to put Rose in a very peaceful frame of mind. *And why not? It's very good food.* Scorpius thought with a pleased sigh of his own.

The quiet was shattered by a belch of truly epic proportions.

"Al!" Rose exclaimed. Whatever scolding she had planned dissolved into laughter. Scorpius joined her; the hilarity of bodily functions was too overpowering a force for his newly forged loyalty as a 'mate', partner-in-crime, and quasi-cousin to contain.

"I have it from Uncle Charlie," Al said, his face cherry-red and setting off the green of his eyes to good effect, "that burping is considered a compliment to the food in some countries." Rose and Scorpius just giggled harder. "Fine, then...see if I help you spell away the crumbs."

"You'd do it anyway, just to show off," Rose finally managed to gasp. "You know more spells than any of us." She didn't seem as sulky about it as she had earlier.

"Only cleaning spells that James teaches me because he doesn't like to tidy up," Al said. Still, he carefully pointed his wand at each wrapper and crumb. *Evanesco*, he pronounced. It even worked more often than not. Once again, Scorpius fought back envy. Still, now was perhaps the time to bring up wands.

"What's your wand...I mean, what sort of wood is it?" Scorpius silently lamented his tumbled-tongued ways. At least he hadn't stuttered.

"Holly...with Unicorn hair," Al said. "They had to dig into the old stock at Ollivander and Frost's to find it."

"I'll say they did. Dad was climbing the walls and Mum was actually finished with the book shopping by the time they dug that one out of the basement. It must have been pre-War," Rose added her own flourishes to the account. "We were beginning to wonder if you were a Squib."

"Ha, ha," Al expressed his lack of amusement. "It's only that they didn't have to think about your wand...just hand you the first ~~rosewood~~ one they came to."

Rose made a brushing-off gesture. "Whatever. So, what's your wand then?" She directed her question at Scorpius.

He drew it carefully out of his sleeve. "Hawthorn and Unicorn hair," he said. He couldn't resist resting one hand on it, pressing it close to his heart for a moment in a sort of hug. "It was my dad's, but he stopped using it when he inherited Professor Snape's wand."

"He has Professor Snape's wand? Are you related, then? Has he told you anything about him?" Al's green eyes shone with curiosity.

"I don't think we were related. I only know that he was one of the heroes of the War, and that he did a lot for our family," Scorpius said. He shrugged apologetically. "I wish I knew more, myself."

Meanwhile, Rose had already turned her attention back to food and its accoutrements. She tore into a Chocolate Frog wrapper. "Ech, another Artemesia Lufkin. Politics are **boring**. I dunno what Mum sees in that stuff." She tossed the card aside, bit the hind legs off the frog to keep it contained, and grabbed another packet in a practiced way. Scorpius caught the card out of the air.

"Nice," Al noted the catch.

An "Aha!" from Rose caused Scorpius to abandon the hard-faced witch on the seat next to Agate's cage. "Listen up! Severus Snape: 9 January, 1960-1 May, 1998. Head of Slytherin House 1980-1997, Headmaster of Hogwarts 1997-1998,** sometime Potions and Defense Against Dark Arts Professor. Death Eater-turned-spy for Albus

Dumbledore. One of 'Those Who Won the War' according to Harry Potter." Rose read aloud from the back of her Chocolate Frog Card.

Al and Scorpius leaned in eagerly to study the picture on the card while she read. Fathomless black pin-points stared into the middle distance from a knife-edge face topped with inky strands of hair. He deigned to give the boys a sidelong glance which turned into a full-on stare. Tiny eyebrows furrowed as he switched his gaze from one boy to the other and his thin lips mouthed something that looked like 'What the...?' Then abruptly, he whirled around in a cloud of black robes and disappeared from the frame.

"Blimey, Rose, you've got all the luck with these cards," Al said.

"How curious," Scorpius said. "Did he look... a little confused to you?"

Rose flipped the card around. "Bother, he's gone already. He's one of the hard-to-find ones...even when you have his card."

"Headmaster Snape...Sir...m-may we have a word?" Scorpius addressed the card.

Al scratched his head. "Um, they don't talk, you know...even if he does come back."

"Oh." Scorpius' only experience with Chocolate Frog Cards was from Mum's and Father's old collections and he thought that they might have changed a bit in the intervening years. Cousin Teddy had given him Chocolate Frogs a few times for his birthday; but the first time they'd melted a bit and Mum had disposed of all the damped cards before Scorpius could look at them. The other time they'd been Boxed Frogs without the cards.

Snape peeked into the frame again, his not inconsiderable nose preceding the rest of him. He studied the three children for a moment, those expressive brows climbing into an expression of incredulity. Scorpius thought that they looked like particularly emphatic punctuation marks in his parchment-pale face. He opened his mouth and all three children could clearly imagine the sort of 'Hah!' sound that he would have made before he vanished again.

"Well, that was something, at least," Rose said. "The Slytherin cards are really rare. And I have all of them now, unlike Hugo," she said with satisfaction.

"They don't usually mention on the card what House a wizard was in, so how d'you know if they're rare?" Al asked.

Scorpius ignored the incipient argument by opening one of his own Chocolate Frogs. Perhaps he would be fortunate enough to find one of those elusive Slytherins.

Instead he was surprised by a pair of familiar green eyes blinking at him from behind clunky-framed spectacles. Only the eyes were familiar, though; this person was much older than Al and much too young to be the Mr. Potter Scorpius had met. His face was subtly yet distinctly different in shape from Al's though their features were otherwise similar. This young version of Mr. Potter also differed in that, in place of Mr. Potter's kindly, slightly crooked smile, he frowned at Scorpius as though he wasn't sure what to expect from him but suspected that it wouldn't be good. It gave Scorpius a very unhappy feeling. As distracted as he was, his hand popped up reflexively to catch the frog before it hopped away. *I knew Mr. Potter was important, but... a Chocolate Frog Card?* Scorpius felt a little overwhelmed by the magnitude of it.

"I think...I think I found your father!" he said to Al. He turned the card to show his friend and felt silly for qualifying his statement as soon as he noted the confirming text on the reverse side.

Harry Potter

1980...

The Boy-Who-Lived-Twice, defeater of Voldemort. Recently Chief Auror.

Scorpius had the feeling that the card was waiting for Mr. Potter to do something else that it could discuss and was rather disappointed that he hadn't as yet. The frown on the card changed from suspicious to puzzled when Al looked over.

"Dad hates those things. He hasn't gone so far as to ban them from the house but he and Mum never buy them for us. James has a few from the tea-trolley each trip to and from school, but he knows better than to leave them lying about. I sort of see why; it's weird to see Dad younger than Cousin Teddy. He doesn't even recognize us or anything. Uncle Ron used to like having one of his own until he started finding them all bent and smudged in suspects' pockets," Al said. He gave Scorpius a sort of half-smile, as if apologizing for the strangeness of having family on Chocolate Frog Cards.

Scorpius returned the expression. Al was such a regular fellow...likable was the word that came to mind... that it helped offset how much a disadvantage Scorpius felt. *He likes me even though I don't have a lot of money or a famous family or anything like that.* The thought warmed away the unpleasant feeling from being frowned at by the picture-version of Mr. Potter.

"Yeah, Dad went off them after that. Mum absolutely **hates** her Frog Card picture...how funny," Rose said, interrupting herself. She studied Scorpius until he felt fidgety. "You have the same odd sort of smile as Al and Uncle Harry."

"Must be a God-cousins thing," Al whispered it to avoid re-igniting that argument with Rose. Scorpius stifled a giggle. Al grinned sideways at him from behind another Chocolate Frog package. "Let's see what I've got, then." He carelessly tossed the wrapping aside and Scorpius again caught the escaping frog with little effort.

"Show off," Rose snorted, but she was smiling at the same time so Scorpius took it to be meant in a friendly way. Al was silent. Rose poked at his shin with her toe. "So, what've you got? Another Celestina Warbeck? We can add it to the collage for Grandmum."

"No." Al's voice went so queer that Scorpius and Rose both stared at him. "Scorpius... is someone in your family named Draco?"

A sort of dread came over Scorpius. The last time he'd felt that way was when Great-Uncle Crius showed up at the Manor suddenly and unannounced, his normally ruddy face pale and solemn. A bad feeling had slipped between Scorpius' shoulder blades and squirmed in his stomach for a second just before the words, 'I'm sorry, Story; your granddad's gone,' had left Uncle Crius' mouth. "That's my father's name," he said.

"There's no one else... an uncle or something?" Al's eyes asked Scorpius to answer 'yes' even as Scorpius shook his head.

"Look at the bloody date, Al," Rose pushed her toes against the thin carpet and stared out the window, refusing to meet anyone's eyes. "He's the same age as Dad and Uncle Harry."

"But... my father makes toys. Why would he have a Chocolate Frog Card?" Even as Scorpius protested, he felt as if he could hear Cousins Laurel and Phoebe whispering, the only word that came through the sibilliance being 'War.'

Al handed him the card. Scorpius almost didn't want to look, but Al touched the back of his hand, and it didn't feel like pity from Aunt Daphne or awkwardness, but like...

Like a friend. Scorpius gathered his courage to look down.

Draco Malfoy

1980...

His wand was used by Harry Potter to defeat Voldemort. Avoided prison owing to having been underage and thus not genuinely Marked; also because he acted under

threat of harm to his parents. Involved in the creation of GaMP Wolfsbane.

"Marked?" Scorpius asked. He felt blank and wrong all over. "What does that mean?"

"Every Death Eater had a mark on their arm like a tattoo," Rose said, her voice low. "Voldemort used it to call them. I heard Mum and Dad talk about it the night they took away my Draco card. I pulled it out of the rubbish bin after they went to bed."

"It says he wasn't really marked," Al pointed out. "That means he **wasn't** a Death Eater."

Scorpius heard it all from far away. He wanted Al's stout defense and Rose's rescue of the card to reassure him, but he was too stunned to feel much of anything.

Rose knew from the moment I introduced myself. The realization jolted him, got his heart bumping again with a sickening lurch. *She said she had all the Slytherins. That's why she behaved so oddly...*

He didn't know the face that looked at him from the card, not really. Like the picture of Mr. Potter, this version of Father was too young, too thin, his eyes too hard. Scorpius had heard the term 'Death Eater' before... Aunt Daphne had said it and Mum had taken Scorpius home immediately and not spoken to her sister for months afterward. He knew that Death Eaters had been bad; long ago, when Grandmother and Great-Aunt Andromeda thought that he was napping, Andromeda had cried about Teddy's mother and father and asked Grandmother 'Why?' over and over, and Grandmother's sweet voice had broken on the words 'Bella' and 'gone wrong' and that awful word, 'Death Eater' and many, many, 'sorries'. He even knew that Grandfather and Grandmother... and Father... had been on the wrong side of the war.

Somehow he hadn't connected all of those things until now.

"Take it," Scorpius said. The words squeezed painfully out of his tight throat as he held the card out, stiff-armed, towards Al. "He doesn't recognize me. *It's so wrong.* He couldn't meet Al's eyes as the bit of paper slowly passed from his fingers. If they were accusing he couldn't bear it. If they were sympathetic, that would be just as hard. Harder, because it didn't seem right to stay around nice, funny, friendly Al and make him the object of the sort of shifty-eyed whispering that was Laurel and Phoebe's specialty. "I...I should go." He stood quickly. The door blurred in front of him.

"No!" Al's hand shot out and caught Scorpius' sleeve almost as quickly as Scorpius could catch a Chocolate Frog but with a steely grip that Scorpius couldn't hope to match. He got between Scorpius and the door as quick as a Snitch. "Please...we're friends, and I just know that we'll be in the same House, whatever that may be...and all that stuff happened **so** long ago, why does it matter?"

"I guess it matters even to my mum's own sister," he said, keeping his eyes down. It all made horrible sense now, Aunt Daphne never letting Phoebe and Laurel over. "Won't let her kids go to a **Death Eater's** house."

"That's not fair!" Scorpius blinked as much at the vehemence in Rose's voice as at the burning feeling behind his eyes. "Even the stupid Chocolate Frog Card said he wasn't really one." She pushed her toe across the carpet again. "And you're not. You're...you're you."

"You're all kinds of articulate when you're giving me an ear-bashing, but not so much at comfort, are you?" Al said to Rose.

Scorpius couldn't help a sad little hiccup of a laugh. He would miss Al's curious way of speaking, even if it was a little more informal than he was used to.

"Oh, shut it, you." Scorpius didn't need to look to know that Rose's arms were folded again.

"It'll mean trouble for you with your family to be around me," Scorpius said. He thought of Rose's parents arguing in the night.

"Listen... Professor Snape's card says that he was a Death Eater, full stop...but he turned around and... and he was good enough for my Dad to name me for him. Maybe that's why the grownups don't talk about the war. Maybe... it was so long ago, they don't want it to matter to us. It won't matter to Mum and Dad." Al's voice was so pleading, so appealing. He made Scorpius wish...believe...he could be right.

At some point Rose must have stood up. Scorpius noted that their toes all pointed toward each other, their different shoes peeking out from under the hems of the heavy, blue trousers that seemed to be some sort of Muggle uniform. Rose's shoes were new and almost shiny-looking, Scorpius' an old-fashioned pair of Father's shoes that Grandmother had sentimentally kept, Al's ratty Muggle shoes tied with strings that looked just like the sort Cousin Teddy liked to wear; yet somehow, they looked right together.

"Al's sort of weird," Rose said, and lifted her voice over Al's protests to add, "but when he's right, he's right." She shuffled her feet. It was obviously a nervous habit. "And... when I said my parents were arguing... Mainly they didn't want a reminder of the war around. They don't like any of the Chocolate frog cards that show someone they knew. Mum even talked about how your mum and dad helped lots of people. You know, werewolves had pretty rough lives before GaMP Wolfsbane... before our time. They're just kind of loud about, well, everything." Rose fixed Scorpius with her startlingly bright blue gaze. "Just, stay... okay?"

Al transferred his hand from Scorpius' sleeve to his wrist and squeezed gently. Scorpius looked up at him and managed to quirk one corner of his mouth up. Al responded in kind.

We do have the same sort of smile Scorpius thought of Mr. Potter's kind eyes. *He must have known, yet he was kind to me.*

"Okay," he answered Rose.

Al let out a victory whoop and squashed Scorpius in another hug, knocking him into Rose.

"Al, you clumsy troll!" Rose yelled, but she was laughing just as much as the boys. Rose even gave Scorpius a quick half-squeeze. He chanced another look at her face to find that her cheeks were pinked again, which made him feel inexplicably shy.

Why do I feel like that when she blushes?

*The song that Lysander and Lorcan sing is taken from 'Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire,' the last verse is left out. This would have been Luna's 3rd year.

**Dates for Snape's Chocolate Frog Card courtesy of HP Lexicon.

By coincidence (admittedly easy to arrange when one is writing it), a certain pair of lifelong friends spent exactly the amount that Uncle Crius gave to Scorpius...eleven sickles, seven knuts...on candy on their way to their first term at Hogwarts...

Four the Win

Chapter 4 of 7

There's no such thing as coincidence--especially for wizards.

Chapter 4: Four the Win

Disclaimer: J.K. Rowling's characters are on completely unpaid leave in my imagination.

Al gave Scorpius' wrist another quick squeeze. This time he felt the hilt of Scorpius' wand. "Say, I just thought of something!" Al absolutely radiated excitement. "You said that your wand belonged to your dad... and the card says that his wand defeated Voldemort... so..."

"No way," Rose breathed. "Let's see it again."

Scorpius felt another shiver. This time, though, it was of excitement rather than anxiety. Slowly, he drew the wand again and cradled it in both hands. "I don't know," he whispered. "Wouldn't it be... I don't know, under glass or something, somewhere? Wouldn't your father have kept it?"

"Dad says his wand is the one he always had, from when he got his Hogwarts letter," Al said, shaking his head. "James asked once and Dad told him it wasn't the one that he used in the last battle and to leave off asking about it. He doesn't keep any others at home and he and Uncle Ron complain about the spares they have at the office being second-rate." The words tumbled out of his mouth faster and faster as he went.

"Besides, who keeps a mess of wands around?" Rose asked. She seemed to have caught a bit of Al's excitement. "This has to be it!"

Al held his own wand close to Scorpius'. "My wand was old stock. Mr. Frost at Ollivander and Frost's said it was one of Ollivander's classics. Look at how alike the hilts are," he said.

Once again Al made Scorpius want to believe. "There is something about them... They might be of an age," he admitted.

Rose held hers out beside them to compare. "Mine is a new one, a Frost model. You can see how it has a different sort of hilt, and the polish is a different because they have different resins in the mix nowadays. This one must be it!" Her eyes shone with the secret. They seemed even bluer up close. Scorpius found himself fascinated by the jewel-like shade, which shifted in seconds from enthusiastic to thoughtful. "Still... better keep this between us, though...unless you want people queued up around the school asking for a peep at it," she said.

Keeping quiet seemed like an excellent idea to Scorpius. It further occurred to him that someone might decide that his wand did indeed belong under glass somewhere, and he was already quite attached to it.

"Can I keep it mum that my name is Potter, so they won't queue up to have a peep at me?" Al asked dryly.

"James says they got over it... after a term or two," Rose teased.

"Yeah, but he doesn't look as much like Dad as I do," Al said.

"If they pile up too deep shall I just whip this out and get their attention?" Scorpius ventured to make his second joke of the day, punctuating it with a wave of his wand that left a little trail of white sparks.

Their laughter was cut short by a sharp, "What's this, then?"

Scorpius looked up to find James and Louis filling the doorway with Lysander and Lorcan peering in over their shoulders. His first, incongruous, thought was that James looked nothing whatsoever like Mr. Potter. The hard expression in his brown eyes was quite unlike the equivalent on the Chocolate Frog Card, and his hair was decidedly red and rather curly. He looked more like Louis' brother than Al's.

"We are keeping ourselves amused in your absence," Rose said. The lofty tone was back, with added primness that couldn't mean anything but reproach.

"Who invited him?" James pointed his thumb rudely at Scorpius.

Scorpius felt a wave of sick worse than his nervousness on the train platform. Just as quickly, he almost laughed out loud when Rosie, Al, Lysander, and Lorcan all said in unison...with varying degrees of exasperation or matter-of-factness, "YOU did!"

At the sight of James' scowl, Scorpius felt a bit of mischief. "Yes, thank you," he said, every bit as primly as Rose.

Speaking of whom... "His name is Scorpius, by the way," Rose said disapprovingly. Stilted greetings were exchanged, and the older boys couldn't quite seem to decide whether or not to shake hands, so Scorpius didn't try. Then it grew rather quiet and terribly awkward.

Louis snorted and flopped into the seat. "Teach you to play the joker," he said to James. "Are we staying, or are you going to deliver the sandwiches and we'll be off again?"

"Do you have any sandwiches left?" Lorcan asked. Scorpius was only guessing as to which twin had spoken, but it did seem that Lorcan usually made the first remark.

"No need." Al waved off James' offer of the thoroughly squashed lunch sack (which contained perhaps half a sandwich, by Scorpius' estimate.) "We handled things all on our own...the three of us."

"Three pounds of cauldron cakes washed down with pumpkin juice, I'll warrant," Louis said. "Don't come crying to us in the dorms tonight when you get a bellyache."

"For your information, we shared out my peanutbutter and Scorpius' quice, and had no more than a reasonable number of cauldron cakes," Rose said.

"Yes, and you needn't assume we'll be in a dorm anywhere near yours, either," Al added.

Scorpius thought that you might have heard a pin drop on the carpet in the instant, but perhaps that was merely by contrast with the subsequent explosion.

"Don't joke like that!" Louis nearly yelled, aghast.

"Is this about earlier? C'mon, I said I was sorry," James whined.

"Did you?" Lysander asked. Scorpius was really only pretending he could guess which one it was, but it was better than calling each of them Lysander-or-Lorcan every time one spoke, even if only in his mind.

"This has nothing to do with it, and I'm not joking." Al stuck his chin out, looking quite defiant. "I don't know what house I'll be in. I can't guess what the Hat will say; maybe I'll just ask it to let me follow my best mate here." He slung his arm over Scorpius' shoulder. Scorpius really wasn't accustomed to quite so much physical contact, nor with anyone being quite so proprietary. Still, the idea of being someone's best mate!

"Al? What... what's got into you?" James sounded uncertain. He peered at Al with concern and at Scorpius with suspicion.

"I thought you'd heard, big brother," Al said. "I can manage all right with my friends, just like you do with yours. Go along and have fun if you like, and we'll do the same...here on the train, and in whatever house we're sorted into."

"That would be Gryffindor if you know what's good for you," came a new voice. Scorpius turned to find himself facing a sneering boy who seemed...he could think of no better description for it...various shades of rust-color all over, from his curled hair to the skin on his hands. He wore some of the most extraordinary clothing Scorpius had ever seen, including a red dragonhide jacket and matching boots over blue Muggle trousers that somehow seemed substantially more expensive than Scorpius' own hand-me-downs. A taller boy stood behind him, idly punching one fist into the palm of his hand. Scorpius could see why the boy who'd spoken might want a bodyguard. Anyone that short, who spoke that rudely, probably stood a fair chance of being thrashed.

"I'll decide what's good for me without any input from you," Al said.

"Watch how you speak to family," the newcomer said.

"Pot, cauldron, Freddy," Louis remarked with a snort.

"I'd think you would understand best, the only loyal one out of your lot," Freddy shot back.

Louis pretended to ignore Fred. James was not so quiescent. "Quit talking rubbish," James said. "Loyalty is how you treat family...not whether you're in the same House as they are. Go buy a gobstopper, you could use it."

Scorpius happened to think almost that same thing at that moment, and gave a little cough to hide his laugh. The sound had the unfortunate effect of getting Fred's attention.

"What's this?" Scorpius narrowed his eyes at the other boy. Between the tone and the words, he'd no intention of introducing himself.

"Honestly," Rose said. It was more of a huff, really. "Fred Wealsey, can't you introduce yourself like a civilized wizard? What about your friend back there?" She peered at the boy behind Fred rather severely, as if silently chastising him for taking up the entire corridor. Neither his size nor the fist fazed her in the slightest. "You have no reason to be so rude to Scorpius; as Al indicated, and I'm sure you would have heard did you pay attention to anything but yourself, he and Al are friends."

"Bet you a sickle Gerry doesn't talk," James whispered to Louis. "I've never heard a word in the two years he's been hanging about with Fred."

Scorpius rather wished Rose would have refrained from helping.

"Scorpius... that's an outdated name if I ever heard one. Let me guess: he's a Malfoy. The definition of outdated. And apparently, skint. Oh, how the mighty have fallen. Can't put enough knuts together for new kit?" Fred plucked at the sleeve of Scorpius' muggle robe disdainfully. Scorpius yanked his arm away. He felt his lips twisting with disgust and anger. "Guess Malfoys must be the poorest wizards there are...too little color and too few children and they still can't cover 'em properly. Shall we show you how to use the loo, seeing as you can't have a pot to piss in?"

"I take it you were the specific Weasley I was warned about," Scorpius said, and scarcely knew where the words came from. All of a sudden he felt glib and defiant.

"Probably because he should come with a warning label," Rose said. She narrowed her eyes at her cousin and Scorpius realized that the look she'd given him earlier was only a faint shadow of cold and disapproving.

"Oi, leave it be, Fred," Louis said. He was clearly uncomfortable with the situation but hoping to diffuse it. "What's a different house among family, or even friends?"

"Everything if that house is Slytherin." Fred said. He made it sound like a word Rudy would say. "We don't consort with the enemy!" Gerry smacked his fist particularly hard. Apparently he didn't speak; he merely provided punctuation.

"What does that mean?" Lorcan asked, wrinkling his nose. It was the most expression Scorpius had seen him make since their acquaintance had commenced.

"It means we thrash them at Quidditch," Louis said with a grin. "But that makes them the same as all the other Houses." Lysander rolled his eyes at that.

"It's more than that and you know it. They need to be kept in line."

"Go away, Freddy, and quit sampling experimental stuff from your dad's lab," James said dismissively. He drew his wand and began flipping stray crumbs into the air and incinerating them, with the air of someone who is so bored with the conversation he had to resort to such measures.

Al held up his hand in a 'halt' gesture, not that it seemed necessary. Fred was clearly ignoring James, as James seemed determined to likewise do. "You need to explain that, Fred," he said. His eyes were narrowed at Fred, and there was something commanding about his manner that Scorpius wouldn't have guessed at from their earlier hijinks. It certainly seemed to draw out Fred.

"You should know better than anyone, baby cousin, who was on the wrong side...and who will be again, unless we see to it they know their place. You might even make a name for yourself, once you join us. We don't forget who we are...and don't let **them** forget, either."

"You don't know who I am," Al said. His tone chilled the room. "Maybe you didn't hear my dad when he said the bravest man he ever knew was a Slytherin. You know what? I'm beginning to think I'll look good in green. Goes with my eyes. I might even throw my name around. How long d'you think it would be before I have more bodyguards than you do? You and what army are gonna push me around...or my house? Who's this 'Us' you're talking about, anyway?"

"I don't think I ought to tell you," Fred said, "and I guess what you don't know, you can't tattle."

"Want to bet against a pensive memory?" Al answered. "My dad might be interested in knowing about someone who's part of a gang organized to harass other students. I'm sure he'll find out who the other members are quickly enough." His voice was tight with anger and his eyes burned with it, but his face was still, almost cold. Scorpius was impressed... and inspired.

"You might not want to bet against the wand that defeated the most evil wizard in an age, either." Scorpius marveled at how he managed to keep his voice steady when his stomach was churning. Still, there was something...some curious reserve of pride, or trust in Al, or maybe just a spirit of sheer bluffing...that kept him upright, his eyes slitted disdainfully at the older boy, unwilling to back down. It was a strange, but he couldn't help liking it just a bit. *Power*, a faint voice whispered in his head. Scorpius

thought it might come in handy. He drew the wand slowly, looking at it rather than Fred as if he couldn't be bothered. "Oh, did I forget to mention it? See, I don't think of it, really... it's only my wand. It just happens to be the same one that defeated Voldemort." He couldn't help smiling at the slender, well-polished stick. It was another connection to his best mate, however roundabout.

"That's not possible," Fred said, his voice sounding a little too uncertain to be dismissive.

"Ask any Chocolate Frog Card," Al said. He was grinning, but it was a cold expression, a shark's grin. "Or my dad, he'd be happy to set you straight."

Unexpectedly, Rose's voice piped up beside Al and Scorpius. The boys somehow managed to keep from betraying their surprise. "And just so you know...where they go, I go. And I'm not the least bit afraid to write to Grandmum."

"You wouldn't. You can't No one is supposed to disturb Grandmum, it's not good for her heart," Fred argued, but he frankly sounded a little scared. Even Gerry looked around as if seeking the source of Fred's alarm.

"You'll just have to make sure it doesn't come to that, won't you?" James said. He seemed to have stepped in firmly on their side, houses notwithstanding. "I'm sure that Dad can see to it she's sitting down if it does."

"I won't forget this, James," Fred hissed. But he was already backing away.

"I'm counting on it," James said grimly. He shut the compartment door...and leaned on it. Everyone seemed to release a pent-up breath at the same moment.

"Blimey, Rose," Louis said weakly. "You played the Grandmum card against Fred."

"Bout time someone did," James said. "I'm voting for Gryffindor for you lot."

"Not while Fred is there. I won't." Scorpius folded his arms. He had never felt so obstinate in his life, and suddenly he didn't care who knew it.

"Seconded, mate," Al said, mirroring Scorpius' posture.

"Rosie?" James turned inquiring eyes on Rose. Louis was too busy trying to collect his jaw from the floor.

Rose abused the carpet with the toe of her shoe again. "Look at it this way, James...Gryffindor is always chock-full of good Quidditch players. I might not make the team until Sixth Year, if then, with all that competition," she argued. "What I need is to find a House where I can stand out sooner, because I...I'm going professional!" she finished hotly, giving up on that equivocating toe with a decisive stomp. "So... no Gryffindor for me, either." She folded her arms now as well.

Scorpius relaxed from his own defensive posture. "She does it better than we do," he observed to Al.

"Did any of you stop to think where you'll be **if not** Gryffindor?"

Louis was completely nonplussed when Lysander and Lorcan both broke out in hearty laughter. Eventually Rose, Al, and Scorpius joined in.

"What d'you think we've been talking about the whole train ride?" Al finally said when they'd recovered somewhat.

James sighed. "You know I was only fooling, earlier," he said to Al, almost pleadingly. "And if it comes to it, there's no way I'm siding with Fred over you. Bloody hell! If you're **not** in Gryffindor, and you make another house team... we'll play against each other!" James was aghast. Louis looked quite grave, and even Lorcan and Lysander seemed at a loss for once.

Al, too, seemed taken aback by the thought. "I know, James. But... Quidditch is Quidditch, and family is family."

"What about him?" James pointed his chin at Scorpius. Scorpius felt his earlier bravado falter.

"He's as good as," Al said. "We share the same birthday. We've both got old Ollivander wands, and no, that was no joke that his is THAT wand," Al said. "That has to mean something."

Lysander and Lorcan fixed him with their bulgy eyes until Scorpius felt like something under Mum's micro-ocular. Louis eyed Scorpius wand until he quite wished he'd never taken it out of his sleeve.

"He's got a point," Rose said. "There's no such thing as coincidence, James. Maybe for Muggles, but not for us. Good way to keep that quiet, incidentally," she added.

That has belated occurred to Scorpius as well, but he'd begun to get the idea that he might need leverage more than anonymity.

"Hm." James looked at Scorpius. It was a thoughtful sort of expression, but he refused to say anything beyond that noncommittal sound.

"Forget Houses for a moment, and relations. Every Pureblood on this rock is a billionth cousin or some such through the Black family, anyway," Louis waved off centuries of genealogy with a careless gesture. "This shit with Fred is real," he said gravely. "What are we supposed to do about it? It's not just him and his thuggish mates. He'll start a war with the contents of Uncle George's store."

"We've got an arsenal of our own if it comes to that," Lysander said. He and Lorcan exuded a sort of quiet confidence.

"Teddy would know what to do," James said. A peculiar little dent formed beside his mouth, and Scorpius guessed that he was biting the inside of his cheek.

"Well, Teddy's not here," Rose said. It was less exasperated than it might have been.

"War is not the answer," Al said. The authoritative voice was back. "I think Rose has the right of it. I know we're not supposed to upset her, but we need Grandmum involved. If this goes too far, people could get hurt...and that includes Fred's sorry self."

"Better you write it than me, little cousin," James said, throwing up his hands in Rose's general direction.

"Yes, but... I think, begging everyone's pardon... you'd have to sign it. I mean, you're in the same house as Fred. If we're all in a different house than you are..." Scorpius trailed off, not sure how to quite explain what he meant.

"Not the worst idea I've heard all day," Louis remarked. He snorted in Scorpius' general direction. "I might have to tell Nicky to make room for you in Ravenclaw." His tone was almost friendly.

"Are we looking at the future firm of Egghead, Egghead, and Swot?" James shifted mercurially back to teasing and draped a heavy arm over both Al and Scorpius, drawing them into a rough sideways hug. Rose dodged his other arm, protesting all the while.

Weasleys and Potters, Scorpius deduced, were very tactile creatures. All this hugging would take some getting used to; Father (and much more so, Grandmother) seemed to leave hugs for special occasions...something to be taken out perhaps once daily, like the dinner place settings. It was getting easier, though, especially since they all had hints of the same Muggle cleaning potions smell. That scent was rapidly becoming a reassuring rather than a strange one.

"Brains are welcome in Hufflepuff, too, you know," Lysander said. His tone was mild, but Scorpius thought he detected a hint of defensiveness.

"Not quite so much in Gryffindor, though," Lorcan whispered. He leaned in between Al and Scorpius, so Scorpius assumed it was addressed to both of them. "Interferes with rushing in where angels fear to tread."

"I suppose," Scorpius said, thinking aloud, "if it's unpopular to be in Slytherin and very popular to be in Gryffindor, then you would actually have to be braver to be a Slytherin."

"That... makes a weird sort of sense," Rose said. She shook her head and managed to include both Al and Scorpius in the gesture. "You two are a pair."

"I guess we'll find out soon enough," James said, switching back to seriousness. "That's the whistle for the Hogs Gap bridge. We need to be dressed before the train stops."

Louis, Lysander, and Lorcan headed back to their own compartments. Al was quiet but for trunks thumping and robes rustling for the next several minutes. Once they were all in school robes, with daylight almost gone, the mood in the compartment grew entirely serious.

Scorpius checked the cuffs of his student robe. He'd practiced putting it on in front of the mirror a dozen times, and he could probably put it on in his sleep. Al was considerably less practiced, as evidenced by Rose having to help him untangle his head from one of his own sleeves. He felt James' hand fall heavily on his shoulder and looked up, startled.

"Rose is right about coincidence, you know," James said. He may not have looked much like Mr. Potter, but there was a certain hint of grave kindness in his eyes that Scorpius found familiar. "I'd rather claim you than Fred any day." Al got free of his robe just as the train groaned to a stop, and James pulled away. Apparently he wasn't willing to concede that much in front of his brother.

Scorpius managed a weak smile. "Faint praise," he choked out. James laughed, all traces of gravity gone in an instant, and charged down the corridor with his irritated owl bouncing behind him in its cage.

"Time to follow the bouncing maniac," Rose said. Her complaining was back, though it didn't quite mask the aura of nerves and excitement about her. Or maybe Scorpius was projecting. Al shot him a nervous grin and followed Rose, and Scorpius hastened after.

The air was chill on the Hogsmeade platform. The chaos was more complete than at Platform 9 3/4, since it was all children and luggage, cats and owls, directed only by taller students with badges. There wasn't a grownup in sight...

Scorpius stopped short, in his thoughts and in fact. Standing at the edge of the platform was a grownup. A mountain of a man, almost literally. His robes spread wide and roughly brown around his great boots of feet, and bits of foliage caught in them like shrubs on the lower slopes. His vast beard and hair flowed gray and white, making the topmost part of him into a dingy late-spring mountain peak. He waved a great, rough, red, snow-shovel hand and called, "Firs' years! Firs' years this way!" With the other hand he piled First Years' luggage on a cart with no visible means of propulsion, much like the ones the older students were entering.

"He looks too big to be allowed," Scorpius said, edging subtly closer to Al.

Al, however, showed no signs of hesitation. "Hi, Hagrid!" he yelled. Hagrid scooped Al's trunk as if it was a balled-up parchment.

"Hoy, is that Al? An' Rosie! Who's yer friend?"

"Shouldn't that be 'Mr. Hagrid,' or something?" Scorpius asked, feeling no less alarmed than before. Al dragged him right to the feet of the giant, for a giant he surely must be. At the very least, a half-giant.

"This is my best mate in the whole world, Scorpius Malfoy," Al said happily, oblivious to Scorpius' consternation. "He's coming with us to tea on Friday, that's all right, isn't it?"

"Oh," Hagrid looked confused and concerned behind his heap of a beard. "Er... I reckon it's all right."

Scorpius swallowed heavily. "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Hagrid," he quavered. Just then, Agate interrupted with a flurry of wings and unhappy sounds. Al tried to shuffle his other bag to reach around and soothe her.

"Don't worry, I have her, Al," Scorpius said. He petted Agate's neck through the bars of the cage. She gently nibbled his finger and Scorpius wondered if he should feel guilty for falling in love with his best friend's owl.

"Eh, she likes you," Hagrid said. He sounded surprised, but his puzzled expression had a pleased rather than a worried look to it now. It made him look a bit more Father-Christmas-like rather than wild-man-like, and Scorpius relaxed fractionally. "Right, time fer all that later! Get in the boat, children! Ye'll not want to be late fer supper!" Far more gently than he'd treated the trunks, he nestled Agate's cage on the baggage wagon amongst the other owls. The cats curled up in their own favored places amid the trunks and bags, sniffing noses with each other and occasionally hissing someone away from their declared spot.

All this to-do had left them the last first years on the platform. Scorpius fell into the end of the queue behind Rose and Al, and they shuffled their way to the boat dock.

Suddenly, Scorpius was blinded by an explosion of light and sound. In the same instant, he was struck painfully in the back and found himself hurtling toward the water. Equally suddenly, he found himself hitting something resembling a brick wall except...it had thumbs.

"Scorpius! You okay, mate?" Al's voice penetrated the ringing in his ears.

"Bloody rotten Fred! Scorpius could've been killed!" Rose was practically shrieking. It finally registered with Scorpius that he was in Hagrid's hand. "Don't make excuses, Hagrid, you know it was him. No one else has access to Uncle George's big fireworks."

"If it was, Professor Longbottom'll get to the bottom of it," Hagrid's rumbling voice came through. Almost as an afterthought, he gently tipped Scorpius safely back on the dock.

"Great catch, Hagrid. Are you sure you weren't a Seeker in school?" Al asked.

"Th-thank you, Mr. Hagrid," Scorpius gasped. He was as out of breath from hitting that massive paddle of a hand as he was from the explosion. He tried to be polite as he pushed Rose, with her fussing, aside. *What difference does it make, how many fingers she's holding up?*

"A Seeker, hah! They didn't make a broom big enough." Hagrid snorted at Al. He appeared to think about it, then patted Scorpius' head awkwardly. "Weren't no trouble. You don't weigh more'n a Snidget," Hagrid rumbled. "No need to 'Mr.' me t'death, neither." He bundled Scorpius, Al, and the rest of the first years into the boat.

"Scorpius! Scorpius!" Al yanked on Scorpius' sleeve. As Aunt Andromeda would have said, he was 'all a-twitter.'

"What?" Scorpius blinked at his friend. He didn't quite see what was so wonderful about being nearly pitched into the lake by a near-fatal joke from Fred.

"Your wicked cool nickname!"

"Nickname?"

"*Snidget*," Al said, grinning from ear to ear. "Hagrid's kinda brilliant, isn't he?"

Snidget. Scorpius turned it over in his mind. *The fastest thing in the air.* Slowly, he smiled a bit himself. He thought he might need to add a little something to his letter home.

P.S. Mr. Hagrid's kind of brilliant

Five by Five

Chapter 5 of 7

Decision time...

Disclaimer: Sure, JKR and other wealthy letters will decide to milk some more cash out of them someday. Until then, I'll just have a little uncompensated fun with these characters and their setting.

Scorpius would never forget the moment he first saw all the lights of Hogwarts Castle glittering over the lake. It was partly because it was a beautiful sight, and partly because he felt a pang of sorts, wondering if Malfoy Manor used to look something like it. And the moment was memorable at least in part because some people in their boat, Al included, **WOULD NOT SHUT UP**.

One chap in particular wearied Scorpius' ears; MacMurray or some such, who had an older brother and a long list of ancestors in Hufflepuff, and who appeared to have swallowed *Hogwarts: A History* whole and was now regurgitating it, page for page.

"...and that's why I can't wait to get to the Common Room, Eddie says the couches are so soft you don't even feel like leaving them to sleep in your beds, and it always smells of old books and biscuits baking, because we are next to the kitchens, you see, and..."

"What if you aren't Sorted into Hufflepuff?" Al interrupted.

"Beg pardon?" The other boy sounded affronted at the very suggestion.

"Not everyone in the same family winds up in the same House," Al said. "I don't know if I'll be with my older brother, and I'm beginning to think I'd rather not."

"But... but... why wouldn't you?" Scorpius was amused despite himself. James had sounded amazed at the idea. This complete stranger was appalled.

"I'm off at school now. Perhaps it's time I was my own man," Al said, and Scorpius was torn between irritation at the fact that they just would natter on, and wanting to laugh at the sheer pomposity of Al's remark, which rivaled the other boy's know-it-all air.

"Perhaps it's time you both shut your cake-holes," Rose said. At least, that's what Scorpius thought she said. It sounded as if it came out through clenched teeth.

"Rather! Who are you, to talk to me like that?" The would-be Hufflepuff boy sounded scandalized.

Hagrid's low chuckled cut through their argument. "Watch who you pick a fight with, lad," he said. "That'un can take care of herself. Just like her mum, she is."

"Not altogether," Rose sulked, albeit quietly so as not to openly contradict Hagrid. "I love Quidditch."

Maybe I can pretend they're frogs and crickets. Scorpius leaned his chin on his hands, trying to unobtrusively cover his ears. It worked until Al started poking him in the shoulder.

"Psst... Snidge! Rosie! We've got to talk."

Scorpius sighed under his breath. Rose was a little more forward with her objections. "What now?"

"Before we get to the castle, we should decide: are we all firm on this...that we'll be in the same House, no matter what?"

Scorpius hesitated. "Shouldn't we... I mean, if we're to do that, oughtn't we decide on a House beforehand?"

"We could all just follow who the Hat Sorts first," Al suggested. "I'm game."

"Well..." Rose hedged. Scorpius could tell she felt it was almost as bad an idea as eating candy for lunch, but equally, not without its temptations. Scorpius empathized fully.

"All right, if I go first, I'll just go where the Hat sorts me and make out as best I can, on my own!" Al said rather hotly.

"I'll go with you," Scorpius said, but his somewhat meek declaration was smothered by Rose replying, equally agitated.

"Oh, stop being so dramatic! Fine, I'll agree to it. Whomever Sorts first, the rest follow," she said.

"Let's swear to it, then," Al said.

"Not a Wand Oath, surely," Scorpius said, alarmed. He'd been warned against those quite strictly by Grandmother.

"Not on your Nelly," Rose said. "Word of honor will do." She directed the last towards Al as if in warning.

Al nodded vigorously. "Right. Where one goes, two follow, and luck to that first one!" He stuck his hand out, and Rose clapped hers atop it. Scorpius took it to mean that he was to follow suit. He put his hand on Rose's hesitantly, but gave it a quick squeeze lest his pledge seem lukewarm. It seemed to satisfy the cousins, who both nodded.

"Now be quiet and let me enjoy the lights," Rose said, her voice brooking no argument. Scorpius sighed again, happily this time. The rest of the boat ride passed all too quickly, but in relative peace.

They made their way up the slippery steps to the light of a tall door. Hagrid addressed the stout, blond man who opened it.

"Firs' years, a whole fresh batch for ye, Professor Longbottom," he announced cheerfully. "Guess I oughtta say 'Deputy Headmaster Longbottom,' an' congratulations on yer promotion."

"I'd rather you didn't...but thank you, Hagrid," the Deputy Headmaster said. He directed his attention to the students. "Since Hagrid has tended to the introductions, follow me, you lot. You don't have to do anything in particular for your Sorting, but do try to put yourselves in some order. Oh, and gaping at the Great Hall is expected...just try not to miss your name being called." A few nervous giggles greeted this. The professor gave a slight smile in return, which seemed to freeze on his face when he saw Scorpius in the crowd. At first, Scorpius thought he imagined it; but every time he looked up, Professor Longbottom had his eyes on him.

"Why is he looking at me?" Scorpius asked Rose.

"You're like a candle flame in the middle of all the black robes, especially with Al and his mop next to you," Rose answered. "It's harder not to look at you."

"Is he bothering you, Miss Weasley?" Scorpius found Professor Longbottom looming over them, with not too pleasant an expression on his face.

"Not at all!" Rose sounded as shocked at the idea as Scorpius felt.

"We're best mates, Rosie and Snidge...Scorpius...and I," Al said, slinging an arm around both their shoulders. "And Mum sends her love."

For a fraction of a second, the Professor's mouth hung open like a fish's. Scorpius would have laughed save that he was aghast at how familiarly Al had addressed a professor. If the elbowing that Rose gave Al was any indication, he wasn't alone.

Professor Longbottom got his mouth back under control and blinked his eyes a few times. Scorpius was growing a bit weary of adults looking at him with that strange expression, as if they weren't sure if he was going to explode or some such at any second. "Right," he said. It was just the polite side of disbelief. "You'll have to remember to guard against familiarity with your professors...Mr. Potter." It was a mild enough warning, but Al looked sheepish nonetheless.

"Sorry, sir," Al said. He gave Scorpius' shoulder a squeeze before letting go. It came to Scorpius that Al had been shocking on purpose, just to throw the professor off balance. *He certainly knows how to get around a grown-up*, Scorpius thought. *Better not mention that in my letter...*

Scorpius could have sworn that Professor Longbottom...or should he call him Deputy Headmaster?...rolled his eyes a little. "Tell her likewise," he said for Al's ears only, just before he crowded them into a small waiting room.

As soon as his back was turned, Al winked at Scorpius. *Definitely not putting that in the letter*, and that was the last chance Scorpius had to think before the Great Hall was revealed and the acceptable gaping commenced. Scorpius did recover his wits enough to think, *I shall work hard and learn how to make a ceiling like that for the Solar...Grandmother would adore it*, once he heard names being called.

It only took a handful of names before Scorpius almost lost those recovered wits. *They're doing this alphabetically. By last name*. Scorpius trembled, his breath coming short. *They'll call me first. Before Al or Rose. The Hat will Sort me first*.

Scorpius grabbed Al's wrist, causing his friend to startle and drawing curious glances. "I can't," he whispered frantically. "I can't go first. I was going to pick whatever House you were in."

Al worried his bottom lip between his teeth for a moment. After a bit, he shrugged. "Doesn't matter," he whispered back. "Between you and me, and Rose, we'll manage any House. No pressure."

"But..." Scorpius forgot to whisper. A few glares and a 'SHH!' were fired his way, and he fell silent, hot-faced and no less panicked. He tried to find Rose's face in the crowd, but she stood in front of them. All he could see was the candlelight glittering on her auburn curls.

Lots of Hufflepuffs were being minted this year, to enthusiastic welcomes from their new House. One more sober-faced girl joined the Slytherin table, to stilted applause. The Gryffindors were growing bored after their initial gains, fidgeting and whispering until they drew a few glares from the Head Table. The Ravenclaws applauded everyone politely, and for a very precise interval. Scorpius thought he detected the pale-haired Prefect that Al identified as Cousin Nicky giving a signal to begin and end the clapping. All the while, the alphabet counted down.

Suddenly, Professor Longbottom called, "Malfoy, Scorpius!" Scorpius tottered forward, propelled by Al's encouraging slap on the back. Before he cleared the final row of students, someone caught his sleeve. He turned to find Rose looking at him, scared and yet defiant.

"If you go coward on me...if you take the easy way out...I will never forgive you, Scorpius Malfoy!" she whispered. For such fierce words, she sounded on the verge of tears.

Scorpius nodded, barely able to breathe. *No pressure*, he thought, feeling ready to faint.

Everything was monstrous in size...the stool was a mountain to climb, the Hat a great maw threatening to swallow him. Hagrid hadn't seemed as large as the Deputy Headmaster, whose lion's mane of blond hair was as wild in its way as Hagrid's snowy top. Scorpius hoped that no one noticed how he was shaking as he sat and waited for the hat to land on his head.

Suddenly, the lights went out. It took him an anxious moment to realize that it was only the Hat drooping over his eyes. *Godric Gryffindor must have had a large head*, he thought.

"Indeed. Some might even have called it a swelled head," a voice chuckled.

"If you please, Mr. Hat...I would prefer not to be in Gryffindor," Scorpius thought desperately. He wondered if manners meant anything to talking clothes that could hear one's thoughts and had a sense of humor.

The Hat seemed not to notice. "Malfoy, Malfoy... Time was I always knew where to put a Malfoy, but the world has changed."

"We've always been in Slytherin," Scorpius suggested tentatively. What if Lysander and Lorcan were a special case? What if Rose had heard wrong?

"All the Malfoys... but there is blood in you that is not so Malfoy, if this old Hat can sense correctly. Curious, indeed."

When no announcement (or even further commentary) seemed forthcoming, Scorpius dared speak up. "I want to be a credit to my name."

"Your loyalty would serve you well in Hufflepuff. It sings in your soul, pure and true," the Hat offered.

Scorpius thought of Lysander and Lorcan. "I have two friends there." It wasn't an unpleasant thought. As annoying as the cross-lake commentary of Hufflepuff's biggest supporter had been, the Common Room he described...warm, yellow-wood-paneled common room with its round doors, bouncy, black velvet sofas, and cozy proximity to the kitchens...sounded quite fun. "But... they'll still be my friends no matter what House I'm in."

"Courage like that is straight from Gryffindor. You would do well there," the Hat said.

Scorpius felt on much firmer ground here, and despite James and Louis being all right chaps, he was still resolved to stay well clear of the House of Fred. "It's braver to go where you're likely to be unpopular than to take the easy way out."

"A Ravenclaw would appreciate that logic."

Scorpius wavered. *Mum would be happy if I was in her house. It would go easier on Al and Rose. They have cousins there*—His resolve thinned to the breaking point.

Still, the Hat had made no announcement. Something in Scorpius pushed against the idea, and suddenly, the words for it came to him. "It should be four equal houses, working together. Right now, Slytherin is put down. I want to go there and accomplish... great things. Honorable things. I want to win respect...for me...and I want it to reflect on my House." He hoped the Hat couldn't hear him think, *I don't really want to find out what it would look like if Rose never forgave me...*

The discussion that only Scorpius and his temporary headgear could hear had gone on for so long that the Great Hall began to stir with murmurs. Scorpius began to feel a little lightheaded from holding his breath.

"That," the Hat said finally, "is one of the most interesting ambitions I have ever heard. I think, young wizard, that you would do credit to..."

SLYTHERIN!"

Scorpius practically fell off the stool. He scarcely noticed the Deputy Headmaster plucking the hat from his head save for the fact that the room suddenly became much brighter. He walked to his new place, focusing on the warm applause and curious, if slightly guarded, expressions of his new Housemates and ignoring the murmurs, anemic applause, and occasional hisses from the rest of the House tables. The two unhappy girls and one boy who had been sorted into Slytherin earlier looked at him with distinct relief. *They're glad not to be the only ones* Scorpius realized.

It seemed as if he had no sooner settled into his place and nodded a greeting to them before he heard, "POTTER, Albus Severus," called.

It was interesting; Scorpius thought the Hall had been quiet as each new student was called to be Sorted. He realized that he was wrong. There had been murmurs here and there, robes rustling, a cough or sneeze, a bench creaking. There was none of that now. Never mind hearing a pin drop; Scorpius wagered you could now hear a quill drop. It was as if someone had cast a Sonorus Spell on Al so that every rustle of his crisp, new robes and the funny slap-squeak of his ratty shoes echoed through the room, if not the entire castle.

Al gave the Deputy Headmaster a quick version of his lopsided smile and hopped onto the stool. The professor gave a small smile in return. A faint anticipatory vibration, not quite a sound, rippled from the Gryffindor table. Scorpius felt a flicker of doubt, but before a firm thought could form about the Hat's willingness to take suggestions or Al's will to make them...almost before the Hat did more than brush the tips of Al's wild hair...that venerable piece of headgear bellowed, "SLYTHERIN!"

"YES!" Al's soft exclamation may as well have been a shout. He hopped down from the stool, causing it to scrape shrilly across the stones as if it was leaping away from him in shock, and his shoes flapped loudly as he all but skipped to the Slytherin table, beaming all the way.

The poor Deputy Headmaster looked completely befuddled standing there, glancing between Al and the Hat, holding the Hat wrong side up and squinting into it as if he was searching for some defect. A riot of sorts started at the Gryffindor table which no fewer than three Professors drew wands to quell, the Hufflepuffs now sounded as well as looked like a beehive, and at the Ravenclaw table, a considerable throng had gathered to comfort Cousin Nicky, who had broken out in sobs. The Slytherin table looked torn between a sort of euphoria comparable to all their birthdays and Christmases coming at once and abject fear lest someone declare it was all a joke. Al acted oblivious to all of it, clapping Scorpius on the shoulder with one hand and shaking hands with their three fellow first years (Scorpius noted that they introduced themselves as Pearl, Amaryllis, and Jonathan, but didn't quite catch their surnames) with the other. Scorpius couldn't help it. He started to laugh at the sheer absurdity of it all.

"Told you," Al said. The brightness of his grin hadn't diminished. "Now we'll just wait for Rosie."

Scorpius privately thought he wouldn't blame Rose if she changed her mind about following them. Four more students were Sorted almost unnoticed in the uproar resulting from Al's choice.

But the number of unsorted First Years dwindled to a scant handful, and Rose was called up as the second 'W'. The Hat seemed to give it a bit of thought before (somewhat dazedly, Scorpius thought) declaring Rose for Slytherin as well. The uproar was only from the Gryffindor table this time, though Scorpius fancied he heard a brief sound of dismay from Ravenclaw. Rose held her head high like a queen and fairly swept along toward their table. The other three girls made room for her, and she returned their tentative smiles with a somewhat brittle one. Scorpius didn't really notice where the last few were sorted. Rose was the final Slytherin. The Headmistress made remarks and introduced professors, and suddenly, Scorpius was confronted with food as far as the eye could see...not a moment too soon, as far as his stomach was concerned. Al was a marvel, being able to both eat and answer (or deflect) questions from all corners of the table, which came thick and fast as their new Housemates realized that they indeed had one of **those** Potters, and not some coincidental namesake. For all their curiosity, the manners and level of reserve at the Slytherin table were somewhat closer to what Scorpius was accustomed to. *Perhaps I am in the right place.*

Rose picked at the welcome feast. She held her head high again as they exited the Great Hall, but her lip stuck out most unpromisingly. Before Scorpius could ask what the matter was, a streak of red came crashing through the Slytherin ranks. Scorpius only just realized it was James and Louis in time to avoid a panic attack. *Do those two ever go anywhere without leaving a trail of destruction?* he wondered. The Slytherin Prefects, having no such foreknowledge that it was only James and Louis (and on closer inspection, Lysander and Lorcan bringing up the rear), were not spared Scorpius' alarm and drew their wands.

"Relax, it's just my brother and my cousin," Al said, holding up his hands in a placating gesture, "Oh...Hi Lysander, Lorcan," he added, belatedly noticing the other two boys. "And hi, Molly. Anyone bring Nicky and Vicky, maybe Roxy? We could have a House-and-Family reunion."

"*Dominique* is distressed that once again, no one chose Ravenclaw." Scorpius blinked at the statuesque young woman in an artfully tied Ravenclaw scarf who had just addressed Al so reprovingly. It was hard not to stare; her hair was almost pink.

Two Slytherin prefects, two Hufflepuff ones, and one Prefect passerby each from Gryffindor and Ravenclaw were suddenly all left standing with their wands out, looking slightly bewildered and perhaps embarrassed. Scorpius gathered that it Simply Did Not Happen that all four Houses gathered in the corridor together without needing some sort of intervention.

"Give over, *Victoire*, or I'll write to Teddy and say you were snogging the Head Boy," James said.

"Are you sure they shouldn't all be in Slytherin?" Scorpius overheard an older Slytherin, maybe a Third Year...he seemed about James' height...whisper to another.

"You really did it! What on earth are Uncle Harry and Aunt Ginny going to say?" Louis was a combination of awed and aghast.

Al shrugged. "Guess I'll find out, won't I?"

James shook his head. "Nevermind. Why I came over is, did you see what happened to Fred?"

"No, what?" Curiosity dented Al's nonchalant façade.

"He tried to shoot fireworks at the Slytherin table DURING THE SORTING!" Lysander and Lorcan said.

"One of Uncle George's blockbusters," Victoire added, forgetting that she was a Seventh Year and far too sophisticated to get involved in such gossip.

"Professor Longbottom and Hagrid hauled him and three other boys out by their robes just before the Feast started, and I heard the word 'Suspension' bandied about." This came from the female Hufflepuff Prefect, whose auburn locks looked lacquered into their neat bob and whose glasses were so lacking in smudges they sparkled.

This seemed to wake up the other Prefects to the fact that their Houses were crowding the corridor to bursting, with a sort of inter-House social hour threatening to break out in card games, jokes, fights, and who knew what manner of other curfew-breaking activities. Of one accord, they began herding their charges up or down their respective flights of stairs.

Before Al, Scorpius, and Rose could make good their escape, Louis and James darted back.

"Uncle Ron's going to be spitting tacks," Louis said solemnly to Rose. She folded her arms and looked defiant, but said nothing.

"More like he's going to be eating nails and shitting spikes," James said. "It's been nice knowing you, Rosie."

Scorpius decided that Al most assuredly had not cornered the market on interesting turns of phrase. He wasn't sure he'd ever find an occasion to use this one, though.

Al rolled his eyes. "Thanks for the news. Good night, guys,"

The nearer they came to the dungeons, the more slowly Rose dragged her feet. Once they reached the corridor where the Slytherin Prefects called a halt, she dashed the sleeve of her robe against her eyes and ran. Scorpius tore after her without a second thought.

He followed flickering shadows and the sounds of footsteps until there were no more, and then he followed the sound of choked sobs. He finally found her crouched behind a tapestry of somber-looking medieval people, sniffing miserably. He knelt beside her and did the only sensible thing he could think of: rummaged about in his robes until he found his handkerchief. It was even clean.

"Is it so bad?" he asked.

"M-m-my d-d-dad is going to k-kill me!" Rose ended on a wail. She blew her nose loudly on the offered handkerchief. Scorpius looked at it with some dismay, wondering how many were packed in his truck. He was pretty sure he'd tucked one under Mr. Mouse's head, as a pillow...

"Surely not," Scorpius said. He wished he could have sounded more certain. James didn't seem to be joking.

"He said he'd disown me if I wasn't in Gryffindor," she whimpered.

"Oh." Scorpius was at a loss. *Disowned!* It was an awful word. He didn't know the precise definition; but he understood that it had happened to Aunt Andromeda once. She'd been sent away and Grandmother hadn't seen her for years and years, until they were both old. That sounded horrid. *Who takes care of you if you are disowned?* Scorpius wondered, quite worried now. Maybe there was some way he could help?

Quite quickly, an idea came to him and he was thoroughly pleased with himself. He had wanted friends to come over, after all! "I... if something like that happened... you could stay with me. I mean, there are lots of rooms in our house," Scorpius said, gazing up at her earnestly. "Father has made very nice furniture for two of the guest rooms, and all the plumbing works pretty well these days; it does get drafty, but most of the fireplaces work now, and Mum casts stout warming charms for overnight...and we've a fine garden, so even if money is a little thin, we always eat very..."

He was cut off by a hug that was more of a flying tackle. "Um... is this how you always hug? I might need to learn to brace myself," Scorpius asked, out of breath and more than slightly overwhelmed.

Rose pulled back. She wiped her nose and smiled at him a little sheepishly. "Sorry. It's just... Thanks. Thank you." She smiled more warmly. One of her arms was still around his shoulder. Scorpius suddenly felt as if he'd done something absolutely brilliant, and how could she make that happen just by smiling? Clearly, this was some new sort of magic.

"C'mon you two, quit snogging and get back to the Common Room," a voice came out of nowhere.

Scorpius jumped about a foot. Rose scrambled to her feet, yelling and waving her arms angrily in the general direction of the sound. "We were NOT...Al, you rotter! Uncle Harry gave you his invisibility cloak!" If Rose had sounded envious about the owl, Scorpius imagined she was beginning to turn green through her brilliant red blush. He sympathized. *An INVISIBILITY CLOAK!*

Al appeared out of nowhere, flourishing a silvery length of fabric. "Actually, I won it off James in a card game. He thought he was going to steal it back during the train ride, but I outsmarted him." Between the grin and the disappearing/reappearing, he was a tail away from being the Cheshire Cat in Aunt Andromeda's *Adventures in Wonderland* book. "Look sharp; Professor Davis wants to meet all the First Years personally before lights-out." He looked around, then waved the cloak again. "Get under here, we'll sneak back before they notice we're gone. Stay along the wall so we don't bump into anyone."

Scorpius huddled under the slippery cloth, behind Al and beside Rose, and dearly wished to know what 'snogging' meant, it having been brought up twice tonight *Must be a Muggle thing.*

"Al, put your shoes back on," Rose whispered.

Only then did Scorpius notice the Al was in his socks, one toe sticking out, and that his shoes were in his hand *While I agree with Rose, it's something of a relief to know that this is not how the Cloak is supposed to smell.*

"Can't; they make too much noise," Al whispered back. They argued for a bit. Scorpius focused on breathing shallowly.

"Bollocks... right, or left?" Al stopped at a junction in the corridor.

"I didn't notice. You were supposed to be leading us back, Mr. 'I'm-wearing-old-trainers-because-my-good-shoes-pinch,'" Rose hissed. "Did all your 'good' socks pinch as well?"

Al ignored this and began inching forward again, bearing right. Scorpius thought the carved snake on the wall looked familiar, but he couldn't be certain. They were approaching yet another junction, so if they were going the wrong way, they would be even more lost soon...

"Who is that? Stop right there!" Scorpius obeyed immediately. That dark, commanding voice seemed to have spelled his feet to the floor. Rose stuttered to a halt a few steps later, but Al kept gliding along the wall and the Invisibility Cloak slipped off Scorpius altogether.

He found himself standing in front of a most curious painting. It depicted a room lit by at least one tall, narrow window. The room contained a sort of table or desk, and there was a bookshelf off to one side, the titles on the worn spines hard to make out in the wan light of the corridor. More than this was impossible to tell because most of the painting was covered by a heavy, green drape...one so realistic, it took Scorpius a moment to realize that it was part of the painting. The voice had come from behind the green drape. *Who paints a portrait but hides the sitter behind a curtain?* Scorpius wondered.

The painted speaker's nonexistent breath seemed to catch. "Draco?" the voice whispered. It sounded gentle, almost hopeful. Scorpius wondered if there were two different people behind the drape. This man sounded almost completely different than the one who had demanded they stop.

"Um, no, sir, sorry...That's my father. I'm Scorpius. Scorpius Malfoy." *Does everyone know everything about my father except me?* he wondered.

"But you... of course," the voice sounded almost let down. Scorpius wished he knew what he had done to so disappoint him.

Al whipped off the Cloak and marched over, sock feet and all. He narrowed his eyes at the painted curtains. He seemed no more intimidated by hidden speakers in portraits than he had been by Fred. "He is, and he's my best mate...so if anyone has a problem with that, they'll have to answer to me," Al said.

"I have a... *problem*... with disobedient, disrespectful children sneaking about in my corridors," the voice said scathingly. Definitely the same one as before.

"We weren't sneaking, sir...at least, we're not trying to make trouble," Rose said. Scorpius marveled at how meek she sounded. It was just the sort of voice adults seemed to love, if cousin Laurel's false humility was anything to measure by. "We're first years, sir, and I got lost. Scorpius and Al came to look for me. We're trying to find our way back to the common room before Professor Davis' speech."

Scorpius had a feeling that the portrait somehow was giving Al a very hard look through the curtain. "I'm to believe that you are a Slytherin?"

"I don't know what you mean by that." Scorpius wished Al would add a 'sir' or two. This painting did not sound like a fellow to trifle with. "But I'm a Slytherin by my own choice, and named after one. Believe it or not, as you fancy."

"Indeed." The hidden subject's voice dripped with sarcasm. "After what Slytherin were you named?"

Al drew himself up as tall as he was able. As they were the same height, Scorpius knew just how unimpressive that was. "Albus Severus Potter is my name, and if anyone has a problem with that, he can talk to my dad about it...he named me for Albus Dumbledore and Severus Snape, two of the greatest heroes of the war and best headmasters this school ever had...and I'll live up to both of those names! How's that for ambition?"

There was an odd sound from the direction of the painting. Scorpius couldn't make out if it was a gasp, or a thump, or a bit of both, but it sounded remarkably as if the unseen speaker had swooned behind his green drape. "Sir?" he asked uncertainly.

At last, there was a throat-clearing sound from the invisible speaker. "I hardly dare ask... would your name, young lady, happen to be Weasley?"

"Rose Weasley, sir," she answered. "I don't mean to be rude, sir, but if you could please point us toward the common room, we really need to be off."

The speaker ignored Rose's request to take their leave. "And your parents... met at school? Your mother's name wasn't... Granger?"

"Why, yes, sir," Rose asked, clearly bemused. "I'm sorry, I don't quite see..."

Suddenly, the corridor echoed with the most peculiar sound. It took Scorpius moments to figure out that it was a sort of chuckle. Scorpius looked at Al and Rose to find their faces echoed his own bewilderment.

The hidden speaker, having finally regained control of his humor, addressed them. "You, Mr. Malfoy, have most peculiar taste in friends... though it may yet serve you well. You, Miss Weasley, have your work cut out for you. And, Potter..." There was a sort of sigh. "I live here, after a fashion. Do try to leave a few stones still atop each other when you graduate. And for magic's sake, put. On. Your. Shoes." There was a pause, so long that the children thought he was gone. "Oh, children... the Common Room is precisely fifty feet down the left branch of this corridor. The password is Wormwood. Do not let yourself be found outside after hours again. I will not be lenient twice." The painted curtain rustled. It seemed clear that the subject of the painting had left.

"I did have the sense to stay around long enough to hear the password. Honestly," Al said. Scorpius guessed he was feeling put-out by the remark about the castle. He had put his shoes back on, though.

"What on earth did all that mean?" Rose asked.

"It means that you three have been singled out for particular attention. Feel flattered; he usually doesn't address first years, even from behind the curtain," Professor Davis said, scaring them rather badly. She had a mild enough voice, but there was an organized look about her that seemed somehow formidable.

"Begging your pardon, professor...who is he?" Rose was afire with curiosity. Scorpius could practically feel it radiate off her.

"If he wants you to know, he'll tell you," Professor Davis said. "Now get in there...Our House is not going to start the term with a Point deficit. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Professor!" they chimed, and fairly ran down the corridor. Scorpius tried to pay attention to Professor Davis' remarks about looking after each other and exemplary behavior being as important to winning the House Cup as marks and Quidditch; but he feared he had not swallowed his yawns completely. He perked up a bit when the Prefects gave a quick tour of the Common Room; the mention of the Owl Chutes, in particular, got his attention. Apparently one needn't travel all the way to the owlery each time there was something to be posted if one's own owl was well-trained enough to fly down one of two long, chimney-like tunnels when called. School owls could not be summoned thusly. Scorpius was disappointed until he remembered that he and Al were sharing Agate, who was surely the most well-trained and beautiful owl in the school. That pleasant thought buoyed him up enough to find his way to their dorm and to their shared bathroom by following the back of Al's head. It was a good thing Al wasn't a girl, or he'd have ended up in the wrong dorm.

He was staring stupidly at his trunk and trying to get his tired brain to choose between digging out Mr. Mouse or his pajamas; Mr. Mouse was winning because he didn't have to be put on. Rather, sleep was winning because he had almost toppled over on top of the green blanket, still in his school robes and shoes, when Al's voice jarred him back upright.

"Huh?" Scorpius asked.

"I said, d'you want to borrow Agate? I'm sending a letter, and she might as well take two as one."

"How are you still conscious?" Scorpius asked. He would have been more indignant, but he was glad of the chance to fetch Mr. Mouse and take off his shoes. Perhaps he would put on the pajamas after all. Two of the other boys were already asleep, and the third wasn't to be found. Al was intent on his letter. This business of sharing living space would be a significant adjustment.

"How'r you able to say 'conshuzz?'" One of their dorm mates tried to question Scorpius, but a yawn swallowed the end of it. He hadn't been quite as asleep as he'd seemed. Scorpius scabbled about his brain for the boy's name and came up with only a surname, Sugden. He was spared trying to answer by the boy lapsing back into snores.

Al shrugged. "Once I knew what House we were going to be in, I kind of relaxed. It uses less energy than being nervous, I think."

"We've only known what House we would be in for the last hour," Scorpius argued. He pulled on his pajama bottoms. They weren't as confining as the blue trousers, but he still missed his nightshirt. Father had said that Muggle things were the fashion, though, and he must not stand out unduly unless it be for something positive. Not terribly different from Professor Davis' speech, come to think of it. *So tired. Still... I'd hate to forget it all before morning, or ask Agate to make separate trips* He put Mr. Mouse on the bed and found his parchment and quill. Laurel's gift of a self-inking one had seemed dull at the time, but Scorpius was glad of it now. He didn't have the energy to look for his ink bottle.

"I've known since we put on our school robes," Al said.

This woke Scorpius a bit. "What? How?"

Al fidgeted. "I knew...all about the Sorting, that is. That it's alphabetical, and the Hat will let you choose. And when you got your robes from your trunk, I saw that."

Scorpius followed the line of Al's pointing finger. "You mean M..." Scorpius stopped. He suddenly wasn't sure if Mr. Mouse was quite mature enough a name for his teddy.

"...my bear?" he finished.

Al nodded. "He's the only silver ted with a green bow I've ever seen," he said, nodding sagely. "I knew you were going to be Sorted first. I knew you'd be in Slytherin because of him. So..." he shrugged, that half-smile back on his face. Scorpius saw it and realized that the beaming grin was all for show. *This is the real Al, the one his family gets to see. The one I get to see.* Really, there was too much about Al to put in a single letter, even if it was advisable.

"Just my luck, I'm in the barmy House." Both Al and Scorpius jumped a little, neither having realized that the other boy had returned from the bathroom. He'd been the one who'd introduced himself as Jonathan-something. He directed his scornful remark at Mr. Mouse.

Scorpius debated defending Mr. Mouse. Al saved him the trouble. "Says the man in the Pygmy Puff pajamas," Al scoffed. "Go to sleep, Cantwell, you're knackered and not making sense."

There was some grumbling from behind the bed curtains, but all was soon snores.

Scorpius sat at the table beside Al and made a valiant effort to form neat letters and coherent sentences. After all, somewhere in that recitation of news, he had to convince Mum, Father, and Grandmother to take in Rose if it proved necessary.

She oughtn't cost much to keep. She doesn't seem to eat much and she already has her wand and all her books. I promise you will all like her, especially you, Mum. She is very smart and responsible.

Yeah, there's only one person you're thinking of when the Voice Behind the Painted Curtain...the guardian of the route to the Slytherin Common Room...accosts Al, Rose, and Scorpius. And you're right. - _ ^

The title phrase 'five by five' originated with a scale to measure the quality of a radio broadcast; with five being the top score possible on each of two measures, five by five indicates a broadcast of ideal strength and clarity. By extension it has come to mean "I understand you perfectly."

I'm feeling almost as sleepy as Scorpius. Shall we finish here? Maybe an epilogue? * swallows a yawn *

Six of one...

Chapter 6 of 7

Scorpius couldn't wish for a better best mate... except it would be lovely to cure Al's insomnia...

Disclaimer: Not my characters, not even for the fleeting moment needed for this little scene to take place. Please don't attack the messenger, this extended drabble is all I have time for now.

"Psst! Psst! Scorpius!"

Scorpius was groggy. Something was piercing the comfortable cocoon of warmth in which he slept, and light assaulted his sleeping eyes right through his eyelids. He squinted painfully and finally discerned a candle, and somewhere behind it, Al's wild hair.

"What now?" he murmured.

"Remember the portrait?" Al's excited whisper threatened to rise to the volume of regular speech.

"Huh?"

"You know, the one behind the curtain!"

Scorpius sighed and tried to hide behind Mr. Mouse. He dimly marked that Al appeared to have some sort of bear as well, though he'd never seen a jet black ted any more than Al had a silver one. "All right. What about him?" Scorpius' brain woke up very slightly. "You haven't figured out who he is, have you?"

"I have my suspicions," Al said mysteriously. "Never mind that. It's what he said: 'Don't let me catch you out after hours again!'"

Scorpius was fairly certain that wasn't a direct quote, but the gist seemed familiar. "Yes, but..." His tired brain struggled with the implications, helped along by Al's grin glinting in the light of the candle. "Oh for love of—"

The only sensible thing to do in response to being awakened at rude-o'clock-AM was to throw the nearest large object at the awakener. Accordingly, Scorpius flung his pillow at Al and pulled the curtains shut on his protestations. Relinquishing his pillow was something of an error in judgment, perhaps, but his arm, Mr. Mouse, and sheer exhaustion would do in a pinch.

This is going to be an interesting year, if being a best mate doesn't kill me. Hope we still are in the morning Scorpius thought disjunctedly as he drifted back into sleep.

Upon waking, Scorpius reckoned they were probably still mates, since Al had given back his pillow. If it was sitting on top of his head instead of under it, well... it was sort of understandable, under the circumstances.

Note: Apologies, dear readers... I don't know when I will be able to finish the epilogue or the side stories that go with this one. Bit of a family medical emergency needs tending, and I don't know when I'll be free again.

Update: Events in this universe that take place between the end of this chapter and the Epilogue are dealt with in 'Recovery Continues: Believing is Seeing,' 'Man Behind the Curtain,' 'Quidditch Trials,' 'A New Deal: Fog Lifts,' the several installments of 'Many Thanks,' 'Gift,' and the upcoming '5 Points.'

...Half-Dozen (of an Epilogue)

Chapter 7 of 7

I know, I know--there's more to say about these characters. It's just that this story isn't the place for it. If I get the time, I promise, there's more where this came from.

...Half-Dozen (of an Epilogue)

Disclaimer: Oh, come on. I may dress up as Draco Malfoy on certain select, appropriate, occasions, but I am not delusional...I know they're not mine and I know better than to ask for pay to write this.

The last term was over; the Seventh Year students, no longer students, were running about the grounds, shouting and carrying on and generally reveling in their freedom in ways that made them resemble First Years. One of them...then another...ran away from the celebration rather than toward it, away from the families waiting to congratulate their grown children and collect them from school for the final time.

A familiar bit of tapestry, a familiar corridor. By now, Scorpius knew all the places to look for Rose. It helped, he was fairly certain, that she wanted to be found by him.

"Mum's going to kill me," Rose wailed. Scorpius winced. Her distress was much more impressive at eighteen than it had been at eleven.

"She'll come around," Scorpius soothed. "It'll be hard not to, with your dad over the moon and all."

"She won't even want to look at me," Rose mourned.

"Well, that's better than homicide, right?" Rose shot him an angry look made more dire by her reddened eyes. "I'm not doing this right," Scorpius fretted. "Look... I'm really happy right now. I'm first string, and my best Beater ever is going to be watching my back. But, I could be even happier... that is... Um... The least I can do..." He shuffled his feet, then dropped to one knee so hard on the stone floor that he winced. "Ow. Sorry. Rose, would you...What I meant to say is, a few years ago...around seven, or eight, I guess... I said you could stay with me, if you wanted to." He cleared his throat and reached into his pocket... only this time, instead of a handkerchief, he brought out a tiny box. "Now, um... I'm asking again."

Rose's mouth hung open rather comically for a few seconds. "Is that...?"

Scorpius hurriedly opened it lest there be any misunderstanding and almost dropped the tiny ring. "It's not very big...I had to borrow against my first paycheck, but I can get you a bett..." His words were cut off by a hug...more of a flying tackle, really.

"You'd think I'd be used to it by now," he gasped. Sometime while he was trying to recover his breath from the glomp and accompanying kiss, Rose had apparently got the ring on her finger.

"Are you kidding," she murmured, all trace of earlier upset gone. "This ring is never leaving my finger. Not even during a game." Her eyes widened and she suddenly grasped the front of his robe. "Oh... what will Dad say? He's only just got used to the idea of...well...us."

"He'll come around," Scorpius said. Rose was enough like her mother that she'd take it amiss to know Scorpius had asked permission to propose, in proper traditional fashion. It would not do at all to mention that not only had Scorpius received permission, he'd received no fewer than three letters in as many weeks from the Weasley father in question...embellished with many colorful turns of expression but whose gist was that Scorpius had better assemble sufficient stones to hand over one attached to an engagement ring for Rose.

An unearthly WHOOP sounded through the corridor, and a near-dangerous blast of fireworks interrupted Rose's attempt to reward Scorpius' apparent bravado with another kiss. "CHAMPAGNE TIME!" Al shouted.

"Albus Severus Potter! You are still a bloody, clumsy, interruptingtroll!" Rose yelled.

Rose wouldn't be Rose if she couldn't change moods on a sickle to berate Al... any more than Al would be himself without being able to interrupt a tender moment Scorpius thought with fond exasperation.

"Yeah, yeah, second verse, same as the first," Al waved it off. "Come on, you two have a lifetime to snog and such. Right now, you've an engagement party to attend, without the old folks to rain on your parade and with a couple dozen of your closest friends and classmates. Here, let me get you started." Al handily conjured a trio of champagne flutes from thin air and began pouring from the bottle he had with him...a rather decent bottle, if Grandmother's lessons in choosing festive drinks amounted to anything. "A toast--to my best mate marrying my best cousin!"

Scorpius took a sip and decided that champagne was rotten stuff, regardless of what it cost. Rose seemed happy with it though, so he took another sip and schooled his grimace into a smile. *Al also wouldn't be Al if he wasn't throwing around money and status symbols...* Scorpius reflected, with considerably more exasperation.

"Look, I already borrowed from you to get the ring. I don't want you to put yourself out anymore," Scorpius said quite firmly.

"Borrowed... this isn't family jewelry?" Rose clutched at her ring, her expression conflicted. She was still sensitive about their respective family histories. Scorpius decided that he ought to have listened to Cousin Molly's advice about proposing and write it all out beforehand, lest there be any misunderstandings. It was quite amazing, really, that he'd managed to surprise Rose with his proposal; the entire Weasley family seemed to know about it within a week of Scorpius buying the ring. Al attributed this to the fact that it was meant to be a huge secret.

"It's not like that, Rose. Grandmother's betrothal ring is a baroque pearl, and she said it would never survive a game of Quidditch. She's having it re-set into a brooch you can wear at the wedding. This is a ruby...practically indestructible. Besides, you can't have a pearl rose-cut." Her smile returned, and Scorpius breathed a sigh of relief. "Father and Mum are perfectly happy that we should use the family wedding rings for the ceremony." Scorpius still wished the wedding rings weren't available. It didn't matter that Father and Mum seemed content, and Mum was still at the Manor more often than not. Scorpius would always feel that Healer Pye...he couldn't think of him as Gus any more...had taken Mum away.

As usual, Al broke up his clouded thoughts before they had time to gather rain. "No worries, brother...I'd make a gift of it if you and Rose would let me, and the party's a group effort."

"There you go, 'brothering' again," Rose said. "You do realize that Scorpius is actually going to be a full-on, genuine cousin as soon as we're married, don't you? Are you

the only one who gets to promote people to 'family'?" She sounded more amused than annoyed, though. Scorpius didn't understand Al's latest eccentricity, himself; he supposed it had something to do with American slang that James had brought home from his trip abroad, since that's when Al had first adopted it.

Al breezed on as if Rose hadn't spoken. "James is letting us use Grimmauld for the party, we passed the hat in the Common Room for the champagne, and Fred made up the difference. I didn't ask whether it was out of his own pockets or Uncle George's."

Al was wise not to ask too many questions where Cousin Fred's money was concerned. Apprenticing as Dragon Tamer with Uncle Charlie...it was far easier to think of everyone in the terms Al or Rose used, there were far too many Mr. Weasleys to distinguish between, otherwise...had certainly worked out all of Fred's aggression issues. It hadn't done anything to improve his taste in friends. Scorpius vividly remembered the resulting awkwardness when Uncle Ron was forced to arrest a certain fugitive dealer in flying carpets who'd been Fred's guest last Christmas. Grandmum Molly had pitched a fit more impressive than Uncle George's fireworks, and Scorpius still couldn't tell if it was because Fred had brought a wanted felon into her home or because Uncle Ron had only taken him as far as the front walk to arrest him.

"You were a lot surer that I was," Scorpius marveled. He really shouldn't be surprised at it, after all these years, but he still was. Al bloody well knew everything.

"You don't give yourself enough credit, brother." Al punctuated it with a grin and a clap on the back.

"Training dragons with Uncle Charlie certainly sorted him out," Rose said. Clearly, she was deliberately ignoring Al's eccentricities. "Still, he ought to have finished school before taking it up as a profession. Speaking of professions... Dangerous Creature Hunting? Really, Al?"

"Fred definitely looks better on a dragon than they ever looked on him," Al joked. They flinched collectively at the memory of some of the awful dragonhide outfits Fred used to wear. "And I'm only working for Aunt Luna temporarily." Only Scorpius knew that Al planned to become a Hit Wizard once he reached the minimum mandatory age of twenty-one. Scorpius still regarded this as one of Al's most questionable ideas...somewhere well worse than lunch consisting entirely of candy, though still a bit of an improvement on 'borrowing' a hippogriff. He had an inkling *why* Al wanted to do it, but honestly, there were easier ways to gain practical experience if one wished to become a Defense Against Dark Arts professor...

"Even so," Rose said. Disapproving of Fred was a difficult habit for Rose to break. It didn't help that, while Fred was quite tolerable these days, one still had to be very, very, careful where one sat when he was about. "Scorpius might have gone professional at the start of this Quidditch season, but *he* had the sense to stay on and get his NEWTs."

"You haven't told her, have you?" Al grinned...and very sensibly, ran like hell, laughing all the way. Scorpius may have been quicker to the Snitch, but no one could evade a hex, jinx, or curse like Al. It all but broke Mr. Potter's heart that he wasn't entering Auror training. He was a natural.

Still, it didn't stop Scorpius from chasing after him, firing appropriately annoying hexes, none of which landed. He turned to find that Rose had kept right up with him.

"Told me what? Scorpius?" she asked, panting slightly.

Better she find out now, in case she wants to give back the ring Scorpius thought. "I... I was going to take the offer from the Magpies. They were offering a ton more money than the Canons... a signing bonus, even. I figured that I could even manage a few NEWTs if I studied on my own between games. A couple of other teams made offers nearly as good. I mean, there are still repairs Father can't afford yet, and we've always hoped to buy back some of the land we had to sell. I could have. They offered that much. But you see... they weren't willing to take on my favorite Beater as well." Scorpius took both her hands in his. It was still a marvel to him that those small, neat hands could wield a Beater's bat to such wicked effect. "The Cannons were the only team who liked us both, and the team owner would rather we started next season than leave school early. Said it would set that example for his niece, who's a third year."

Rose stared for what seemed an eternity. "Let me get this straight," she said very slowly. Scorpius braced himself for a dashing of all his dreams, with a homily on his intellectual deficiencies besides. "You gave up enough money to pay all your family's debts and the chance to play on one of the premier teams in the league... to play for the Cannons, with me... and you weren't even sure I would say 'yes?'" He voice rose higher and higher.

"Well, I did make sure you weren't really keen on the Harpies' offer before I turned the rest down flat," he said meekly.

As many times as he and Rose had kissed... from the first sweet, awkward, nose-bumping occasion at their first formal ball to the time Scorpius actually grasped, for the first time, the practical definition of snogging... Scorpius now understood that they hadn't REALLY kissed until just this moment. There was no magic like this anywhere in the curriculum, certainly. He was floating somewhere amid bright clouds and wondering if Rose would be willing to skip the engagement party and go somewhere with decidedly more privacy than Grimmauld Place when her voice brought him back to earth.

"Scorpius Hyperion Malfoy," Rose whispered, punctuating each of his names with another kiss, "I am going to love you until the day I die. And I am never going to be convinced that you should not have been in Hufflepuff."

A thread of humor sneaked its way through Scorpius' euphoria. He beamed at her, not interested in relinquishing his grin any time soon. "Funny you should say that..."

FIN

Note: Yes, the word 'Houses' in the title refers to both family and Sorting. I can't resist that sort of thing. Also, the title probably represents the nadir of my chapter-titling career.

I have a few days off sickroom duties, so I'm attempting to put them to good use. Next stop: answering reviews. Actually, next stop is catching up on the laundry and paying bills, but I think I can slip in a few review responses. Thank you all for the kind wishes! :)