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Valley of the Shadow: Act III

by potionpen

Summary

Autumn: 1980: The wizarding world has been straining against the rotting stitches of tradition and tribalism for at least a thousand years. Every few centuries, things get so bad that even wizards admit there's a problem. It's gonna be one of those years.

Hogwarts may or may not be talking to its newest guardian through the stones, a government under threat that can't be pinned on a map is a dangerously predictable animal, the elements that move a nation are blood, gold, and ink, and Tom Riddle is pretty sure they should all be thanking him for the kick in the pants.

What'cha got in there, Pandora?

Ch. 35: In which Evan exercises his genius for efficiency, his lawyer regrets charging only time-and-a-half, and Walburga's umbrella stand was probably already cursed so no harm done, really.
Notes

PSA: Chapter-narrators are conveying their own opinions, not the author's. This goes also for what they consider to be true, and what they consider to be right, and even what they know to be the facts. Characters are allowed to be wrong, especially when they're smack in the middle of propaganda wars or stranded on a sea of oral tradition.

See the end of the work for more notes.
August 30, Fortescue's

Chapter Notes

It'll help for a minute in this chapter to be familiar with the Beedle the Bard story The Fountain of Fair Fortune, but it's not really necessary.

Act III: Autumn, 1980
Book V: September

why, yes, that does mean if you're starting here you're gonna be hella lost there's, like, boatloads of fic and 'what you should know about this series'
If you want a one-shot by me, try the Cobra series! They're fun!

"And ask him to tell Severus hullo from me, too," urged Sirius from out of nowhere in an unaccustomedly earnest and diffident voice.

Lily almost gave herself whiplash.

Of course it wasn't Sirius. It didn't even really sound like him; the voice's plaintive note not only raised it a good half-octave from any voice she should have recognized as Sirius's, but sounded natural, too, not playfully wheedling. It sounded like real and habitual humility.

In fact it was his little brother, looking very tall and pretty in three-or-four-hundred year old togs, just as he'd always used to on Hogsmeade weekends. Today, though, the clothes didn't look as if he'd pulled a pleasing combination out of three or four different ancient wardrobes: they matched.

Also, his hair wasn't doing that fetchingly stupid James-thing—the one where an extremely vain straight-haired boy enchanted his hair to always look artfully wind-blown. She was sure Regulus Black had usually used it, because she'd noticed in her fourth year that his fringe and all of Jamie's hair had the same tendency to stay rakishly disarranged until a new gust of wind raked it into a new sort of becoming disarrangement, and stayed attractive once he got indoors instead of going limp and wet and clumping or, in drier weather, messy and mad-scientist-ish, like Sev's did.

She'd been exceedingly scathing at Jamie—or, at the time, Potter—about it. After which the tosser hadn't stopped using the charm, but had started playing with his hair a lot so it wouldn't look the same all day. Because he thought everybody including her was a bit gullible.

It was one of the things she'd learned to roll one eye at and keep the other out for. Jamie couldn't be helped but be moved by his feelings. They were usually stronger and worthier ones than vanity, but he'd always been a bit susceptible to things that were quiet and small, in more ways than she thought he let himself realize.

Black's fringe wasn't charmingly ruffled today, but very smooth and even, and his queue didn't have a single glossy hair out of place. He looked awfully formal, for a teashop.

Not to mention awkward. And secretly terrified, in an if-I-don't-admit-it-to-myself-it-will-go-away
sort of way she recognized from scowlier Sev-faces.

Which was a bit odd on him, because if you asked Lily, Regulus Black always looked edgy. Or, no, not edgy, Sev looked edgy. Black had a softer look, as if he was always asking do you like me? On principle, you might say; it didn't seem to be about anything in particular.

Sometimes Lily had thought his face was just made that way. Like Sev's smaller smiles always looked smirky when you didn't know him. Or the way her school roommate Mary's air-cooled teeth (as Tuney would have said) and tendency to a stuffy nose made her tilt her head back to breathe, so that she always looked like a right cow who was looking down her nose at you, even though she was really a warm and lovely girl (despite being dim enough to fall toes over teakettle for Sirius three times in five years).

But this time it looked as if Black had something particular to worry about; he didn't look like a puppy who'd messed so much as a horse on the highway, with white all around his grey eyes.

Madam Fortescue, the one he was talking to, was giving him an odd I know what's going on here and you don't smile. It was amused and tolerant, with a little something extra.

Lily had seen that something extra on Evan Rosier's face a few times, mostly when he was telling her something new about the mad way purebloods saw things. She'd thought it meant you ought to know this already, but then she'd seen Remus make the same super-patient eyebrows-up face at Sirius. Who, of course, said something stupid and got his head bitten off in a that's what I thought you'd say, when will you be better than this sort of way. Lily had realized then that it meant let's see what you do with all this rope I'm giving you.

Black must have been the recipient of that expression more than often enough to recognize it, because he looked deeply alarmed. Or, rather, he didn't exactly look deeply alarmed, but if you'd spent enough time with Sev you could recognize it. It was the look of someone who knew he'd swallowed his own foot halfway to the knee and was internally running on a hamster-wheel of dread, caught between the short-term terrified imperative to de-foot-ify his mouth and dig himself out of trouble at speed and the stubborn bedrock determination not to flail embarrassingly in public.

He did his obvious flailing in a perfectly appropriate voice that was only just a little hasty but giving off that sense of oh god oh god oh god what did I say she's going to kill me and I don't know why about as strongly as a scared skunk. "Er, I mean, I'm not sure what his title is, exactly? If he gets one. But you should tell him to! It's, er, it's a Slytherin thing, it'll help."

"Flora's a Hufflepuff, Mr. Black," Madam Fortescue said in a reminding tone, still wearing the Patience With Rope look.

"I know Florean's Hufflepuff," he assured her, still too hastily. Lily blinked a little; it actually didn't sound anywhere near enough like Flora's in Hufflepuff to make her think she'd misheard.

More than that, Black had put a sort of light emphasis on it that, for all his anxiety, sounded to her a lot like a Remus who was very firmly making a point and was only doing it in a non-angry way out of friendship.

"But Severus is Slytherin," he went on, semi-secretly anxiously again, "and if Florean sends a signal he's friendly with me and then I confirm it, Severus won't automatically assume he's an idiotic and malicious waste of space!" He beamed anxiously at Madam Fortescue.

Then he faltered a little, possibly because her eyebrows were trying to crawl their way up onto the ceiling. Collapsing in on himself a bit, he allowed, "Um. Probably."
Lily's hand shot up to her mouth, forcibly holding the snicker in. It was too bad Siri's brother was a muggle-despising pureblood snob (although certainly not, no matter how despondent Sirius got when he got really drunk, a murderous Death Eater). He was awfully cute, and it was good that Sev had at least one friend who wasn't sadistic, sleazily manipulative, or bossy enough to scare Sev into submission.

Which was probably the category she most closely fit into, herself, she had to admit. Even if she didn't want to be in it and hadn't understood how she was scaring him back in when she was doing it.

(Part of her felt strongly that she shouldn't feel badly about maybe having bossed him around sometimes; he didn't seem to have a lot of time for people who couldn't. And they had, she realized now, been sort of trying to raise each other. His parents had been worse than hopeless, and hers hadn't known the world she and Sev were going to live in. But they were grownups now. She'd let go of trying to mum him and force his choices back at that awful end of fifth year, and could only be grateful they were back, if not on the same page again, at least in the same chapter.)

She wasn't going to put Evan Rosier into the second category, because even if she was half-convinced he was the most manipulative person she'd ever met, she did believe he was genuinely on Sev's side, and she couldn't honestly call him sleazy.

But he couldn't count as a healthy friend for Sev, either. He thought everything Sev did was marvelous, even if it was as unexceptional as making tea, or utterly arse-faced. Maybe especially when it was arse-faced.

Probably the latter; she herself went a bit squishy inside when Jamie yowled humiliating and poorly-written ballads at her and shouted idiotic names at her in public, although she'd never reward him for it since she did actually recognize it as behavior a grown-up should not engage in.

But she knew James knew how she felt. And Sev was far more sensitive about other people's feelings than James had ever needed to be. He didn't always react well, and he could be as dumb as any man in some ways, but he was usually clear on how people felt about him. Usually because he automatically felt the same way back, twice as hard, and thought of reasons for it later.

She didn't think Evan had ever felt Severus was ever doing anything he ought to be discouraged from.

Except that he might, rather, just have been the most manipulative person she'd ever met and being all goopy on purpose to make Sev relax. Either way, Regulus Black, for all the bedrock snobbery that meant he'd never said two words to her unless forced, seemed like a much safer person for Sev to have around.

"You could write Mr. Snape yourself," Madam Fortescue suggested, less as if she thought Black ought to than to see what he'd do.

What he did was blanch and look appalled. He and Sirius didn't look that much alike, not really—Black Minor had a softer, more oval face, which was a good-looking one and still nicely pointy in the right places but didn't have Sirius's really aggravatingly remarkable bones.

There was enough of a family resemblance, though, that seeing him look horrified (and, clearly, horrified over a point of etiquette, not a point of fear) was just unutterably charming and made Lily feel warm all over and wish Remus could have seen it. It certainly made her feel better about what Sirius had done to her bathroom that morning, and goodness knew Remus deserved to have his schadenfreude tickled.
"Oh, no," he blurted. Then, pulling himself together, he tried to look less as if someone he was trying to impress had experimentally slapped him in the face with a wet fish. It was a very, very limited success. "Er, that is, no, Madam Fortescue, Severus wouldn't be impressed by that at all."

"Why not?" the proprietress asked. "It's the same thing, isn't it?"

"Uh," Black said blankly, his sad, posh Slytherin upbringing leaving him completely unable to put his finger on the very simple concept of 'Sev is disgusted by people who won't do for themselves.'

She left him explaining, instead, that if Flora-or-Florean just mentioned to Sev that he (?) knew Regulus, and then Regulus said yes-I-do-what-a-nice-person, Sev would understand that Regulus knew Flora-or-Florean and approved of him (him?). Whereas Regulus speaking to Sev himself would imply all sorts of importunate things, mainly that Regulus had the right to bully Sev, and then Sev would resent Flora-or-Florean for it.

And, Lily assumed, yell at Black. She further assumed that Sev yelling at Black was the outcome he most wanted to avoid, more than how Sev might feel about this floral person.

She did leave him to it then, though, because a waitress in cheery, glossy, orange-embroidered chestnut colored robes with short, fluttery hems scooped her out of the waiting area and led her to a booth.

Lily would have preferred a table; she liked being in the middle of things, able to turn and talk to anyone she knew. Since she was here to meet with an inveterate gossip, though, she didn't argue.

"By yourself, luv?" the waitress asked, putting down a menu and pausing with the second.

Lily smiled at her. "No, leave it, please, I'm meeting a friend, I'm just a bit early."

"Do you want me to wait until you friend shows up?"

"Oh, thanks," Lily smiled, "but she's not the most patient. Let's have a pot on the table when she gets here. I don't know her taste, though. What's good in this weather?"

The waitress was happy to be consulted, but in the end Lily ended up with a fruity green tea with elderberries. She wanted to send some to the little Blakeney girl at Hogwarts if it was any good, as a present combining 'congratulations on your prefecture from a former Head Girl' and 'sorry being impressed with my lunatic best friend led you to skip something nice and drink radish juice instead.'

Should she send it with a card? She would if it was most people, but since Blakeney was a Slytherin, would she be insulted by having it spelled out? Sev might have been, but Sev wasn't just a Slytherin, he was mental.

Calling Rita a friend was a bit of a stretch. Frankly, calling Rita a friend was an affront. It was an affront to wonderful people like Marlene and Remus and Ravi and wonderful pains in the arse like Alice and Sirius. Even to people like Peter and Mary who Lily felt vaguely obliged to be nice to even if they hadn't always been the best friends to her personally (she continued to hold that Mary was a wonderful girl. Having a pash for Sirius could derange anyone, even without everything Mulciber had done. One couldn't quite forget, though). Possibly even to twelve-year-old Tuney, although after that year things had gotten less friendly and more love-hate-stressful between them.

It wasn't an affront to Sev, because Sev had a strange relationship with warm words. Also because Lily didn't want to expose any of her easier friends to Rita, but she did really, really want to put Rita in a room with Sev and sit back with a bowl of popcorn.
Not even to get back at him for the last four or five years, although that would make it better. Only, she was almost sure that when Sev let himself fight with anyone these days, he made himself stop the verbal whiplash at first blood.

Which was as far as she wanted to go herself, thankyouverymuch, when it was just fighting for fun, but the boys on and around Spinners Row hadn't been anything like as polite or touchy as Sev's housemates. Lily would bet no one had invited him to a game of shouting-to-be-settled-honorably-through-footie by telling him his mother wore army boots in years.

Rita would be good for him. As long as she didn't go away remembering to bear a grudge. That was the problem. And Sev would stop at nothing when he really felt desperate (which was kind of chilling, especially in hindsight, however comforting it could be at the time when everyone else was being fluttery and useless), but he didn't actually approve of obliviation and wasn't very likely to use it just to help himself.

Lily was reflecting on how happy she was to be able to wholeheartedly believe that about Sev and how much she wished she could make her husband understand it clearly enough to subside rather than just backing off, when a dramatic shadow posed over her teacup.

Looking up, she saw a trim woman only a little older than her, with really solid face-bones accentuated into a mystique of near-androgeny by an amazingly glossy Beatles-ish mushroom cut and bright, acid-green nails a little longer than Lily would have felt comfortable with. It might have been those nails, or the combination of chartreuse blouse and dark amber cape, but her hair looked… brassier than Lily remembered. Or maybe she meant bronzier.

She didn't think Rita was using soap like Sev's; it didn't look unwashed. There was just that ever-so-faintly laurel color about the highlights. If Lily hadn't known wizards' hair and eyes commonly looked a bit strange, she would have suspected the same kind of hair-dying accident Tuney had had once, trying for a 'stylish' pale blonde that would have screamed peroxide to anyone who knew anything, if it had worked.

Smiling, Lily gestured to the chair across from her, but got exclaimed at and her cheeks air-pecked before Rita would sit in it. Lily would have just dived in, given the choice, but first she had to get through a fair few minutes of how svelte Lily looked for a new mother, where Rita found tailors that did Chinese collars, Harry and whether James was behaving himself (she said yes), and what tea Rita wanted. This turned out to be a smoky Assam that looked carbonated to Lily, apparently as a result of Bouncing Bulb powder, accompanied by some rather alarming-looking tea sandwiches.

Eventually, though, those rather long nails still piercing a sandwich-triangle, Rita pivoted from her apparently-entranced inquiry into how hard it was to resist the darkly-seductive lure of sleeping charms on an infant who didn't understand the difference between AM and PM and was therefore confused as regards to which four o'clock was the appropriate one for a light meal.

"It all sounds so grueling, darling," she said with a sympathy that Lily thought had some basis in real emotion even if it was drawling with cabbage-crisp enunciation and Rita looked as if Lily had been describing arcane rituals of Tibetan fishermen in Greek. "Are you sure you don't want to wait a few months?"

"It is grueling," Lily admitted, "and I don't think I ought to go take an office job or anything, but I don't like sitting around doing nothing but obsessing over the baby and tinkering with toy charms and babysitting the babysitters."

"That dishy Black boy's still hanging about, then?" Rita asked—disapprovingly despite her choice of adjective. Lily wasn't surprised. All their prefects had gotten tired of Sirius well before
Christmas of their first year, even the ones who'd given him the benefit of the doubt about coming from a notoriously, er, traditional family. The ones like Rita, who'd been doing their OWLs or NEWTs the year they'd first encountered him, had all seemed to take his terrifying mix of naturally ebullient personality and loud dammit-I-am-not-a-dark-wizard defiance very, very personally.

Rita, unlike most of their prefects, had had a brother in Hufflepuff, and two sisters in Slytherin. She'd taken Sirius especially personally, telling him to his face that he was only showing his ignorance when he said being Gryffindor proved he was a good person, because both her sisters fainted in Potions when it was time to dissect things, whereas she herself ate hobnails and noisy, smelly, stupid little firsties for breakfast.

"You don't choose your in-laws," Lily replied, going for diplomacy. She could have reminded Rita that Sirius had been less of a universal pest once he and Jamie had stopped being wary of each other. Since the boys had, at that point, stopped being irritants in the common room and graduated to exploring the castle and losing Gryffindor oodles of points a month, however, she thought it better not to. "Besides, he is good with the baby. Not that I'd leave them alone all day, but—"

"Well, of course he is, with a captive audience," Rita opined, with an odd little jerk of her head. It looked as if she was trying to toss her hair, and Lily concluded she'd cut a lot of it off quite recently. "But talking of audiences."

Lily blinked at her.

Rita sighed, and flashed her an irritated and quite toothy smile. Which was exactly why Lily wanted to corner her and Sev and put a camera on them. "You said you had something quite new for me to show my editor," she reminded Lily.

"Oh! Yes, only I didn't know if you'd want—I mean, the paper, if they'd want something pleasant or controversial," Lily temporized.

"A product can't be popular if it isn't noticed," Rita didn't exactly answer the question, her eyebrow arched a bit ironically, "and if it isn't popular, it won't sell."

Not entirely comfortable with that answer, Lily nevertheless shrugged and, pulling her notebook out, asked, "Do you want them both, then?"

"Just read me out a bit," Rita waved a hand.

Lily opened the book, but couldn't help frowning. "If they're in my voice, though, you won't be experiencing what a reader does, will you?"

"Oh, I never do," Rita waved again, airily. "We think someone cursed me as a child; letters jump about on the page."

Lily stared. "But you're a reporter!" she protested. "You write!"

Looking amused, Rita reached across the table to pat her hand. "That's what dictaquills and recitario spells are for, darling," she said patronizingly. "And editors, of course."

"...I love magic," Lily sighed. Most of the reason her mum had been willing to tolerate Sev, despite Tuney's stridency, was because of Gran's failing eyesight.

Back before the stroke that had taken her, Gran had been left to look after the girls while Mum and Dad had a weekend away. Lily had taken Sev home from the playground because he didn't look as if he wanted to go home much, but he'd ended up stranded with someone else's grandmother for
over an hour, the poor boy.

Tuney had demanded that Lily and Lily alone help her cook, because Gran looked so tired and Sev was dirty and obviously wouldn't be any help no matter how he was looking to show off because he was a boy.

Sev had tried to go home at that point, although Sev never wanted to go home really. It hadn't had anything to do with Gran; it was because Tuney was ignoring everything he'd tried to explain about how he helped his mum in the kitchen and often cooked by himself all the time. Lily didn't imagine for a moment he'd actually cared about 'getting his grubby hands on Mummy's expensive modern kitchen things.'

He had cared about having his expertise dismissed and his offer to help scoffed at. Lily couldn't have guessed which he'd hated more. It was the saddest thing, how he'd never understood that Tuney just acted that way because she was lonely, too.

Gran had somehow caught his reluctance, anyway, and wouldn't let him go. When Mum and Dad came back, dinner was long since over but he was still reading A Tale of Two Cities to her and Lily, without any sign of impatience or resentment except for the many pauses to snort indignantly at the dialogue.

Lily had watched her mum's eyes widen in suspicion and alarm when they first came back, and then incredulity. Then, as Sev and Gran and Dad got into a (respectively whingey and amused) argument about whether or not it was acceptably frivolous to turn a major character into a walking pun in the midst of a heavy-handed argument about social justice, they'd softened, and she'd made them all tea herself and toasted some muffins.

Lily hadn't really followed the argument. Which had been frustrating at the time, but she forgave herself in retrospect: she'd been nine.

Gran had remarked later that evening, after Dad had walked Sev home, that she'd been in the middle of the book years ago when she'd had to give in and admit reading glasses weren't enough anymore: she'd never thought she'd have a chance to finish it. Lily's grandfather had been gone so long Lily didn't remember him, and the girl who came to do for Gran didn't have the patience.

It was Mum herself who went to Ms. Ellie to ask to borrow the boy in the afternoons and evenings in exchange for supper for the rest of Gran's visit, and Lily had never seen her bake so often before or since. She hadn't objected when Lily kept bringing Sev back after Gran left, either, just made all three kids tell her about the homework they'd done that day over supper.

It might have been more difficult for Sev if Gran had been able to make magic read aloud to her, but Gran would have been less bored and restless and itchy in her last years.

"Naturally you do," Rita said indifferently. "Isn't that what you said you'd be writing about?"

"Er, more or less," Lily didn't-exactly-agree in her turn. "I can start with that one, anyway."

She turned back a page, and read, "You have passed the Wyrm, and the chill in the wind has ripped tears from your eyes without pain: crossed the fields, and the sun has watered them with your sweat before you noticed. You have come to a river—a great lake—and though you're too young to give it terrible memories, it draws away your interest in what you've left behind, and leaves you with a safe and cozy boat, well guarded. You can see the fountain before you, promising you everything if you only dive in: health, learning, friends, the chance for love."
"All around you, the friends you've met on this journey are in your boat, in their own boats. The sparkling night water dazzles your eyes and you're swamped with feeling, with joy and wonder at this fair fortune offered you through no virtue of your own, this chance at more than you could ever have dreamed you that's come to you without your trying.

"All around you, your new friends are complaining about how they'll have to get wet to get everything the world could possibly offer them. They've come to the fountain because it's what was expected of them. They're disgruntled about how long it will take them to be allowed to risk their lives hurting each other for sport. They're wondering how much trouble their homework will be.

"This is what it is to come to Hogwarts when the only world you've known is muggle.

"Soon, you will meet Merlin in the flesh, and hope his wisdom will make sense to you one day. Your friends will note that everyone knows he's a bit mad, and hope he'll shut up soon so they can eat their tea. Soon, you—"

"All right, I see where you're going," Rita waved her silent, and tapped a long, bright nail thoughtfully against pursed, dark red lips. "Was that the pleasant one or the controversial one?"

Lily laughed, abashed. "Well, I thought it was the pleasant one when I was writing it. Fairy-tale tone and all, and there's a bit about the humbugs they have at the feasts in a minute. I only this week found out what they're for."


She tapped her lips a few more times, and took the notebook away from Lily. Turning to a fresh page and setting a quill from her own bag to hovering over it, she squinted vivisectingly at Lily and began dictating. "Dear… Asphodel. My mum wants to visit me at school and I don't know how to tell her the school is enchanted to keep people like her out and she can't call the right bus. What can I tell her?"

She turned to a new page. "Dear Asphodel. My boyfriend wants me to meet his mum, but he's a half-blood, screamer."

"A half-blood screamer?" Lily blinked. She knew one of those, of course, but didn't think that was what Rita meant.

"A screamer is an exclamation point, Lily-girl," Rita laughed at her, lifting the feather away from the page. "You have to tell the quill." Putting it back, she went on, "Should I bring butterbeer? Flitterbush sprigs? Dandelions? Do I bow or shake hands? Help!"

A new page. "Dear Asphodel, I'm a first-year. I've been doing really well at school, but when Professor em-dash told me to drink a potion I panicked and ran away and now I have detention. Asphodel, it has underline newt-eyes end-underline in it, screamer! I don't want to leave school, but all my friends are calling me a stupid pansy and my Head of House says I can't drop Potions for underline five years, end-underline, screamer! What can I do?"

She turned one more page, and speared Lily with a shrewd, challenging look. "Dear Asphodel, my husband has a new job at the Ministry and I'm very proud of him. But I'm also worried. I'm a muggleborn, and everyone in his office is so cool to me. I think they're telling him to be ashamed of me, maybe even that I'm why he has a hard time getting promoted. I know he loves me, but he's been drinking more and I'm afraid he's starting to believe them. I'm afraid this could ruin our marriage and I'm feeling so hopeless, please help me!"
Rita closed the notebook and slid it back across the table. She drained her tea, pocketed the last sandwich, and stood up with a wink. "Thanks for the tea, Lily. Same time next week?"

"Absolutely," Lily said firmly, all gleeful, bright-eyed butterflies inside. While it wasn't anything she would have thought of herself—or dared to think she might be any use at—she couldn't wait to get home and talk the sample problems out with her family. Jamie and Sirius could pureblood-proof her ideas, and Remus could help her find some sense to start with, and even Peter could tell her when her advice would be too hard for a nervous person to follow.

Although she wouldn't ask him using those exact words.

And someday, Harry would be a half-blood in the wizarding world. He'd be a young man, trying to make his way in a world of girls with agendas and criteria, maybe a world of cutthroat workplace competition that spun tidily around a network of old families and older ideas. There was also approximately a 100% probability, teenagers being teenagers, of self-involved friends who might care about him but wouldn't, as Sev might say, know how to be supportive social animals instead of normal human monsters yet. He'd have to deal with prejudiced purebloods and teachers who were there to make him grow and learn, not make him comfortable.

If the young men Lily knew were any guide, if the boys she'd known had been, Harry wouldn't want to bring every problem he had home to his mum. If she did this, he could have her help anyway.
August 31: Hogwarts' Boardroom

Chapter Summary

Recipe For Headdesk: a summary

Hat, budget, Sybill:
Snape's first faculty meeting.
New Hire: it's a skill.

Chapter Notes

Warnings: self-delusion, seers, squabbling over the budget, singing headgear, and Severus Snape.
(You can probably skip the doggerel. The rest is kinda baked in.)

Notes: This chapter has had the advantage of being doubly betaed: by psyche_girl (Here and Gone Again: A Dwarf King’s Tale and more) and by plutoplex (Crossing Lines and more). I am very grateful and you should go read their stuff if they haven't. Since psyche_girl is no longer able to do any betaing and more than one perspective is super-useful for a story like this, I'd still be very interested if anyone else feels they'd be very good at asking characters to examine all their choices in life.

I would like to particularly note that the first few paragraphs were written after psyche_girl had to sign off, and they were completely crap before plutoplex got to them. They're still completely crap, but now it's intentional awfulness and, hopefully, in character! :D

…announcement that the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophe's new Muggle-Worthy Excuse Committee will report directly to DMAC's Junior Minister, Cornelius Fudge. Many fear that Fudge, a bumbling and officious wizard of forty-three with little exposure to Muggles, lacks the experience to head a brand-new department which must interface with them closely. Those closer to Fudge express a more generous view.

"After all, he'll have people to actually talk to the Muggles on the streets," said Mr. Regulus Black, 20, the dashing heir to the Black fortune, in an exclusive interview with this reporter outside Madame Fortescue's Tearoom. "We already know he can keep calm when very clever and excitable people are shouting at him; that's probably the important thing."

Mr. Black gallantly refused to reveal whether the people who often shout at Mr. Fudge include half-blooded Minister for Magic Millicent Bagnold or Mr. Fudge's direct superior at the DMAC. He admitted, however, to losing faith in Bagnold's administration, which he called 'a bit highly-strung,' after Ministry Aurors assaulted him in Diagon Alley not a month ago (for more on the curse that may have been brought down on this great nation by Aurors hunting during Nemoralia,
This scandalous incident, set off merely because Mr. Black had put up his hood in the rain, is referred to merely as 'an honest mistake' by Bagnold's Ministry. But WAS IT REALLY? Sources tell The Prophet that since the August 9th raid on the Portkey Office, DMLE head Bartemius Crouch...

—The Daily Prophet, August 31, 1980

In years to come, wizards whose business it wasn't would be certain that Severus Snape was eternally grateful to Albus Dumbledore for giving an errant Death Eater a second chance at goodness, freedom, and redemption.

What Severus Snape was in fact eternally grateful to Albus Dumbledore for was glancing up from the schedule he was reading out and saying, "Ah, Severus. No trouble at Customs, I hope?"

Which allowed Severus to say, "None to speak of," very dryly, and make Professor Flitwick chuckle and pat an empty chair next to him. Which in turn allowed Severus to both avoid prolonged introductions and awkward explanations of his unusual status while he stood framed in the door as an outsider, and instead to sit between the fastest wand in the room and the reassuring hulk of a half-giant who saw no irony in giving monsters names like 'Bertram,' 'Beauty,' and 'Cuddles.' Which further allowed him to avoid sitting between the half-proud, half-wary, velvet-covered lump that was Slughorn and the two strangers on either side of him.

He could still feel Evan's worried eyes burning into his shoulderblades. For all he knew, Ev was still standing outside the gates, his mind's eye still fretfully fixed on Severus walking away from him. For all he knew, Evan was still standing outside the gates, his mind's eye magically fixed on everything Severus was looking at right now.

Because that was a thing wizards could, he'd learned, give their spouses the ability to do, and Severus was, it turned out, exactly that much of a besotted idiot. Worse, he was such an idiot that thinking Ev might be doing it right now, since he still didn't know how he'd be able to tell, was warming. Worse yet, if possible, even the smallest possibility that he might be in such new and intimate contact with Evan while sitting next to someone he didn't even know how not to trust made him want to snarl and claw.

"You shall have to tell us all about your trip later, especially if you made it to the zmey's shop," Dumbledore said amiably. It didn't sound in the least like you promised me a report in person, don't think you're getting out of it by not turning up until the start-of-year staff meeting. Severus was mildly impressed.

"Yes, yes, I got you your snuff box," he replied, putting on a face that said he knew how impolitic it was to be annoyed with his new employer on his first day. As he took a schedule from the middle of the table, he added, in the same why-does-the-new-kid-have-to-play-owl voice, "Your friend the old dragon says hello and he hopes you'll write soon."

Because he could insert double meanings out of context without prior agreement, too. Put that in your beard and braid it, old man.

And it did, in fact, he noted smugly, win him a restrained double-take, and Flitwick's eyebrows went up. All Dumbledore said was, "Well, well. It has been a long time."
"But since we don't have an especially long time before classes begin," the Tartan interjected, meaningfully folding her arms. "And a more than usual number of us need orienting. And since they have now all condescended to join us…"

"Professor," Severus said, inclining his head respectfully, "if you know the trick of getting the obligatory souvenirs through Customs without a delay that International Relations appears to calculate by picking a number of hours out of a hat, especially when those souvenirs include fanciful-looking boxes of grey powder reeking of lavender and dissipation, I should be glad to learn it."

She looked at him in suspicious surprise. Severus couldn't imagine why; he'd been perfectly polite. International Relations being staffed with stuffed shirts, arses, and mules was a well-known fact he could not possibly be blamed for. He didn't know why the hell Slughorn was suddenly coughing into the lacy cuffs of his sleeve and Professor Babbling was choking on her biscuit, either.

Or why the little brown bug-eyed, frizzy-haired shadow on the other side of Slughorn was staring at him through glasses the size of Holmesian magnifying glasses. Or why she seemed familiar, for that matter. She wasn't. He would have remembered those glasses, and most likely even that hair.

"So should we all, I'm sure," Dumbledore said soothingly. "Alas, it must remain a mystery, for Professor McGonagall is quite right; we must make the most of these remaining quiet hours."

Half the professors gave sighs that were half bitter, half fond, and all reluctance for their jobs to start. Then they gave Severus skeptically raised eyebrows for joining them in sighing.

"What?" he demanded. "You cannot possibly think me unfamiliar with the chaos of a school full of adolescents hopped up on competitive tribalism and testosterone I have a whole bag of throat lozenges. If anyone needs one, you have only to say the word."

"Do try the tea, Severus," Flitwick suggested in what Severus considered to be a rather strangled voice.

"I don't suppose anyone would care to explain," hopelessly hoped the man on the other side of Slughorn from the frizzy sparrow. Severus assumed he was Gawain Robards, who'd beat him out for DADA professor at the beginning of the summer.

Having read some of Robards' articles, Severus considered that this was entirely fair, even if he also considered that no one from a normal wizarding family was likely to have the granular grasp of Defense that he did. Not in Britain, or at least, he'd never met anyone at Hogwarts who showed any signs of growing up in a rough neighborhood. And the pureblood families that used hexes as punishments didn't allow their children to dodge.

Flitwick reached up to pat Severus's arm, and now there were going to be introductions, ugh. "Professor Gawain Robards, Professor Sybill Trelawney, this is Master Severus Snape, who'll be assisting our own Potions Master this year while working towards his international accreditation. As you can see, Gawain, Severus is a quite recent graduate, and we all remember him."

"I for one remember him being better-mannered," the Tartan muttered to Dumbledore, who twinkled at her and didn't reply.

Severus opened his mouth to explain that he'd been in her class at that time and the situation had called for a complete subsumation of his personality out of respect for her position and the desire to avoid more detentions than her students kept punting him into.
Perhaps fortunately, Sluggy got in first. "I thought of nominating young Severus for Head Boy, you know," he said comfortably. When everybody's eyebrows turned to him, he added, "For, oh, fifteen seconds or so. One doesn't like to have one's students murdered in their beds, after all."

"That was most thoughtful of you, sir," Severus told him, meaning both the original semi-homicidal and quasi-complimentary fleeting notion and the preservation of his life from blood-purists like Mulciber, genuinely touched.

Moderately touched. Slughorn knew he hadn't been alone in his bed and was therefore somewhat buffered from that sort of thing, surely? He couldn't be that out of touch. Severus had been sure he was just criminally laissez-faire, not ignorant. Taking that into account, it was possible Sluggy had been more concerned about the health of firsties who might annoy Severus by asking him for help. "My form's prefects will be glad to hear of your consideration."

"It would have been nice to have a Head Girl and Boy who took the work of looking after all the younger students seriously, after all," Slughorn explained why he hadn't fought harder for Narcissa Black, let alone Evan Who-Me-Work Rosier (which latter needed no explanation; Severus wasn't blind about Ev, he hoped). Not that Severus grudged Lily her badge, or that Narcissa would have had much use for a distinction that got in the way of her spiderwebs and social life. "They so rarely do."

Severus bit back a stinging remark about how unfair it was for students to expect teachers to do most of the work of looking after children. In his current position, it would be certain to come back and bite him venomously.

"Was he expected to murder students in their beds?" the frizzy sparrow whispered anxiously to the Tartan. McGonagall, for all her annoyance with Severus, shot her an immensely heartening incredulous look.

"Only by the very silliest," Severus told her smoothly and truthfully, with what he hoped was an engaging and comforting smile.

She edged away.

It would have been an engaging and comforting smile on Evan's face. Even on Luke Malfoy's. Severus was sure it would, and retreated to his teacup to sulk.

Dumbledore, damn his eyes, twinkled harder. "Severus, you're aware of Professor Robard's work, I believe?"

"I've enjoyed what I've read of it," Severus agreed, "and I'm intensely curious to learn whether your collection of secrecy sensors explodes once the students arrive."

Everyone seemed to be looking at him. He blinked at them. "Perhaps you think some of the Hufflepuffs, at least, aren't sneaking, conniving little bastards?" he inquired. "I assure you, this is not the case. Oh, fundamentally, perhaps," he hastened to assure Professor Sprout's expression of gathering thunder, "but there's not a one of them that isn't snogging before they're supposed to be holding hands, or rehearsing explanations for inevitable homework lateness, or buying sweets on the train and rainbow glitter ink in Hogsmeade when they were given a perfectly good packed lunch and sound black inkpots, or making friends with someone with the wrong politics or blood status to please their parents, or planning the wrong career. Usually nothing notable, but secrets are secrets, and most instruments don't know how to make distinctions. There are, what, five hundred students arriving? And I noticed Peeves didn't bother me when I came in, but I expect he'll be about and in full force on Monday."
"I expect he'll be manifesting in half an hour or so," Kettleburn observed drolly.

"Now, now, lad's got a point," Hagrid kindly patted Severus into the table, nearly breaking the teacup with Severus's chin and also nearly breaking Severus's ribs. He'd forgotten what a Hagrid back-pat was like, and possibly Hagrid had forgotten what skinny people were like. Or perhaps he'd only 'forgotten,' like Rus Lestrange did when he was annoyed or being pointed.

"All I meant," Severus pushed out, coughing, "was that a combined concentration of sensors and —"

"I left most of them home," Robards said mildly. "I had the same concern."

Still coughing, Severus beamed at him, although probably no one here was going to recognize the expression for what it was. Probably this meant Robards was going to die horribly rather than be fired in disgrace, but it also meant that in the meantime Severus just might have someone sensible to talk to. Maybe. One data point was one data point.

"Not all, though, Professor Robards?" asked Sprout, evidently still smarting about the perceived smear to her Hufflepuffs. "You'll need them for lessons, won't you?"

"Not to mention to guard his office," Severus said as a show of good faith since he knew that had really been meant for him.

Sluggy's hand opened and closed once, quietly. His face was amused, though, not warning or overly kind, so Severus took it as a *quit while you're ahead, not a that's enough damage from you*. Subsiding in relief, he chanced a sip of tea now that he thought he could swallow without decorating Professor Babbling's face across the table.

"On the matter of offices," Dumbledore turned the discussion, "our Keeper of the Keys will show you to yours after the meeting, Master Snape, and I'll meet with you and Professor Slughorn to discuss your duties tomorrow after breakfast, and the findings from your trip. I trust that by then you'll have acquainted yourself with the Potions syllabus and schedule?"

"If I may have a copy of it, yes," Severus said cautiously, in case this was hazing and they meant him to struggle along without one.

"Naturally, m'boy," Slughorn said, passing a thick, tightly-rolled scroll over. Severus did hear just a trace of warning in it, now. He thought it meant he was insulting someone, but wasn't sure how.

"Excellent, excellent," said Dumbledore lightly. Severus couldn't tell whether he was ignoring their undercurrents or hadn't noticed. "Now, as Professor McGonagall has noted, we do have one or two new professors in unusual need of orientation. Professor Robards has been away from Hogwarts for long enough that the customary tour is in order, to remind him of, for instance, its touchier stairways, and Professor Trelawney has never passed through our fair halls at all. Would anyone like to volunteer?"

Severus became aware that most of the faculty was giving him a collective you-are-now-the-junior-member look. He frowned, and looked at Slughorn. "Is that what you'd like, sir? I thought you'd want me to spend tomorrow going through the student files and ingredients cupboards and checking the equipment."

"Oh, no need to worry about the equipment, m'boy," Slughorn assured him, sending Severus's heart rate through the roof, which was quite high in places at Hogwarts. The last time he'd seen some of those cauldrons, they'd been beyond due for recasting, and some had even shown traces of
and that had been two years ago! "But, er, yes, I think you'll be quite occupied." His eyes were a strange mix of strain and satisfaction, and Severus was suddenly panicked with the certainty he was about to be sent through a thousand unknown Slytherin dormitory crawlspace cleaning out all the dark magic toys that careless pureblooded students had squirrelled away for the last thousand years.

The prospect was still less terrifying than rusty, worn-thin cauldrons. He tried desperately to catch the Tartan's eye, since she was Deputy Headmistress and had the most parchment in front of her and could be assumed the manager of the budget. And it was just possible she could redistribute the metal herself, if he could fix the rust.

In fact he did catch her eye, but all she did was to very civilly refill his teacup. "It appears to be up to you again, then, Hagrid," she said, and refilled Hagrid's, too.

"Bless you, I don't mind," Hagrid smiled encouragingly at the sparrow.

"If that's settled," said Professor Timaeus, "I move we discuss the proposed alterations to this year's—"

"Motion denied," said the Tartan flatly.

"Oh, really, Minerva!" Timaeus exclaimed. "Look, I mean no disrespect to Professor Trelawney, but Imago never needed half this stuff, and Peeves drop-kicked a telescope and two crates of crystal lenses off the Astronomy tower last April. Reparo does very little good after a nine-story drop! Not to mention astral drift…"

Severus gathered from the resulting twenty-minute clamor that there was no hope for the cauldrons. He spent most of it re-acquainting himself with Slughorn's insipid syllabus, crying silently inside with despair over the class distribution. He'd so hoped his year was an anomaly, or that, at worst, the distributions alternated. No: apparently everyone just wanted there to be fights between the most volatile student groups in the most dangerous classroom every year.

"It's the hallmark of a good compromise that everyone should go away unhappy," Dumbledore finally put a stop to the twelve-way catfight, which included Madam Pomfrey and Madam Hooch, but not Professor Babbling or the napping Professor Binns. Not really paying attention, since he was too busy internally screaming at Slughorn about the fact that there were still no surprise exams scheduled, Severus asked, without lifting his nose from the syllabus, "Isn't that also the defining characteristic of the last act in a tragedy?"

"And flights of angels," muttered Flitwick into his palm, only just audible, "sing thee to thy rest."

Even if it was Flitwick, Severus was feeling rather frayed at this point, and narrowed his eyes. Equally quietly, he muttered back, "If that was a crack about me mam—wait," he added in a slightly less sotto voce, even more hopefully than before, "can they? Are we done?"

"Who said anything about cauldrons?" asked the witch Severus vaguely recognized as the Muggle Studies teacher, sounding bewildered.

"Didn't you?" he asked Slughorn, probably sounding more accusatory than he meant to in public.
"Now, Severus," Slughorn began, sounding so guilty that Severus knew his whole damn maintenance budget was going to the Slug Club.

"No, Master Snape," Dumbledore cut across everyone, so loudly and placidly that Severus would have cut right through every one of them to get to Evan. Ev would have done the same thing in a similar tone, but without raising his voice. Or maybe just by setting his teacup down quietly. "I'm afraid we can't send you off just yet," he smiled. "Next item, Professor McGonagall?"

"Unless anyone wants to discuss Quidditch—"

There was a series of groans.

The Tartan started to briskly and good-naturedly accede to these groans, but the sparrow timidly asked what the matter was at the same time that a rather blank Severus asked, "Why doesn't everyone want to talk about Quidditch?"

While Slughorn gave Trelawney a few brief, fatherly words on Why We Do Not Get Certain People Started On Quidditch, Professor Babbling had concluded she had another fanatic on her hands. A bit exasperated, she told Severus, "I realize you used to play for your House, Snape, but there'll be plenty of time to talk sports during term, and the Heads can sort out the pitch bookings between themselves privately."

Rather pleased she'd remembered he'd played sometimes, despite her tone, he replied, "I don't want to talk about sports, Professor, I want to talk about off-pitch injuries."

"What do you mean?" the Tartan asked keenly, looking as if she wasn't sure whether to be interested or suspicious.

"Not now, Severus," Slughorn blared. Severus whipped around and stared at him. "Not now," he repeated, less urgently but still quite emphatic. Severus shot him a narrow-eyed you'd better believe it'll be later, then look, and he wiggled his plump fingers shallowly on the table in acknowledgement.

"Then, if no one is going to talk Quidditch," the Tartan tried again, a bit dryly, to a few chuckles that Severus would decide later whether to resent, "it's hallway patrol."

"I think Professor Trelawney and Master Snape ought to be excused for the first term," Flitwick said thoughtfully. "It's one thing for the new DADA teacher, but I think we ought to let the students get accustomed to seeing these two in a classroom role first."

Severus frowned. "I can't object to any extra time for research, of course, but I don't ask to shirk any usual duties." The fewer teacher-like things students saw him doing, the longer it would take him to establish himself and the more trouble they'd give him.

"That's good of you, Sn—Master Snape," Madam Pomfrey said drolly, "but I don't fancy sorting out any knock-down drag-out hex battles between seventh-year Gryffindors and a member of staff who makes up his own, if it's all the same to you."

"Well, I wasn't going to say that," Flitwick agreed, as Severus flushed. "But really, Severus, I think it's best they get used to seeing you in the classroom before they get used to seeing you walking about in the dark on your own. We don't want students hurt, you know."

"I wouldn't—"

"Or glued to the ceiling."
Severus huffed, and retreated sulkily behind his teacup. Now the sparrow was trying to apparate to the other side of Slughorn, he could tell.

"Now," Dumbledore said, "for the benefit of our new faculty: at ordinary occasions you may all sit where you like, so long as it's at the High Table where we can all keep an eye out for incipient food fights—"

"Oh, surely," the sparrow protested, horrified.

"Ha," chorused McGonagall, Timaeus, Babbling, Kettleburn, and Severus, whereas Hooch, Flitwick, and Hagrid actually laughed, Digitalin, Robards, Pomfrey, and the Muggle Studies teacher each made a face, and Sprout sighed.

Dumbledore smiled serenely. "For high spirits, let us say rather. At more formal meals, such as the Start of Term Feast, however, I should like you to be seated before the table of your own House. It will increase their feelings of unity and solidarity on these occasions and, most importantly, reduce the appearance of chaos amongst their guardians."

One or two dutiful chuckles. Severus did not, of course, join in. He wouldn't have anyway, and he wasn't sure how he felt about it. For one thing, he thought it largely had served, in his time, to point out how few Slytherins there were on staff.

Not but what three out of twelve wasn't, when he looked at them all together, in fact the correct number. But in this case, the numbers lied. Everyone knew Kettleburn didn't count and Babbling wouldn't be bothered with House matters.

"The Heads of House are excepted from this scheme," Dumbledore went on, "as they will sit in the center of the table with me. Yes, Professor Trelawney?"

"Excuse me, but that doesn't tell me where to sit," she reminded him, not exactly timidly but with a mustering-her-courage look.

"Which brings us to my very favorite part of the evening!" Dumbledore cried delightedly.

Severus hoped it was also the last part. He was thoroughly done with people for the evening, between this meeting and dealing with Customs all day. Besides which, he wanted to get a start on the student files in case Slughorn kept him busy all day tomorrow with something dreadful.

Except that all he really wanted was to tangle up with a space alien and let ancient words drift through the warmth they made together, speaking not to them directly, but to a universe of future humanity that generously and anonymously encompassed their half-listening quiet. Surely he wasn't the only one who wanted to leave for reasons beyond impatience to be getting on with it?

He'd never joined in any of the half-hearted gossip about his professors' social lives. Not that there'd ever been very much; his set had been much more concerned with their own marital prospects and he himself had been profoundly uninterested in the entire topic of conversation, except when it was making him want to kill Potter and whoever was underestimating Narcissa or wasting Evan's time at any given moment.

Now, though, he wondered how many of them really slept in the castle, as they were all said to do. Dumbledore had entertained himself for a while at Severus's expense by absolutely forbidding even the most discreet of roommates before explaining that vanishing cabinets in the rooms of married professors were standard practice. It had seemed a bit of a security risk at the time, but Linkin's extensive list of complaints about the trouble of setting up the arrangement had put his mind somewhat at rest. So he wasn't excessively worried, though it was something to keep in mind.
if things got worse. And he wasn't exactly curious; he didn't feel any urgent need to pry into anyone's life in particular. But he did wonder.

Granted, this place was probably nothing more than normalcy for most of them, by now: a tedium and occasional irritant at worst, home and respite at best. He doubted any of them were quite as comforted as he was by knowing there was always, as it were, a welcoming lamp-post on the other side of the wardrobe, however eternal the winter. But Hogsmeade wasn't much of a wide world to ramble through. It was a great richness compared to Spinner's Row, no question. After two years in London, though, living off Diagon Alley and visiting the Sherwood any time he felt like apparating by after work, it felt very, very small.

But then, 'small' in the wizarding world could still be filled with unexpected things, as Dumbledore reminded Severus by pulling the Sorting Hat out of his voluminous ash-and-turquoise sleeve and setting it on the table. Smiling at the sparrow's very Petty-Evans-ish what-the-hell-is-that-dirty-thing expression, he said, "This, Professor Trelawney, is the venerated artifact who determines where everyone in the castle, will, as you so straightforwardly put it, sit—yes, Master Snape?"

Because Severus, who had seen where this was going, had raised two diffident fingers. At least, he was trying to be diffident, since he was a) the junior here and b) not currently overwhelmed with tsunamis of infuriated frustration. "Mightn't it be a good thing, Professor, to have one neutral party in the castle?"

"Well, there's Filch," pointed out Hooch.

"Filch regularly threatens students with whipping and disembowelment," Severus reminded her. "He's no one's idea of a safe haven. Professor Trelawney," he nodded civilly at the sparrow, "looks far more approachable. She's never built up House alliances, so there's no reason to lumber her with House rivalries, is there?"

He seriously doubted, in fact, that she could survive thirty seconds in that role. But she didn't have the plasticity of an eleven-year-old, or any form-mates to live in her room and draw close around her as House politics marked her and scarred her and painted a two-colored target on her face, either. Severus didn't consider himself full of benevolence towards mankind as a general matter, but he didn't think it right to shove someone who couldn't swim into a lake full of sharks when there was already blood in the water.

"I hope students in need of a safe haven always feel they can come to their Headmaster, Severus," Dumbledore said gravely, meeting Severus's eyes over his half-moon spectacles.

"No doubt, sir," Severus replied neutrally, and felt he deserved a medal for it.

Dumbledore sighed. "Well, Professors, Master Snape's point is not without merit. What say you?"

"I say that there's no reason to tell the students where the Hat puts Professor Trelawney," the Tartan said pragmatically. "It's not as if we ever do remind them where a new teacher was sorted as a student, except when someone takes on a House as its Head. Sorting her will tell her where to sit at the feasts and whom to assist during emergencies; it needn't go beyond that. It's not as if we all go about wearing our colors."

"True, true," Dumbledore agreed. "And it is traditional, whether a new teacher was taught at another wizarding school or by tutors."

He gave Severus an are you going to make trouble over this look. Severus shrugged agreeably. It wasn't really his problem, after all. His problem was that everyone already knew not only what but
who he was. Everyone was going to think the new witch was a Hufflepuff anyway, with how twitchy she was, since no one knew her, even if most actual Hufflepuffs weren't like that at all. In his experience, the twitchiest ones were the Gryffindors who'd fought to wear red to prove to themselves they could overcome all their baked-in fear, but hadn't found the trick of it yet.

And certain Slytherins who were intelligent enough to grasp how much trouble they were in, he wryly acknowledged to himself.

"However," Dumbledore went on cheerfully, "we can't Sort anyone until they've heard the Sorting Song and know what it's all about. That would be most unfair, since the Hat does take personal inclination into account. Which returns us to the best part. Hagrid, would you like to explain to our new staff members?"

Next to Severus, the big man puffed himself even bigger. "Be proud to, Professor," he said.

Severus couldn't help but smile a little. While he himself had no intention of foregoing the advantages of the voice he'd worked bloody hard to hone, it was good to hear someone talking, as Da would have said, like a real person.

He had opinions about modern people living in patron-client relationships—had spent most of his school years trying to avoid them, with only middling success but more than he'd placed practical hopes on—and that little interaction had been pure patronage, in so very many ways. But if Hagrid was happy, it wasn't anyone else's business.

Hagrid couldn't really be called a modern person anyway. He certainly wouldn't do well in a modern setting. Those tended to be scaled for five-to-six foot tall people, and involve more steel, which was to say wrought iron—cold iron, at any temperature—than might be entirely healthy for a half-giant.

"Now, this here hat, miss," Hagrid said, oblivious to Severus wondering if he could even ride the Knight Bus, let alone a muggle taxi, "is a thousand years old."

Trelawney stared at it, half fascinated and half dubious. "But how—"

"Magic," the Tartan told her crisply, and didn't say obviously out loud.

Severus understood this to mean Hagrid just said it was a thousand years old, how the hell are we supposed to know how it works? The sparrow had shrunk back into her chair, but he himself breathed easier.

He'd gotten the sharp end of her tongue often enough to be wary of it himself, and the frizzled witch clearly didn't know how to take it, true. Still, Severus had to admit it was a relief to be somewhere where they talked both in straight lines and in English. You couldn't get both at once in either London or Bulgaria, and he wasn't old enough to retire into an apothecary in the Sherwood yet.

"It's a part of the castle," Flitwick explained more patiently, possibly because he was as quick to talk about enchanted objects as McGonagall was to talk about the Pride of Portree team. "Part of the castle's magic. It had a more mitred shape around the top, back when I was a student. We think it may have been a helmet one of the Founders used in the Anarchy, although records from around the founding of Hogwarts are on the murky side."

Severus, whose ancestors had done rather well out of the Anarchy, glared at the slumbering and translucent Binns for not having been the one to say that. Ever. To anyone.
"And what we do with it, see," said Hagrid, "is, the students put it on, and it has a look into their heads and tells us all what House they'll do best in. But first it sings that song Professor Dumbledore was talking about. As an introduction and all. And it gets that," he finished proudly, "from us."

"Very clearly put, Hagrid," Dumbledore said kindly.

Severus disagreed. At the end of those four sentences, he had about fourteen more questions, and he'd sat through seven Sorting ceremonies.

Dumbledore wasn't relying on Hagrid's 'clarity,' though. "While the Hat is an artifact rather than a person, Professor Trelawney, it has enough personhood to get bored. It doesn't like to give the same song year after year. And, indeed, language and culture change so that we wouldn't understand the songs it sang when it was new!"

Quietly, to Flitwick, Severus muttered, "Many men seyn that in swevininges ther nis but fables and lesinges…"

"The droghte of Marche hath perced to the rote," Flitwick diverged, grinning.

Which Severus thought was something of a cop-out: everyone knew that one and it had nothing to do with the passage Severus had slid him. But at least it proved he'd recognized Severus's author, even if he hadn't quite capped the quotation off the top of his head without warning. And that there were at least two of them at the table who would understand a twelfth-century song quite—well, reasonably adequately, anyway, thank you. At least three, in fact, since Professor Babbling's proficiency with Middle English could be tentatively assumed even if it did use the modern latinate alphabet.

"Professor Flitwick, Master Snape, did you have something to add?" Dumbledore asked courteously.

"We were just agreeing that linguistic drift would indeed complicate communications from an unlearning and static artifact, Professor," Severus replied innocently. Because he was innocent, and hadn't actually said anything terrible. Even if Avery would have been sure that 'sweveninges' had to be a far dirtier word than 'dreamings.' Which only went to prove the point again. Although you couldn't prove much by Avery,

"Just so," Dumbledore agreed, giving them tolerant that's enough, boys eyes. Slughorn's eyes, by contrast, were well plastered over by his fleshy palm, for some reason.

"He couldn't have had that rehearsed," Timaeus hissed to Slughorn suspiciously from across the table. Without moving his hand, Slughorn shook his head glumly. "It sounded rehearsed," Timaeus insisted, giving Severus squinty eyes, which were all the worse for being buried in several metric tons of crows feet.

Severus stared at them both in confused suspicion. You didn't have to rehearse a quote: you already knew it, and so did the other fellow. That was the point of a quote.

Then he remembered he was supposed to be a Slytherin, and thought he'd better stop looking Obviously Out Of The Loop before Narcissa's ire could apparate in from Wiltshire and kick him in the face.

Speaking to the sparrow again, Dumbledore continued, "Aside from the question of, as Master Snape so eloquently puts it, linguistic drift, the practice of having new professors put the Hat on
keeps it up to date on current events."

"More or less," Flitwick piped up dryly.

"The grand sweep of events," Dumbledore amended, smiling. "While the Hat has no second sight and cannot see the future," he bowed a little to the sparrow, with that old-fashioned courtesy that Severus had concluded meant precisely nothing. "its long experience has, in the past, allowed it to place the news of the day—"

"Year."

"Yes, indeed. To place the news of the year, as our good Head of Ravenclaw points out," Dumbledore sailed on serenely, affecting not to notice Slughorn smirking at an unbothered Flitwick for being called a pedant, "into the context of the echoing patterns of history. It has, over the centuries, issued several very timely warnings due to this practice."

Severus bit his lip on a comment about correlation and causation. When there was only one artifact of its type in the world, doing a controlled experiment to find out what had really enabled those warnings would, admittedly, be difficult. Still, he detested the way wizards had of making up a fable and taking it for fact.

Severus glanced around the room to see if anyone else was making a face that might indicate they'd noticed the enormous assumption that enabled the Headmaster to publically justify what might well be an otherwise pointless tradition that gave him, the Hat's master, telepathic information about new hires. Then he nearly fell out of his chair.

Everyone seemed to have swallowed the pronouncement without interest—except the sparrow. When his gaze darted over her face, passed over her eyes, it was like someone shouting in his face: overwhelming relief, a faint sense of smugness, the sense of being in a small room full of soft, dark, warmth and incense, and the very dismissively felt phrase cold read.

"All right, Snape?" Hagrid asked.

His mind kicked up a notch. Why might he be distressed—curiosity wasn't quite enough to cover it if he'd really flinched, and even if he hadn't meant to glance over her mind, it wasn't likely to be taken well… not that he'd taken it well, considering he hadn't expected it at all…

"If there are three of us, do we all have to put it on?" he asked Dumbledore warily. "If it has both memory and personhood, er, our first encounter wasn't… ah, it didn't go entirely smoothly…" He let himself wince a little, and wondered if he was flushed. He felt as if he might be.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Robards asked, looking between him and the Hat curiously.

Severus retreated a little in his chair, his shoulders inching closer to his ears.

"At his Sorting," the Tartan said dryly, "Master Snape came within a hair's breadth of setting Godric Gryffindor's own personal hat on fire."

There being nothing he could reply to this that wasn't a heartfelt insult to her own personal House and almost everyone in it, Severus just turtled back further into his hair.

After a moment, Robards said, carefully, "Did you mean that quite literally, Professor? There are hat-stalls in every year, of course, but—"

"There was smoke," the Tartan said flatly.
"We all saw it," Digitalin agreed. Sadistically, in Severus's opinion. It wasn't as if Digitalin could have had any proof that Severus was the one who'd etched an array to make a peep-hole into the Hufflepuff quidditch showers. She couldn't have had, since it had been Mulciber. Disliking him for perverting her teachings when she had no evidence against him, other than Black's histrionics, was ridiculous.

There was nothing left to do but straighten out his back and lift his chin. "I was entirely satisfied," he declared with as much dignity as he could scrape together, "by the conclusion it came to in the end."

"Meaning you won," Flitwick teased.

Severus shrugged, refusing to embarrass old Walrusface, who was only civil to the head of the House Severus had wanted. "I didn't lose."

"Well, if the Hat bursts into flames, we shall forego the experiment." Dumbledore said cheerfully. "And, in the light of this concern, I think we will also save you, Master Snape, for last. That way the Hat will have the memory of this conversation, and will be able to act on its own behalf if it wishes to."

Severus did not like the sound of that at all. He reached into a waistcoat pocket and drew out a phial. With a tap of his wand, he turned the cap into a pump and nozzle, and sprayed his face and hair.

"What was that?" Hagrid asked, sniffing the place on his sleeve where some of the mist had got him.

As flatly as McGonagall, Severus said, "Flame retardant."

There was a short pause, and then Robards asked Dumbledore, "This is the one that wanted my job, isn't he," and Babbling incredulously asked Severus, "Why on earth are you carrying around a bottle of flame retardant?"

Rushing to answer before Dumbledore could, Severus said, in a this-should-be-obvious tone, "A cauldron might explode." He immediately wished he'd said something about Dumbledore's pet fire hazard instead, but it was too late.

"...At a staff meeting."

"You never know. I didn't know putting on the Hat was on the agenda. Someone might have wanted a stimulant brewed. Or a post-meeting... aperitif."

"Which you'd expect to explode," Babbling pursued.

Severus lifted his chin. "There are any number of reasons a cauldron might unexpectedly explode," he replied, as smoothly as he could. Then he Very Carefully Did Not Look At Slughorn. "Reasons increase with age and decrease with good maintenance."

Slughorn sighed.

"What a good thing no one has brought any," Dumbledore steamrollered over the discussion. As far as Severus could tell, his pleasure in them all seemed genuine, which was positively headache-inducing. Then Dumbledore paused, and asked Severus cautiously, "Have they?"

Severus turned an insulted look on him, and didn't reply. He thought that yes, of course, three was
probably not the answer that Dumbledore was hoping to evoke at this point in the conversation.

At least his nonanswer seemed to have shared out his headache, which was cheering. Looking just the tiniest bit strained (*ha*), Dumbledore said to Robards and Trelawney, "Well then! Without further ado, which of you would like to venture first into a more equitable exchange with history?"

The sparrow, predictably, shrank back anxiously in her chair.

"I don't mind," Robards shrugged. "Put it on myself, then, this time, shall I?"

"By all means," Dumbledore agreed courteously, and handed it to him.

Although it should have been old hat to see the wrinkles on the tapering, sagging crown deepen and solidify into a curmudgeonly, tortoise-like face as soon as it touched the top of a head, Severus had never seen it happen up close. From far away it was funny, but from far away you couldn't feel the air tighten, didn't get that sense of shifting coins echoing around damp stone walls as a buried dragon stirred awake. There was something stirring and uneasy and deep about the change, when it was so near to him, like all the best dark magic.

Then there was the thing that so often happened under the Hat: Robards' face looked as if its owner was having an animated conversation, but his mouth didn't move except for the time or two when he laughed. Children did sometimes mouth words while they were talking with the Hat, usually while trying hard to get their preferences across. It was always a silent conversation, though, and mostly a private one.

Unlike children at the Sorting Ceremony, he did indeed look as if he was having 'an equitable exchange with history;' he had the look of someone chatting with an old and well-liked acquaintance. Severus did find this all mildly interesting, and he was looking forward (with a determined refusal to think about worst-case scenarios) to examining the experience from the inside with a more adult perspective than he'd had at eleven.

Then, though, Robards did something the eleven-year-olds decidedly did not do, ever. His eyes glazed over—at this point, Severus noticed that Flitwick had a quill hovering over a heavy black tome he'd pulled out of nowhere Severus had noticed—and he started, in an echoing, rolling voice, to speak. Or, more precisely, Severus decided, to declaim.

"In ancient times of civil war
When faith and magic reeled
Four friends fought hard, and, back to back,
Made free one bloody field.

"They built a town and school here,
But then wondered how to fill them:
Let hate and chaos reign again?
That prospect truly chilled them!

"Cried Helga, "All with magic, come!
For if our gates are wide,
They'll always know who their friends are:
I'll let them all inside."

"The ones he thought were bravest,
Godric meant their strength to hone:
"In times like these we need bold wands
To tend and shield our own."

"Rowena smiled, "Can you sit still? Love learning? Come with me. Such things we'll make were never seen At church or university."

"But brooded canny Salazar, "The children of the muggles Bring swords and flame: they've ever been Our foes, and, too, each others'! Ere we dare to try to teach them, All must call each other brothers."

"And so they four spelled up this school, Each House new family. To learn which one is now yours, Nothing simpler! Just ask me."

It had been unsettling to watch, but it was so very clearly a Sorting Song, so very much like every other Sorting Song Severus had ever heard, that by the third or fourth stanza Severus felt that there was something… almost normal about it. It was such a usual song that he didn't feel it told him anything very striking about Robards.

Oh, there were points from which he might draw hypotheses, which he could compare over time to Robards' behavior. It had been unusually understanding about what Slytherin's opinions were supposed to have been, for one thing, and by not treating the Houses alphabetically it cast Hufflepuff inclusiveness in a less offensive light than usual, besides being heavily weighted towards what learning could be used for. More, he thought it might hint that Robards knew more about Flitwick did for the ICW than did most. But it was, at bottom, nothing more or less than the eighth Sorting Song Severus had heard.

Looking pleased, Slughorn took the hat. He had to reach up a bit to get it.

"Very nice, very nice indeed, Gawain!" Dumbledore cried, applauding politely. This forced everyone else to applaud politely as well, although most of the teachers looked bored and Flitwick was occupied by applying blotting paper, turning a page, and dipping his quill. "A sound effort indeed!"

"Er, what?" Robards blinked. "That felt very odd there at the end, I'm afraid I may have missed something."

"To be expected, to be sure," Dumbledore assured him soothingly. "And now you, my dear Professor Trelawney. As you can see, there's no cause for concern."

Trelawney looked as if she didn't agree, and was in fact being eaten alive by misgivings. She let Slughorn hat her, though.

Her eyes glazed over at once, without all the preceding conversation. Severus was watching her with almost the same idle curiosity as everyone else, but then his eye was caught by some little gesture of Dumbledore's. Then he was speared in the forehead by a thrown pike that shouted DISPLAY NO REACTION from the middle of his brain. He would have reeled and flinched, except that the command was so urgent. Later, he'd console himself that it hadn't felt in the least like the Imperius looked from the outside. Screeching, not soothing at all.
He understood at once why Dumbledore was shouting at him, because Sibyll Trelawney's rolling echo of a voice-in-trance was so familiar that he stopped being a human person sitting in a chair and became a bag of skin full of crawling revulsion.

When he stopped seeing Voldemort's face turning into the jaw-unhinged one of a sickly wrong-colored cobra and sniff-licking Lily's bright hair and the room was almost solid around him again, except for the feeling that it was wanly rippling, he dropped his eyes from the prophet's face.

He hadn't seen it before. Not really, not to register. They had passed each other before his knees gave. She'd passed through his vision, palely, in front of adrenaline-soaked eyes that weren't seeing much. After a harrowing, touch-and-go fencing match with a dangerous enemy with unfathomable motives. In a corridor, outside a room made up for interviews. Upstairs, in a tavern. In the Hog's Head.

It wasn't her fault. How could it be?

It wasn't his fault. She'd been so loud, everyone in that tavern must have heard. They must have. The sort of clientele Aberforth Dumbledore had, at least one of them would have known what he'd heard, would have run to get out, to sell it before the old men could steal his memories.

He'd had to make sure the Dark Lord heard it in context, properly spun, all its ambiguities underlined, the treacherous ambiguity of all prophesies underlined thrice and circled in red ink. And he hadn't even known who was meant.

It was just the way things had happened. Fate, if you believed in that rot. It had nothing to do with this nobody. It wasn't her fault.

If he fled this room right now and never saw her again, it would be too soon.

Frantic for another subject, his gaze landed on Flitwick's book. It was still open with his quill poised on it. Apparently Flitwick had expected her to say more than,

"Steadfast under stars,  
What fortune to be allowed!  
The future beckons."

But there wasn't any more. He forced his eyes back to the prophet who thought herself a huckster, because that was where everyone else was looking. Looking warily and with rather large eyes, in Robards' case. The others looked worried in quite a different way, as if she'd proved her credentials for a difficult, dangerous, and necessary mission to be entirely lacking. All Severus saw was a grown-up child having what looked exactly like a normal Sorting argument.

"No, no, there's no question," the hat said at last, out loud, "I couldn't possibly put you anywhere besides RAVENCLAW!"

She looked pleased but puzzled as she took it off and handed it back to Slughorn. "It said to ask you the difference between an aspiration and an ambition," she said.

"A plan," Kettleburn said promptly, smirking a little but with a touch of rue in his voice.


"Discipline," concluded Severus grimly. Looking at her was still making him feel sick, but it would have looked odd at this point if he hadn't joined in.
"Execution, in a word," Slughorn summed up, smiling, and held out the wretched object. "And now for yours, m'boy."

Severus glowered at him, and reached out sullenly to take it.

"Oh no," the hat protested. Out. Bloody. Loud. "Not a chance, Albus. This one's a bloody menace."

"…Right," Severus decided, suddenly overwhelmingly done, and spun up out of his chair to stride for the door.
August 31: Still the Boardroom

Chapter Summary

Severus fails to be done, considers at least three tantrums, and has life explained to him by the gamekeeper, who should have used smaller words and a bigger cluestick.

Chapter Notes

warning: Severus has played some mind-games with himself. One consequence is that, for about five minutes, he's in a headspace that's about what Harry would expect from him.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Severus wondered whether there were any linguistic connections between the words *colloportus* and *claustrophobia*, however far removed. He certainly felt them to be thematically related.

“I’m sure you’ll be great friends once you’ve got over this little hump,” Dumbledore said implacably, slipping his wand back up his sleeve.

“Yes, sir,” Severus retorted, momentarily forgetting himself in a blur of apprehension, pique, and the smart of old wounds. “You always are.”

“May I point out, Severus, that the four of you left one integral point out, in your otherwise admirably comprehensive definition of ‘ambition’?” Dumbledore asked mildly.

Crossing his arms defensively, the locked door unforgiving against his back, Severus swallowed all his words and raised one attempting-to-be-respectful eyebrow.

The cursed man twinkled at him. “Optimism.”

In Severus’s current mood, he would have done a header out the window before admitting the bastard had a point. So instead he growled, “That doesn’t distinguish it from aspiration, which is nothing more than a wistful sigh.”

“Ah,” Dumbledore continued to twinkle, “but without that fortifying breath, no movement is possible.”

“I thought we were having a staff meeting,” McGonagall said sharply, looking as if she badly wanted to tap her foot and possibly roll her eyes.

“Indeed, my dear Professor, indeed,” Dumbledore said soothingly. “And as soon as Master Snape is properly re-introduced to Hogwarts, we may, in fact, be finished with it.”

This was accompanied by such a pointed (and twingly) look that Severus was forced to acknowledge that his only civilized choice was to return to his chair. If he did it with his hackles up and his hair falling around his face, the sullen lack of grace was all Dumbledore deserved.
“I haven’t agreed to this!” the Hat protested.

“My dear Gwyllim,” Dumbledore soothed it, “I am entirely certain that you have no cause for concern. Does it, Severus?”

Having been jolted out of his silent snarl by the painful evidence that the hat had been given, at some point in its long history, not only a name and a Welsh name but an aptonym and, most revoltingly, a name beginning with G, Severus shrugged. “A ‘good’ compromise may be one where everyone goes away dissatisfied,” he said carefully, “but in the aftermath of an honorable one, everyone is satisfied for their own reasons.”

Because he’d always half-suspected that the wretched thing had sent him to be a knutless half-blood in Slytherin out of spite over his burst of accidental magic, right from the first evening, when Luke had taken advantage of his role as a prefect to curse the river-rat’s hands into flippers. This had clearly been, whatever Luke had said, not for talking to Lily at the feast but for objecting to Luke teasing some tiny, prissy little blond girl on the Express by pulling her hair.

A Gryff might have laughed it off and saved face by clapping Severus on the back and announcing to all and sundry that he had spunk or spirit. Lily had in fact approved, although the prissy blond herself had just given him a will-you-be-a-useful-bug look.

(It was probably the only reason she’d lowered herself that evening to help make his clothes respectable, though, whatever she’d been bribed with. If he’d gone to some other house it wouldn’t have mattered, but she wouldn’t have wanted to leave a debt to a fellow-Slytherin with no sense of propriety hanging open.)

Luke (Junior-Prefect Malfoy, the ponce) had not been amused at all. On the personal level, he’d been tolerantly punitive because firsties had to learn they had no business mouthing off to older boys with badges.

After that toffee-nosed knob Evan Rosier had absconding with all his rags to make Narcissa turn them into something resembling school uniforms, also quietly slipped Severus a book for no apparent reason, Severus learned that the main reason he’d been made to think he was going to be dropped head-first off a moving train was because Malfoy had been offended by a grubby little pleb horning in on any interaction between his family and the Blacks.

Everyone who’d watched Luke frog-march him at wandpoint to be dangled terrifyingly over the rail until the Head Boy got wind of it understood exactly what was going on when Prefect Malfoy had made a further example of him that evening. Luke had got away with it, though, by explaining in a loud, clear voice that his hex had been a warning to Severus not to speak with such a dreadful accent. The excuse of teaching him to be a climber everyone would despise had made torturing him for behaving like a man ought to into laudable behavior.

And so Severus had understood that, however he personally felt about what Slytherin was supposed to stand for, the Hat had decided it was okay by the school if the upstart brat who’d mostly-accidentally tried to bully it back with fire were to be murdered in his bed, and the school was rather hoping he’d be broken.

Damned if he was going to give anyone else, especially his new immediate supervisor, any reason to suspect it, though. Besides, he had been satisfied, and still was. What did one come to school for, if not to learn to think, to learn how to handle the world?

“So it’s not going to try and kill me again,” the hat proposed warily, testing the idea out.
Severus shot it a dirty look. “Not unless it tries what it tried last time,” he retorted. “Which would be against all its own precedent, its decision already having been made, announced, and lived.”

“That’s what worries me,” the hat muttered into its brim, but let Slughorn pass the hat to Hagrid without further protest.

Folding his arms and glaring at Dumbledore, Severus announced, “SLYTHERIN,” himself, before Hagrid had quite put the thing onto him. The thing did not, in fact, always wait to be settled onto a student’s head before settling their fate, after all.

The moment its soft, musty weight was on him, he stopped hearing the professors snort at him, and rather heard it complain, “Which is exactly what I meant! You can’t tell me you wouldn’t have done well in—”

“Yes, I can,” Severus retorted, grateful to know he wasn’t actually making any noise, “because I’m not a thug.”

“—Hufflepuff,” the Hat finished huffily. “You were as much an Abbott as a Prince, you know.”

“…Or a Hart, which is to say, not hardly,” Severus returned dryly, not quite before his thoughts had stopped being blank and full of blinking. Because Da’s mam was the only grandparent who’d never shown any sign of being ashamed of him while they were both alive, thankyouverymuch.

He didn’t care for her name being left out because she had no magic any more than he liked Da pretending she was just some respectable woman who’d never been on the stage and didn’t have any notorious cousins. She hadn’t been around long enough to help raise him at all, but he remembered her singing and making puppets out of scraps. Surely that counted for as much as Mam’s residual pureblood instincts.

He hadn’t forgotten, exactly, that it would have put him in his wizarding grandmother’s House as happily as his mother’s. Not forgotten, exactly; he did remember it, but only as one remembered facts that had been on one’s History of Magic exams, and weren’t going to come up even if one got into a heated argument about wand rights with a goblin.

It had never seemed important. One word, already eclipsed by the outrage that had come before it. Especially since he hadn’t known Julilla née Abbott at the time. Certainly not half as important as refusing to be in his wizarding grandfather’s House with those two nightmarish young snots who were everything he’d ever imagined the bastard to be.

“You would have been happier,” it told him shrewdly.

“I would have been harassed less,” he corrected, because the strongest, smartest, most loyal, and fiercest people he knew about would never have looked at him twice if they hadn’t been cooped up with him for years. “It’s not the same thing. Besides,” he added in a more conciliatory tone when the hat sighed grumblingly, “I already knew how to work hard. Working smart was what I needed.”

“And you think you got that, do you?” the hat demanded waspishly.

But Severus was more inclined to be charitable with it now. Not only had he realized their misunderstanding, but he felt he understood the thing’s criteria now. They were less manipulative—or, rather, less utilitarian than he’d assumed.

All adults were manipulative about trying to ensure the best for children. When adults were narrow-sighted and ruthless about maximizing a child’s potential in an area of their own choice, or
making the child stick intractably to a shallow, uninformed childish choice made with an underdeveloped brain, that was not forgivable.

But perhaps that wasn’t, after all, what this was. Perhaps the Hat’s had been annoyed because it had wanted him not only to do well, but to be well. Perhaps it was only as annoyed as he would have been if he’d tried to teach Regulus to be safe from everything and Reggie hadn’t even heard he was talking.

So it was with a piece of a smile that he said, “It seems I’ll have another year for advanced study.”

The Hat made a noise that Severus translated without difficulty as *oh bloody fucking Godric but I hate dealing with boys like you.*

So he added, smugly, “See? You ought to have put me in the eyrie, after all.” Just in case anyone could read lips and might tell Slughorn later if he said ‘ravenclaw’ outright.

“I ought not,” the Hat replied with flat melodrama. Severus didn’t know whether he was being mocked or the thing took on some quality of the head it was on, but either way he didn’t like it. “You’d have blown it up within the year. Now be quiet and think about Hogwarts.”

“What about Hogwarts?” he asked, trying to give the thing on top of his head the side-eye. “It’s rather a large subject.”

“All about it,” it snapped.

“Certainly,” Severus agreed mildly, “*Gwyllim.* If you’ll tell me why my House’s Founder *really* left the school.”

“Trying to prove yourself a credit to him?” the Hat asked—a touch snidely, but not with what Severus considered to be really contemptuous amusement. “I keep the confidences of every head I touch.”

“But not from the Headmaster, I expect,” Severus mused. “Otherwise it’d be useless.”

“*Hogwarts,*” the thing scolded him.

“Why are the Slytherin dorms in what used to be the dungeons?” he pressed, folding his arms. He was going to get *something* useful out of this humiliation if it killed him.

It sighed, ruffling his hair unpleasantly. “Because Headmaster Swott was a diviner by profession and an avid admirer of Isaac Newton. When the winter of 1739 made constantly heating four towers to living standards an impossible drain on the castle’s magic, he took the opportunity to dedicate one to Astronomy.”

Severus sat back, rather charmed. “Two Houses live underground, now,” he pointed out. “The Common Rooms’ wall panels are all older than that.”

“Yes, well, elves are useful for that sort of thing. The Hufflepuffs felt moving belowground would be appropriate for badgers, once the idea arose, and since they volunteered to help with the move, they got first choice of locations. So the cellars moved to the library, which moved to the fourth tower and got a great clock where the picture window of Madam Hufflepuff used to be, and now we have no dungeons at all.”

“Alas for Filch,” Severus agreed dryly.
“Who?”

Severus stared up at the brim cutting off his view of the ceiling. “...Well, that won’t do at all,” he decided. That was sick. Filch had been working at Hogwarts at least ten years, because he hadn’t acted like a new hire when Severus had got there, and no one had spared him thought, had encompassed his eternal cranky guardianship in their broad conception of the place? Students routinely spent hours at a time dreaming up stupid names to call his stupid cat. “I’ll commence thinking about Hogwarts now.”

And he did, as intently and comprehensively as he could, but he got dizzy almost at once and his vision went grey, as if he were going into shock. The next thing he knew someone was levitating the thing off his head and everyone was bloody staring at him again.

Everyone except Flitwick, who had the book upright in front of him so Severus couldn’t see what was in it. He was comparing a page to a rather earlier page, and then a rather earlier page than that, and then a much earlier one. With an absolutely inscrutable expression.

Severus considered several opening remarks, including don’t let my dulcet murmur lead you astray, actually I can scream quite loudly. He settled for tersely asking Robards, “Are you still dizzy?”

Because Robards was the only one comparing whatever he’d said only to student experience and the sparrow’s haiku, not to Robards’ own song and whatever else had happened in this room over the years. He was only looking like he was stifling laughter at Trelawney’s expense, not as if Severus had made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. And all he said was, “No, it passed very quickly.”

“Fine,” Severus nodded succinctly and, since it was in fact already passing, stood again. “Hagrid, about showing me to my office. Professor Slughorn, about those student files.”

He was halfway to the door when someone made a soft chicken noise. Without turning around, he snapped, “I will expend fortitude where and when there is cause to, Professor Digitalin, and as I was informed our business here would be concluded with this pantomime and I have, in fact, further business to attend to before we meet again, if no one else does, my summer vacation having been a working one, I will exercise it in the appropriate direction. Good night.”

But he was deprived the pleasure of the slamming the door behind him, because Hagrid followed, rather than led, him out.

“Well, now,” Hagrid commented. Severus could actually hear his beard quivering. “Most new teachers are a mite quieter in their first week, I must say.”

“Oh, shut up,” Severus groused, moving a step closer to him in the dark halls. It was absurd, but he couldn’t help feeling someone might jump out at him at any moment. They’d even said Peeves hadn’t manifested yet, so he was just being a gutless rabbit, but the sense of hungry, judicial eyes on him from every shadow, vicious like a wounded animal, was unshakable. “Anyway, why did they have you there and not Filch? You’re neither of you faculty—and neither am I, for that matter, I don’t think—and he’s been here almost as long.”

“Ah, well, Argus is busy going over one or two things with the elves, isn’t he?” Hagrid asked knowledgeably. “One of us has to stick about to show you firsties to your rooms. The other teachers do have summats to do before tomorrow, after all,” he added with what wasn’t quite a reproach, but was definitely telling Severus he’d been unfair, however understandably.
“I won’t keep you if you have to hurry back to guide those two, then,” he replied, not sure whether he ought to be warding off guilt, for making Hagrid take two trips, or the unpleasant feeling of being a chore. “I suppose I ought to get straight to work, it’s not as if I could say hullo to that damned Barghest of yours at this hour.”

“You ought to get straight to sleep, young Snape, if you don’t mind me saying so,” Hagrid returned, what passed for sternly with him. “Ripper’ll be right glad to have you tomorrow for tea.”

“He’s started eating people, then?”

“Don’t get cheeky, now,” Hagrid said, but not as if he especially minded. “Nah, I’ll have a cuppa with you if you’re offering, help you get the place set up a bit. I think the Professor wanted to see the girl home safe himself, and there’s one or two of those young ladies won’t mind showing the new Defense lad to his rooms, if I’m any judge. Any road, you won’t be letting the elves touch your precious papers and bottles and that, if I know you.”

“Too right,” Severus snorted. “Just a quick cup, then; I really ought to start reading up on the returning students tonight, and I’d rather unpack when it’s light out. I hope Slughorn does let me get away for tea tomorrow,” he added gloomily, “he sounded as if he had Plans.”

“You just tell him I’ve got to show you where patches of some special grass or other are in the forest,” Hagrid said slyly. “Now you’re allowed in it outside detentions.”

Severus turned up to him, mouth twitching. “Hagrid, you wouldn’t know the difference between asparagus and sparrowgrass if it bit you.”

“Reckon not, but you would,” Hagrid agreed, twinkling down at him conspiratorially. When he laughed, Hagrid asked, “What is the difference, if you don’t mind me asking?”

Severus replied, “Spelling,” and kept laughing while Hagrid indulgently elbowed him into a wall.

When they got to his ‘office,’ though, he wasn’t laughing. “Good grief,” he blurted, drawing back from it, “I expect Grindelwald has a nicer cell than this.”

“Why?” Hagrid asked. He was giving Severus a you’re-crazy look, but it was the Ah Yes Our Spike Has Once Again Said Something Mental one, which was fine. Nothing like the This Young Serpent Is Dangerous And We Always Knew He Was A Bit Off Are You Really Sure About This Headmaster look he’d been getting in the boardroom.

“Well, I was talking to people over there—”

“Over where?”

“Bulgaria, and—”

“Merlin love you, what were you doing in Bulgaria?”

Severus blinked back. “Finding out how Durmstrang does things, of course. And doing research for my mastery. I wouldn’t say it’s easy to speak safely with vampires if you go through their embassy, but it’s easier. At any rate, I was talking to people over there, and he’s still got quite a lot of support. I’d say more than half of them are more angry with Professor Dumbledore for fighting Grindelwald at all, rather than dragging his feet—you don’t have to look at me like that, I didn’t ask you to be angry with him, but really they all are.”

“They ought to be thanking him!” Hagrid scowled.
“Yes, well, they don’t,” Severus shrugged. “You can think what you like about it. It’s their country.”

“True enough,” Hagrid allowed, still looking scowly.

“In any case, there’d be a furor if he weren’t treated well,” Severus said, looking in subdued horror around the little room. There wasn’t much ‘around’ to look. “As opposed to the Führer there’d be if they’d treated him as well as they wanted to. And everyone’s very definite about how we’re barbarians for having dementors, which they absolutely do not have—”

His quoting tone was interrupted by Hagrid’s shudder. “Now, don’t let’s be talking about them,” he said in very definite tone. “This lot won’t look so bad in the morning—”

“This lot? What lot?”

“—Once you’ve got your things set up. Let’s just ask an elf for that tea, and—”

“Certainly not!” Severus drew himself up, insulted. “Host you here? I’d be ashamed. You wouldn’t even fit. I’ll bring some decent tea to your hut tomorrow. Or whenever Slughorn lets me out of his… foot skirt.”

“Er… no offense, but I don’t think he means to have you tailoring his robes,” Hagrid tried, mystified.

Severus rolled his eyes. “It’s the part of a slug that… never mind,” he gave up crankily, and made a shoo gesture he’d probably be embarrassed about once he’d had more sleep, although he couldn’t be fussed at the moment. “Go somewhere you can stand up properly, you’re making my back hurt looking at you.”

“Ta,” Hagrid agreed, grinning at Severus, and turned to leave.

There was something in that big face that Severus didn’t understand. He wrestled with himself, then called, “Hagrid?”

“All right, Snape?” Hagrid turned back, looking concerned.

Cursing himself for his hesitancy, Severus asked, “You don’t… mind, do you?”

“Eh?”

“That is… it must be, for you and Filch… my being here, I know it’s… odd. Fish nor fowl, as they say.”

Hagrid looked at him in the dim corridor, then came back and patted him on the shoulder, so carefully it even felt gentle. “Don’t you fret, our Severus,” he charged him. “You’ll be who you’ll be. And what, come to that. I expect you think you’re fair growed… well, never mind. It don’t hurt me none, having you here, or ol’ grouchy-guts, either. Don’t you mind him, he will talk. Or any of those fine folks back there, come to that. You just do what you’re here for. Professor Dumbledore can tell a bowtruckle from a boggart, don’t you worry.”

While Severus was still trying to make sense of that, Hagrid winked, “I expect he can tell that there sparrowgrass from spattergroit, too,” and left him.

“That’s asparagus, you—!” Severus yelled at his back on pure reflex and, shaking his head, gave up. It had been a long day, and Hagrid didn’t currently deserve to be called a lump anyway.
Much.

He sighed. It must be nice, to be able to trust someone unequivocally like that. Or to feel able, rather, whether you really could or not. Especially someone with power over you. Back in Nelson, the religious muggles had always had an air of smug comfort about them.

On the other hand, _being_ trusted like that was probably bad for Dumbledore’s moral character.

On the third hand (or, alternately, the first foot), he did seem to have a reasonably quarrelsome staff to corral on a regular basis, which probably went some way towards mitigating the damage. Severus could certainly join in on helping him there. There was probably no helping it even if Severus actively tried not to, if he was honest with himself.

Dumbledore seemed, however, to actively enjoy a level of professionalism that would have made Damocles Belby put his fists on his hips and start bellowing about how he expected his ducks to behave themselves and be a credit to him and anyone who insisted on acting like a Hogwarts firstie could spend the rest of the week playing tea-boy for the whole floor. Which Dumbledore could probably better afford to than could Belby, given the his office’s lack of highly volatile potions made primarily out of one of the nastiest contact poisons that ever pretended to be a pretty, pretty flower. So Severus probably didn’t have to actually grind his teeth flat trying to behave unexceptionally, as he’d tried (and, usually, failed) as a student.

Of course, Hagrid was wrong. Severus being here certainly hurt one person: Slughorn, who would have to spend a year wondering if he was really saying goodbye to his job or not.

And it might hurt everyone in the end. It was all well and good to say ‘the evil of having a fox among the hens is mitigated by that fox being known and being me,’ but how long would that last? If Dumbledore got a bit too clever, or if the Dark Lord demanded something of him whose harm he didn’t recognize, or couldn’t counter subtly…

No use in standing in the shadows of distant torches fretting over the unforeseeable, though.

The room was a student dorm in small. A wardrobe instead of a trunk, a writing desk and wooden chair, a bed with ugly canopies that would, if nothing else, preserve some warmth in this chilly stone room. At least there was shelving, but nowhere to sit and read comfortably, certainly nowhere to entertain. This was supposed to be all right for students, because they had their common rooms.

He hadn’t expected to entertain, exactly, and it made sense to him that the school might take measures to prevent such a very recent alumnus as himself from inviting any students into his room, even to discuss strictly academic matters. There were indeed such things as common rooms, and Slughorn’s office if privacy from students was needed.

Still, it rankled. There was an insult there. Too, he’d become spoiled, got used to having his own space. He could have invited Hagrid to tea at Dye Urn Alley, had invited both Slughorn and Flitwick. It felt like a constriction, and a collar.

It didn’t feel like anything Dumbledore would have thought of. Slughorn didn’t punish, although he did allow the punishments of others to stand when he was angry with you, or simply not especially impressed.

So Severus was inclined to blame the Deputy Headmistress. It might not be personal; she’d always been one of the stricter professors, when it occurred to her that a situation called for oversight. It was an insult, it was a cage, but he wouldn’t call it wrong until he knew if it had been ordered with
Wearily, reluctantly, he stepped over the lintel and unshrunk his book bag. Filling the shelves was but the work of a wand-wave, and that was his unpacking done. Maybe it would reassure the others if he put things on the walls, like the illuminated herbals and extracts from the Yellow Emperor’s book he’d had up at St. Mungo’s. He didn’t have his scrolls here, though.

There was an en-suite, at least, and it wasn’t the soulless stall he’d half-expected even though this was Hogwarts. It had a sunken, padded, medieval bath rather than a shower, or even an old clawfoot with pipes. Severus supposed this sort of thing was conceivable when you had servants to maintain it, which of course Hogwarts did, and magic to summon and banish hot water, which of course Severus did.

An argument could even be made that this was a kind gesture: it wouldn’t get cold like a tub, no one could possibly expect him to clean it manually himself, and rotting padding wasn’t a concern, with elves about. The bath wasn’t nearly long enough for stretching out, but he might have to revise his initial conclusion that he hadn’t been provided with anywhere comfortable to sit and read.

There weren’t any pipes anywhere, and that made his skin tighten. He’d got used to pipes, Severus realized, got soft. While he hadn’t grown up with indoor plumbing, the students dorms had it. When he’d graduated, his roommate had presented him very firmly with a choice between acceding to an expensive flat with modern amenities and acceding to a house elf underfoot all the time, bullying them and telling tales to Callisto Rosier.

It had not, in Severus’s opinion, been much of a choice: he’d taken the hit to his pride and swallowed his last tattered shreds of class loyalty. He’d given in so completely as to let Evan buy furniture that turned velvet in winter and suede in summer, paint the bedroom ceiling with birds, and do any other fool thing he liked with his own money.

Evan hadn’t gone half as mad as Severus, after a summer in the Malfoy home, had feared. The lines were clean, the colors calm. Apart from a few gifts from Narcissa-and-appendage, Reggie, and Evan’s parents, they had no decorations Ev hadn’t made himself.

He had, however, put in a bathroom that was, in Severus’s opinion, even more ridiculously self-indulgent than the sofa. Which was saying something. The bathroom probably wasn’t more indulgent than the rug in front of the fire, but it had been quite far up there on Severus’s list of How Is This Possibly My Life.

Now he was appalled at himself: it was one thing to be ambitious and want trappings to communicate success, competence, and status to people whose respect would enable one to get things done, but quite another to quail and whinge at a lack of quite unnecessary comforts—say it properly: luxuries—that one hadn’t even grown up with.

This wasn’t going to be like Spinner’s End. He wouldn’t have to go out and pump in all sorts of weather to fill the ewer and basin, or find a well, or purify water from the lake. The necessary (as Da would have called it) looked medieval, but a moment’s examination of its carvings was encouraging and not smelly. When Severus dropped a button in, the button disappeared with a little glimmer of magic, in mid-air. And there was one of the castle’s familiar and everlasting loo rolls tucked into a hollow in the wall, so disgusting improvisation or humiliating conversations with elves would not, it seemed be required.

A hypothesis was beginning to form: that putting him here hadn’t been, per se, an idea McGonagall had had. Maybe it had just been so long since the school had housed any research fellows that no
one had ever bothered to include the rooms intended for them in modernizations that dorm rooms, classrooms, and presumably teacher’s rooms had been given.

The Tartan had always seemed very busy. Very likely, being confronted with an extra task, she had noted that the castle had contingencies for it and given the matter no more thought. As was usual with her, while not as responsible as Severus might have wished, this seemed within the realms of reasonable.

He seemed to have been expected to bring his own candlesticks, and he hadn’t. An elf obliged. She was ecstatic to be asked for tea, but disappeared with an alarmed squeak when Severus thanked her and asked her name.

He sighed, and settled down with Slughorn’s notes on the returning Slytherins. It was looking like a long and dreary evening.

Until the vanishing cabinet opened from the inside.

For a moment he could only stare at Evan, who did not look significantly altered, and wonder what was wrong with himself. There was a reason he had no luggage, no clothes to put away, how could he have forgotten?! 

But, he remembered slowly, he’d intended not to think about it. Hadn’t wanted give off any signals that said he was anything more than they expected. Unprofessional. Indiscreet.

Evan was talking to him, and he was giving back answers that probably more or less made sense, but the air was beginning to smell right, and there was a warm, unyielding hand holding fast in a circle around his wrist, and his head was a solid, thundering pulse of home, home, home.

Which was absurd. They weren’t going home, they were going to Evan’s horrible, sterile little hotel room of a nursery in Rosier Hall. Which would still be better than this.

Of course he let Evan pull him through the wardrobe. He would have let Evan pull him through Mordor.

(Going willingly didn’t mean going gracefully.)

But then they were home. Their home, their flat, their books and cool walls, their airy curtains and sky-paintings, their beckoning sofa and fireplace and the hall to their bedroom, their familiar lock on the door that had always led into a hall they shared with Hufflepuff neighbors. It didn’t now, because Severus could see Evan’s family’s mile-wide rose garden out the window instead of the unprivate noise of London.

Severus had, over the years, had to scathingly shoot down several accusations that he considered himself to be a genius. He wasn’t one (although he would, in trusted company, cop to being a polymath, as that was term wizards never understood), but he didn’t have to be. The situation was perfectly clear: Evan’s name was spelled wrong. It needed its vowels switched, and it needed to start with an H. The second E was optional.

It wasn’t that he hadn’t realized this years ago, but now that they’d been through that ritual in the caves, admitting it was probably mandatory rather than unforgivably soppy.

Very well: if admitting it was mandatory then Severus would do so, but he still wasn’t doing it out loud. Ev had far too much hair; if his head got any bigger he wouldn’t be able to wear hats at all and he’d overbalance when he walked.
“…Why can’t I wear hats?” Evan asked, bemused, steering him down the hall.

“I imagine they’d be uncomfortable in bed,” Severus said calmly, “and if I just said that out loud, we must repair to bed without delay.”

“That I can’t wear hats,” Evan asked, his eyes crinkling up in the way that was someday going to make permanent crows-feet Severus was really looking forward to, “or that they’d be uncomfortable in bed?”

Severus met the dancing, crinkled-up sea-green in a grim, desperate stare, and bit off, “Either.”

Evan lasted about three seconds before the laughter fountained out. Severus sulked all the way to bed, but he wasn’t fooling anybody and somehow he couldn’t even mind.

Chapter End Notes

next: Horace tries to have breakfast.
September 1, Hogwarts' Great Hall

Chapter Summary

In which Horace intends to indulge in his yearly ritual of a pleasant breakfast on the last morning of lovely, lovely peace before the students arrive.

...Oh, Horace.

Dear Asphodel,

My wife is a bit uptight (her family takes being a pureblood dreadfully seriously). How can I persuade her that this is 1980 and the arc of history bends towards free love?

Love Child

Dear Love Child,

Since you’re calling her your wife, it might be a bit late for that if you didn’t work that out first. Once you’ve made a promise, it’s be there or be square! Best stop arguing and invest in costumes and daydream charms before her parents hex you into the hearthrug—or she gets there first!

Best wishes,

Asphodel

Lily— what on earth does ‘be there etc.’ mean? —Rita

Rita— More or less ‘if you don’t you’re not worth knowing.’ It’s something someone calling himself ‘love child’ would understand. —Lily

Lily— I’m not sure how Barney will feel about using Muggle slang, at least until you’re established. One thing for the letter-writers to do it, the Prophet doesn’t back them. You can’t be all things to all people all at once; you’ve got to win over the bills-payers before appealing to the masses. I’ll make your point, but you might prepare a backup. —Rita

It didn’t take the serene Rowena to work out that Albus had set young Severus up with one of the sets of vanishing cabinets. The lad simply didn’t look like someone who’d spent the night in one of those cozy little closets for visiting scholars that hadn’t seen any use in... well, not while Dippet had been headmaster, certainly. It might have been either Phineas Black’s temperament or Brutus Scrimgeour’s disinterest in real scholarship that had pinched off the flow of visitors, or perhaps it had been the more usual case of a Triwizard tragedy leaving no one in any mood for any student exchanges.

In any case, as charming as the visitors rooms could be once properly outfitted and aired, no elf would replace a room’s ready-stocked furniture without being guided in its occupant’s taste. Guests were one thing, but they never presumed for new staff. The bed would have been sitting in a closed room for decades, if not centuries. Even the elves’ preservative magic could only do so much when not renewed on a regular basis, as Horace had found out when, as a young teacher, enjoying the freedom of the castle, he’d gone poking about in search of abandoned trifles.
Even they couldn’t air completely air out a room like that on short notice, and all the little resident-visitor’s cells had smelled strongly of must and stale stone. Severus didn’t look in the least like someone who’d breathed fusty bed-canopy all night and been woken by a strange and timidly enthusiastic elf shaking with anxiety from not knowing whether Severus wanted an alarm clock or tea or the curtains drawn. The boy would have stormed in to breakfast in a cloud of twanging nerves and clogged sinuses, whereas in fact he looked quite refreshed.

Horace was a touch surprised about that. He’d been told in no uncertain terms that the cabinets were only for married faculty, back when he first started. Dippet had used the term ‘family obligations,’ to be exact. He’d said that he’d reconsider the matter if and when Horace’s parents needed looking after, but Horace was not to run home every evening just because he preferred his childhood bedroom.

To do Dippet justice, when Mother and Father had got old enough that one couldn’t entirely look after the other, he hadn’t even waited for Horace to ask him. The wardrobe had just shown up, with a kind note and a basket of comforts. By then, of course, Hogwarts had been home and really living anywhere else would have been out of the question, so one might say it had been a calculated and cost-free gesture on the old man’s part. But you could say this about Dippet: he may have spent more time in worry than in getting things done, but when he did a thing, he did it graciously.

There were worse legacies, to be sure.

Horace thought that headmasters and gamekeepers had a lot in common, sometimes. Hagrid took very fine care of the castle’s chickens and cows and goats and fed the fish and Squid most dutifully, and was scrupulous in looking after all of dear Minerva’s demonstration animals, but you could see he didn’t care a jot or tittle about them. He was only interested in Kettleburn’s ‘interesting’ creatures.

Similarly, Albus was perfectly polite and helpful and patient with, oh, everyone. But you could see he didn’t really have patience even for the brightest, highest fliers, if they were normal, everyday, reasonable wizards. Like dear old Abraxas, or, latterly, Amelia Bones, or Sara Fudge, or Hippocrates Smethwyck, who was going by Hippocrates now he’d got his Mastery. Or even Millie Bagnold, for Merlin’s sake, and she was Minister for Magic now. Albus would certainly have kind words for any of them, and would give advice if asked, although it might be a trifle barbed in the unlikely event of Abraxas doing the asking; that owl had well and truly flown.

It was the grotesques that caught his fancy, and only the male ones. He could be very pleased by the most shining of the girls, but never tried to talk to any until they were old enough to be sharp with him, as if young ladies were fantastic creatures who might be observed and certainly had personalities, but did not have a real language that a man might understand.

You did get that sometimes in the wizards that became of boys who hadn’t chased after witches, especially boys whose dearest friends had all sported dust-jackets and gilt-edged right angles. Horace rolled his eyes over it with Kettleburn, but it didn’t surprise him. The thing he never could understand was that Albus didn’t care much for the boys who behaved themselves, and wouldn’t try to.

He was often pleased enough to appoint ordinary children as prefects, or Head Boy and Girl, but he didn’t make himself available or put himself out. When Miriam Strout had been Head Girl, Horace wasn’t sure Albus would have recognized her in the corridors, and he’d certainly never taken to poor Tom Riddle. He’d given every mention of Regulus Black only his polite smile—and you couldn’t hope to find a harder-working young lad who’d never need to work, or anyone more anxious to please who ought to have had everyone falling all over themselves for his favor—but
he’d gone easy on the boy’s scapegrace brother time and time again.

Not that Horace blamed him for that. Sirius Black had *it*, that indefinable quality. Flair. *Je ne sais quoi*, as they said across the water. Charm, looks, talent, confidence, style, and *it*. Some people grew into it; young Sirius had had it from the start.

But Horace didn’t think for a moment that Albus liked the lad because he was likeable, or gave him second chances because Albus saw what Horace did. In Horace’s opinion, Albus saw a boy from a family that flaunted its conservative views and love of the darkest arts shout *I WILL BE A WHITE KNIGHT, HOWEVER INCOMPETENT I AM DOOMED TO BE AT IT ON ACCOUNT OF BEING BORN FOR OTHER THINGS AND ALSO MAD AS A LOON*, and a little piece of Albus’s brain had sat up in fascination and said, *Go on, then, tell me a story.*

He’d also been keenly interested in the werewolf boy, until the child had crumbled like a biscuit in tea at the first hint of peer pressure, and thereby proved keenly uninteresting. He hadn’t been at all interested in that year’s Ravenclaw prefect, who was doing very well for a young lad these days and had invited Horace to meet the baby. He hadn’t been interested in the Slytherin toughs, either, which had been something of a relief considering that he *had* rather liked James Potter.

But then, Horace supposed, it was one thing for a boy who believed himself a White Hat to decide, out of sheer sexual jealousy, that another boy was an inhuman monster to be destroyed without the faintest sense of anything wrong about it. A boy who thought he was a crusader against the unmagical and go about attacking muggleborns was a quite different bushel of knotgrass. Which was to say: a tidier one. Everything followed logically there. The premise might be regrettable, but it wasn’t *distorted*. It didn’t promise Albus any story to follow, or any way to insert himself into it and *Make Things Better For Everyone*.

So it really oughtn’t to surprise anyone that Albus would bend over backwards to break whatever rules he decided to for Severus Snape. There would be a reason in there somewhere, and considering what Severus hadn’t-exactly-confessed to in that serene flat, it would probably be far more *Political* than Horace wanted to know about.

Reasons were, ultimately, excuses that passed muster. In Horace’s opinion, it boiled down to Albus’s complete inability to look away from colliding broomsticks. The bigger the collision, the more Albus wanted it to happen on his particular pitch.

He’d thought for a while that Evan Rosier might be like that. No one had ever noticed young Rosier missing a game, and he’d… if he hadn’t shouted and waved his arms about like everyone else, he also wasn’t someone you’d expect to. He’d been quite enthusiastic, in his drowsy sort of way, and helped with the face painting when he wasn’t flying. He’d also always brought a sketchbook, and once he’d become captain he’d driven his team to the air on every single post-game evening. Every game, whichever teams had played.

The Slytherins whose favorite school subject was gossip said he was rescuing the antisocial from victory parties, and the ones who saw cunning wherever they looked said he was making sure that his team was comprised only of those who took Quidditch *seriously*.

The young captain himself had been content to let them think what they liked, but Horace had noticed, during those three years, that innovative new maneuvers (and, indeed, dusty old ones that had fallen out of common use) only worked on the Slytherin team if tried on them first.

Albus attended only occasionally, and usually when he’d been made aware that tensions were especially high. He wore neutral colors (which was to say: never in any House’s particular color
combinations; neutral really wasn’t the word) and cheered with happy, indiscriminate enthusiasm for every goal and every feat of youthful acrobatics. Horace didn’t think he’d ever played a day in his life. He supported Pride of Portree, and while he could chat about it very well, as required, Horace didn’t think he’d had any particular reason for choosing it beyond Portree’s being only half an hour away from the school on a good broom.

Which was to say that Albus was clearly a Quidditch fan only because it was expected of him, and for the fun of the fouls. Imaginative nastiness that didn’t do permanent damage at Hogwarts didn’t earn detentions half so harsh as did fisticuffs. Of course he’d find good cause to break any rule that occurred to him, if it would keep the frantic, steering clockwork that was young Severus near enough to watch the show.

Make no mistake, though: Horace was happy that those boys would be allowed to go on sharing rooms, even if that meant that a staff member who wasn’t even faculty and might not be staying was getting special privileges.

For one thing, Severus probably didn’t know he was getting special privileges. Horace knew because he wasn’t smirking at anyone, and the poor boy couldn’t half help himself with a face like that.

It really was the only way he knew how to smile, Horace was sure. Since he did, in fact, feel superior to his fellow beings on intellectual grounds quite often, and did like to win, that razor-honed eyebrow saw a lot of exercise. But Horace had never seen him smile with his eyes tucked up and teeth showing, like a normal boy. There had been teeth showing at times, but those smiles had always been of the murderous variety.

On this occasion, however, none was in evidence, of either type. Severus had just slunk into breakfast as if he wished he could sit at the foot of the Slytherin table and ignore Gilderoy and Regulus in favor of his book, as usual, while his own year ignored him farther up.

Horace had lived through the Dungeon-Wide Creeping Pall of the disastrous Lily Evans breakup of ’76, and he did not wish to do so again. Oh, there had been other cyclones at the same time, largely unrelated except for who was at their eye, but Horace didn’t think they’d mattered as much to him. Snape might not have been a tough, but he was a tough lad. Whatever Poppy Pomfrey said, getting shoved about a bit and publicly mocked again would have been more or less another Tuesday for a boy who didn’t care what other people thought, if he hadn’t managed to make the girl he did care about hate him.

That had been a real tragedy, in Horace’s opinion. It was one of the few things he and Flitwick agreed on. Evans and Snape had made as good a team in both their classes as Potter and Black did in Charms and Transfiguration, and almost as good a team in Runes and Arithmancy, too. When they were speaking.

A real tragedy. If those two hadn’t split up, Horace thought Albus might have stirred his skinny arse to bring back an Alchemy class, or Theory of Magic, even if he’d had to teach it himself. Merlin knew the Ravenclaws had been clamouring for one for decades.

Dippet hadn’t been interested, and Albus tended to smile infuriatingly and burble about collecting dew with full hands in the fields of heaven, or some such rot. Horace had, after reluctantly asking Flitwick what the hell he was quoting, gathered this to mean that he wasn’t going to bother teaching Alchemy to anyone who wasn’t enough of a visionary and passionate enough about it to pick him up by the front of his robes and scream the demand in his face.

Snape on his own was a meticulous sort; he knew how much about Potions he still didn’t know,
knew how much room for growth and research there still was in the field, and his experiments were careful. He wouldn’t scruple to shout at anyone, but he didn’t have the sheer arrogance it took to try to be a potions master and a charmsmith and an alchemist all at once just because he could.

Whereas Lily Evans was far too charming a young lady to shout at her Headmaster, but she would have made Severus do it for her if it might win them the chance to play around with alchemy together. And for her, he would have made the effort even if he did think it was silly and airy-fairy.

A real tragedy.

And they both had it, too, although Snape hadn’t had it from the beginning and half the time seemed to wish he still didn’t. Horace had never bothered to find out whether any actual weather magic was involved, but some people could affect the barometer for up to a hundred feet around themselves simply by being in a good mood, or a bad one. They rarely noticed, in his experience. The ones who did, like Albus, used it very, very effectively.

Yes, he was quite pleased that no one had tried to wrestle Snape away from the chap he was currently attached to. No one wanted the walls in the dungeon sweating miserable grey stone dust while Snape drifted listlessly about, biting off the occasional head completely at random. Again.

Besides, Severus was thoroughly incompetent at everything at which the Head of Slytherin had to be excellent. Albus was completely off his rocker, although Salazar knew that wasn’t news.

The only two saving graces to the situation were that it might well only last a term or a year, after which Hogwarts would resume as usual with Horace in his usual position, and that Severus could apparently go home and talk out all his problems and inevitable social explosions with Evan Rosier. Who could, at least, tell him what he’d done wrong sometimes, so Horace wouldn’t have to be the one every time.

“—Going to eat that or poke at it, Horace?”

Horace blinked. “I do beg your pardon, my dear Mona,” he apologized, and looked down to see what he had, apparently, been mutilating.

It was a pile of fried tomatoes, and the word ‘mutilated’ was distressingly apt.

“Can’t abide airs and graces at breakfast,” Pomona reminded him baldly, and descended into her seat with an air of *phwumph*, if not the actual sound. “What’s eating you? The locusts descend tonight, you know. I should rest up while I could, if I had your lot to look after. I thought you did, usually.”

“Ah, well, it’s not a usual start of term for me, you know,” he confided, glancing down at where his new ‘assistant’ was arguing with Poppy Pomfrey about whether a) one apple and a cup of coffee could be considered breakfast (and if not, whether the deficiency could be made up with a hard-boiled egg) or b) it was mean and ungrateful behavior to turn down the muesli and bacon and sausages and fried slices that the nice elves had worked so hard to offer. And also whether the ‘nice elves’ had any right to decide whether or not a ‘grown wizard’ needed feeding-up.

Severus seemed to think the ‘nice elves’ were all overbearing, tyrannical busybodies, as a matter of species prejudice. By which Horace understood that he had met one house elf once as a young child and failed to be crueler to it than were its masters.

Horace noted with pleasure that Severus had the sense not to tell Poppy that she had no right to decide he needed feeding-up. He hadn’t been out of her care nearly long enough to hope to get
away with that, not with all the time he’d spent under her eagle eye. Not with cheekbones and a jaw you could have dissected a kipper with and wrists as knobby as gobstones. Horace was frankly surprised he didn’t try it anyway.

“Well, I won’t say he was a sensible boy,” Pomona judged, heaping her porridge with gooseberries and crumbling some bacon slices over it (Horace tried not to look). “And in your place I think I should have boxed his ears for him last night. Worked bloody hard in my class, though; I daresay you could do worse.”

Horace frowned. “I don’t recall being impressed with his Herbology marks,” he said delicately. By which he meant that if any student had reliably earned only Acceptables in his class, and hardly ever earned anything as low as Exceeds Expectations in anything else, he would have taken it as a mark of disinterest, if not disrespect.

“Oh, well, same problem Minerva had with him,” Pomona shrugged. “Difficulty with the practicals, just doesn’t have the touch. Made up for it in the written work well enough to pass, though. Which took some doing, I don’t mind telling you. Rummiest thing I’ve ever seen. I tell you what, Horace Slughorn, if you send that lad anywhere near my greenhouses, I’ll have you in detention, don’t think I won’t.”

It wasn’t pleasant to have Pomona Sprout glaring at you with a beady expression she probably considered to be shrewd, so he merely said, “Perish the thought, m’dear.” He resigned himself to gathering his domesticated fresh ingredients as usual, and wondered whether he had any appetite for his tomatoes at all.

“What’s he trying to get out of now?” Minerva asked Pomona, sitting down next to her with rather more grace.

“Nothing yet,” Pomona assured her cheerfully, and passed the eggs.

Which were scrambled, not hard-boiled at all. Horace didn’t know whether to hope that this meant young Severus wasn’t entirely awake yet. On the one hand, that would be cheeringly normal of him. On the other, Horace wouldn’t be able to pass off the responsibility for keeping an eye on the House at breakfast for heaven knew how long.

“Minerva, m’dear,” Horace said hastily, smiling charmingly under her gimlet eye, “you look lovely as ever, but rather tired. Do have some tea.”

As he’d hoped, she only glowered at him suspiciously for another moment, before accepting the tea and launching into the traditional rant about the patrol schedule.

Albus interrupted it, probably because he’d foolishly joined forces with Poppy in praise of hearty breakfasts and caused Flitwick to start lecturing him about complex sugars and how to avoid needing a nap every day after lunch and why ‘jammy sylvan dolichocephalic ectomorphs should not take their jumped-up metabolisms for granted.’

Horace didn’t begin to understand this turn of phrase, but it made Albus turn up his twisty nose and Severus choke on his coffee.

In very understandable haste to avoid being lectured about fibre at breakfast and, perhaps, to get back at Severus for coming so close to laughing, Albus suggested, “Severus, perhaps you could be of some assistance to our good Professor McGonagall?”

Severus blinked at him and then at Minerva, and then helpfully passed her the fruit bowl.
“Thank you,” she said graciously, and took a bunch of grapes. “What do you mean, Albus?”

“Why, Minerva, that our young Master Snape here has only lately come from running a laboratory, and so he must—”

Severus was giving Albus a funny look, and followed it up by interrupting him. “Excuse me, sir, but I don’t know what you mean by ‘running.’ It was Master Belby’s lab.”

“I think he means, Severus,” Horace put in comfortably, “that my good friend Damocles has so very many projects, and surely, as his senior apprentice, you were effectively responsible for the administration of your laboratory.”

Severus blinked at him. Tragically, Horace didn’t even think it was fake confusion because he’d worked out he didn’t want to be anywhere near Minerva’s schedules. “Er… no, Professor, as senior apprentice I was ‘effectively responsible’ for the stillroom. Ranjit Patil took over most of the paperwork over a year ago.”

Horace blinked back. “How unusual,” he said, only a touch blandly.

Severus raised an eyebrow at him—rather defiantly, Horace felt, although what he thought Severus was in fact trying to communicate was the drawling sort of sardonic expression that had made the Malfoy boy the bane of his fellow prefects. “He seemed to prefer that arrangement to the alternatives.”

And he might not have weeded all the defensiveness out of his face muscles, but his slightly amused, matter-of-fact tone was perfectly chilling, and the cool glint in those colorless eyes sent goosebumps down Horace’s back. Refusing to show it, Horace said affably, “An admirable attitude in an apprentice.”

“Serving as most needed?” Severus asked, tilting his head thoughtfully, his eyebrow sliding up another notch. “Valuing the real requirements of the situation over a job description? In anyone, I should think. But so few wizards are able to see sense when presented with the opportunity to serve the common good in a way they personally dislike.”

Horace felt himself go an angry red, and if they hadn’t been at the breakfast table he might well have informed the young snot that he had bloody well tried to offer his resignation, and then where would Severus have been with no guidance and no experience, and what was Severus’s definition of the common good anyway, because in Horace’s opinion intimidation and the creative killing of helpless animals just to make a point was unlikely to lead to any common good that Horace recognized!

Fortunately, Pomona got in first with a puzzled, “What alternatives?”

“Oh,” Severus said, turning to her with a rueful twist to his mouth, “he said he’d rather deal with the paperwork than with the filthy temper the suppliers and the equipment schedule put me in—which was probably true. And that I wasn’t as good at those sorts of logistics as he was, which was certainly true. And then it turned out the potion we were working on required some spellwork that was a bit beyond him. Master Belby asked if he’d rather be moved to a different lab, but he said that even if all the brewing he got to do was ingredients preparation it would be excellent experience towards running his own brewery one day.”

Horace let him talk—perfectly naturally, as harmless as any other young swot—and felt the cold sweat evaporate on his temples as the atmosphere returned to that of a pleasant collegial breakfast table. After Severus’s abominable failure to behave like a new and very junior addition to the staff
last night, Horace hadn’t expected anything like this under-the-table tail-rattling.

He was proud and heartened by it, of course, not least because he didn’t think anyone but Albus had noticed, but ye gods. Horace couldn’t think when anyone had got to him so badly, since the war. Even when Severus had unnerved him before, he hadn’t struck under Horace’s skin and pricked his temper.

“Didn’t you want that experience?” Pomona asked, frowning at Severus as though she’d thought for a moment she understood him and was baffled again now.

“Patil has hopes of running a commercial lab one day,” Severus explained, and continued to explain for at least a minute and half. At the end of it, he’d avoided sounding like an overbearing petty tyrant and reasonably-subtly suggested to Minerva that anyone who gave him paperwork to do would get it back meticulously filled out in ways they would not like, and also, as a matter of compulsion against which Severus was helpless, completely rewritten with margins full of snide commentary.

“And speaking of demarcation of duties, have you finished eating, m’boy?” Horace broke in again cheerfully, because he’d quite lost his appetite and a bony drakelet a quarter his age could not be allowed to think he’d won. He would have been proud, if he wasn’t still feeling so rattled.

“Quite, sir,” Severus said, making Poppy scowl forebodingly. As he rose, only his limply unpleasant hair and rawboned vulture of a face stopped him looking perfectly good-natured, in an uninspired sort of way.

You’re imagining things, old boy, Horace told himself. You’ll be sleeping with nightlights next. You know perfectly well the boy’s mouth goes running off without him when he’s cornered; it doesn’t mean he follows after it.

The hair at the back of his neck, facing his old student, his new teaching apprentice, factotum, and protégé, was not convinced.
September 1, Horace Slughorn's Office

Chapter Summary

After which Horace should have realized this is EXACTLY how his whole year is going to go, IF HE'S LUCKY, and started brewing the gallons and gallons of headache and ulcer potions at once.

“No, then,” Horace asked, settling himself comfortably into his favorite armchair—the aubergine, not the bottle-green one he was obliged to keep to make his more House-proud students comfortable. “You said last night you meant to go over the student files; how—what is it, m’boy? You look puzzled.”

“I know you had a desk,” Severus declared, looking around Horace’s office in confusion. “I remember staring at it for hours while you lectured me about what Sirius Black did to the ceiling when we both attended your club. Wasn’t it black walnut?”

“Oh, yes, I’ve got it in here,” Horace agreed airily, patting the little drawer in the side-table. “But I don’t think we shall need it today, do you?”

“I’ve no idea,” Severus said, looking at him as if he’d grown a third eye and lowering himself into a corner of the silvered-charcoal sofa instead of the green chair.

Horace was surprised about that, but he approved. The sofa was immeasurably the more comfortable of the two, and it made Severus’s dull clothes stand out like a still pool on a grey day. The chair would have turned them to mud.

Horace wondered whether to send his congratulations to the Rosier boy or the delightful young Malfoy bride, but made no mention of it. It was possible, and even probable, that Severus simply found armchairs confining and hadn’t thought about how to use the colors to best effect at all. “Well, no matter, no matter. I was asking you how far you’d got.”

“Never started,” Severus admitted, the truculent tilt to his jaw screaming out a refusal to be embarrassed or make excuses.

“Well, I am surprised.” Horace said gently—he was, in fact, but that wasn’t the point. “I didn’t require it of you, of course, but you sounded so determined to make a start.”

“I was,” Severus agreed ruefully. “But to be perfectly honest, Professor, I barely made it to my rooms before falling asleep. I have some recollection of opening the file and looking at words, but I don’t believe that a completed process of reading happened.”

Horace paused, though he knew he’d regret it. “A completed process?” he had to ask.

“Steps in reading,” Severus explained, looking embarrassed, “including exposing words to view, viewing them, comprehending them, and, ideally, placing them into a larger context and fastening them into memory. I’m not entirely sure whether steps three or four happened, but step five most certainly did not.”

After a moment, Horace’s quizzical look forced him to explain, “Yesterday was a very long one.”
When Horace just kept looking, he elaborated, “They kept us at Customs for hours because the Ministry was aware that vampires were on my itinerary, and then... I don’t think I can describe it properly, but coming back into Britain was like... like walking in sleet without a wand or umbrella for hours and the moment you’re back indoors in the warm and suddenly you realize how cold you’d been telling yourself you weren’t, and how much it took out of you.” Which was the damnedest way of describing homesickness Horace had ever heard of. “And then that meeting…”

He didn’t quite shudder, but Horace almost did. “The less said about that the better, I think, m’lad,” he agreed, not unsympathetically.

“And,” Severus complained, taking him at his word, “our guide kicked up the most confounded fuss when we left.”

“Oh? Why was that?” If someone he was responsible for had managed to create an actual international incident, best he knew at once.

“Damned if I know,” Severus said, looking genuinely lost. He didn’t apologize to his Head of House for his language, which told Horace something—although he wouldn’t, of course, be too quick off the mark to decide what. “He had some kind of a tantrum at Rosier—called him all sorts of names and said he’d heard about the British Museum and it was just like a heartless English pig-dog to hog everything good that really meant things to other people, and he didn’t stop until his mum showed up and threatened to take all the skin off his back. And Ev—Rosier couldn’t stop laughing long enough to help me at Customs, even though they were ten times more likely to listen to him than me, and no one would explain.”

Horace stared at him through pained eyes.

The Rosier-Snape alliance had been one of the best-kept nonsecrets in Slytherin during their last years. Perhaps the best-kept: while little Rabastan Lestrange had been discreet while stepping out with his roommate’s inamorato, his discretion had been purely a matter of politeness. Barty’s boy had openly declared that he was a free agent, had made every effort to be seen publicly with everyone including Lestrange who would be seen with him, and overall had made very few bones about hoping the Lockhart lad would take a hint.

Dear Lucius and Narcissa had been positively secretive by contrast, and only by contrast. They had been perfect examples of decorum and certainly never been caught up the astronomy tower, but largely because they’d been four years apart. As far as anyone knew, they very properly hadn’t started seeing each other until Lucius had been out of school several years. He’d squired her about Hogsmeade quite openly.

Rosier and Snape had also, apparently, never once been so much as caught snogging as students. Which was fascinating, since the elves informed Horace they’d tied their bloody beds together three years running and Rosier was reputed to believe he hadn’t studied properly unless he’d left chin-marks on Snape’s shoulder.

The shoulder-studying had struck Horace as overly demonstrative for a lad of Rosier’s background, but he’d quite approved of their joining their beds. There was always the potential for spurts of passive-aggressive spitefulness to flare up in Slytherin dormitories, but when you had personalities like Snape and Mulciber caught up in one room the situation could easily become chronic. And when one of those personalities had a mountain of muscle who was pleased to take orders and the other had fast reflexes, an excellent and sullen memory fueled by far too many books, and a viciously overpowered wand arm with no compunctions about dropping said wand in favor of gouging out eyes...
Horace had started to worry by the middle of the boys’ first year that the situation could turn truly dangerous. He hadn’t thought it outside the realms of possibility that, by the time they were all ready to graduate, it might have turned deadly. Albus had been so bloody certain that he was overreacting, but by the time Horace had nearly decided he was going to have to (shudder) Do Something, Narcissa Black did it instead. And suddenly Snape had a friend in the room where he slept.

In a situation like that, Horace didn’t care what they got up to. As long as he didn’t have to tell Snape’s parents that a classmate had killed the boy in his sleep, and didn’t have to tell Rosier’s parents their heir was caught in Snape and Mulciber’s cross-fire or involved in a pregnancy, he considered that all was well. Or, at least, as well as could be expected. And he’d asked the elves to warn him if the boys ever untied their beds, and they never, ever had.

And yet they’d never sat together at meals, or in classes. They’d spoken coolly and formally to each other in public, and casually in the Common Room, and shouted furiously at each other quite normally at Quidditch practice. Just like any other pair of Slytherin boys. There had been two months when they’d both seemed shaken, and kept close even outside the dungeons, but in seven years that was all they’d showed the other Houses.

In view of this odd restraint, Horace refrained from asking whether Severus thought it at all possible that he’d made a little conquest on the Continent, and just sympathized, “How very vexing,” while pushing his box of crystalized ginger across the table.

“I felt sorry for his mother, primarily,” Severus said candidly, pretending not to notice the ginger. “It’s my understanding that she’s a very well-respected war hero, but everyone seemed to think it quite normal for her to have to run after her son and stop him making an unprompted spectacle of himself.”

Horace’s hand stopped halfway to the pineapple. “And which side was she on in the war?” he asked.

Severus gave him the you-have-three-eyes look again. “Er… on the side of not too many people in her city being killed, outraged, or thrown into prison, Professor.”

“I should keep up that acquaintance, if I were you,” Horace advised him, continuing his reach for the pineapple.

“She is a quite remarkable and experienced witch,” Severus conceded warily, and then added as if someone had kicked him, “and of course I appreciate that she is doubtless well-connected.”

“Doubtless, doubtless,” Horace echoed placidly, popping a crisp and chewy piece of fruit into his mouth. “But I meant with the son, Severus. It’s occurred to me since last night that you could do with some instruction in the fine old art of letting yourself be underestimated.”

Severus shot him an annoyed look, but didn’t bother to say I thought we weren’t talking about last night out loud. He did say, “While, after several weeks in his company, I don’t consider that Mr. Karkaroff is quite so clownish a clod as his countrymen seem to think him, I do believe that the light he’s hiding under his bushel is of quite ordinary lumination.”

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Horace wagged a finger at him. “What he is or isn’t relevant, m’lad. The way he presents himself has left him able to safely throw tantrums that would have serious repercussions for other people.”

Severus sat back and blinked. Looking thoughtful, he asked, “Isn’t that on account of his mother?”
“Oh, connections never hurt,” Horace agreed. “But it’s one thing not to have your foibles prosecuted, and another to have them dismissed under the umbrella of ‘oh, that’s just his way.’”

Severus shot him a startled, speculative look.

“Do try the ginger, Severus, I’m sure you’d like it.”

“On no account,” Severus retorted, continuing to eyeball him.

Which was silly but, in context, flattering, so Horace just chuckled. “Now, as to the files—why on earth did you want them so badly?”

This particular stare was of the I have just been asked why the sky is blue and not by a three-year-old variety. “Well,” Severus said slowly, “because I should like to minimize my missteps.”

“But, my dear boy, why do you think that my assessments would help you to, er, minimize your missteps, as you put it? I’ve never had the impression that we thought about people in particularly the same way.” He selected another piece of pineapple, regarded it thoughtfully—a very nice little crust of sugar there, yes, indeed—and chewed it. “To say the least.”

“Perhaps not,” Severus conceded, very carefully indeed. “But the observations of others, taken in an attitude of appropriate crit—that is, those observations are most useful when one is familiar with the observer and their bia—the general trend of their thou—opinions.”

“Severus,” Horace instructed kindly, “repeat after me, will you? ‘I know what we disagree about.’ There’s a lad.”

“But it’s not about agreement,” Severus disagreed earnestly. “Our differences are about valuation, aren’t they?”

Now it was Horace’s turn to look at him blankly. “Do explain the distinction, m’boy.”

“Well, take Regulus Black,” Severus suggested. “I don’t think we disagree about him, fundamentally. He’s on the bright side of normal intelligence, earnest, hardworking, easily flustered, devoted to his family, generous, easily led, wealthy, well-placed, and without any driving ambition except to do well at what’s asked of him by those he cares about. What would you add or disagree with?”

“Well,” Horace said thoughtfully, “I think I would add that he’s a very good-looking lad. Tall, you know, dresses well but not fussily. That’s a great advantage to a young man.”

To Horace’s shock, Severus very nearly smiled. It was an edgeless expression Horace didn’t recall ever seeing on him before. “And that’s just what I mean. You think first about what people’s available tools are. But the overlap between that question and the question of ‘who are they as people,’ which is to say, what are the motivations and what style of behavior may be expected, is very great indeed. It’s often the very same information, viewed from a different angle. For example, rather than ‘he’s good-looking and that’s an advantage,’ I might have said that he’s anxious to look well and look acceptable, and is less conscious than others in his family of the effects of his natural appearance. He’s less likely to use his looks consciously as a weapon, but he’s not so humble about them as to be delusional. He cannot be upset by accusations of ugliness, which he would know to be untrue, as he can by being informed that he is poorly groomed or dressed wrongly for an occasion.”

“I think I do see what you mean,” Horace allowed, thoughtfully taking another pineapple. He wasn’t, at least so far, so vexed by the interview as to treat himself with the best and sweetest; they
could still be saved for last. And it was so important to sort through and make the selection without looking unrefined and making one’s fingers mucky.

Not to mention that certain people needed instruction in patience, or hospitality, or status symbols, or indulgence, or all four together with the addition of manners and quite possibly the biological action of consuming solids. He urged, “Oh, do have some tea, at least.”

“We just came from breakfast,” Severus pointed out helplessly.

“Which you didn’t eat, m’boy,” Horace wagged a finger at him. “I don’t want Poppy Pomfrey coming after me on your account, thank you.”

“Because you already know what that’s like?” Severus inquired with a sardonic flick of his eyebrow. He didn’t even let it sink in, much less give Horace time to respond, before he returned to the other conversation. “In any case, yes, I think it’s a matter of… of translation, more than of agreeing or not. And, of course we do draw different conclusions from evidence we agree on. As it’s your House, it’s important I should know what those conclusions will be.”

“Such as?” Horace asked dutifully.

“Well,” Severus said thoughtfully, “I’m not sure I wouldn’t have made Regulus a prefect, in your place. As I think I remarked at the time, none of the other options were any better. But you selected him almost automatically because of his family, didn’t you, sir?”

“The trouble with meritocracies,” Horace explained, pouring him tea anyway, “is that merit is such a subjective measure. Even when someone’s qualities simply shine for all to see, most people tend to think themselves deserving of opportunities they want, and they will argue and make trouble. It stops things getting done. And, you know, Severus, your own experience will show you that it hardly matters who gets the prestige of a position.”

“But that’s not true at all!” Severus burst out, scowling passionately. “No one would have listened to me for a moment if your authority—the approval and support of the adult-in-charge—hadn’t gone to my allies. The person with ‘the prestige of a position’ also has the power of delegation, and the power to approve or disapprove behavior with the force of the institution behind them. They’ve been deputized. When you appoint a prefect, you’re saying ‘This person speaks for the school, they represent Slytherin, Hogwarts is behind them.’ It makes their decisions and their opinions close enough to official as makes no difference.”

Horace nudged the tea at him pointedly.

“Appointing Regulus was cruelty,” Severus pressed on, ignoring the cup, “but it was also approval of his personality and his moderation, and therefore, given the other options, I’d agree it was necessary cruelty. But you would also have appointed his brother over Rosier, wouldn’t you, if he’d been Slytherin? Just for being a Black. And then you would have been approving his bullying and his so-called sense of humor, as well as his All Dark Magic Is Black Magic opinions. You would have appointed Mulciber if his family had more standing than Rosier’s.”

“My dear Severus,” Horace said, trying not to sound pitying with a boy who exhaled pride with every breath, “there is a difference between approval and acknowledging the inevitable.”

“There’s no such thing as inevitable,” Severus said flatly with burning eyes that weren’t serpentine in the least. “Not if you catch things early enough. You encouraged Bellatrix Lestrange to think—no, I beg your pardon, she already thought it, but you encouraged her belief that she is a special person of whom everyone who matters will always approve. You encouraged Luke Malfoy to
think he can get away with whatever the hell he wants as long as he puts on the right face.”

“But, Severus, she is and he can,” Horace said patiently, taking up his own tea. “She’s a beautiful, forceful, charming, wealthy, self-possessed, and well-connected young lady. He’s a good-looking young man who knows what he wants, knows how to talk to people, and knows how to make money work and speak for him. What use would it be to be the only one denying approval the world will heap on them in haystacks? School is meant to be training for later life, you know.”

Severus gaped at him in outrage.

“But, Severus, she is and he can,” Horace went on, shaking his head sadly. “I’m afraid neither of them, talented boys though they both are, possesses the happy gift of… how shall I put it…”

“Having themselves dismissed under the umbrella of ‘that’s just his way’?” Severus asked dryly.

“Now, Sirius Black and Meredith Mulciber are quite different cases,” Horace went on, reaching over to pat Severus’s hand sympathetically. “They’re both good-looking boys who know what they want, know how to talk to people, and know how to make money work and speak for them. What use would it be to be the only one denying approval the world will heap on them in haystacks? School is meant to be training for later life, you know.”

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“If I don’t think Luke has that,” said Severus, more dryly yet.

“Well, perhaps not to the ultimate degree,” Horace conceded. “But even those who complain of him the most never try to say he isn’t respectable.”

Severus sat back, crossed his arms, and looked very hard at him. It was a considering look, a dissecting one, and far more comfortable to receive than most of the ones Horace had got while trying to teach Potions to the younger Snape.

He still had to reach for another pineapple to break it up.

“I think I see,” Severus said finally. There was judgment in his tone, but it was judgment contained.

Horace didn’t think Severus really wanted a follow-up question, so he had to ask one. “What do you see, m’boy?”

“You’re a Tory,” Severus said, still with that contained-judgment in his voice and that expressionless face, “and you feel that school’s role is to train people to… to accept and to act at the social level they’re destined for.”

“What’s a Tory?” Horace asked.

“Desperately simplified, philosophically a supporter of the old—the gentry.”

“Muggle slang?” he asked shrewdly.

“Political party dating from Charles II,” Severus said, dry again. “It may have qualified as ‘slang’ in the 1660s.”

“Ah,” said Horace, who had dreaded requests to help students with their History revision, back when students still expected him to help them revise. It was so dreadfully dull. “Well, I’m not sure I should put it quite like that, m’boy. Only, there are those who can rise and do well in the world, and those who can successfully plug along in quiet ways, and those who can’t help but make
trouble.”

“There’s different sorts of trouble, though,” Severus pointed out, “some of it constructive. And those who can rise and do well will certainly make trouble for others if they’re not taught…” he thought a moment, and shrugged. “If not taught responsibility, and what it means, and how to take it.”

“To be Head of Slytherin is to be a kingmaker, Severus,” Horace told him gently, “It’s not a simple job, and oughtn’t to be. Complex matters always want discernment and judgment.”

“And you wonder why I wanted your notes?” Severus asked. He was still being dry, but now there was an amused glitter about his eyes.

“Very good, very good,” Horace chuckled appreciation for the flattery, which Severus had made sound perfectly sincere without either overdoing it or trying to pretend that Horace’s argument had changed his mind. He took another pineapple with a better appreciation for its tangy sweetness. “I’m afraid I can’t allow you to spend the morning on them, though. Do you think you can do an inventory of the stores and familiarize yourself with the first week’s syllabus by noon?”

“It depends how thorough an inventory you want,” Severus said warily.

“Cautious beast,” Horace smiled. “I should like you to know where everything is and how much we have of it. You should also begin to develop your understanding of the replenishment schedule, but I don’t expect you to have all the expiry dates memorized today, of course!”

“Am I permitted parchment?” Severus asked. Really, if he didn’t stop being so arid all the time, Horace would have to press tea on him rather more forcefully.

“Certainly, m’boy, you may use any system you like only,” he wagged his finger again, “don’t go upending any of mine, if you’d be so good.”

“In that case, do you need me to be done by noon? It would be most efficient to take good notes and do the thing once. But I doubt if four hours will be enough, considering how comprehensive the school’s stores are.”

Horace considered. “Well, I shall leave it to your judgment, Severus, but keep in mind that I do want the project completed today. We’ve an appointment for lunch, and I couldn’t say how long it will go. The afternoon’s project shouldn’t take until supper unless we have to start quite late, but it will take some time and really, m’boy, if you want to look at those files…”

Severus stood. “I ought to get started at once, then. Is there a particular elf I ought to call on for Potions business—to ask for supplies, and so on?”

“No, no, just snap your fingers four times and someone will turn up,” Horace assured him.

He got a funny look. “Four times?”

“It’s very rare for anyone to go above three by accident, or out of temper,” he explained.

“Well, let’s be sure they know to turn up for me while you’re present,” Severus said—dryly, and Horace was not getting accustomed to it. He snapped, and the elf with the nose like a small courgette popped in. “Ah, good. Twilsey, a hard-backed notebook and a dictaquill, please.”

Horace didn’t know whether he or the elf was more surprised that Severus knew its name on sight, but he seemed to have got it right. “And fetch Master Snape a pot of a chilled tisane, there’s a good
chap. You can bring them all to the potions storeroom.”

“Professor,” Severus started, exasperated.

“It’s stuffy and dusty in there, Severus, and it is still August, after all.”

“Barely. Technically. This is a stone castle.”

“You’ll want it, I assure you. And you do seem so dreadfully dehydrated.” Severus eyed him suspiciously—aptly, for once—but Horace ignored him, pressing, “Mint? Basil, maybe?”

Severus gave up, and told the elf, “Both, but in a lemon shrub, please, not,” he glared at Horace as if he’d never traveled off the British Isles in his life, “a cold tea.”

Horace smiled affably. “Now do recall, you’re not to do any dusting or replace the labels or anything of that sort. Save all that for detentions.”

“May I spell the glass blue and amber?” Severus asked dismally. “You know it would delay expiration.”

“I do know, Severus,” he agreed placatingly, “but we want the students to learn what ingredients look like. It’s such a help to them when they’re buying their own. And it isn’t as if there’s a window in the storeroom.”

Severus sighed, and told the elf, “I think that’s all for the moment, then.”

“Twilsey will bring the things to the storeroom directly, Severus Snape,” the thing squeaked, and popped out as silently as he’d come.

“Keys? Wards?”

“Oh, we’ll set up that sort of thing this afternoon,” Horace assured him. “Meet me at the gates at noon sharp, now. And Severus?”

“Bubblehead charm?”

“Dress nicely for lunch, will you?”

Severus’s eyes widened—just a touch, but noticeably. “I didn’t think Professor Dumbledore so formal,” he said, but it was really a rather worried question.

“Oh, we’re not meeting the Headmaster,” Horace assured him, and then reconsidered. “Not as such.”

“But that means he’s still expecting me now!” Severus cried, with more than a hint of accusation. He pelted to the door, racing-broom speed from the first step. His flapping summer mantle nearly got caught in the slamming door, and certainly would have had it been cloak-length.

After a moment to recover from the shock, Horace told the closed door, “I should be happy to write you a note if you like, Mr. Snape,” and snickered—not wholly unkindly, surely—into his teacup.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

In which Sir Not Appearing In This Chapter tries to deal with his demons by making everyone else er…. face them? Sure, let's go with 'face them.' Also, school principals spend a lot of time hearing about misbehaviors and bodily functions. Which is cool, because the rest of the job is basically paperwork.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Ah, Horace,” Albus smiled in welcome, gesturing the doors open. “And how was your lunch with Professor Dippet?”

It was a very sincere welcome, even more so than usual. Anyone would have been welcome. Severus hadn’t had the least idea how disturbing his report on his Bulgarian mission had been—not that any other outcome would have struck Albus differently. He flattered himself that Severus, sharp though he could be, had left as ignorant of his effect as he’d begun.

Or, at least, ignorant to the cause of Albus’s disquiet. Severus considered that Albus should be concerned that Central Europe was still angry with him for ‘waffling’ between the Muggle World Wars. Albus didn’t argue entirely with this assessment of their feelings, but thought it might be more accurate to say that Central Europe still resented that England hadn’t been so unilaterally flattened as many by the Global Great Depression, and considered that Albus should have dissuaded Hector Fawley from focusing so closely on internal affairs.

Albus had quite agreed with Fawley. Witches and wizards had disobeyed Archer Evermonde’s orders to keep out of the muggle ‘Great War’ in droves, and died in droves, and those who had survived had come away in just as much shock and despair as any of the surviving muggles who would dream of mud, maggots, maiming, and mustard gas forever. Too many had come away telling themselves that the Great Evil that had had made it all possible was simply the nature of muggles. A period of healing had been badly, badly needed. Everyone had agreed about that.

They might gotten it, too, if someone hadn’t decided that power was a better healer than peace. Or, rather, that it was impossible to feel peaceful without possessing the complete security of complete power.

Albus wasn’t disturbed to hear Severus tell him that the countries who sent children to Durmstrang were still annoyed with him. After all, he led the International Confederation of Wizards. He had ample opportunity to distinguish between the amiable griping of the Australians, the American nation-states, and Western Europe, the polite skepticism of the Norse, the near-complete disinterest of Eurasia and South Africa, and the chilly rote courtesy he received from Germany and the Carpathian regions.

He was a little disturbed, he might have admitted if anyone had asked him, to hear Severus so frankly admiring Durmstrang’s very regimented teaching methods. Perhaps he shouldn’t have been surprised, since he’d heard a very lengthy, loud, and profane ‘why won’t you even try to keep my classmates under control’ rant an average of twice a year for nearly a decade.
Should not have been surprised, but was: Severus had enjoyed Filius’s lighthearted Charms class very much, had been almost infamously inspired by it, and gave every appearance of respecting Filius over all other teachers. He’d shown no such draw towards Minerva’s class, which was probably the closest at Hogwarts to imitating the methods for which he was now expressing such approval.

Albus had barely thought of a single one of these very practical and somewhat pressing concerns the whole time Severus was talking.

Gellert was still locked up.

He was still scheming, and he wasn’t—not really—alone. It was only his body and his magic locked up. He had not been stopped from receiving letters, or sending them.

(He hadn’t been sneaking any to Albus. Of course he hadn’t.)

His spirit had not been broken.

—So Albus had not destroyed Gellert entirely—

—So Gellert, who had been alerted and involved in Britain’s affairs, would be interested, and would involve himself. In Albus’s affairs.

Unless he wouldn’t (want to think of him at all).

How could he resist?

Only to drive Albus mad, only as punishment for Albus agreeing with the ICW that he could never trust himself, except through complete silence between them. ‘

What else could Albus have done? It was true enough that he’d won the duel between them, but he hadn’t been able to finish it. It had seemed to him that they’d stared at each other, filthy and aching and paralyzed, for aeons before Filius had slid in with his stunner and incarcerus and Calid Bashir had rolled Gellert up in an IWP carpet.

Most likely it had been no more than a heartbeat. Filius never hesitated when he ought not to.

Albus had had to stop himself from shouting at Bashir, even from hexing him. Gellert had looked so battered, so sick.

—But the appearance of disinterest would do just as well as the fact of it, for revenge: Gellert might or might not care about his old follies any more, or about Albus, but he could never resist jumping into a great argument. He hadn’t sent Severus away coldly: he was not resisting.

And Severus hadn’t been protecting himself against Albus. He had wanted Albus to have as much insight as possible, and had met Albus’s eyes openly and earnestly and often.

He hadn’t thought much about Gellert’s face. Albus had seen shrewd observations about the way his old friend was kept, about what correspondence the guards allowed, or what liberties were being taken their incompetence. He’d seen a grim young castle frothily skirted in lemon groves.

But Severus was very young, and extremely newly handfast. He hadn’t thought much about Gellert’s face, after the initial shock, but Albus hadn’t been able to look the child in the eye without seeing the shapes of his old friend, rosier and warmer and calmer and more sincere than Albus had ever seen before. For the first time, he’d seen those wolf-shaped eyes race with cool calculation
meant for protection, not conquest, seen what that full-lipped smile would have looked like, had it belonged to a man capable of loving people as much as purpose.

Oh, yes, Horace was welcome. Any distraction would have been. Albus would have welcomed a stinking-drunk Aberforth shouting century-old condemnations. With open arms and a hangover cure.

Blissfully immersed in his own concerns, Horace eyed Albus dyspeptically, every curve in his comfortable form doing its best to convey disapproval of Albus’s carefree attitude and overly-dramatic way of greeting visitors when they both knew the gargoyles had alerted him to who was coming upstairs and it was customary for Horace to come tell him about Dippet’s end-of-summer fundraiser in any case.

“When I left,” said the Potions Master with rotund dignity, drawn up to his full, if meager, height, “poor Armandus’s beard was paisley.”

“Oh my,” Albus remarked, intrigued. “Let me see, now… it was 1974 when the boys left off hexing each others’ hair in their House colors, wasn’t it? I don’t think any of them had got past polka dots at the time, although as I recall Sirius Black managed an attractive red and gold zebra-striped pattern towards the end. A very shiny gold, too. I thought it quite fetching, although of course our young Mr. Snape didn’t seem able to see past the patriotic slur. Very clan conscious, those two.”

“Albus…”

“Paisley, now,” Albus continued cheerfully, “is far more complex, although of course a beard,” he patted his own, “would be easier for supporting a pattern than ordinary hair, being stiffer and shifting about somewhat less.”

“Albus…!”

“I’m quite impressed!” he concluded brightly. “I do hope Professor Dippet took it in good part and allowed a photograph to be taken. I’m sure Professor Flitwick will be agog to learn such a clever little charm. None of our curtains shall be safe.”

“It was the Rookwood boy who actually cast the spell,” Horace said irritably, huffing himself cantankerously into Albus’s armchair and digging into the sweets bowl without being asked. Which he was more than welcome to do, of course, but it did show his mood. “So I’m sure Professor Flitwick will have no trouble picking it up. Perhaps you should give Professor Flitwick an assistant to keep under control, instead of me.”

“Surely it wasn’t as bad as all that,” Albus suggested.

Horace glared, and pointedly ate a caramel cobweb. There was a great deal of crunching.

“Let me fetch you a drink,” Albus alternately suggested, “and you can tell me all about it.”

“Well,” Horace grumbled, somewhat appeased, “it’s a bit early… still, you may as well.”

When the elf had brought Horace his tropical-fruit mimosa, and brought Albus a nice refreshing shandy so Horace wouldn’t exactly be drinking alone, Albus asked, “Now, why would a rule-abiding lad like Augustus Rookwood hex his own great-grandfather’s beard?”

“It wasn’t Augustus, it was his son,” Horace corrected irritably, and slurped his drink.
“Gracious,” Albus blinked. “And how old would he be?”

“Eight!”

“What a talented young wizard,” Albus noted, beaming. “I shall look forward to his joining us in a few years.”

“Well I shan’t,” Horace groused, straining more mimosa through a wet moustache. “That boy will be trouble, you take it from me.”

“Did he have a reason for it?” Albus asked, entirely out of benign curiosity and a fondness for the inexplicable whims of the young. It wasn’t at all because he strongly suspected that his predecessor had taken it upon himself to be a stickler and disciplinarian over some matter the boy’s parents would have chosen to ignore, at least in public and with strangers present, such as a failure to present boots to the elf for cleaning or a refusal to eat vegetables. Dear, dear, no.

“I’m sure I couldn’t say,” Horace said primly, clinching it.

“But why would Severus—that is what you were implying, Horace?” This was a more genuine mystery. Albus had once, not long before introducing the young man to Perenelle, tripped over a perfectly innocent and unrelated question into a loud and angry rant over the folly of sharing one’s invented spells, which was to say: one’s weapons. He had been quite forcefully assured that Severus would never do such an idiotic thing, and his ‘naïveté’ for believing that students respected one another’s privacy and belongings had been ridiculed at great length.

“Well,” said the head of Slytherin, rather looking it, which was to say that he seemed to suddenly be finding the moulding around Albus’s office windows inexplicably fascinating, “the child had been making rather of a nuisance of himself until, oh, twenty minutes before letting the spell off.”

“In what way?” Albus enquired.

“Oh…” Horace squirmed. “Asking perhaps somewhat impertinent questions of adults trying to converse amongst themselves. Nothing untoward. Perhaps just a touch distracting for someone who isn’t accustomed to young children, especially while trying to advance an agenda to someone who mustn’t be offended.”

“I do beg your pardon, Horace,” Albus said, trying not to let his beard twitch, “but are we speaking of Severus or yourself?”

“Oh, really,” Horace huffed.

Which was in no way an answer, so Albus mused aloud, “I do hope this luncheon hasn’t cost us more in bribery—oh, do excuse me, Horace, I meant hospitality gifts—than Professor Dippet will be returning to the school.”

“Really, Albus, it was only a sickle or two!”

“But why?” Albus asked with an expression of concerned pain, quite ready to be entertained. “Surely eight year old boys aren’t so much more difficult for you to deal with than the eleven year old variety, Horace?”

“For pity’s sake, Albus,” Horace scowled, less defensive now than really annoyed, “it wasn’t to save myself the trouble of dealing with the child! I had to know how Severus performs under pressure against an opponent he knows he mustn’t curse!”
“I should hardly call one of Professor Dippet’s admirable luncheons ‘pressure,’” Albus suggested.

“You wouldn’t,” Horace said smugly, “and nor would I.”

“Ah.”

“Besides,” Horace elaborated, “I explained to him very carefully before we left that if he wanted any chance at those new cauldrons he was after at the staff meeting, he’d have to help me persuade Armandus that Hogwarts was the proper recipient of the bulk of his charitable giving budget this quarter. Which is an uphill battle, as you know,” Horace sighed, looking fretful, “with Augustus waxing eloquent about the marvelous research being done at the Department of Mysteries and Barty Crouch on fire over the so-called needs of the Auror Office and Barney Cuffe plumping for the Prophet and every one of them a closer relative than poor old Horace.”

“And are we that recipient?”

“No,” said Horace sourly.

“Well, I suppose we couldn't expect anything much in the way of persuasion from our young friend, considering he’s joined us only this week and doesn’t know any of our current budget strains,” Albus suggested. Gently, reasonably. Not a hint of reproach for Horace’s leaving such an important matter to such an untried and awkward young man, certainly not.

“No, Albus, that’s not it at all,” Horace said, scowling again. “Severus and Augustus got into a howling great argument about the proper treatment of the werewolf problem, and Severus kept asking—oh, what is his name, Westley? Barty’s secretary, you know,” he waggled his eyebrows, “the one he takes everywhere…”

“Weatherby, I believe,” Albus supplied, hand over his mouth to hide the smile. “Barty Crouch is married, you know, Horace. I recall your speaking most favorably of his son.”

“As if that ever stopped anyone. Never thought he’d amount to much—Weatherby, I mean—but I suppose it’s the sort of work that makes Hufflepuffs happy, and … well, Severus kept turning to him for support about his cost quotes and statistics and whatnot, and Augustus sneered at him about it, so of course Barty went over all frosty…”

“I suppose Professor Dippet was so offended he washed his hands of the whole affair for the season again,” Albus sighed.

“No,” Horace said again, more sourly yet. “I daresay we’ll be able to get that astral camera Timaeus wanted, and maybe even that special mulch Pomona was asking for. But Severus was, in fact, extremely persuasive: most of the money’s going to St. Mungo’s.”

“I hope they won’t need it,” Albus said, soberly enough to distract Horace from his politics.

“Oh,” he said, fidgeting with his plump fingers. “Well… yes, of course.”

“But let’s not dwell on these dark possibilities at the beginning of a new year!” Albus decided, as hearteningly as he could. “There’s the feast tonight to look forward to, after all, and a new crop of Britain’s best and brightest to meet! I am agog to see what Severus will do with your classroom this afternoon. I think you said you were going to have him choose the tapestries and so on?”

“Well I was going to,” Horace went fretful again, “to make him feel protective about the classroom—you know—but he’s being so conscientious over taking the inventory that there simply isn’t time. As a matter of fact, Albus, I can’t stay long at all this afternoon, since I meant for him to do it
and now I’ll have to myself.”

But he got the numbers from Horace in time to give them to a rabid Minerva. That was a quieter meeting; she liked to attend to budget matters in his office, although she didn’t usually ask his opinion. It was convenient, since he could pass her the parental letters he judged would lead to considerably longer conversations if he answered them himself.

In the middle of that discussion he got a howler he rather suspected Dirk Cresswell’s mother had meant for him to receive at the Welcome Feast. It accused him of passing over her son for Head Boy because he was muggleborn.

“Oh, dear,” he sighed, and Minerva looked up. Since it was her prefect under discussion, he passed her the letter.

“Isn’t she right?” she asked. “You did say a Head Boy wasn’t any use if he was going to spend all year on the defensive. And I said what about ’77, and you said being controversial from a position of strength wasn’t the same thing.”

“If a student acknowledges no peer authority,” Albus shrugged, “and everyone else has already decided to bear with him, and have already sorted out the areas of responsibility between themselves in any case, denying him a role as a figurehead would be foolish and cause unnecessary problems. And when he shows every sign of rising to it and turning it into a real leadership role if expected to, it would also be a waste of potential. As I said at the time. Dirk Cresswell is a fine young lad, but he hasn’t James Potter’s impenetrable self-confidence. Or Lily Evans’s defenders, for that matter.”

“Mmm,” Minerva commented, perusing the letter critically. “He is quite old enough to remember Lily being his Head Girl. Or perhaps a muggleborn girl doesn’t count.”

“His mother mightn’t think Head Girl does count,” Albus agreed thoughtfully. “Not having gone to Hogwarts herself, she might assume they’re quite different jobs.”

“Nonsense,” Minerva said crisply, and drew out her quill.

“She did write to me.” Albus pointed out, smiling and not at all loathe, “and you were doing the donation allocations.”

“The donation allocations,” Minerva said, more crisply yet, “will wait, and you’d muck it up.”

“Just as you like, Professor,” Albus had almost finished saying meekly when the door banged open.

“Muck and FILTH!” Filch railed, waving a furious brochure at Albus. “Have you seen these, sir?”

“Why, I don’t know, Argus,” Albus blinked, and held out a polite hand. “Do show me.”

“It’s those damn so-called Marauders demons!” Filch howled. He was probably trying to hand the brochure over, but he just kept shaking it.

“They’ve graduated, Argus,” Albus pointed out kindly.

“THAT DON’T STOP THEM! And you’ve brought that trouble-magnet Snape back, too, the castle is going to FALL AROUND OUR EARS, and who’ll have to sweep it up? MUGGINS, that’s who!”
“Do tell me what the trouble is,” Albus sighed, massaging the old breaks in his nose with a finger under the bridge of his spectacles.

“They’ve made these capsules of powder,” Argus informed him, still very red, “you can break it over food or dissolve it in drinks, see, and they say it tastes of blackcurrant so people might take it themselves!”

“Oh, dear,” Minerva looked up in dread. “What does it do?”

Apparently Argus hadn’t noticed her, bent over her quill. He turned a slightly different shade of red. “Er… don’t rightly like to say in front of a lady, Miss.”

“Youre tender feelings do you great credit, Mr. Filch,” Albus said gravely. “But I’m sure you would also not like to leave the good Professor unwarned against the foul imaginations of her former students.”

He had, apparently, chosen his words perfectly.

“Fowl, that’s the point, innit?” Filch agreed, reverting to the unabashed ruby of infurition. “If you take that there powder you start sh—” he glanced at Minerva and recollected himself. “Mean to say, when someone does the necessary it’s these little duck eggs hit the water, and then they hatch and fly away!”

Albus blinked. “I must say,” he had to say, “that sounds rather charming, Argus.”

“Oh, it sounds just luv-er-ly,” Filch managed to spit and draw out sarcastically at the same time. “But what about when the magic wears off, you tell me that, sir, and those ducks turn into what they was from the beginning!”

“…Ah. Will they?”

“ Doesn’t say! Or if they eat! It’s bad enough trying to keep bird droppings from pitting and staining the outside of the castle, all that acid. At least a castle’s supposed to look weathered on the outside. And they’ve got fumes! You want the kiddies breathing that all day from all the nooks and crannies? The elves don’t do a whole-castle deep clean every night, you know! One undersized duck wouldn’t do much harm, I grant you, except they’re mean little sods.”

Fortunately, he didn’t notice the flicker of a look, loaded with suppressed laughter, that shot between Albus and Minerva.

“But how many hatch at a time? You know there’ll be a fad till the little monsters get sick of it. This says the effects can go on up to a week and what a great selling point because your loo won’t smell! As if birds don’t stink!”

“Long term strategic thinking never was Sirius Black’s strong point,” Minerva noted dryly, the hand over her mouth proving that Sirius Black’s failing was not typical of their House.

“I’ll write to Remus Lupin and make enquiries,” Albus sighed. “For the moment, I think the best thing is not to draw attention to the product’s existence, Mr. Filch. For all the drawbacks you mention, it sounds fanciful and delightful, and to label it forbidden before everyone understands why it is, first and foremost, an annoyance, would only make the children want it more. Thank you very much for bringing this to my attention, Argus; I’ll be sure to ask Mr. Lupin how any inopportune waterfowl that might show up around the castle can best be disposed of.”

Filch sighed too, and thanked him in a disgruntled sort of way. He went out, grumbling about
disgusting children liking everything nasty and slimy and smelly.

The two of them got in a further a companionable half-hour or so with the budget and the mail. They had to confer again because Albus opened a somewhat incoherent letter from Madam Jones, whose youngest daughter Gwenog would be starting today and was, apparently, in danger of starving due to a misguided worship for Percy Shelley.

Minerva couldn’t make sense of it either, finally offering up the baffled shrug, “It isn’t as if there aren’t always bread and veg on the tables, and porridge for breakfast.”

“Do you suppose milk in the porridge is allowed?” Albus asked, regarding the letter in equal bafflement.

He never found out Minerva’s opinion: the door slammed open again.

“Albus,” Sylvanus shouted, not as loudly as Filch had but, still, unmistakably vexed. “Do you know what your pet haystack has done now?!”

“Escorted our new Research Fellow to his rooms?” Albus suggested, stroking his beard and twinkling at both of them. “Had lunch, I trust? Speaking of lunch, do come and have a caramel cobweb. Or perhaps a wine gum?”

“Parent letters that bad this year?” Sylvanus asked shrewdly, and regarding Albus’s more brightly colored candy bowl with interest. “They’ve got wine in? It’s not tea yet.”

“The letters are a trifle perplexing this year,” Albus allowed, “but ‘wine gum’ is only a name. Hagrid, come in, do try some, sit. I’m sure you’re not in trouble.”

“I’m not,” Sylvanus grumbled, but he sat in an armchair and tried a purple one. Hagrid tentatively shuffled over to take the sofa and half the bowl. He’d hardly have gotten a taste, otherwise.

“Now,” Albus asked kindly, regarding them both over folded fingers, “what’s the trouble?”

“They didn’t mean no harm,” Hagrid said defensively.

Sylvanus threw up his hands, one of which clicked softly from three fingers as he flared them in exasperation. “Of course they didn’t, no one means any harm by belching. The question is, why were nifflers belching flame?”

“Good afternoon, gentlemen,” Minerva said at once, gathering her papers and rising crisply. “I can see I’ll get more done in the library.”

“Smart woman,” Sylvanus observed her disappearing back wistfully. “Wish I could get more done in the library.”

“Why is that, Professor?” Albus asked mildly.

“Because Pomona uses gold watering cans and sickles and rakes for the heliotropes and mistletoe and, I don’t know, some other things. She keeps her tools in a wooden shed. I did mention about the nifflers breathing fire? They noticed.”

“Who noticed?”

“The nifflers did. It was coming out of their mouths. They’re dead clever, you know. it’s not as if they never smelled the gold through the keyholes and under the doors before. They just couldn’t
get in before someone spotted them digging.”

“Ah.”

“So between decent walls and wards that kept wizards out, Pomona’s quite expensive tools used to be quite safe.”

“Quite.”

“Neither absent and well-hidden nor gnawed on with their handles burnt off, is my point.”

“Yes, I understand.”

“I’m glad you understand, Albus, because gold is rather a soft metal, and the reason nifflers go after precious metals is to chew them into unrecognizable spiky sheets to armor their nests with.”

“Yes, I do see.”

“Also there are now honking great melted holes in the greenhouses, because she uses some interesting ores in the fertilizer in some patches, and some of those plants—”

“Thank you, Sylvanus, yes, I grasp the scope of the catastrophe. Hagrid, did you by any chance feed the nifflers anything interesting?”

“No, Professor, I wouldn’t!” Hagrid protested. “They’re cute li’l devils and everything, but looking after the nifflers is Professor Kettleburn’s job. I’d never, unless he asked me. I’d never want to step on the Professor’s toes. He lets me feed the thestrals and all, and besides, his feet are that small.”

Kettleburn looked up at him sourly. “Ta ever so.”

Hagrid grinned.

It turned out, after in Albus’s opinion rather too much questioning, that while Hagrid didn’t feed the nifflers himself, he did provide Sylvanus with their food.

What they ate, indiscriminately, was insects.

It further transpired that Hagrid had been experimenting with creating gypsy moths that glowed like fireflies. Everyone talked about how pretty fireflies were (Albus couldn’t imagine when this had come up), and the things were almost too small for him to see. It had occurred to him that a glowing gypsy moth would make a lovely night light, much calmer and less likely to bite than a fairy.

Only he’d tried it on smaller, more common moths first. Because he didn’t understand that ‘firefly’ wasn’t a literal term (he didn’t seem to have thought about their never setting forest fires), he’d given some caterpillars water sprinkled with Fawkes-ash from a recent cage cleaning.

And then, after the flaming post-cocoon disaster, it hadn’t occurred to him not to feed his dead experimental subjects to the nifflers. They were dead little insects and so they were niffler food.

After a very long silence, Albus rated his headache a three and said, “I see.”

He let that hang there for a second, allowing everyone to sweat because he had flaming nifflers running amok all over his grounds with children who’d never used wands arriving in only a few hours, and then smiled kindly at Hagrid. “Well, Hagrid, I can see you meant it for the best. Now, you may not have time after helping Professor Kettleburn to secure his nifflers and Professor
Sprout with whatever she needs to set the greenhouses in order before you must meet the first years.”

“Er, yes sir?” Hagrid asked, looking more than a bit like a first year caught at mischief himself.

Albus supposed he still was, in a way, a third year, unable to study further, unable to live as a wizard anywhere else in the country, and certainly unable to live as a muggle. It was so important to be a sanctuary and not a cage, to offer what he could to his friend—to this legally-unwanded magical being in his care—without rotting the Wizengamot from the top down.

“When you do have a moment, I should like you to tell Professor Slughorn that I’d like our new Research Fellow to,” he smiled, “yes, to tutor you in basic experimental procedure. Why don’t you make those glowing gypsy moths your project? He did take your class, Sylvanus, as I recall?”

“Oh Merlin,” Sylvanus groaned, covering his eyes, “we’re all going to die.”

“Well, we shall do it with your nifflers in a nice, flameproof pen until we find out whether the effect will wear off.” Albus said firmly, rising. “It’s a lovely day out and I could do with a walk in any case.”

“Because that’s the reason to fence in blazing two-foot squirrels that move at forty miles an hour and have as much respect for personal space as tapeworms,” Sylvanus grumbled, head-butting his way out of the chair for the door.

“Sorry, Professor,” Hagrid tried to whisper sheepishly once Sylvanus had left.

Albus patted his elbow consolingly. “It was a lovely idea, Hagrid. You’ll clean up the mess, and young Severus will teach you to do it better next time.”

“He’ll shriek a lot,” Hagrid predicted gloomily.

“I daresay,” Albus cheerfully agreed. And he would, but this wasn’t in the least revenge for making Albus vividly remember things he’d never wanted to think about again. Severus had expressed a specific worry about having enough free time that Tom might think it reasonable to give him extracurricular assignments. “I suggest you take notes; he does it so well. Now, come along, and tell me all about what bait they’ll like best.”

After all, he had at least thirty letters from the parents and the Wizengamot and the Confederation on his desk, none of the latter color-coded Dammit Albus This Is Really Important People Are Dying Over Here, and it was a lovely warm day under a cool white sky. And in only a few short hours, the skies would darken and the dear locusts would descend.

Chapter End Notes

Next: In which it is shown that the ruthless and tricky attackers Severus expected to invade his mind and muck him about did not include castles.

Notes
September 1, Hogwarts' Great Hall (Evening)

Chapter Summary

In which we learn, though Severus doesn't, that the ruthless and tricky attackers he fully expected to invade his mind and muck him about did not include Salazar-bedamned castles!

Chapter Notes

**Warnings**: LONG
- PTSD, occlumency that flirts with dissociation, sensory integration that flirts with self-harm.
- some dark-and-deep-but-not-black and ephemeral magic which I will not name at this time but which would trigger the living bejeezus out of Ginny Weasley if she read this chapter
- also your usual Sorting Night o.O headscratchery, a sirius smackdown, someone spitting on Snape,* Severus's handwriting, and the Giant Squid.

* as it were

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Dear Asphodel,**
All my life, I’ve been surrounded by nervous people overwhelmed by my glorious presence, help!
Snuggles,
Rock Star God-Merlin

**Dear Remarkably Supreme Goiter-Monster**
Have you tried being NICE to them?
Smooches,
Asphodel
P.S.: Take my job seriously, you prat! And stop breaking into the study when you’re meant to be babysitting!

**Dear Asphodel,**
Harry wanted to see where Mummy and Tigger work so hard for up to five minutes at a time when they’re shamefully abandoning the family business.
But Wormy really is acting extra-squirrelly, don’t you think?
Cuddles,
Radiant Supreme Genius Megastar

**Dear Blind Self-Absorbed Git-For-Brains**
Goodness, I wonder how Peter could possibly have gotten the idea that somebody who teases him about whether he has a girlfriend and every possible plug-ugly naff of a girlfriend he might
possibly have persuaded to go out with him despite his obvious drawbacks and teased him mercilessly practically every day at school and calls him wormy might not be a particularly safe person to talk to during his first week at a never-existed-before job that could dissolve under him if it doesn’t start off well?
Nervous blokes don’t think you’re funny. They just think you’re mean. Keeping on when you can see it bothers them is a mean thing to do. You’re better than that, Sirius, that’s why you’re Gryffindor and that’s why you’re our friend.
I’ll see you when you’re done sulking about this, Scorpio Spectacularus.
Love (for real),
Lily

Nostalgia wasn’t what perched Severus atop the roof of the Hospital Wing, the lowest tower in the castle because nobody wanted to fly or climb any higher than that to wrestle with a giant clock. It wasn’t sentiment plastering his gaze to the solemn-lighted boats drifting apprehensively towards the welcoming castle. He didn’t care that the Black Lake under them was darker and deeper than the grey velvet of the skies above, full with the promise of the first September night’s soft rain.

It was just that if he didn’t get a memory for the pensieve of lamplit dories cutting over dark waters from the squat, forest-bound station, burdened with innocent, eager, apprehensive expectation, a professional artist who knew where he slept would gut him. Worse, Evan might try to pretend not to be disappointed to have missed the chance at a scene so picturesque.

And Severus would have failed him. Would have dropped the ball on helping Evan in his work, his clean and daylit work, when it would have taken no effort and cost him nothing. Ev wouldn’t have had to gut him.

Which Ev would know perfectly well, the viperous bastard, and his half-second of silent sad eyes before he determinedly ignored the whole issue wouldn’t be innocent at all.

Unless it would. Which would be worse still. And you could never quite tell, with Evan.

Apparently Luke and Narcissa actually enjoyed this sort of game. Severus didn’t want any part of it.

So he had to do it, waste of his precious preparations time though it might be. And since he had to, as a Slytherin he was obliged to find a way to make good use of it. Which was why, even though a pensieve visitor would see where Severus was rather than what he saw, he’d nicked a telescope from the Astronomy tower first. He wasn’t going to memorize all their faces tonight, but the head start would be helpful.

He had thought about nicking two, but even if Ev would be able to look through a telescope set up for him (which would actually be a fascinating experiment, if Evan didn’t already know), he would have had to keep adjusting it; the enchanted boats were rapid. The telescopes weren’t even enchanted to track even slow celestial motion; students were expected to work out where to look. Ev wouldn’t really be after close-ups, anyway; it was the nightscape he’d want.

Not unexpectedly, he only recognized one face besides Hagrid’s, although quite a few gave him the sense that if he saw them next to people he knew, a family resemblance would jump out. In one or two cases, he thought he could name the families. He was sure Ev, Narcissa, Reggie, and probably even Wilkes could have placed every drop of wizarding blood on the water.
He didn’t know the one boy he did recognize—had never spoken with him, didn’t know his name. He’d only seen the laid-back-looking little ginger once, in Diagon Alley, people-watching with Evan and Narcissa a few months ago. It was a face that had You can’t phase me: I sit For baby monster siblings written all over it, and it seemed to think Hogwarts looked promising.

Severus ruled out Ravenclaw. No matter how intelligent the boy might be, he had no more chance of getting in than Evan’s particular genius had. Ravenclaws were earnest or dismissive or overexcited, as a matter of general style; easygoing wasn’t in their hollow bones.

Or perhaps it was just that if anyone came in with an even-tempered attitude, it got pecked out fast by the general frantic air of the House, the expectation of feeling pressured by every assignment, the culture of We Must Get Everything Right. If the Hat really did want the children to be well as well as do well, it might need more persuasion than Severus had given it before it sent a natural tranquility like Ev’s into the land of frazzled obsessions. In Slytherin, you were meant to look unruffled, and lay out your plots calmly.

(When Narcissa was in a pet with Severus, she called him the worst Slytherin in the history of ever. He did his best, but secretly felt she had a point, or possibly several. But every other cobra had probably been called something similar at least once, and no few of the sidewinders and rattlesnakes, and some of them had done very important things.)

The boy next to the redhead was overexcited. As Severus watched, he started to poke the redhead, who looked agreeable but confused, and then their mouths started opening and closing energetically, and then their boat started rocking, and then the girls in their boat started smacking them with both hands and wands, although fortunately not with magic.

Hogwarts as usual, then.

Severus had looked at a few other boats full of apprehension, slack-jawed gormlessness, excitement that made him flinch and jerk the telescope away, and the occasional intelligent spark of deep skepticism, when the boat with the loud children overturned and the Giant Squid eeled up to the rescue.

Severus dutifully watched through the telescope, wondering exasperatedly why the one member of staff who was expressly forbidden to do magic was sent every year over a frigid evening lake to escort fifty-odd children who were also not yet allowed to do magic, might not be able to swim, and had not been provided with life jackets. The Squid was a good and friendly lake-guardian, as those who knew it well knew, but—

Ah, yes. One of the girls had shrieked away from the Giant Squid was doing her level, flailing best to beat it away from her. It gamely kept trying, but was also trying not to hurt her. Severus knew Hagrid was trying to explain, if the girl could just stop screaming long enough to hear his giant lungs shouting.

With a sigh, he turned a levicorpus on the little idiot before she could breathe water screaming, like Lockhart, and do herself a mischief. It meant he and the Squid all had to wait for Hagrid to row over and flip the boat back over by hand, but at least Severus had, since thebeech tree all the Lockhart nonsense, long since worked out the bloody wandwork. He didn’t have to further terrify and humiliate an ickle firstie by holding her upside down.

Which was a very great mercy. It was odds on she wasn’t wearing either muggle trousers or proper soft, split-legged, foam-hemmed wizarding underrobes. Fashions in Diagon lately had leaned more towards displaying what wizards would once have considered fit only for private wear or clothes for muggles, with robes worn open and cloaks cut so high in summer as to barely qualify as capes.
Skirts and frocks had become quite common.[1]

(Severus had no opinion about this. He’d been informed that, until he was willing to stop dressing like an eccentric Victorian accountant and wear traditional robes, he was not allowed one. He had pointed out that a) Lucius was the only wizard their age who wore straight-cut full-length robes at any occasion that did not boast nervous elves holding golden platters and b) robes did not go well with the high boots he liked, and these points had been flicked away like less than dust. By which Severus had gathered that Narcissa was well aware that her argument was irrational and being right was not going to help him win this one. And he wasn’t giving up either waistcoats or his frock coat; robes without them felt... loose, louche, unanchored, unarmored.)

Once the kids were all safe, if not dry, Hagrid started looking around for who besides the squid had helped. Severus’s clothes were hard to see against stone and a night sky, though. Especially when he’d instinctively ducked behind a pointy crenellation.

He hoped Hagrid had the sense to say something vaguely threatening about how they’d always be safe at Hogwarts because, see? Hogwarts was always watching them and looking out for them.

Half-hoped, at best. He knew better.

It occurred to him that, had he not humored the request Evan hadn’t thought to make, he wouldn’t have been in position to help the shrieking panicker (or to learn who was most likely among the first years to go all to pieces the first time a potion started spitting), and so it was in a pensive mood that he slipped into place at the Great Hall.

Slughorn’s sour look washed right over him. It wasn’t his fault if Slughorn didn’t allow enough time for work assigned to be done well enough that it didn’t have to be done again later. Or if Sluggy dropped him into the middle of sensitive negotiations without adequate preparation. Or if what Slughorn wanted out of them, even if Severus wanted it too, was less important than speaking for the lethally contagious who had no other credible voice, no recourse but the fangs of their contagion.

—Of course, it occurred to him, he also wouldn’t have been in position to help the hysterical twit-child if he hadn’t got involved with idiots who couldn’t say boo to parents who thought the Dark Lord was sensible and right as well as powerful.

Besides, the twit-child hadn’t been in any real danger, surely. Hagrid would have summoned the Tartan, in the worst case. Or grabbed her with less delicacy than the squid had shown, since he never could understand full-blooded humans were more fragile than himself, and dragged her back into a boat by force.

Severus noticed that his thoughts were jumping about, and wondered at it. He hardly had any real cause to be nervous. Just because five sevenths of the current crop of students had seen him beaten up and humiliated at one point or fifty…

…And besides, it was only three sevenths, wasn’t it? At least, Severus had only been habitually humiliated through fifth year. After that, Black had seemed to realize his own impulse control issues and haunted Lupin’s heels like a devoted omega as often as not. Potter, while at least as insufferable and self-righteous as before, had taken his duties and his NEWTs at least half as seriously as Quidditch, and therefore been busier than in previous years.

Potter had taken looking good for Evans, and anyone who might grass to her, very nearly as seriously as Quidditch, too. Classes had still been painfully tense, but there hadn’t been flying ingredients in NEWT potions. The occasional bout of fighting or guerrilla hex-fest had broken out,
but that was mostly incidental between the houses at large; arguments rather than ambushes. When it came to Severus, Potter and his cabal had started limiting themselves, in front of everyone Gryffindors would believe, to taunting and what they thought was sarcasm. It wasn’t true peace, and certainly wasn’t leaving him alone, but it had helped.

And Slytherin had closed ranks, which had helped more.

Once they’d gotten the hang of it, at least. One might think that a collection of aristocratic scions would have some understanding of self-discipline, but it became a House joke quite early on in sixth year that you could hardly expect Slytherins to move in lockstep, since snakes didn’t have feet.

Since it was a House joke, it didn’t have to be a good one. Since it was Narcissa’s joke, everyone pretended it had been anyway.

(At least, Severus had just groaned loudly and put a sofa cushion over his head. But he was accustomed to speaking truth to psychotics in stilettos, and had the bruises to prove it.)

So less than half the school, really. The oldest 43%, to be sure. The nearly-half the rest looked up to. But only… seven years times four Houses: twenty eight forms, and the three highest-threat forms—three years' worth of the most fully educated Gryffindors—divided by twenty-eight forms total… three years? Yes, call it the top three, because first years in the fall of ’76 would been too busy getting their bearings in more basic matters to wrap their minds around upper-form politics before Slytherin had gotten its act together. First years always were, their first term, even in Slytherin.

Since they generally spent the next term reeling over the reality of exams, Severus might have gone so far as to think most of the rising fifth-years might not have been paying much attention during the worst of things, either. But that would have been foolishly optimistic, when Black and Potter had gone to so much trouble to make hounding him a spectator sport.

Still, only 11% of students were in the top three years and in Gryffindor. Three problem classes out of fourteen, if he even took all fourteen. Nor would he be alone in front of them, or even the primary focus of their attention.

For that matter, given Dumbledore’s lunatic insistence on trying to make the two Houses most at loggerheads work together during the single most volatile class available, they wouldn’t be alone in front of him. This would provide them with ample opportunities to try to make him lose face in front of his own House, but it would also provide him with natural allies to whom he was no stranger.

Not cake, but manageable, surely? Like dueling a Dark Lord who was holding back to teach him. Survivable, so—

“No need to be nervous, m’boy,” said a kindly voice, and since it was in his ear as well as exactly what he was thinking, was Slughorn a telepath now?!, he jumped.

Sluggy chuckled and patted his hand. “Not to worry, not to worry,” he said, with a much kindlier aspect than he’d been lowering at Severus not two minutes ago. “Children don’t bite, m’boy. Well,” he lifted a wagging finger, “I have met one who did…”

Severus waited for it with flat eyes.

Too pleased with himself to notice, Walrusface finished, “and you mustn’t think dear Rufus has
forgotten! You really must apologize to him, Severus, now you’re both grown wizards.”

On Slughorn’s other side, Professor Babbling choked.

“Why would I apologize for teaching a future Auror a valuable lesson?” Severus asked, eyebrows raised.

“What lesson was that?” Professor Babbling asked, morbidly curious.

Since hers was far from the only curious face aimed his way, Severus elected to answer her in Mandarin: he was sure that Flitwick, at least, spoke every other language Severus knew, certainly all the Western spellcasting ones. With Mandarin he at least had a chance at private conversation.

“Not to turn his back and walk away from one he had denied, insulted, and patronized, honored teacher, no matter how much smaller was that one,” he told her. “Also, the lesson was to my great detriment: I was given punishment and, beyond that, the behind side of his trousers did not taste delicious.”

Severus was out of luck: Flitwick and Babbling both laughed. Oh well; at least they both laughed.

“But don’t you think,” asked Babbling, who was a Slytherin even if she didn’t seem to care about it much most days, “that it would be wise to mend fences, since he is an Auror?”

“Certainly it would,” Severus agreed, because stupidly stubborn wasn’t the same as just plain stupid.

After a moment of watching him look back at her placidly, she sighed, “This is a men thing, isn’t it.”

Severus told her, “Possibly, but since only one of us was old enough to have testosterone poisoning at the time, it’s equally likely to have been a cobra thing.”

Then he glared, because Slughorn had sprayed pumpkin juice all over the table, and half his face.

“This explains so much,” Babbling said faintly, and passed the frantically nodding, choking Slughorn a napkin.

“The juice went on me,” Severus pointed out indignantly, cleaning his face off with his own napkin. A good portion of his indignation was for Slughorn evidently not bothering to find out or remember his students’ snake-names (unless Slughorn had just been unprepared to hear hormones named scientifically at breakfast? He was quite old… but no, surely: he was still a brewer!)

He’d told Babbling out of politeness, and more, self-preservation. Most legless serpents were peaceable, conflict-avoidant creatures who killed only to eat and when fleeing or giving a sharp warning didn’t work. Similarly, most Slytherin serpents liked to play games, including metaphorical arm-wrestling, and were dangerous when they had to be, but were largely polite, family-oriented, and risk-averse, and liked to build their castles in the air on very solid foundations.

The whole point of giving snake-names publicly, though, was that, while most Slytherin were just variations on your garden-snake variety peace-loving, don’t-tread-on-me I-have-plans-I-won’t-let-you-interfere-with, don’t-you-dare-bite-my-eggs asp, ‘most' wasn't 'all.' Some, like stiletto snakes, like saw-scaled vipers, who seemed unnatural and unpredictable for their aggression, their irritability, or because they moved in strange directions. Some snakes no one knew anything about, like Narcissa’s silvertail, so good were they at evading researchers.

Slytherins complained, if Severus snapped at them or told them to their face their spelling was
horrific, that he should have introduced himself by saying, ‘I was identified as the snake with a subtlety deficit.’ And that was just when he spoke without artifice, before they crossed him hard enough to find out which kind of cobra he was.

He and Babbling were at least nominally colleagues now, and he didn’t know what kind of snake she was, or what form her annoyance would take if she felt she should have been warned. And she certainly hadn’t been, before now. She was so far removed from Slytherin politics that he’d never expected her to know. She certainly had no formal obligation to know, never having had a titular role in the House, much less as its Head.

Unlike Slughorn. But just at the moment, with sickly squash juice dripping down his linen collar, staining the thirsty fibers with insipid spices and cooling Slughorn saliva, that wasn’t the larger fraction of Severus’s revolted irritation.

“But not on your napkin, Severus,” said Flitwick, making a magical copy of his own napkin and passing it over anyway. He must have done something else to it, because it worked much better than Severus’s had. Even Severus’s hair dried off when he dabbed at it, without going sticky or spiky. Severus raised an appreciative eyebrow at him.

“Children,” Dumbledore murmured ambiguously from farther down the table. He was watching them with an infuriating smile and eyes dancing like a figure skater’s blades under spotlights, but he was also doing a chin-nod at the doors.

They were still closed, but when silence fell so everyone could eye them, the sharp clip-clop of McGonagall’s hard-soled shoes rapped nearer and nearer. Then they did swing open, and Severus’s vision swam with the surreality.

A swarm of black robes and pointed hats seethed in semi-orderly fashion to settle themselves around the four long tables, color-coded by the collars, while the Tartan stood by the doors and watched keenly, turning on her heel to go await the first years once Dumbledore gave her the nod.

It was the eighth time Severus had been in this scene, and the angle was wrong. It wasn’t the first time he wasn’t weak and scared and starving and bruised and feeling filthier than he was, but it was only the third, and the last two times he hadn’t been able to believe it either.

It was the first time he’d faced this hall in new clothes, clothes he’d bought with his own money, chosen-himself-clothes without holes mended fifty times. The first time in boots made for his feet that didn’t squeak or leak. There was sharp defense well-balanced and well-sheathed against his ankle, straightening his posture without chafing,

His robes weren’t useless sheets of threadbare netting glamoured barely respectable over thirdhand rags, either. He had first aid tucked away, and stronger medicines, too, and extremely unpleasant topicals and suffumitories in phials that would become most delicate once removed from their careful cushioning charms. His wand would spring to his hand from whichever of three different sheaths he moved to draw it from.

Neither did he really need the boiled egg or flask of water in his side pocket: an elf would be delighted, literally delighted, to give him whatever he asked for. To bring him whatever he asked for (although he didn’t think they knew how to fry fish properly). It was literally his privilege to call one into his presence. He didn’t even have to go sneaking to the kitchens and risk assault if he forgot to store food away. Anything he needed would be brought to him; he had only to ask, and there would be no cost.

His rooms in the castle were closet-sized, lonely, and on the gloomy side, but they were free of
inventive Mulciberness and had a padded corner bath in them. If the bed reeked of faded moth-repellent herbs and the mattress was elderly and hard and rather thin, it was free of insects and poking springs and he did not, in fact, need it at all. He could walk straight home through the wardrobe whenever he had the time.

He looked at his hands. There, that was the barbed wire scar on the side from almost getting caught sneaking the Nelson lads to see *Frankenstein Must Be Destroyed*. Or had it been *The Body Stealers*? Or maybe *The Horror of Frankenstein*. One of those; he couldn’t recall which. It had been before Hogwarts, but after meeting Lily. He was sure about that, at least: she’d held it over him for weeks how smart she’d been for not wanting to see it, not quite understanding (as usual) that he’d *needed* to go—not out of a pressing desire to see Mary Shelley’s masterwork desecrated for cheap thrills but because it would make him right with the other boys for a while.

She’d been right to give it a miss, of course, despite utterly missing the point, but Severus—Seth, then, to everyone but Mam—had been lucky. At least the dogs had backed down when he’d yelled at them. Tommy Yates had had worse than rust to clean out of his leg.

So that was normal, that looked like his own hand. So did the knobby wristbone and the stubborn, barely-there little pale pinprick stains on his fingertips and knuckles from giving the stirring charm on the Felix Felicis its daily refresher. There, staining the fingers of his left hand, was the deeper, golden splash-stain, not yet faded, from when they hadn’t realized the Bulgarian hotel’s fireplace had a drop-off at the back enchanted with a Vanishing charm, to sweep the ashes into, and Severus had had to grab to prevent toppling when the back of his cauldron-stand had suddenly ceased to exist.

Here was the old, jagged scar from where his knife had slipped cutting dragonhide, the cut that had slithered raggedly from the heel of his palm so dangerously near his wrist and made him decide a knife that couldn’t rebound while reverberating like a struck bell would be quite a good idea. And here, almost below his cuff, very new indeed, a faintly blue mark that wasn’t really his own. Not a stain or a scar: a sleepy kiss good morning.

He slipped his thumb under the cloth and pressed down, hard and harder, until his bones creaked under the pressure and it finally hurt.

There: he had been sent off from home with a bruise after all, so he was Severus on September first at Hogwarts. There was no need to feel the world had gone all sidewise and inside out and left him trying to breathe treacle. If this was a bruise he was pleased about, it was still a bruise he’d carried here from home. Everything was, after all, if not quite normal, comprehensible.

It was a good job he’d taken that pensieve memory of the boats. It was only fair, what with Ev laying down cunning time-bombs to stop him embarrassing himself by running screaming out of thickly populated rooms. Especially since cooking for him was going to be trickier now.

They were going to have to talk about the cooking.

Severus could feel eyes on him, and he could feel that the whispers were aimed. It was because only a few of the Slytherin children had been given any idea he’d be there, of course. Or, in the case of the younger students who didn’t recognize him, because there was an extra wizard at the staff table, and between Severus and Robards and Trelawney they didn’t know who was there for what purpose. They couldn’t see he was losing his mind.

“What was that you were saying about cobras?” asked Professor Babbling, and she was even kind
enough not do it in a particularly kind voice.

“Ah, yes, snouted cobras,” Severus said in an I-was-interrupted-so-thank-you voice, nodding briskly. He didn’t care if it looked pathetic to anyone who might have been following along, as long as the children taking in their first impressions were fooled. “Strong, as snakes go; they can make a very impressive display, lifting quite a lot of themselves off the ground, and enormous hood flare, as these things go. Big hair, as one might say. Odd creatures, though; did you know they make their nests in termite mounds, as often as not? Abandoned ones; they don’t eat bugs. And they don’t get called king snakes even though they do sometimes eat puff adders. Odd, as I say. And they can be… oversensitive.”

“Not the sort to take being bitten lightly, then,” Babbling suggested dryly.

“Oh, they can fall to other snakes in their own turn,” Severus said, less dry than wry. “Can’t we all? Snouted cobras are considerate, though; they don’t strike the moment they’re frightened. They bluster first. Which, I suppose, is fine if all your challengers are mice.”

Slughorn very nearly breathed pumpkin juice again.

“I never would have pegged you for a gossip,” Babbling noted, grinning at Severus a little.

“I don’t care who Scrimgeour’s dating,” Severus returned, affronted, “it’s a character assessment.”

She grinned a little wider. “Is that what Miss Black told you?”

“And,” he said firmly, “I’m sticking to it.”

Then the doors to the foyer opened again, and the House ghosts preceded the rising first years into the Hall. They circled the High Table, Sir Nicholas and the Friar calling merry hellos to everyone, greeting the Trelawney sparrow warmly and welcoming Severus and Robards back. The Grey Lady floated more ceremoniously, her face, as usual, detached.

The old Baron stopped right in front of Severus, his eyes piercing and steady as the silvery blood throbbed down his doublet.

He didn’t speak; he never did. He didn’t even speak in Severus’s head, which was something of a relief. Everyone was secretly afraid he’d someday do that and either their heads would explode or their brains would dribble out their ears, or that he never spoke because his voice struck all listeners like the imperius, or that he could only speak like a mandrake or a banshee.

There weren’t any words, no compulsion, no shrieking. Severus felt, instead, a great pressure of question around his skull. It was very like the beginning of a migraine, before the pain set in: that sense of weight-all-around. This, though, this was awake and examining him, joyless, endless, implacable. This was the closing-in of a warden’s expectation in a silent language that was an alien to innocents.

Severus half-rose on his hands, and half-bowed. What else was there to do, except run screaming? The Baron gave him the quiet, dull eyes of a Sisyphus long past the agony of hope, but the vice-grip of demand eased. The ghost joined his fellows in front of the High Table.

Severus had always thought that a bit Gryff-centric. Muggleborns were raised to be afraid of ghosts, but had to turn their backs on them while being Sorted. That meant their ability to function while afraid was in the spotlight while Gryffindor’s hat was evaluating them. The effects of peer pressure could look a great deal like courage to people who didn’t think things through properly.
Especially to small children who preferred to tell themselves that they were brave rather than terrified of looking uniquely phasmophobic in front of up to six hundred strangers. It was no wonder Gryffindor tended to get more students than anyone but Hufflepuff, and had always got more of the muggleborns even when that wasn’t such a hotly charged political issue.

“What was that about?” Babbling whispered curiously. “He didn’t do that when I got here. Horace?” Slughorn shrugged.

“The Baron is from a martial age,” Severus said carefully. He felt his mouth try to tug up a little: he’d seen the curiosity in Sluggy’s eyes, and thought the bland shrug and its accompanying mysterious smile under the monster moustache was good policy. “I think he may see you as monks at heart, and outside his particular… idiom.”

The Runes Master frowned. “What do idioms have to do with it?”

“It would take too long to explain,” Severus said, letting his eyes fall in a half-lidded look he hoped would be taken for apology, “and I suspect I’d lose you even before the coconut-bearing songbirds.”

“…What?”

“See?”

“I don’t think I should enjoy being a monk,” said Slughorn cheerfully.

“What about the Trappists?” Severus asked. “You could drown in ale, all day.”

“An excellent point!” Slughorn toasted him with the magically (elvishly) refilled pumpkin juice. “Although I prefer mead.”

By the time the first years had shuffled into the Hall and McGonagall had set the stool down to be stared at apprehensively, half the staff were arguing over whether ale was still in a different category from beer and what hops had to do with it, most of the rest (including the Fat Friar) were arguing whether the quality of alcohol out of Normandy made up for its lack of variety, and Severus and Flitwick were staring at each other in mutual incomprehension over their respective preferences for dry green-apple cider versus sweet scrumpy mulled with cherry malomel and maybe a dash of caramel syrup or butterbeer.

When McGonagall put the Hat on the stool and (rather pointedly) cleared her throat, Severus was in the middle of incredulously demanding, “What are you, half butterfly?” and it rang out into one of those silences that happens in crowds, very clearly.

Unphased, unlike the flushing Severus, Flitwick chirped, “No wings yet, alas, but I’ll let you know if a proboscis develops,” and turned, bright-eyed and unruffled, to the Tartan.

She gave them all the if you’re QUITE finished eyes with which Severus was all too familiar, and turned her gaze to the Hat.

Sitting behind her, Severus forgot his embarrassment in gleefully noticing that she nudged the stool with her foot before it started its stretch-and-develop-features routine. It was so subtle the children couldn’t see it from in front, but she had definitely given it its wake-up cue with a kick.

It wasn’t the same as Narcissa being there, or feeling the irked little jolt on his own ankle. He still felt a bit more at home.
He hadn’t expected Trelawney’s uninformed haiku again, but he had, he realized, unconsciously been expecting the Hat to sing what it had on Robards’ head. And he hadn’t taken into account that, unlike what it had produced for Robards, the Trelawney haiku had not followed the usual formula of friendly free-verse for fluff-brained firsties. Today, the hat sang:

Hail! To the brilliant, and hail to the strong,
Hail, traveled wanderers! Welcome, new friends,
To where, will-ye nill-ye, you’ll always belong.

You fear for who you’ll be, I apprehend,
But history’s ragged form is on your side:
Your gnawing knot of dread I’ll swiftly mend.

Long guardian am I of Hogsmeade’s pride,
Soft-tattered now, a soldier’s helm of old,
Turned confidant and keeper, willing guide.

How came I hence? Their stories long ill-told,
Trailblazers worked and strove in days of yore
The future of their own to raise and mold.

Laud always first: bold, glorious Gryffindor,
Which draws the brash, the advocates, the tough,
The rash, the rascals, and the ever-sore.

Praise next the doughty, oft dismissed as fluff,
Who never tire: stronghold of lambs, rams, bricks
Who hold the world together: Hufflepuff.

To Ravenclaw, proud home of the eccentric
Who love that learning is unlimited,
Surge blazing, ready minds, both deep and quick.

Last, subtlest, most suspect, most misread,
Inspired and thirsty, their memory long:
Sing Slytherin, who, patient, lightly tread.

Take comfort, each, all, in this artifact’s song:
I’ll faithfully send where you’ll grow to belong.

So hail to the hopeful, the just, and the wise,
Hail gentle, raw, resolute, clever.
Be welcome in Hogwarts: by wandwright yours now,
The order here joined yours forever.

Severus stared at the Hat until the tingling on each side of his face told him that all the professors were staring at him. Even some of the ones who’d been at the hell-meeting last night.

He raked his eyes desperately over their faces. Most of his old professors’ were on the dour-to-sardonic scale; he might have translated these as It Had To Pick Someone’s Version, Kid, You’re Not Special. Babbling was scribbling thoughtfully, though, and Flitwick was exchanging smug eyebrow-waggles with Dumbledore’s twinkles while McGonagall looked more annoyed than
Severus had noticed last night. Which also made more sense than it had last night, when Severus hadn't realized how many snide puns about her House he had, apparently, unconsciously slipped in. Digitalin, for once, did not seem personally affronted, and seemed to be subjecting the song to numerological examination, as if it were a piece of homework Severus had turned in about which she intended to be fair-mindedly critical.

To his terror, Professor Sprout’s eyes were too shiny. She wrenched them away from the Hufflepuff table to give him a watery smile, and it didn’t help at all.

As a matter of fact, it was worse than the time she’d enveloped both his shoulders in her hands and told him with overflowing compassion that she expected him to continue his very good written work and if he ever stepped foot in her greenhouses again she’d hang him upside down over the Devil’s Snare, and then told him she knew it wasn’t his fault and hugged him. And he’d had nightmares about that for well over a month.

Mostly about the rest of his professors telling him the same thing and taking his wand away and locking him into the library forever while everyone else got to practice their magic, granted.

He hadn’t made half of anybody else’s greenhouse dry on the stalk over the course of three classes, but still. Nightmares.

And it had been second year, right when they’d started to learn how to use their own magic to compensate for uncooperative soil and weather. Sprout had started them on that quite early in second year, well before winter got its claws in, and so Severus’s only friend had been of the wrong House and gender to be of any help with his sleeping problems.

Besides, the overflowing professorial compassion dripping down on him, especially while being squeezed by someone who was usually so brusquely lets-be-about-it-then-lads, had been traumatic all by itself. He’d had no idea how he was meant to respond to melted looks like that.

Like this. It made all the hair on the back of his neck want to jump through the sky-painted ceiling, and he sympathized with that desire.

The Tartan had her back to them, and had already briskly read out the first name. Thank God.

She was six names in before the hat first sent a boy to Hufflepuff. He hadn’t taken half a step towards the table before it erupted: first one voice, then a dozen, and then the lot of them, shouting, “Bricks, bricks, BRICKS!”

Professor McGonagall shot Professor Sprout a look Severus didn’t see. Somewhat reluctantly, Severus thought, Sprout gave her table the sort of sweeping gaze that nearly-enough met everyone’s eyes, and held up a quiet hand.

They subsided, and if there was an occasional whispered “Real bricks!” when a new Hufflepuff was sorted, it didn’t get louder and no one stopped it.

To Severus’s annoyance, about halfway through, Septimus Travers in fourth year, who Severus recalled as not so much malicious as easily bored and convinced he was funny, took it upon himself to baa. Severus might have been wrong about him. Too many people sitting at this very table had thought the same about ‘Frivolous’ Black. Refusing to admit he’d been wrong about a charming bully was a mistake Severus was resolved to never, ever make.

There was a collective hiss from the Hufflepuff table—not a snakelike one. Not even a weasel-family hiss. It was pure indignation.
Since Slughorn only sighed, Severus, more annoyed yet, cleared his throat quietly and caught Travers’s eye. Travers Looked Innocent at him, to which Severus responded with a heavy dose of Deeply Unimpressed with a healthy side of Come On Tim You Know Better.

Travers turned—apologetically, when you could read the muted body language of even a fourth-year Slytherin—to the Hufflepuff table, and the girl who’d just sat down at it with a blotchily humiliated face. Considerably more loudly than he’d baaed, he declared, “Real bricks!”

Severus nodded at him, just a little, sharply.

Then the Baron nodded at Severus. Just a little. Sharply.

Theoretically, there was a table to duck under, and he could probably sink through the floor and into the kitchen if he really tried, but he was in front of all these people. If he imagined all his blood shooting into his feet, maybe it wouldn’t pound out through the pores of his face and paint the fine unbleached linen of the tablecloth. He felt it was already.

“Well, that’s more than I expected of him,” Slughorn said happily, aside to Severus, his little gooseberry eyes still fixed on the Sorting. “A bit quick off the mark, Travers—be sure you keep an eye on him during classes, m’boy! But he’s a good sort as these things go. I’d invite him to Club meetings if I could only be sure my drapes would end the evening the same shade they started. You know how it is. But he’s a clever lad; his uncle’s rising, I think, and since all the children are at school his mother’s got in on the ground floor for a magazine I think will do very well, very well indeed!”

Severus stared at him, trying to decide if it was even possible that Slughorn had missed all of that except for the bits that had actually come out of Travers’s mouth. Surely not. Slughorn was saving face, that was all. Pretending he’d passively delegated, rather than failed to act. Or pretending nothing had happened at all. Just pretending. Wasn’t he?

He hadn’t made up his mind before Babbling asked what magazine and Digitalin leaned behind Sprout to hiss shh at them all.

Severus’s gaze was caught on its way to her by a pair of bespectacled eyes that weren’t even twinkling, they were approving of him so hard, and he very nearly did dive under the table.

Now the blue eyes were suspecting he was crazy, which was more usual. He could deal with that. Lungs functioned properly and everything.

And now they were sad, ugh. What was wrong with people.

Twinkles back, this time with a conspiratorial flavor, Dumbledore mercifully looked away from Severus and stood while the House ghosts joined their tables, creating cold spots and not-merely-physical discomfort, but also the first step to newcomers knowing their hearths.

Just like always, Dumbledore beamed at everyone (Severus could see it in the windows at the back of the hall, and belatedly realized he’d have been able to watch the Sortees’ faces, if he’d been paying attention. Maybe even read their lips. Damn. Well, that was what pensieves were for, although he was dubious about having time for it) and spread his arms. “Welcome to another year at Hogwarts,” he announced.

Severus waited with morbid fascination, along with everyone from third year up (the rising second years often still hoped their greeting might have been an anomaly), for this year’s ‘few words.’

As pleased with himself as ever, Dumbledore declared, “Sully! Cuckoo! Madcap! Swallow! Thank
Sometimes Severus just thought the welcome words were weird. Sometimes he got a sense that Dumbledore meant something. This was one of those times, and one of the times that it chilled him.

Off at the other end of the table, someone Severus barely recognized, almost certainly the Muggle Studies teacher, snickered sotto voce, just audibly into the traditionally stunned is-he-mental silence of the firsties. “African or European swallow?”

Severus’s mouth twitched, just a little, but he had a sinking feeling in his gut that it was a distraction from something that was already being too universally ignored.

Of course, his brain told his gut, twining with impatience and irritation, if what Dumbledore had to say was as important as all that, if it was important for anyone to understand, he might consider just saying it.

After more food than a reasonable mind could take in (the vast majority of which he ignored) and one shortcut (courtesy of Phineas Nigellus Black’s offhand decision, several years ago, to rescue a hounded Slytherin from his own descendant), Severus was home.

It wasn’t his new-and-now home, his haven. Neither was it the one they’d made theirs, the one that was respite, the one they were forcing Evan’s old cage to become.

This (sorry, Mam) was his first home. This was the perilous, promising hearth-inferno that had forged him. The one that had, for a thousand years, hatched and hammered out the ones who went out determined to remake the world—and often failed—and sometimes didn’t.

This, however few knew or noticed, was the center and sprouting-point of magical Britain. With firelight flickering over him and making it hard to see the lazy fish through the great bubble-window, surrounded by earth and stone on every other side, Severus breathed what felt, for one mad moment, like the only true air he’d had in years.

He knew it for nonsense even while the feeling swamped him, but couldn’t disavow it.

The wave of black woolens swallowing wooden benches well-polished by a thousand years of variably-miniature arses had rocked Severus. The orange glow here, flickering over wrought ironwork, grey marble, and forest-green velvet, picking out new fires in some two-dozen pairs of solemn, unblinking, unliving amber eyes, seized like roots at something in his chest and lulled his anxious pulse.

The left one. The pulse on the right had been reassuringly and strongly placid since well before lunch. He hadn’t given in and reached up to touch it yet, especially since his hand would feel nothing but his waistcoat if he did. What he felt was an enchanted echo, no mere illusion, but it wasn’t as if Evan’s heart physically beat inside him and fueled his blood.

He did put his palm against the wall. Granite was the most common sort of wall in the in the castle, but mainly in the halls and storage areas, and places like the kitchen. The areas where students sat down were more finely finished—occasionally in marble, as here, where someone had felt it appropriate, but mostly in panels to be covered in wallpaper. Silk wallpaper in the common rooms, Severus’s Ravenclaw friends had told him.

And, hiding with false modesty in corners, or in the crowning in classrooms, you could usually find a small etching of a boar on a field shaped like a five-petaled rose, feet planted firmly, eyes keenly
facing forward. Severus didn’t know if there had ever been paint on those etchings, but he knew that, as far as the man with the chisel (or wand) had been concerned, that boar was a snowy, stubborn, skeletal white, the wild rose behind it as blood-black as the drowning, super-fertilized earth of civil war.

Mottos had once been a personal matter, like monograms, and the families that had come together after ripping a nation apart had each burned through many. When people had stopped needing (and painting) their own shields as tools for self-defense and self-identification on confusing battlefields, heraldry had become more about history than personal accomplishment. Mottos had become things that Houses were stuck with.

Severus considered that the Prince choice to call upon their Gaunt ancestry in picking their motto proved two things, or nearly-proved enough to make a working theory. First, that the Princes were as snooty as any other purebloods (which he really knew already). Second, that whoever had picked it knew what gauntlets were (saw them every day, most likely) and was genetically responsible for what Severus’s friends called his alleged sense of humor.

He suspected, however, that the Hogwarts headmistress at the time, who had known her runework well, had deliberately turned a blind eye to the Neville contractor from York signing his cousin’s arms in graffiti wherever he worked. She must have known that what he was etching, in room after room after room until arithmantic resonance began to kick in from sheer force of repetition, meant safe in my hands.

If you read between Bagshot’s lines, the only other reason for allowing it had been quite stupid. In sum, one of Severus’s de Medici ancestors, during the family’s exile in Italy, had made a stink about his precious pearl (oh, well, all right, and her brothers) going off to school in a giant stone pigsty. Since his ancestrally-English mistress had insisted and Italy had been extremely dangerous at the time whether or not one was magical, or blue-blooded, or wealthy, he had resolved the problem by throwing money at it.

Headmistress Skanderberg hadn’t particularly cared what school Aurelia Prince went to, but she’d been perfectly happy to take the doting papa’s money. She’d even used (again, according to Bagshot) at least 80% of it to renovate the common rooms and hospital wing and dormitories, as he’d intended.

The doting papa hadn’t thought about the Great Hall, or the classrooms.

This shouldn’t have surprised anyone.

Severus had seen Evan’s paintings of Aedis Hekate Minerva, the Roman magical school. In bad weather, Italian students did weird and humidity-defying things with floating, spinning wreaths of rosemary and lavender that, apparently, insects hated. If things ever got so bad they had to have classes inside, Ev had said, they had arrangements with the theaters and cafes. You could live like that, Ev had sighed wistfully, when you weren’t subjected to British weather.

(Severus had called him a silver-spooled Hampshire milksop who didn’t appreciate what was in front of his easel. Hogsmeade weather was unpolluted, bracing, moody, and gorgeous. Evan had protested himself extremely appreciative, as long he could appreciate it from the warm side of the window.)

Most of the furniture from that donation had long since been replaced—in various pushes for what was considered at their times to be modernization, and from damage caused by plagues of magical pests like doxies and children. Severus didn’t think that the current Slytherin sofas and chairs, for example, were much older than his own… well, than Mrs. Prince. Whatever she was to him.
He stroked a plush green armrest, idly trailing his fingers down to thumb over the smooth polished-amber eyes, for luck, and felt a smile ghost over his lips at the memory of Potter and Pettigrew high-tailing it out the door, committing a noise far too high-pitched to be called yelling.

You could survive coming into the Slytherin Common Room without the password, if you could find a way. After all, the House was inclined to reward both competent sneakiness and excellent social networking. Just as it was inclined to let stupid Slytherins who let themselves be spied on reap the benefit of a learning experience.

But Godric help any fool so arrogant as to abuse the hospitality of Slytherin, so clumsy as to try to directly harm one of his own in his own halls.

Severus had really treasured that squeal.

Even if, sounding more Pettigrewish than Potterly, it might not have been so very hard-come-by. At the time, shaking, putting out fire in his hair, with the chandelier spewing purple goo that had half-eaten his only pair of boots, it had been soul’s balm.

He hadn’t despised Pettigrew for squealing. There were a plentitude of other good reasons for despising Pettigrew, but abject horror, when mostly-metal snakes were springing out at you from the chairs and sofa-arms and the fire-grill, was pure good sense. Severus had just been pleased the lump hadn’t left a biohazard on the rug.

Most of the time the fangs on the chair-leg serpents hooked into the carpet for stability, disappearing entirely when the chairs were intentionally moved, placed on a hard surface, or swung at heads by angry Averys. Severus had examined them, though, and they were sharp. Even if the subtler, more serious protections on the room had decided the Gryffs weren’t worth troubling about, the obvious-to-anyone-with-eyes ones were nothing to take lightly.

These guardian seats were new by the standards of Hogwarts, but the writing-tables were in the same closely-carved style as the heavy Slytherin bedsteads, and the slightly hypnotic grey swirls of the interior walls breathed history that reached out like family into Severus’s veins.

This hadn’t meant anything to him as a child, when he had no leisure to care for anything but his own survival. Coming back to this marble, though, felt like Mam looking up calmly from the mending on a summer evening to give him a back, are you nod that was pleased enough to see him but not particularly exercised about it. Of course he was back home, where else would he be, and had he brought that stitchwort she’d sent him for?

Here and now, Severus didn’t know what he was meant to have brought. But the nagging of expectation hadn’t evaporated when the Baron turned aside, just because the weight of that empty gaze had trailed away. He could still feel it in his soles, like the itchy wrongness of soil across the sea, the slightly-dragged sun-warmth of Rosier hall, the sullen, patient four-hundred-year-old fury sizzling out of Pendle. It was strongest on the hill, not an hour’s walk from the grubby, choked despair of Spinner’s Row. Pendle Hill, where witches and muggles alike had fallen on each other in the storm of petty betrayals that had lit the match of the Separation. Very much, in fact, like that: something fuming, something waiting.

Only this weight was looking at him like it was his problem, which the Witch’s Walk at Pendle had never done. Not even when he took Lily out for a two-day’s tramp through the Bowland back in the summer after second year and lay on the moor outside Lancaster castle, where ten condemned ‘witches’ had proven themselves to be either muggles or unbelievably pig-headed by successfully dying on loops of rough rope with plenty of warning.
Unless they’d faked it, like Mata Hari or Wendelin Flinders, to set off a revolution—which the outrage certainly had done.

Pendle Hill hadn’t even told him she was his to solve or sooth when he’d dug his fingers into her earth and closed his eyes, just roiled and ached and hammered out danger through his blood, sang a warning into his magic, tolled out the centuries-old peal of run, run, there is no justice, take your freedom, take your brothers, take your sisters and run that had struck like a gavel and dropped a Veil all over the land. Britain’s Carthage, maybe: blood-salted earth, blind to any future less bleak.

But Hogwarts still saw a future, still wanted something. Wanted a very great deal, and he didn’t know what.

He could feel it when he opened doors, when he brushed the walls, when the Baron looked at (through) him. It was that feeling of I Know I Shall Have A Cold Tomorrow, of already being miserable, exhausted, and contagious, but not quite having symptoms yet. It was that feeling where the throat and nose had not yet begun to suffer, but a heavy aching had already set up camp in every bone and spread a fog throughout the brain.

Hogwarts was like that; probably every old castle was. Its bones were deep, sensitive, one with the ley of the land, but centuries of repairs and renovations had layered them with younger, bolder, brasher stones.

Severus had always found it reassuring to look through the common-room window. If you didn’t get distracted by the lake-life swimming by, you could see where the marble changed to granite. Where the castle became harder, rougher, scarred and speckled, a promise of strength under the style and shine of Salazar’s silver.

The school could hang its bright banners in bold, naïve primary colors, but its every wall, its every stone was shaded in steel. Other rooms might be paneled in wood, plastered or papered over for cheer, but they were supported and shielded by the strength of the grey.

Red-gold might reign over the hills for a few weeks, when the students were forming their impressions. That would start soon. And it would leave an impression even when its true strength was gone: that was the deception and the magic of glory. It was powerful magic, powerful as a good illusion always was.

As a good story always was. Stronger than cold iron, until it was questioned.

But in winter the children looked out onto white snow, and in summer onto grass of a dozen shades of green, and all year round changeable shades of silver shared the sky peacefully with brutal, tranquil blues over this place of learning, peppered the broad planetary shield of den-dark black at night, omnipresent, never failing.

And most of the clueless lumps so fiercely guarded with this primal prismagery just thought the campus was pretty.

If they were muggles, it would just have been pretty. But centuries of Hogwarts wizards had been beaten over the head with the meaning of every color but pink and purple, had those stories drilled and dreamed into them. No British muggle could see the color red without the silence at the back of their mind whispering blood and love, no Chinese muggle without knowing they were seeing luck, and no British wizard would ever see the color without feeling (and loving, or resenting) that spark of courage. This was a knowing beyond thought.

Magic was will formed by power, shaped by belief. There were stories you heard, and there were
stories your skin breathed in.

‘Wands are necessary,’ for example. Wizards believed that one like nobody’s business, these days, even though everyone knew there’d been a time of staves, before wands, and a time of magic before the first druidical staff. Not all countries’ wizards used either, even today. But wizards who believed they couldn’t do magic without wands couldn’t.

Severus was inclined to suspect the goblins of a long-term snow job to make the stupid humans reliant on easily breakable sticks. The way they kept ostensibly starting wars over wand-rights and ending them when ceded other rights and properties that were definitely not wands was… notable.

Severus had grown up in a Muggle house and neighborhood, according to the Ministry: in a house where it was illegal for a minor to use a wand. He loved the swift sugar-rush exhilaration of wanded magic as much as any other kind, but the original reason for that law was that wands were obvious and muggles understood them, couldn’t easily explain away a wand making bright lights that did something unnatural.

Severus could respect that. It was hard, when home was dangerous, but it made sense. However, he had never, not once in his life, never had any intention of being a brainless, domesticated rabbit in the modern Ministry’s shiny, not-even-pointed hat. If someone wanted to act as though a rule meant more than it said—meant no magic when it said no wands—they could only fool the sheep who let themselves be cowed instead of bloody reading something.

So now it was his penknife he took out instead of his wand, although he hadn’t really planned on doing anything with either. He was moved to it; it felt right. That was all.

(Later, in Devon, the teacher he called Madam Nell owled to ask him to please re-write his letter in more subdued handwriting with more traditional capitalization, or perhaps to come to tea instead, as she could only think he’d written that a pail of rooks had processed his bran, and she did not believe, herself, that either corvids or chess pieces had very much interest in grains.)

He put one knee on the floor in front of the sofa. He’d dozed and read and worked on it a thousand times or near, with red-gold waves spilling over his hips and cornsilk pooling on his shoulder. a puddle of children and their familiars scritching quietly with their quills and playing gobstones and go all around him. He curved a hand over the plush green armrest and murmured, “I know you, you old serpent.”

It might have been his imagination, but he thought something flickered in the pale amber eyes. More likely something had, and it was only the firelight.

He took out his penknife anyway, pricked his thumb, and wrote four runes on the stone next to the valuable carpet, so ornate that the eyes never quite bothered to take in its details.

His blood was sucked, siphoned, breathed in, one oath at a time. Othala, Logr, Tiwaz, Algiz: it was his promise, and Slytherin had heard it. Flowing hearth of mysteries, home and heritage, I will shield you with reason and honor will lead you.

Just as he’d felt a pressure of expectation when the Baron looked him in the eye, he now felt a strong sense of being wearily eyeballed by a plague victim being told they’d feel all better if they just rubbed themselves with birds or drank emerald powder and wee.

“Er?” Evan would ask later, one quizzical eyebrow up, when Severus tried to explain.

“I swear, Ev,” Severus told him, pouring himself a measure of headache draught, “I could
practically hear Salazar himself telling me, ‘untwéolic, onæpling, sigorspéd gesundigan.’”

“You thought,” Evan translated slowly, “you heard Salazar Slytherin saying, ‘sure thing, kiddo, good luck with that.’”

“I didn’t hear anything,” Severus corrected, raising his chin defiantly, “it’s what he meant.”

He didn’t have time to sit and shiver at the time, though, as would have felt fitting, or even eye the corners of the room warily. The blooded stone had only just dried grey again when he heard heels ringing towards the door.

The cut he’d pricked into his thumb burned suddenly, but not with pain. Like Pepper-up, or brandy, or purpose.

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[1] Severus was muggle-raised enough to have breathed tea the first time he’d seen Damocles Belby change out of his lab gear into a set of wired petticoats, and had then been subjected to a five-minutes lecture on Why Robes Are Poorly Designed Tripping Hazards Designed Only For Broom Flight and One Should Only Ever Wear These And Trousers For Walking.

Severus had won that argument by handing Belby a cup of tea and a book, turning on the daylight-quenching spell in the ceiling but not the moonlight-emulator, and saying, “Stairs.”

At least, he’d thought he had, but then Belby came in the next day with the same sort of petticoats, only six inches shorter. At which point Belby’s apprentice admitted that all major safety concerns had been addressed as long as nobody tried to brew in the things and they were properly enchanted, and got on with his life.

Chapter End Notes

Notes: For those who, like Nell (and most of everybody) find Severus's gothic-chicken-scratch calligraphy a little difficult, he meant a pile of rocks had possessed his brain.

The Dear Asphodel segment riffed off a (possibly tongue-in-cheek) prompt Eilinel gave me in a comment here. It's not quite an answer to that lovely prompt, but there wasn't really anyone who could plausibly write that question in. Send in a letter for her that I can use in context, or a prompt I might be able to similarly spring off, and I might use it!

Normal reviews are also deeply appreciated and day-improving and sometimes prompt me to write/rewrite/integrate edits/post!
Snakes are very dangerous, absolutely. Can be lethal. But it's not because reptile-brains are capable of plotting, ok? I don't care how calculating their cold, beady little black eyes look, reptile-brains cannot do that. It's because sometimes, when they have to, on pure instinct, they just do shit.

FAST.

**Chapter Summary**

**Chapter Notes**

**Warnings**: some dark-but-not-black-or-deep magic which would make every single student at Hogwarts from now until 1998 run away screaming if they knew (because any good Severus has a little Esme in there somewhere). Also, Proto-Professor Snape is, as always, a little... er... confused about how authority works?

**Notes**: This post is very, very late, and I am sorry, especially because the last chapter broke where it did. There was RL stuff taking up a lot of my attention, and when it started to settle the public transportation/working with many humans combo whomped me upside the head with the Winter Grues. All is fine, but I didn't have enough mental energy left over for fanwork for a few weeks there. :/

I would also like to note that this chapter benefited markedly from being beta-read by plutoplex. Call-outs were made that prevented characters from making bad and OOC mistakes. Many thanks!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Letting instinct move him, Severus surged calmly up and back, melting into the shadows by the mantle. He cast no spells to conceal himself; he didn’t have to. The stones were all hard angles, but so was he. With a perfect fit, who needed mortar? He belonged to these walls, he was part of them, and there was no reason for anyone to look in his direction and see anything but wall.

He probably couldn’t have done it in one of Evan’s waistcoats. Or with paler hair. But then, he told himself, someone who routinely let themselves stand out brightly wouldn’t have been, by nature, a part of these walls.

It was more of a surprise that he’d had this long to greet the old place in peace than it was to hear the elephantine horde approach. Still, it wasn’t merely due to his shortcut. The prefects would have taken them the front way, the formal way, so as to point out where the Potions classroom and Slughorn’s office were.

Also to watch them talk to each other and start to get a read on what had happened over the summer and what the firsties were like, if this year’s prefects were any good. But officially to show them Sluggy’s office. There would have been questions slowing them down, Severus supposed; he
might not have noticed the delay as a student, being either engaged in it himself or in too much pain to count time.

“Well!” Slughorn beamed, rubbing his hands in front of the fire, when the common room was packed full of fifty or sixty pointy black hats.

He’d only started to escort the incoming students personally to the common room in Severus’s sixth year. Severus didn’t know whether it had been his own idea or not; he knew Narcissa had been busy that summer with more things than securing Lucius Malfoy. Even with more than the high drama of her cousin’s slow and noisy exit from their family, and trying to keep Regulus in one piece during the painful process.

Severus hadn’t been on good enough terms with Lily to ask whether McGonagall had made any similar changes after that. Or even to ask her to pass the beetle eyes. He could ask her now.

Come to think of it, he could probably ask the Tartan.

If he felt especially suicidal.

“Well well well,” Slughorn repeated, looking over the fresh (and, in many cases, saucy) little faces with an air of proud satisfaction. “Home sweet home! I’m most extraordinarily pleased to welcome all of you to Slytherin. I, of course, am Horace Slughorn, and I shall be your Potions Master as well as your Head of House. You older students will remember the young gentleman who’ll be assisting me, this year, both in looking after you all and in class, a very promising—bless me, where has he got to. Any of you lot seen Severus?” he asked the older years, who all shook their heads.

Severus took note of the ones who actually turned their heads from side to side and either needed postural tutoring or were being, for some reason, overly dramatic on purpose. He didn’t hold his breath as people looked around to look for him. Walls might not breathe much, but they certainly didn’t stop breathing.

“Dear me,” Slughorn sighed. “I expect he’s back finishing the inventory. My fault, I should have been more explicit. Ah well.” Some of the older students exchanged quietly amused glances. Severus interpreted these to mean of course Snape ran off after supper to stick his head in a cauldron instead of saying hello to anyone, what did Walrusface expect?

Slughorn shook his head, like a sea lion sloughing off water. He went on with his pretty little speech about tradition, ambition, house unity, and looking forward to inviting some, perhaps many or even all of them to a few little parties throughout the year where they might meet shining stars of the Wizarding World such as Flibbertywhoozit and Severuswasn’tlistening and Severus didn’t care, because Slytherin was the house that most helped its eager young thingies to rise very high despite the fact that snakes didn’t have bloody feet, let alone wings.

Except for occamies and quetzalcoatlts. And maybe even wyverns and dragons, if your taxonomy was more traditional than accurate, although Severus was fairly sure that having even one set of feet excluded a reptile (but never a primate) from snakedom, if not serpenthood. Nobody thought millipedes were snakes, and their feet were so small the things just looked furry. For that matter, slugs had only one foot, unpaired and only queasily symmetric, and that kept them from even being wyrms.

Severus caught himself getting bored and impatient, and reminded himself that walls did not experience those feelings. There was a second heartbeat in the right side of his chest, slow and steady and even (walls were always unexcitable and stolid). He told himself that it was the heartbeat of Slytherin stones, and sank into it.
Evan would have eaten his supper too, by now—alone. This was completely unacceptable. No wonder his pulse was so bored Severus could mistake it for the slow atomic breath of centuries-old rocks. And Severus was supposed to sit at the High Table during all the meals. They were definitely going to have to talk about this. Some other time, when Severus was a wizard and not a stretch of shadowed marble.

Eventually Slughorn allowed that while he knew they’d be anxious to unpack and settle in, he might take one or two questions, and one of the sixth years stepped forwards.

“If you don’t mind my saying so, sir, we missed you on the train,” said Morcant Selwyn. He’d been an obsequious little tit as a second-year, Severus recalled, and no evidence of improvement was yet forthcoming. He was frankly astonished Selwyn hadn’t been made a prefect, even if he wasn’t from the main branch of the Selwyns, what with all the fawning.

Was that unfair? Maybe that was unfair. Slughorn liked to be flattered, but he not the way he liked to eat disgusting candied fruit. He liked it the way Narcissa liked dancing: as often as possible, but only with people who were good at it, darling, and not mechanically-competent rusty-jointed puppets irrationally afraid of my slippers, so why don’t you go let Rodolphus enthuse at you about that Irish swamp stuffed with mummified kings he found last week before he starts unnerving a Ministry Hufflepuff, there’s a pet.

So Severus was probably being unfair; Selwyn was an incompetent flatterer and Slughorn wouldn’t have encouraged him. There’d been a set of twins in his year from a Nottingham family that could compete in status with a lesser scion of the Sacred Twenty-Eight, at least one of whom had seemed sensible, but Severus was never that lucky and the sensible one was the girl, anyway.

It occurred to him that the only students whose snake-names he knew were Cleo Blakeney, a few of Selwyn’s contemporaries, and about half of the seventh-year; it took an Effort Of Personality to get dubbed before fourteenish. Blast. As if learning their given names wasn’t going to be enough of a nuisance.

“Alas, alas,” Slughorn smiled. “Other duties, m’boy, though I was sorry to miss it! Still, I shall get to know all you young fellows in good time,” he addressed the firsties. “Yes, Corban, m’boy.”

“Sir,” said Yaxley, not fawningly, “what exactly do you mean, Snape will be your assistant?”

“Master Snape, Corban,” Slughorn corrected him lightly, taking no notice of all the pureblood brows darkening.

Severus reminded himself that walls neither rolled their eyes nor sighed heavily in frustration. Muggles thought they had it bad, drawing no linguistic line between medical doctors and the other sorts. They thought it was confusing to know that the same word had, at different points, been applied to married gentlewomen, professional witches of good repute, and female pimps. They ought to try using the same word for nearly-feudal overlords as close enough to Roman patrons as made no difference, learned craftsmen, social-climbing shopkeepers who didn’t see why they shouldn’t get a grand-sounding title when their witch peers did, specialized schoolteachers, and unfashionably posh little boys in short pants. Concurrently. While, due to the presumed-powerful futures of said nasty little boys and the solitary splendor of the usual school in question, liberally mixing connotations as well as paving the road for deadly insults and worse puns.

Although, as far as this sort of thing went, English still would have had to wake up five thousand years earlier in the morning to be as bad as Chinese. Severus would be forever grateful to Míngyùe’s grandmother for enabling him to converse with the best herbalists on the planet on their
own terms, but his entire NEWT year hadn’t given him as many headaches as his first summer under Madam Chang’s tutelage.

Of course, he’d also been studying under Luke’s dueling tutor and critiquing other people’s wares. The fumes from the Unblending Potion and the rain of concussions probably hadn’t helped.

“Severus,” Slughorn scolded lightly on, “has attained his mastery with the Most Extraordinary Society of Potioneers, and you must use his title just as you would with any of your professors.”

“But what’s he doing here, sir?” Yaxley persisted. The wall under discussion didn’t miss that he hadn’t agreed.

“Master Snape will be assisting me in various ways,” Slughorn said vaguely, “while finishing his research for his M.B.”

“I thought you said he had his mastery,” said Linnet Stinchcombe suspiciously. “Er, sir.”

“Ah-ha,” Slughorn waggled his finger at her, “clever girl! Yes, a witch from a potioneering family will want to know this; a Mastery in Potions, as bestowed by the Society, is quite sufficient for youngsters like yourselves to get work brewing for St. Mungo’s, or anywhere else on these isles. But if you want credentials that will bring you recognition overseas, it’s best to also take a Mastery in Brewery from the International Association of Master-Brewers. Well, I say best,” he amended, wrinkling his nose a bit. “They do take themselves awfully seriously over there, and it’s a great deal of trouble. Still, most of the serious experimenters do at least consider making the attempt.”

Severus didn’t think that IAMB people were anywhere near as stultifyingly self-important as the brewers he’d met at the MESoP conference who’d never stepped outside of Britain except, perhaps, on holiday from their tedious jobs brewing the same four commercial potions week-in and week-out. Walls, he reminded himself, did not have opinions.

Not even about Slytherin role models who derided ambition out of the professional equivalent of nationalism. Walls had no words they wished to have with humans, and certainly did not spring off their floors to bite said humans in the face for arrant smallmindedness.

He got the feeling that the bits-of-wall that were bigger and older than himself felt they did have opinions, thank you. He also got the feeling that once he stopped being a nice, calm, stone-blooded wall, he might have to shriek and run in circles for a while over that.

Outside.

“But what will he be doing?” demanded Yaxley. “Teaching classes? Telling us all what’s wrong with our spelling?” This got a bit of a laugh from the older years, but Yaxley just went on, reddening. “He can’t take points or give detentions, can he, sir?”

“As to teaching classes, we may consider that in the future,” Sluggy said, starting to look a bit uncomfortable. Walls didn’t thunk their heads into the stones behind them, so Severus didn’t, but he could see control slipping away from those pudgy fingers. “Tutoring, certainly. As to points and detentions, we shall have to see how things go! I think you all ought to consider him, yes, let me see, a sort of over-prefect, as my teaching assistant.”

“Excuse me,” said Najwa Shafiq, rather chilly. “I don’t recall being told there would be a new House position ascendant over the lead prefects. Did anyone inform you, Yaxley?”

Her fellow-prefect wasn’t listening. He was too busy being appalled and blurting out, “You can’t put a mudblood over us all!”
At least, he started to shout that. It ended up in just a shout, and a muffled one at that. Enunciation, as Yaxley and so many other rebellious firsties who’d thought Evan could be walked over and Narcissa was an unprotected porcelain princess had learned years ago, was awfully difficult while plastered face-first to the ceiling with shadowy cobwebs.

Severus stepped away from the fireplace, his wand loosely at the ready in the hand. “Who else can’t bear not to be set above all Slytherin?” he inquired softly, combing his eyes over them all. He didn’t challenge Najwa specifically. There was no capital in making a cold-blooded witch lose face. Besides, her problem wasn’t necessarily with him personally; no sense in changing that.

“Good Merlin, Severus,” Slughorn half-gasped and half-glowered, as annoyed with Severus as he was surprised (nothing new there), “when o—that is, please don’t overreact, m’boy.”

“Certainly not, Professor,” Severus agreed, nodding cordially at him without taking his eyes from the students.

Up on the ceiling, Yaxley mumbled something, loudly and angrily.

“The rattlesnake who strikes in silence and cares for the young,” Severus told the otherwise silent room, very quietly, like the prefect he’d never been, “is the mountain diamond-back, *Crotalus oreganus cerberus*. These rattlers are not temperamental, but their strike reaches far and is lethal, and they don’t always choose to give warning. When they have lost their patience, their victims may never know until it’s too late.”

He smiled, except for his eyes, and his voice hardened. “You will address your Housemaster with respect, whether or not you yet understand why it is deserved. You will represent him, and your families, with distinction and decorum.”

“I think that means ‘watch your language, Yaxley,’” Linnet Stinchcombe posited innocently at the ceiling.

“Interrupting is also discouraged, Miss Stinchcombe,” Severus shot her down so Yaxley wouldn’t feel obliged later. He didn’t, however, make his tone as chilly as he might have. Dry, mainly, which all the students who knew anything would just take as Snape being Snape, no special reprimand. Which they would further take to understand that she was by-Salazar right they should watch their language.

He studied them all, eyes hooded. No one looked inclined to hex him, so he went on, what the hell. “My name, as many of you know, is Severus Snape, and anyone who calls me either Mister or Master will become intimately acquainted with the insides of several cauldrons.”

A number of pureblood foreheads relaxed at being told they didn’t have to call him Master, so Severus also relaxed, at least a little. At the same time, a lot of less-proud older students bright enough to realize he wasn’t inviting them to address him informally were wincing at the thought of all the scrubbing that might be in their futures due to lack of an acceptable choice. Meanwhile, the firsties were blanching under the assumption that he meant to chop them up to simmer.

Most of him flinched at how he’d semi-inadvertently painted himself, but a corner of his soul he didn’t really want to discuss with Evan or Reggie or Lily (Narcissa would understand it instinctively, and would need no telling) was rather cheered by their horrified little faces.

He told himself that he was pleased because it meant they’d give him less trouble than they might otherwise have done. He didn’t quite manage to convince himself. The huge eyes and dropped jaws under the big pointy hats were hilarious, he wanted a picture to savor forever, and an honest person
would have admitted that was all there was to it.

“Apothecary,” he went on, looking seriously at the more blood-conscious older students, the ones who didn’t personally hate him but had, a moment ago, Had A Problem, “might be somewhat old-fashioned, but I can live with it if you can.”

He eyed Slughorn, half droll and half sour. “My position here is intended primarily to enable my own research, and yet I have no doubt that an incipient acquaintance with Madam Pomfrey’s inventory will make the title relatively appropriate.”

While Severus checked to see which of the first and second years didn’t look confused by the long words, and which of the third and fourth years did, Slughorn widened his eyes innocently. “Why, I’m sure Madam Pomfrey and I shall greatly appreciate the assistance, Severus, although it is a bit cumbersome to say, isn’t it?”

Severus shrugged. “Madam Chang tells me I may introduce myself as Yīyàozhé without embarrassment, if not Zhōngyīshī, but I’ve no pressing desire to hear the title clumsily butchered, and I’m not an herbalist in the English sense of the word. Braumeister would be technically accurate, as I have my Society of Potioneers mastery, but since IAM and B has adopted the title as their own to bestow and I do count what they offer worth the trouble, I’m willing to accede to their sensibilities in the matter. It’s the best of a distinctly limited set of options.”

“Not to worry, not to worry,” Slughorn assured him, but actually he was looking at a few of the third and fourth-years, rather sternly for him. “I’m sure that the respect I expect every member of our House to show every member of the staff will do in most circumstances.”

Ah, Severus noted resignedly. There’d been another wave of Filch-baiting. Lovely.

“But indeed,” Slughorn added meaningfully, allowing a flash of the morning’s annoyance to show again as he turned back to Severus, “I’m sure Madam Pomfrey will appreciate your offer, as I do. After all, anything we don’t have to buy commercially is a great saving for the budget.”

Severus considered his options briefly, decided he wasn’t going to make it to morning without one of the older students telling everyone he was a galumphing battering-ram of a cobra anyway, and said bluntly, “Quite. Regardless, I’m not sorry.”

Some hopeful soul said er? in a doomed effort to provoke an explanation.

Severus continued to lock eyes uncompromisingly with his Housemaster who, eventually, sighed and warned him, “You will be when the first cauldron melts.”

“I won’t be,” he said stubbornly, “when Lovegood solves the side effect problems, or makes it cost-effective.”

“I never took you for an optimist, Severus,” Slughorn tutted fondly, shaking his head.

“I’m not an optimist,” Severus corrected, revolted. “I’m merely keenly aware that, in our project, Safety in the person of myself has left, and Sanity in the person of Patil is sleep-deprived with newborn twins. Which leaves our remaining labmate, who is as mad as a spun-sugar cauldron, with no one to restrain her inspiration.”

After a moment, Shafiq cleared her throat. In a holding-on-to-sanity-by-the-fingernails tone, she said, “Welcome back to Slytherin, Apothecary Snape.”

He smiled an only moderately cool and scaly little smile at her, and commented, “When you have
graduated, Lead-Prefect Shafiq, you will find that, just as Slytherin never leaves you, neither will you ever leave it.”

He didn’t have a real cobra’s hood, of course, and unlike that pompous ox Scrimgeour’s, his hair was unworthy to serve. Sometimes, though, he felt that the muscles around his neck and temples might be, separately from himself, a bit delusional in this regard. They occasionally, without his conscious direction, tried very hard.

More than half the time he ended up with a headache from that, but you couldn’t argue with results. Ev said it didn’t give him a hood-flare so much as do something glittery to his eyes. Which looked ludicrous when Ev tried to do it to show him, but that was because Evan made sure to look like a fluffy-Puff.

Admittedly, the hood-flaring thing had been known to hurtle Severus headlong into fist and wand-fights with people looking for an excuse, but a taipan like Najwa Shafiq could be relied upon to withdraw her challenge and sit back for a while to observe while stupider children tried him. He’d been careful not to make her lose face; or at, least, not so much that she was obliged to bite it back from him right away. He’d give it to her freely, if she let him. She was clever enough to know he’d want her alliance, with Yaxley frothing in the wings.

Because the upper-level politics couldn’t be his first concern. Not until he knew whether the Potter-Black poison was still brewing in that stuffy migraine of a Common Room, waiting to attack even the smallest of the drakelets.

Who were extremely tiny. Intellectually he knew he’d once been not only that young but too poorly fed to be even the right size for his age (which he probably still was; he’d given up on reaching Da’s height years ago) but good grief. They were shorter than Flitwick. That was understandable in infants and cats, but these people were Flitwick-sized and were going to be, like Flitwick, expected to look after themselves, but they were underpowered and uneducated. And some of them, dear god, probably thought themselves strong and brilliant and up for anything.

Letting his attention widen to take in all the students, especially the quite-possibly-deluded midget-monsters, he said sharply, “If you are to be Slytherin, that means more than parties, or even what those parties may help you achieve.”

He didn’t so much see Slughorn raise his eyebrows as feel it through the side of his head.

“Ambition is a fundamental cornerstone to our House,” he continued, trying to sound casual and unhurried and as though he’d always meant to say it, “but no house has only one corner.”

He could tell the Slughornian eyebrows were unfooled by his back-scrabbling, but the phantom tail-rattling the back of his neck had been very loudly imagining seemed mollified.

On firmer ground, he rapped out, “It also means you do not leave each other alone. Whatever fights you may have amongst yourselves, whatever disagreements you have with me or with Professor Slughorn, they are private. If a student from another House offends you, you react quietly. You let any behavior that will draw disapproval and punishment come from that boor, and not from yourself. This is the House of dignity and tradition. You will uphold it and do it honor, and you will help each other, and we,” he gestured to Slughorn, not feeling any of the certainty ringing in his voice, “will help you. Are we clear?”

“Crystal, Naj,” smiled Cleo Blakeney, who’d never been backwards in picking her ground and coiling up on it. Severus sighed to himself as the instant burst of excited, nervous wittering from the second and third years at the name told him someone had been telling tales.
He hoped they’d told more tales about him kicking Lockhart through windows than getting hung upside down in no trousers and grey-with-age pants that weren’t hiding quite so much as usual.

He ignored all that (as best he could while internally cringing and rather wishing he’d ever had a habit of prayer to fall back on for comfort), and carefully lowered Yaxley to the floor. Or nearly. Leaving the boy’s dangling toes a few centimeters over the carpet, he asked, more softly still, “Are we in accord, Lead-Prefect Yaxley?”

He thought for a minute that the lout was going to try something stupid and Gryffish, perhaps thinking that being three inches taller and two hands wider than Severus would let him get away with it. The longer their eyes drilled together, though, the less keen Yaxley looked. Eventually, the boy said, “Yes.” He even followed it up with a reluctant, “sir,” as Slughorn had hinted was appropriate, although not before Severus had continued to stare levelly at him for a further eight seconds without blinking.

Obviously the word meant nothing but a very temporary retreat, but Severus was satisfied for the moment. Yaxley was going to be a colossal pain in the neck, but he wasn’t going to scream mutiny in any mob-frothing way that had to be handled with brute force. Not soon, at any rate. Severus therefore lowered the boy’s heels to the floor, and let the magic go.

Yaxley would just have to wash the cobwebs off for himself.

“Your prefects will show you to your rooms,” Severus said when all Slughorn seemed to want to do was favor him with a hairy eyeball from behind a placidly smiling face and hairier moustache. “Do not allow your roommates to miss breakfast; you’ll receive your schedules there. If you are not presentable, you will be sent back again and again until you are, and will have to make do whether or not there’s a solitary scrap of burnt toast left. You may also have difficulties if you must try to find your classrooms alone; this castle’s doors and stairs are not entirely reliable. Yes?”

“Excuse me, Apothefairy,” oozed Selwyn, “but if you don’t mind my asking, we’ve all been shown Professor Slughorn’s office, but where should we go to find you? When we need your help, I mean.”

Severus eyed him flatly, letting every line of his body scream, to any Slytherin worth their salt, do not imagine either your choosing of sides or your threat has gone unnoticed, that was stupid of you. Slughorn had certainly noticed, but he was largely watching to see whether Severus, put into the familiar position of having had a snide name slipped in at him, was going to lose his temper.

Actually Severus was wondering whether the little git had enough muggle exposure to have meant something besides comparing Severus to insignificant, ill-tempered garden pests that people liked to paralyze for decoration at holidays.

Unlikely from a Selwyn, which was too bad. That sort of insult would have, by inference, outraged any number of his peers, once it was explained to them. Considering that his usual eeling-up manner implied a certain degree of intimacy, it would also have lain him open to charges of hypocrisy. Spurious or otherwise.

For the moment, Severus just bent the poker of his lips into a wintery smile and assured him, “You shan’t have to. As I shall be right here, doing my own work alongside of you all, so very often. Easily available, for your assistance and education. As in such matters as your pronunciation. Yes?”

“‘Scuse me.” The very small boy whose robes and hair looked to have been stiffened by a sub-par drying charm lowered his hand. His accent squeezed at Severus’s chest with memories of tiny Lily
before she’d even learned to slow down, let alone to talk public-school. “Only, you made that bloke fly and someone pulled a girl on me boat out of the water when we went over and she tried to hit the octopus, was that you?”

Fortunately for everyone, he was rattling on in such typically break-neck Liverpudlian that Severus seriously doubted anyone who hadn’t grown up with a tiny, chatty Lily had picked up even one word. At least, no one at Hogwarts had ever seemed to understand her, although he supposed they might have been pretending as an excuse not to talk to a Muggleborn Gryff.

He’d learned it wasn’t surprising, though. Wizards lived all over Britain, but apparition let them do it in a scattered sort of way. Isolated places with plenty of land where the kids could practice flying and do their homework and no one had to be careful around Muggle neighbors were popular, and there were safe areas in a handful of cities for those who needed or wanted to be near the stores or their jobs.

Liverpool been one of those cities once, but never again since Cromwell. It didn’t need to be, in any case. There wasn’t anywhere that a decent apparitioner could get to from Liverpool that they couldn’t also reach from Appleby, Holyhead, Nottingham, or Manchester.

Matching the boy jibber for jabber to ease the sting (which no one had bloody well done for him; Luke had given him *flippers* for talking too Northerly), Severus informed him, “You’d be well advised to tune your tongue, or Scouse won’t be the worst word you hear, take it from me.” Switching back to standard-Hogwarts before anyone had even finished blinking, he ordered, “What’s your name.”

The first sentence might have taken him a second or two longer to say. But no more than that. He was really, really looking forward to telling Lils about this bit. She might actually throw something at him for mimicking her in front of his fellow scalefaces, even if they didn’t know. He was planning to laugh right in her face, gleefully, using the actual words ‘ha’ and ‘ha,’ while her jackass husband blew a gasket from not understanding anything at all.

He wondered if he could still pull off droning *Only A Northern Song* while she tried gamely to pull off *Imagine* at the top of her lungs with her fingers in her ears and scowling at him. He was willing to wager one of his lesser teapots that she couldn’t keep scowling if she burst out laughing over Potter’s most horrified face. It might warp the infant for life, of course, but he was doomed anyway in that household.

Besides, the junior Potter-fiend had it coming. It wasn’t merely an unwitting threat to Lily’s life because of its horrible timing in being born, but actually and currently a nightmare child. The little demon hadn’t cried at Severus’s handfasting, which would have been both an excusable disruption due to age and traditional for the occasion, *oh no.*

He’d vomited. Projectile vomited. A la Linda Blair.[1]

On Perenelle Flamel’s face.

This was arguably Dumbledore’s fault, but it was down to no one but the mini-demon that he had, on an earlier occasion, very nearly succeeded at weeing in Severus’s own face. And Severus had been instructed not to take it personally, because he apparently did that while being changed *all the time.*

Severus had handled Narcissa’s baby dozens of times. It was a fact that Draco was as liable to drool gas, whining, unpleasant bodily fluids, and mashed foodstuffs as any other pre-toddler. However, he did not expel them forcefully from his orifices as aimed mouth-seeking projectiles.
Severus might have thought Lily and Black had got one past Potter, if he’d ever seen Lily’s eyes dilate around that-other-bastard once, because the little troll was unquestionably a future Beater.

Breaking Severus out of his fit of the gripes, and looking as if he really, really didn’t want to admit his name (Severus Snape sympathized), the new boy from Liverpool admitted, “Myron. Only it’s Ron. Er, Wagtail.”

Severus refused to let a single muscle in his face twitch, or one glint of amusement into his eyes. Others were not so disciplined. As though these disgraces didn’t exist, he said evenly, as he knew Hagrid hadn’t, “You’ll find, Mr. Wagtail, that at Hogwarts even the walls have eyes, and they are always watching… for your health and welfare.”

“And speaking of health,” Slughorn broke in jovially, to Severus’s enormous relief, “off to bed with the lot of you, chop chop! I expect to see every one of your delightful faces nicely scrubbed tomorrow at seven in the Great Hall. And welcome again to Hogwarts! Come along, Severus, let’s leave our young friends to settle in. I have a wonderful pot of darjeeling that I know you’ll simply adore…”

“Oh, thank Christ,” Severus moaned fervently as soon as the door to the Common Room was shut behind him, collapsing limply onto his heels against it.

Not by coincidence, this put his ear right up against the mostly-ornamental keyhole. Faintly through it, he could hear the newly-minted Junior Prefect Blakeney lecturing the others, and very nearly hear her grinning. She was saying, “The elapid that gives two warnings and makes itself a target twice…”

“No bad, m’boy, not bad,” Slughorn smiled down at him, “but however did you get behind me?”

“Got there first,” Severus admitted, not getting up. “I wanted to say hello to the common room before it got swarmed by rabid lethifolds starved for the blood of the weak.”

Slughorn looked puzzled. It wasn’t exactly the you-are-mental stare, but it was definitely you-are-an-odd-one. Finally, he said, “Locusts.”

“…Sir?”

“Pomona always says ‘before the locusts descend.’”

“Oh.” After a moment, Severus posited, “That’s probably because Professor Sprout actually cares if all the leaves get consumed in a cloud of darkness and flashing dun-colored chitin.” Personally, he’d been more concerned about the new Divi teacher. And himself.

Inside, he heard a squeaky, Wagtaily voice pipe up curiously. Someone, despite being audibly too old to have watched the boats come in, scornfully answered the boy, “Of course it was the Naj!”

Severus thought it might be Blakeney Major, backing up his little sister instead of being a jealous twat about her prefecture as Severus would have suspected. In which case maybe Petunia could grow out of it, too?

However warming, that didn’t sound much like prefects showing firsties where their beds were to him.

“Well,” said Slughorn, more than kindly enough to be very insulting indeed, “all those different species of leaves are quite useful to us as well, Se—”
“You promised me tea,” Severus accused him. It was definitely an accusation and not a wail. Definitely.

“And I’m delighted to oblige,” Slughorn said cheerfully, “in gratitude for the promise you just gave to be at the doors of the common room, smartly put together as an example, at six forty-five for inspection.”

“So I should hope,” grimly agreed Severus, who had in fact understood what he was threatening at the time and was planning to be there at six-thirty.

And yet he somehow also absolutely had to at least have a cup of morning tea with Evan, lest they never find time to eat together again in Severus’s whole life ever. (Or at least for as long as he had this position, but even a single term back in Hogwarts might well feel like the rest of his life.)

So a 5 AM-ish sort of rising was mandated for the lazy tosser who might not be such a complete slug-a-bed as Severus had previously believed, but had quite genuinely had a grudge against every wakeful second before ten for as long as Severus had known him. Even when they’d had Charms first. Even when waking up early was Ev’s own idea because he wanted to catch dawn on the Black Lake or the early clouds behind the crenellations.

What a lovely morning it was going to be.

Weighed down with resignation, he let Slughorn give him a hand up.

[1] Which Severus had gotten to see through use of an actual movie ticket he hadn’t had to steal or pay for, due to a bet with Lily that the flick would be uninformed American Muggle nonsense that would not, in fact, teach them how to give Hogwarts girls one more usable loo.

They had both pretended Lily hadn’t made that bet specifically to get Severus to go see at least three movies a summer with her without outraging her unsneaky, well-fed Gryffindor sensibilities. Come to think of it, since they were talking again he could probably get away with declaring she owed him movies for every summer since ’76, if he could be sure of avoiding the wrong peoples’ notice. It might even be a way to spend an hour in her odious husband’s company without getting into a fight, which would make her happy. Definitely food for thought.

Chapter End Notes

Notes:
1. ‘Chop chop’ is a culturally and linguistically stupid thing to say. Slughorn is saying it because he is old enough to have grown up with really dumb Colonialist slang. Author letting character be character does not mean author endorses character’s behavior.

2. Yes, the ceiling thing was absolutely every bit as inappropriate as the Fake-Moody Ferret Incident. No, Severus is not going to be explicitly called on it; Slughorn considers that detention has just been assigned and everyone who needs to understand does. Yes, Slughorn is mistaken, because Hogwarts is run rather informally, and Severus has no job description, contract, or code of conduct to refer to. No, the lack of formality is not the case for titled professors, but Severus is here on a trial basis and as
an excuse. Yes, Dumbledore was, in this case, vague on purpose, for reasons in the plural.
September 1, Evening, Rosier Hall

Chapter Summary

In which Severus is making up his job as he goes along and very earnestly doing his absolute best to carry out his duty as he sees it, and absolutely everybody is so, so sorry.

Chapter Notes

Notes: I’d say 'happy new year,’ but anyone else remember being relieved that 2016 was over? This year, let’s try... ’Keep Calm And Harry On.’*

Warnings: Transportation of a non-consenting citizen across state lines (as it were). Blatant theft of Lord Vetinari's ideas (he can't protest; Feet of Clay was published 16 years after the events of this chapter). Also, Slytherins are weird—but you knew that already.

More serious warning: A protective person has become convinced that nobody in their particular environment will effectively help vulnerable people who don't use proactive defenses. We are skirting the borders of outward-facing internalized victim-blaming here.

* Still two verbs in that sentence, y'all.

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Dear Canadiwizard In Old York,

Thank you for writing in with that interesting story. While the moon frogs of our August issue may well be the source of your ancestor’s legend, we cannot substantiate the connection. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to study moon frogs in sufficient detail to determine whether their origin is terrestrial, as the wizard who secured and photographed these fascinating creatures was unable to keep hold of them long enough to perform a dissection. Having learned that the moon is without gravity, we speculate that moon frogs have developed the ability to apparate, so that the powerful jumps typical to frogkind do not send them hurtling into the unkindness of space. We must also sadly note that no moon frogs large enough to be seen from Earth have yet been observed. Or indeed, as would please many grandmothers of my own people, any moon rabbits. But take heart, Canadiwizard! The unproven may always yet be only undiscovered!

—Mrs. M. Lovegood, Asst. Chief Editor, The Quibbler

“I swear,” Severus snarled, slamming wrists-first through the doors of the vanishing cabinet, “it’s like dropping into an actual fucking snake pit. That castle is slavering for blood pudding made with my—Evan?”

Ev looked up from the mask he was sketching. He had the penseive out, and a projecting-charm trained on the memory of Lucius standing up on it. Luke’s face was hovering in the air near them, frozen and haughty-over-self-doubt and three times its usual size, gone all translucent towards the
neck. Evan only needed his face.

He smiled, trying to make it a full-bodied one, and put down the sketchbook. The last thing anyone needed was for Spike to think Ev had gone off with the fairies again, and resort to drastic measures. He’d managed to make that clear to Voldemort, he thought, but he was a bit worried about what the cost might be.

They’d deal with it. Now he ended the projection charm and said, “Hallo, Trouble.”

Taking the badly-needed steps to come up against Spike in front of the fire, Evan pushed the unnecessary-for-indoors-wear mantle off his shoulders. His arms came a-circling and his nose went into one of those lovely hollows under Spike’s cravat and he sighed a happy mmm noise into, sadly, a vest that was not Spike’s skin.

“I thought your pulse was just calm all day,” Spike informed him suspiciously, hot hands splayed deliciously tight and possessive over his back, digging in worriedly around the fingertips, “but you look blue.”

“Blm?” Evan asked the delicious collarbone.

He was torn. There was, on the one hand, slightly sheepish delight that Spike was using colors to talk in. Usually he only used shades of potions to very precisely describe shades of other things; color-as-metaphor was more of an Evan-and-Narcissa thing that Spike only used when he had to. If Spike was picking up Ev-language, using it before trying anything else… well. Evan had disgustingly squishy newlywed’s feelings about that, which Spike was not going to want to hear about.

On the other hand, he wasn’t interested in anything but getting at the new-and-old, fresh, invigorating note of wet stone layered into the comforting, familiar intrigue of woods and heather and spices and Spike-skin.

“Blue,” Spike repeated, trying hard to be annoyed while having his throat sucked, poor doomed thing. “Slightly blue about the edges, not to mention lethargic and pale and detahhh-h-h… Detached! And exhausted, and as though humiliating Luke through a mmm a mask he’s meant to be honored by wasn’t a prospect that thoroughly delighted you with a wicked delight unspeakable by the ton—that is, in any language known to man, by which I deduce that—”

“That’s all very well,” Evan broke away to inform him, ignoring this ton of nonsense in favor of jigsaw-fitting their noses together, “but apparently we’ve both had dismal days and you smell like a spice-wood and a heather field and the sky when it’s raining all at once, Spike. I mean, feel free to keep talking and all that, it feels lovely, but do keep in mind I shall be snogging you the while and not paying too terribly much attention.”

Spike’s eyes were probably only crossed because Ev’s own were so close, and they were probably only pure black because his eyes were, in fact, pure black, but Ev liked to think his lower hand had something to do with it, too.

After a pause wherein Evan refrained from occupying himself so completely as he would have liked (it was only polite to give the other fellow a chance), Spike said, more temperately, “I’m expected to take all my meals in the Great Hall. Faculty does, and evidently I’m close enough to count.”

This took a moment’s sorting out, which was difficult when Spike’s hand was slow-stroking the small of his back. Finally, though, Evan pointed out, “You sat every meal in the Great Hall when
we were at school, too, and you spent more than half of them studying. You kept sneaking apples and onions back to eat after dark.”

“We could try it,” Spike allowed slowly, looking a little happier, or at least less furrowed above the eyes. “Only…”

“Mmm?” Evan asked from under his ear, and got a shiver.

“I think Madam Nell cursed me,” Spike murmured into his temple.

“Spike Snape,” Evan pulled away, grinning, “that is outright slander. That sweet old daisy-sprite. That tiny little holy terror I want to paint on all the tarot cards who beams sunshine out her ears. You lie through your face.”

“I believe it, ergo it isn’t slander,” Spike insisted, putting his chin up in one of his absurd valiant poses. “It was a curse about mornings. One morning everything’s normal, then she gives me a ribbon and suddenly Leaving Evan Alone In Bed To Sleep Of A Morning Is A Crawlingly Unthinkable Horror. There is no other possible explanation. She cursed me, with a morning curse.”

Evan tugged him down so he could laugh himself sick on a comfortable Spike’s-back-pillow made of bones on their rug in the firelight, as nature intended. If he had been feeling a little blue (or, indeed, a little white) when Spike came growling in, he was very nearly warmed-through now.

He’d be even warmer if Spike’s skin was closer and all this linen wasn’t in the way. One could take care of such things efficiently with wands, of course, but efficiency wasn’t nearly so nice.

“I’m explaining,” Severus failed to sulk.

“By all means,” Evan said cheerfully, smoothing ugly lichen-colored cloth up and away from skin which was, admittedly, a little on the sallow side because Ev hadn’t given him a chance to wash his morning soap off yet, but soft and wiry-ripply and just begging for him to warm his cold face in it. “You can explain while I paint your spine.”

There was a long, suspicious silence, but Evan knew his Spike-timing. By the time Spike demanded to know what exactly he meant by that, his mouth was halfway lowered to the topmost knob. And that, he noted with a long smile he made sure to press into the inky roses bursting into bloom along Spike’s neck and arms to rub petals with him, was the last they had of properly-strung-together words out of Spike for a while.

The back of his mind put aside to remember that this was, in fact, rather worrying; Spike usually got squirmly and overstimulated and took over, except when he was shaken or worse. However, unlike Some People, Evan was capable of thinking, on occasion, about one thing at a time.

And, actually, it turned out that Spike was feeling masterful enough to eventually make him stop only a little farther along than usual, bite him for pouting, and drag him into bed (skipping the bath; Spike and He-Who-Must-Never-Be-Thought-About-In-Bed-Ugh-Nonononono must not have brewed anything up at the school).

“But if we slept on the rug you wouldn’t be leaving me asleep in bed,” Evan pointed out.

“I’m not leaving you asleep in bed,” Severus informed him. “I’m waking you up.”

Evan eyed him as dangerously as a man could eye anyone who had a soothing hand pressing him softly down by the stomach and sternum and another kneading him tantalizingly and aggravatingly just two inches from the best place possible. “When are you waking me up,” he demanded.
Severus shrugged. Ev would have enjoyed what the movement did to the muscles along his side if he was also enjoying any single thing he was hearing. “Five?” Severus suggested.

Evan’s eyes bugged out in silent outrage. It would have been less silent outrage, but there was so much of it he couldn’t even squeak.

“I know, Ev,” Spike Spike-apologized—which was to say that he looked unhappy but his chin was sticking out stubbornly. “But I have to be in the common room at six-thirty to make sure the little monsters are presentable and—don’t laugh at me when we’re naked!”

“You’re going to make sure,” Evan spluttered, folding up over him, “oh, Spike! Oh, Salazar, you just wait till I tell Cissa, she will fall over dead.”

Rather than sulking or getting mad or turning his back to Evan and freezing him out all night (Ev could see the options flit, thankfully fleetingly, though his favorite pair of exceptionally evil eyes), Severus favored Evan with a long, vicious, killer-whale smile: all teeth. “Good point, well made,” he said. “Of course, I’ll notice bad mending and curses and that, but current fashion disasters are quite beyond me. Good job I’ll have an invisible clotheshorse at my side.”

Evan stopped laughing. Six thirty. “…No,” he declared. Firmly.

“You go on telling yourself that,” Spike suggested with what he thought was sympathy, but everyone else knew was unadulterated, vicious, gleeful malice, and patted Evan on the hip. And then swept his hands inwards and brought his mouth down to an ear with such delicacy and decision that the last corner of Evan’s fire-sparking brain that couldn’t even remember why it felt it should be horrified was drowning in the sharp and gorgeous velvet lava-syrup of spikespikespike in probably less than three seconds.

When Evan woke up, someone had put a featherlight charm on his head, which was in Spike’s lap as was correct and proper, but Spike was fully dressed. In out-of-doors clothes. With boots. He could see them, propped up clean and shiny and far away on the other armrest. There was a belt between Ev’s mouth and Spike’s bits and everything. A buckled belt. It was horrible.

Also, the blankets were gone, because they were on the sofa in the Slytherin common room (Ev had napped on it-and-Spike more than often enough to know from the feel), facing the wrong way, and Evan couldn’t see his own hands.

“Timezit?” he whined. He knew he was whining, but he couldn’t help it. There was no sunlight filtering through the water outside the great window, no light anywhere but the low flicker of coals in the hearth.

“Six-fifteen.”

“Nooooooo…”

“Well, I tried to wake you up earlier, Ev, have a bite and a cuppa and perhaps say good-morning, but you weren’t having any of it.”

“’R’a rat,” Evan informed him hopelessly, grinding his eyes into Spike’s not-terribly-forgiving
hipbone. Even if he could force himself upright, he didn’t know where Spike’s room was in this benighted ever-shifting honeycomb of a castle. He didn’t even know if it was in the Slytherin wing at all. Dumbledore might have put Severus next to the infirmary; Evan certainly would have.

It would probably, he reflected grousily, be a time-saver. If Spike could make Ev want to murder him, he really had no hope with anyone else.

“I know,” Spike said softly, bending down to press his forehead to Evan’s shoulder. His hair was damp, which made Evan unspeakably indignant for reasons he was sure he would have been able to identify if he’d only been awake. “But I refuse to get up five days a week as though you don’t exist and never see you till a very late supper with scarcely a moment to eat or talk, let alone read, before it has to be lights-out for early mornings.”

Evan turned to glare up, even if he was invisible and Severus couldn’t see. That had struck through him, right through, woke him like a bell inside his head and left huge wide swathes of him melted into quivering mush. You couldn’t let someone know that who was already being wildly unfair.

After a moment, when he felt more collected, he said in a too-calm but not cold voice, “This doesn’t answer your problem, Spike.”

“Of course not,” Spike hastened, sounding a bit relieved for some strange Spike-reason. He went one in one of his I-know-I-did-everything-the-worst-way-possible-but-fundamentally-I’m-not-wrong-and-someone-will-acknowledge-it-eventually voices. It was the one where he was actually embarrassed about his behavior, but not enough to admit it, and someone who wasn’t a snake might have had a dislocated jaw from sticking it out that far.

Spike could, actually, pop his jaw out, in the same slightly-odd but not magical way some people could turn their elbows around like owl-necks. Evan had never told him it was one of those things he and Siri had in common for no possible reason, and had long since decided to just enjoy the ability without allowing the coincidence to make his brain fry and weep sizzly, greasy tears of thinking too hard about his cousin in all the most disturbing ways.

“But now you know I mean it. And you can think of something better. You have to, Ev; I don’t think I’ll have time today. This week. Christ,” he sighed, dispirited, and dragged a hand down his face.

“You’re fetching me all of the coffee,” Evan told him. “And when we’re done, you’re bringing me back home and I am going back to sleep.”

“I don’t care if you sleep till tea,” Severus told him, and for half a second he really sounded like he believed it. Then he reconsidered, to Evan’s profound relief, and gave the far more Severus-like qualifier, “I might die of contact embarrassment, but needs must.”

“You’re too deranged to die of any sort of embarrassment,” Evan told him, hoisting himself farther up so he could cram his face into the uncapacious wedge between chest muscles and curling in. “Honestly, Spike. Even for you. This is mental.”

“Don’t make good points if you don’t want others to expound on them,” Spike suggested haughtily, long, warm fingers curling around the back of Evan’s invisible neck, sinking into his hair, mmm.

“This isn’t expounding, this is kidnapping,” he pointed out, but since he’d turned his face into Spike’s overly-buttoned ribs he didn’t hope to be taken terribly seriously.

“Pit-viperhood doesn’t give you a monopoly on snap decisions.”
He pulled away far enough to drag a droll eyebrow upward where Spike could feel it move. “Mine usually involve conscious people, Whiplash.”

“I’d have had an elf take you back to the wardrobe in twenty seconds flat if you’d had a serious objection, and you know it, Kettlepot Whingerton,” Severus told the top of his head. “Or go together. The Slugstache didn’t think I needed to be here till six forty-five.”

Evan made a rude noise, but then a terrible thought occurred. He might be under Lupin’s handy little chameleon spell, but they were in the **Slytherin Common room.** “Spike—you do have a muffliato up?”

“No, I put a one-way **hordloc internos** between us, your lips to my ears. A muffliato would hide our words, not your presence. And separate notice-me-nots on you, myself-as-a-person, my clothes, my hair, and the sofa, what do you take me for?”

“Oh, all right then,” he capitulated, or, rather, burrowed sleepily, into Spike’s welcoming (but, drat him, belted) stomach.

“…Right,” Spike said cynically, and snapped his fingers four times, right above Evan’s indignant eyebrow. “Good morning, Nandy. No, over here. I don’t want an apology, I want a cup of coffee and its pot, please. Strong, and enough for two.”

And then there was coffee. Which was, once Evan was awake enough to enjoy it, infuriating. He’d never been allowed coffee as a student struggling through his morning classes, not even as an adult wizard in his NEWT year, and it turned out the Hogwarts coffee was excellent.

Since, however, it was extremely important not to let Spike win when he was behaving horrifically, he grumbled, “I don’t know why you think I’m going to be any use getting extra-sneaky children who don’t want to be awake to breakfast when I don’t want to be awake either. I **sympathize** with them, Spike. I am in complete agreement. Expecting anyone to sit up enthusiastically and take in information they may need later before at least one in the afternoon is disgusting behavior, and if you ask me—”

“I’m not asking you to herd cats to breakfast,” Spike said patiently. “If they choose to miss a meal, that’s their look-out, and if anyone chooses to miss a class, they’ll discover soon enough why that’s not a decision to repeat.”

Evan shot him a grumpy why then am I not in my nice bed pray tell look, sipping his strangely smooth and delicious coffee dangerously.

Patiently ignoring it, Spike went on, “I think you’ll be useful because I’ve sat in Diagon while you and Narcissa shared a teapot like a couple of vicious cats, and you could make fun of the poorly-dressed while fully asleep.”

Ev sat up quickly enough to very nearly spill his precious, precious coffee. “Spike!” he exclaimed, eyes wide. He vaguely remembered Spike saying something similar last night, come to think of it, but then he’d been distracted. “Did I sleep through eight months? Is it my birthday?!”

Spike laughed, just with a slight rocking of his breath and a crinkling-up under his eyes, and squeezed Evan’s hand. Seriously, he said, “You and Narcissa didn’t let me go to our first breakfast in rags, and you didn’t care a jot about me at the time, or have the least feeling for our House’s reputation. No one explains the ways to wear the ties, or—”

“You are ridiculous,” Evan informed his broody hen, and, putting down the cup they were sharing,
snogged him silly on their common room sofa one more time, counting on Spike to be more alert than himself even while being kissed.

His trust was not only well-founded but justified: Evan was still floating happily in his lovely swimmy place, letting Spike’s grabby-hands around the back of his head and neck be his only grounding, when Spike suddenly pulled back and rearranged himself into an attitude of cool watchfulness.

Right under Evan. It didn’t exactly tickle, but Ev had to stuff a hand into his mouth to keep from laughing out loud anyway. No one would have heard the actual laugh, but Spike tended to startle (not to say bristle) when people laughed loudly near his ears.

As a thoughtful and supportive person, he rearranged himself at Spike’s side, in case Spike decided to uncoil and stand up at people in a rapidly unnerving sort of way. He hadn’t seen that sort of behavior recently, but then Spike hadn’t been faced with irritating fourth-years recently.

He whispered right into Spike’s ear—which was not, despite Spike’s spell, redundant. Not after the way Spike had distracted him from arguing last night. “One point when you know something’s wrong, three points when you know what. You lose your chance and I take over when they’re three-quarters to the door. Kiss tonight per point.”

Spike tried to slide Evan an outraged look without actually turning. He wouldn’t have succeeded even if Ev hadn’t been off to his side and invisible with unmeetable eyes. First, he had been successfully challenged and Evan wasn’t blind enough to miss his eyes brightening and the That’s What YOU Think curl at the end of his lips.

Second, he didn’t have time to be outraged, because the footsteps that had alerted him had resolved into a tall fifth-or-sixth year with red-brown hair and a chipmunk-cheeked pointy-nosed face that resolved into dismay when she saw an adult in her common room.

“Good morning, Miss Chisterleigh,” Spike greeted her with a bland suggestion of a smile. Evan still didn’t recognize her as a former fellow-Slytherin, although he did recognize the Bagman ears and cheeks and it did look quite like the Chisterleigh chin, now he was looking for it. “You’re first up, well done. Let’s see if you’ll be first to make it to breakfast.”

“Oh, come on, Naj,” she said, missing whining by a few crucial notes. She was clearly going to go on protesting, but Spike cut her off.

“Because,” he said with implacable eyebrows, “I imagine it would be quite difficult to move quickly in such fashionable heels.”

She crossed her arms (not, Ev was pleased to see, in a way that seemed specifically designed to emphasize her juvenile bust. Nobody who knew Spike well enough to call him ‘Naj’ should think that would work on him) and huffed. “There’s nothing—"

Spike’s Chaser’s wrist flicked out, and the girl nearly fell into the arms of the small group approaching behind her. “That was a gobstone, not a spell,” he said calmly, “and it wouldn’t have worked if you weren’t trying to balance on quillpoints. Do help Miss Chisterleigh back to her room, ladies, and assist her in locating her school points and a dry set of socks.”

There were a few amused notes, which Ev thought was very good-spirited of people being slowed down on the way to breakfast.

“Oh, and while you’re back at your dorms,” Spike called out to their backs in the same bland tone,
“you might keep in mind that Wingardium Leviosa is a rapid-acting first-year spell, and
troglodytes well below your own age might be able to lift a hemline several inches before its
wearer notices.”

A couple of them turned to look at him. They weren’t visibly deciding how horrified to be and
why: this was Slytherin. There was, however, a certain air of you have got to be kidding hovering
around the chandeliers.

Spike shrugged the shoulder Ev wasn’t leaning on. “Expressing yourselves through uniform
modification is all well and good,” he said, “but you will be spending your days amongst the foul-
minded monsters with poor impulse control commonly known as ‘half your peers.’ And when I say
that I’m only speaking of hormones. This year’s political climate has yet to be assessed. We won’t
be able to do even the most preliminary of soundings until this evening.”

“This is Hogwarts!” a girl with a prefect badge protested. She had the narrow Nott jaw and the
Lingreen eyebrows, and her accent was too perfect, like Spike’s. Her nose and skin tone, pale
though she was, suggested a distant drop of near-East blood. Evan would have bet twenty galleons
she was a Quartstave. “Not a war zone!”

Spike raised an eyebrow at her.

“Look,” snapped yet another girl whose name Ev couldn’t remember. He did remember Spike
drooling poisonous red ink all over her Herbology essay once, and that she’d had to be brought
down to the kitchens after for cocoa and hot buttered toast.

Evan had sent Regulus to do it. Reggie was good at that sort of thing and had needed a confidence-
booster, whereas Evan had needed to stop Spike from storming off to do things that were not his
job and might get him hexed into jelly in the name of making all Slytherins learn all the available
things.

“I know things were bad when you were here,” she foolishly tried to argue with him, “but—”

“You had no idea half of what went on then,” Spike said softly. “I could tell, because all your year
took far too long to stop walking the halls alone when you felt like it in your third year. What
makes you think you know what others outside these rooms are thinking now? Or will come to
think, and plan, and decide on a lark to do without planning?”

“Three more years of Divination since then, for one thing,” the possible-Quartstave offered
reasonably.

Spike inclined his head. “Divination provides a very good start,” he agreed, pitching his voice a
little louder because another group, with a shorter average height, had come up behind the sixth-
year girls. “But we only go out wearing targets strapped to our chests if we have a very good reason
for it. And if I see any ungraduated Slytherin presenting the appearance of being easily disrobed, I
will expect an explanation every adult of their family would be not only satisfied with but pleased
by. And be assured that, if I feel at all uneasy in my mind, that explanation will be put to that test.”

This only got a howled Naj!!!! from about half the group: the rest were too young to know Spike.

“I mean it,” Spike said grimly. “And you can’t guilt me about grassing on you, because I’m not
just one of you, you are in my care. If I have to pull in your parents or your great-grandparents to
teach you the habits of safety, or your bloody house elves, don’t you imagine I will hesitate.”

This got him a lot more complaints about how Hogwarts was perfectly safe for people who weren’t
Severus Snape, which he met with a sneer of open contempt.

“You could have said last night,” said a grumpy boy from the slightly-shorter group. “Before we got dressed.”

“I was hoping your native good sense and well-bred groundings in propriety would make warnings to dress properly and within accepted Hogwarts limits unnecessary,” Spike said, only semi-witheringly.

“But loads of people wear short skirts under their robes, or nothing,” Chistlethwait-or-whatever complained.

“I think you’ll find,” Spike said dryly, “that half those people are thrill-seekers or otherwise happy-go-lucky—both of which tendencies I expect to see well-mastered where they present in Slytherin —”

Evan idly debated kicking him, or possibly laughing in his ear. But that wouldn’t really be fair, and would therefore lead to argument: just because Spike was a trouble-magnet didn’t make him a voluntary thrill-seeker.

“—and the other half are deliberately laying obvious traps to attract easily controllable life-mates,” Spike finished dryly. “When tempted in that direction, I advise you to look at the colors at your throat.”

Ev thought this was a little unfair to Hufflepuff.[1] They had a House reputation to counter if they wanted to be exciting or mysterious or sexy. They had to go for that extra touch of flamboyance, if they wanted to be thought of as anything other than ‘oh, the Huffie? Yeah, she’s nice.’

“Slughorn doesn’t mind,” the possible-Quarterstave countered, putting hands on her hips. Since she was, in fact, quite reasonably dressed except for having stuck her quill in her hatband (an affectation that Ev gloomily expected Spike to pretend he approved of for practical reasons rather than as a Quidditch statement), Ev approved. She was either defending her housemates with the standing of her badge or fighting for her future prerogatives while she still had the high ground. In either case, good strategy.

“Slughorn doesn’t stop you,” Spike corrected, a sardonic eyebrow up. “I am doing you the courtesy of giving you information directly, rather than becoming more and more annoyed by your poor judgment over time until you unaccountably find yourself off the Christmas Party And Post-Graduation Assistance list.”

This met with a moment of silence, and a higher-pitched ‘huh?’ from a shorty off to the back-left. The possible-Quartstave, however, glared at Spike and demanded, “Are you saying we shouldn’t dress as we like because it lets boys be pigs?”

“No one has permission to be a pig,” Spike said irritably. “What you wear does not give anyone permission to be a pig. Piglike behavior is not to be condoned, and will not be condoned by me. Unfortunately, there are those who will be pigs, whatever consequences they risk for it, and you are sharing halls and classes with them, and I don’t give a damn about what the world ought to be like.”

Liar, Evan thought fondly.

“The world is a hellhole,” Spike rolled on, implacably annoyed, “and this school has a uniform code, which you accepted when you came, and while you are under my aegis you will not shove at
its loopholes to tempt fate like daredevil Gryffs. I don’t care about your thirst for self-expression. Save it for Hogsmeade weekends, when your safety is the available adults’ only job. If you’re too young to know that, while in the castle, they’re too busy to monitor all potential pigs, take it from me.”

There was a whispered argument amongst the sixth-years. Then, from the hallway, a cool voice asked, “What other instructions would you like to see spread, Apothecary Snape?” and a rather small young lady with a shining prefect badge and henna writhing distractingly all over her coffee-colored hands stepped out from where she’d been probably-eavesdropping.

Evan’s grandfather claimed to enjoy painting henna. Ev still hated it, due to not being good enough yet. It always came out either blurred or monstrous. At least tattoos stayed more or less in the same place, or all the ones Ev had seen so far did. If you were patient, you could get their full ranges in all the angles. Henna was like trying to paint an entire living portrait inside a living portrait, and he just couldn’t get the knack of it. This was probably not a black mark against someone Ev’s age, since as far as he could tell his dad hadn’t managed it yet either.

“Good morning, Lead-Prefect Shafiq,” Spike greeted her in an equally formal tone. “I think you will agree with me that the drakelets should be aware that unbound long hair in students attending Potions, Defense, Herbology, or Care of Magical Creatures is, being foolish and unsafe, highly discouraged. Scent worn to Care of Magical Creatures, Divination, and Potions is similarly discouraged, and anyone choosing to wear any cosmetics or extra adornments to Potions class had best be prepared either to prove that what they’re wearing is not a safety hazard around unstable cauldrons or to remove it.”

The Lead-Prefect gave this due consideration. In Ev’s opinion, she took a second or two longer than was quite necessary. “That seems reasonable,” she said finally, “but the students won’t find out the schedules until breakfast, and will not know which set of precautions to take.”

“Then I suggest,” Spike said, tilting his head and dry again, “that students either ensure they are prepared for any class they might take before leaving the common room, or finish eating early enough to make any necessary adjustments.”

There was grumbling, but it wasn’t as bad or as mean as it might have been.

“You liar,” Ev snuggled Spike’s arm when the kids had gone, pressing into his cheek so Spike would feel his smile. “You don’t need me at all.”

“Bite your tongue,” Spike retorted, offended, and Evan smiled wider.

By the time Evan closed the points tally, Spike had caught six joke items and a charm bracelet that he said was a terrible stealth weapon because a) it was called a charm bracelet and b) everyone who heard it clinking would be annoyed and direct that annoyance at Slytherin as a whole, because no, the clinking was not charming when one was trying to take notes.

He had put his foot down about open-toed sandals, too. Ev was looking forward to sharing his loud, irritated objections to them with Wilkes (who might have worn sensible boots for one week a year, in midwinter, maybe), inviting her over for tea, and then sitting back and enjoying the argument.

He also sent no fewer than eight students back with their ears on fire for not wearing wand-sheaths, and one for leaving his actual wand in his actual trunk. That one’s actual ears actually blistered. Spike yelled at him again for letting bad language shock him into hurting himself with his accidental magic, and threatened to make him brew a term’s worth of burn cream unless he talked
Ev had caught a pair of wobbly heels and a set of tap shoes charmed to look like school boots, a pair of stockings that made him wince (Spike noticed those on his own, but because a hole in the toe was making the girl walk funny, not because of the horrible color). Also a pair of stockings that Spike must have thought were okay because they were black, but which had some dangerous patterns woven in.

They’d disagreed about a wristwatch with a loud and erratic tic, which Spike had clearly thought was a brilliant weapon until Evan had pointed out he was going to have to listen to it. Spike had also resisted about the second-year who’d apparently shredded his school tie on purpose at the end to be fringe-like; Ev had to point out that deliberately destroying official school stuff was a bad look.

And he’d had no problem at all with the waistcoat that all but screamed I Am An Illiterate Farmer’s Pig-Boy and would have made Evan cry if he hadn’t been in sneaky-mode. He hadn’t exactly given in on that one, but after much hard, indignant poking he’d long-sufferingly asked the boy if it was a deliberate choice.

Evan hadn’t even had to poke him about three pairs of under-robe trousers worn under open robes, or the pair of trousers that were actually pyjama bottoms. Ev took this as a major victory, although more Narcissa’s victory than his own.

Spike was looking rather ragged by the time he brought Evan back to the vanishing cabinet. When they were safely in his rooms, he said in his trying-to-approximate-an-apology tone, “It may take me until the weekend to make it up to you.”

“I expect you’ll have something good planned by then,” Evan said unconcernedly, taking the invisibility spell off himself. It was, however, in a forbidding tone that he asked, “You’re not planning to do this every morning, are you?”

“Tomorrow,” Spike said, “and once or thrice a fortnight through Halloween, and then maybe once a month. They shouldn’t be able to predict when I’ll do it.”

“Okay.” Ev said, still in his best stern tone, “but am I expected to get up before six on all those days?”

“Tomorrow?” Spike-begged Spike. “After that I should hope my eye for this sort of thing will be at least somewhat practiced.”

“Mmm,” Ev hummed, dubious and noncommittal. “Maybe. But not as a matter of course, Spike.”

“No,” Spike hastened to agree. He thumbed gravely over the tree on Ev’s left arm, troubled. “But I don’t want to only see you once a day for a late supper, Ev.”

“No, that’s unacceptable,” Evan agreed, doing his own thumbing over the back of Spike’s hand and getting a highly gratifying three-inch shoulder drop for his trouble. “Bring me your class schedule, we’ll have a look.”

Unfairly suspecting that Evan’s vengeance scheme included biting him somewhere visible as well as making him suspiciously late for breakfast, Spike wouldn’t stay for a decent good-morning snog.

Evan knew that was what it was really about, but what Severus actually said was, “I can’t, Ev, I have to go be a hypocritical killjoy and interfere with all the upper-form beds.”
Evan eyed him. “Since you said ‘hypocritical,’ I think you’re going to do something Slughorn doesn’t care about. If he doesn’t care about it, you don’t have to do it.”

“Horace Slughorn is not my moral compass,” Spike said, his mouth going very hard and his eyes sparking like cold flint.

“If you’re about to say Evans is, you’re going to come home tonight and find I’ve boiled oolong for twenty minutes in your best pot,” Evan warned him, scowling.

The flints melted into a grin that very nearly reached Spike’s mouth, and then Evan got pulled into, if not a satisfying snog, at least a lovely little nuzzle. “I use my own, thanks, don’t bother. Go on, I’ll explain later.”

Resignedly, Evan allowed, “Oh, I’m sure you’ll think you did, but I’ll get sense out of you in the end,” and the hard gust of breath that Spike thought was a laugh followed him into the Rosier Hall side of the Vanishing Cabinet.

Stepping out into his bedroom, Evan made a beeline for the hearth, twitched a pinch of Floo powder into it, and dove through into Malfoy Manor the moment Narcissa answered.

“Evvie, are you all right?” she met him worriedly, cleaning ash off him with the brush instead of her wand like a mother hen. “You should have come yesterday! Bella came over for tea, she said he was awfully unhappy with your report about your trip. He didn’t hurt you did he? Oh!” she gasped, hands flying to her mouth. “Evvie, what are you doing up at this hour, did he curse you?!”

“No, no, it’s fine,” Evan waved her off. “He didn’t curse me. Bella exaggerates everything, Cissa, you know she does.”

“‘Exaggerates’ isn’t ‘wrong,’” she pointed out, folding her arms and glaring at him as if he were Spike insisting he was fine when they met him at King’s Cross with his nose broken again.

“I’m not saying he wouldn’t have liked us to have made more alliances,” Evan agreed, moving over to the cradle by the window to see if the baby was awake (fortunately he was not). “But I think he sort of enjoyed hearing that Spike made a friend with connections and nobody liked me.”

“Evvie,” Narcissa said in a very Spike-like lowering tone, frowning at him in a way that conveyed whole worlds of disapproval without wrinkling her forehead.

“Narcissa, he said he’s been to Albania and he should have warned me they think people who smile a lot are liars and fools over there. I’m not saying he was impressed, but he admitted he sent us out unarmed. He doesn’t think we weren’t trying. We’ll just have to follow up on the Karkaroff angle.”

“Evvie,” Narcissa said severely, “your strategy cannot rest on someone who, you have assured me, eats bugs.”

“He was trying to steal my Spike,” Evan reminded her indignantly, “every day, and I was drunk, and you can have a perfectly lovely career even if you eat bugs, look at old what’s-your-cousin Caractacus.”

“Disappearing out of a grimy old pawnshop is not my idea of a perfectly lovely career,” Narcissa informed him, still doing the Narcissa-equivalent of an irritated Spike-scowl.

“Well, I expect the Bulgarian bug-eater’s to be a very promising one,” Evan assured her, totally straight-faced, although he was sure she heard the faint dry note in his voice.
He wasn’t lying. Karkaroff, in his Slughorn-trained assessment, was almost sure to have a sound career, if not a brilliant one. It might be founded entirely on nepotism, but that had never stopped anyone who had more self-esteem than self-respect. In Evan’s opinion, Karkaroff, while nowhere near as bad as Gildylocks, wouldn’t understand the difference.

“You should be more worried about the short-term prospects! Bella said he gave you two a special project and you didn’t get anywhere!” she accused him anxiously.

“Oaks don’t grow over tea,” Evan said, starting to feel a little cranky. He was sure he would have had more patience with her very warming concern if they’d been having this conversation five hours later in the day. “Acorn sown, it’s not my fault if he had unrealistic expectations, and that’s not what I came about, Narcissa, it’s Spike.”

She collapsed in graceful horror into an armchair. “Oh, no, did he get himself fired already? Or did one of the seventh-year Gryffindors try to strip him and stick him to the Astronomy tower? Oh no, they tried and he killed them! Evvie, is he in Azkaban?!”

“No, Cissa, will you listen?” Evan pressed, jittering his fists urgently on her chair-arm. “He kidnapped me out of bed at six in the morning and expected me to help him with no preparation and be functional at six in the morning just because he was asking me to, without even bribing me, and just assume he’d listen and be reasonable and do what I said if I said no! Completely out of the blue!”

There was a long, long moment where Narcissa was staring at him and visibly trying to make sense of that and work out what she was supposed to make of it. Evan deeply, deeply sympathized. It had taken him at least ten minutes.

Then her face crumpled up and her eyes went all watery and she softly cried, “Oh, Evvie, I’m so happy for you!”

“I know!” he exclaimed, throwing his arms out victoriously (and, if truth be told, rather bouncily), and let her hug him.

“Thank you for telling me, darling,” she said, a little snuffly, and cuddled his arm with her head on his shoulder until the baby woke up hungry and started to cry.

“I think that’s my cue, unless you want help,” Evan said, eying it warily. “I just had to come tell you.”

She waved him away, still beaming a bit as she bent over to pick Draco up. “Does he know you’ve worked it out?” she asked with interest.

“Don’t be silly, coz,” Evan laughed. “He hasn’t worked it out.”

“Are you going to tell him?”

He tilted his head. “Er, no, obviously, because I don’t want him to have a stroke.”

She made an unimpressed face, and sniffed, “Most people wouldn’t have a stroke just from realizing they trusted someone they’d already married. And not even in an arranged marriage!”

“Sure,” Evan agreed, grinning easily at her as he stepped through her fireplace back home. “Most people aren’t Severus.”
Evan may possibly be a little paranoid about Hufflepuffs laying marital traps for poor innocent Slytherins just trying to get to know everybody. Because he dated Pansy's mum for, like, a week.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

A chapter with a sad and perhaps surprising lack of dragon fangs, broomsticks, and magical guitars, in which Severus is still figuring out the limits of his job and will probably be murdered by his coworkers well before tea.

Chapter Notes

**Warnings:** 1. Multiple adults being problematic.

2. A character in this chapter is trying to do a particular dietary regime in 1980 at 11, without environmental support or a good understanding even of what nutritional requirements are. Where issue is taken with her choices, it's for those reasons, not because of the diet itself.

That said, Dear Reader, if it is news to you that Severus Snape is judgy and dictatorial, I have sad news for you. The news is called *every page he's ever touched with ink*.

**Notes:** Guys, I am doing my best to avoid OCs, but this is the chapter where 'avoid' becomes 'minimize.'

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

*Dear Asphodel,*
My older brother has announced that he intends to marry a SQUIB! My parents are furious and ready to disown him, but it must be a love potion. How can I get him away from the filthy creature and calm my parents down long enough for it to wear off?

A Dash of Reason

*Dear Dash of Reason,*
If your brother is old enough to marry, he’s old enough to marry whoever he wants. Since you care about your brother and he’s determined enough to risk being disowned, your best bet is to realize that humans are humans before you drive him away.

Best,
Asphodel

Lily—
Glad you’ve got that off your chest. Answer their question, and this time remember that this isn’t a political column and love potions can be a real problem. —Rita

*Dear Dash of Reason,*
Your parents may calm down once they understand either your idea or what your brother sees in his partner. You can make both those things happen if your brother is willing. Tell him that your parents are worried for him, and his best chance of convincing them is to take a love potion antidote and then explain to them why he loves her.
Best,
Asphodel

Lily—
Much better, we’ll just have to put in one edit. First, I don’t know why you’d assume the squib is a witch. Second, don’t ask a wizard to explain why he loves someone. The best case scenario is bad poetry. We’re replacing the last bit with ‘why the objects of his affections is worthy of their family.’ —Rita

Rita, that doesn’t sound like me at all. —L
L— Come up with something the Prophet can print yourself, then. —R
Rita, can I stand you tea or lunch or something? I have a few questions. —L

***

In the glorious Scottish sunlight (it was kind of weak and grumpy looking, actually, just like everyone else who didn’t want to be awake for breakfast, but Bill was On An Adventure) the Great Hall looked open and bright, its blue banners cheerful against the grey stone. The bacon and eggs were piled high, and the students looked, if sleepy and morning-mussed, hopeful and happy to see each other.

Except for the green table, where Ron, Bill’s boatmate from last night, was sitting. They did not look hopeful, or happy. They all looked extremely neat and a bit traumatized, like Bill’s mum had been at them.

Ron didn’t look especially traumatized, so Bill shot him a what’s-with-them look. Ron grinned an I Got To Watch A Free Show Because The Older Kids Are Morons Who Don’t Know Grownups Are Easy grin and shrugged, so Bill grinned back. It was nice to see that face and know it didn’t mean a two-year-old was judging him.

“What’s with him?” asked Bill’s other boatmate who wasn’t a giant fusspot, settling down next to him. Bill had already forgotten the name of the second girl—she wasn’t going to be in their house, anyway—but Gwen was all right. They’d already agreed to cheer for each other’s teams as long as the Cannons and Tornados[1] weren’t playing each other.

Ron wasn’t going to be in their house, but unlike that other girl he knew everything about dogs and crups and awful things about ducks and geese (which his family used to guard the crups), and he knew songs by heart whose titles would have made Mum faint and Dad go temporarily deaf, and Bill was keeping him.

“Dunno,” Bill said, holding out the bacon for Gwen more because you did that for a mate than because Mum would want him to be a gentleman, “but all the other—”

“Euuuuggghhh!” Gwen said. “Thanks, Bill, but no thanks! Just pass me the muesli or the porridge or something, will you?”

Bill looked down at the delicious pile of crackly, delicious, delicious brown delicious bacon smelling deliciously up at him like crackly greasy salty delicious cracklings. “Did a spider fall in it?”

She laughed, and pushed it away. “I don’t eat pigs. Especially their bottoms. Go on, you have mine.”

He blinked, and shrugged, and agreeably took ‘her’ serving. He held her out the eggs instead.
“I don’t eat baby chickens that came out of a mommy chicken’s girl bits, either,” she told him cheerfully. “Really, just the porridge, please.”

He looked down at his own plate, aghast.

Still completely cheerfully, she said, “The porridge, please, and no cream in or I’ll talk to you all about where milk comes from. Oooh, and can you pass me an orange?”

Bill cast around for help.

There was a sudden big space all around them (house of the brave his bum, Dad), and across the hall, Ron had almost fallen into his plate of fluffy baby chickens and delicious crackly pig bits, convulsed in laughter, even though (or maybe because) Bill didn’t think he was close enough to have heard a word of it.

Help came in the form of a tart adult brogue suggesting, “I should pass the young lady her orange if I were you, Mr. Weasley,” and a matching pair of parchment rolls settling down in front of them.

They looked up at their new Head of House, trying not to be intimidated. This was difficult, since she when she was telling them last night to smarten up she hadn’t appeared to care that they needed to smarten up because they’d fallen in the lake. They chorused, “Good morning, Professor.”

She smiled down at them, and if it was a brisker smile than it was warm, it wasn’t unkind, either. “Good morning, Mr. Weasley. Miss Jones. Your year will have Charms first this morning. The Charms classroom can be tricky to find on a Monday, so be sure to allow yourself extra time and ask directions every few portraits, if you cannot find a prefect or Sir Nicholas to escort you.”

Bill and Gwen stared at her, and one of Bill’s new roommates (who’d inched closer once the conversation had turned away from Gwen making eggs unexpectedly horrifying) blurted, “Isn’t there a map or something?”

“Good heavens, no, Mr. Wood,” she smiled, looking really amused. “A map would be quite useless at Hogwarts. You shall have to learn its ways like everyone else. Good morning to you.”

She moved down along the table, dropping off a scroll at every student and exchanging greetings and some longer words with older students.

Bill opened his scroll.

Bill closed his scroll and stood up on the bench. “I don’t know about you lot,” he announced loudly down his table, ignoring any possible raised eyebrows from the teacher’s table, “but I’m going to make a sarnie and see if I can’t grab my charms books before the prefects are finished eating, because,” he waved his scroll aggrievedly, “there aren’t any directions on here!”

There was a little laughter, and then a big chap with a silver badge said amiably, “Don’t worry, squirt, if Professor McGonagall will write a note, we’ll eat slow.”

“Good idea; so will we,” said a girl who also had a silver badge, sitting at the yellow table.

“Our firsties came to breakfast already prepared,” said someone from the blue table, grinning.

“So,” said someone near Ron, not really that much bigger than Bill but scary beyond all reason with eldritch designs crawling all over her hands, her voice very cold, “did ours.”

At the staff table, Professor Dumbledore stood, and everyone fell silent. He looked around, and
Bill suddenly wished he’d thought to get down off the bench once the prefects started squabbling.

“Two points each to Slytherin and Ravenclaw,” he said slowly, perhaps a little dangerously, “for foresight and preparedness, and two to Hufflepuff for that readiness to adopt and credit the good ideas of others which we in academia call good sportsmanship.”

His eyes swung around to Bill, who quailed but stuck out his shoulders and chin. He wasn’t going to get *sent home* for jumping on a table. They’d at least give him a *warning* first, wouldn’t they?

Then the headmaster burst out into a beardy white smile, eyes going all sparkly and grandfatherly. “And five points to Gryffindor—two earned by its prefects and two by Mr. Weasley for seizing an opportunity to support younger children and one’s peers without being asked, and one for showing common or, indeed, exceptional sense in the face of the unknown.” He clasped his old hands together and beamed down at them all. “We *are* off to a happy start this year! Be sure to keep it up!”

Bill slid down self-consciously and, because everyone was still sort of staring at him, tried not to look self-conscious as he slapped more pi—bacon and eggs between some toast and hissed to Gwen, “That man is up to something.”

“That’s *Professor Dumbledore*, that is,” reproached one of Bill’s new roommates, the one who’d kept the light on late because he was afraid of getting quizzed on his first day and getting a Howler from his parents. “He’s a *war hero*.”

“So he’s probably very good at being up to something,” Bill concluded.

“He looks like my Granddad,” one of Gwen’s roommates said critically. “Only less splodgy.”

“He’s hiding being up to something behind his beard,” Bill insisted, less because she’s made a good point worth acknowledging (which she absolutely hadn’t) than because at this point it was a matter of honor.

“He just gave us five points,” Gwen reminded him irrelevantly, unhappily trying to fold dry muesli into a napkin.

The napkin ballooned away from her fingers and tied itself into a neat package, like Bill had seen in illustrations of wanderers with all their things tied to sticks. A very deep voice commented neutrally from behind them, “Toast would be neater.”

“Bread has eggs in,” Gwen explained, turning around and looking up at the skinny, black-haired man in dark blue-grey. He looked a little familiar; Bill thought he’d been at the welcome feast. What he didn’t look was ‘much older than the seventh-years.’ Bill didn’t know what he was if not a professor, though since he was a grown wizard and didn’t have a Hogwarts uniform on. “Er, thanks.”

His eyes narrowed as he looked at her, and his mouth thinned. Which must have been hard, since it was pretty thin already. “Dull hair, split nails, sore at your lips at an age before acne is likely, hollow eyes at eleven, a touch of jaundice, refuses animal protein even when none other is available. ‘Natural diet?’” he asked disgustedly. Bill could hear the quotation marks.

Gwen’s chin went out, so Bill got ready to back her up even though he didn’t know what they were talking about. He knew girls got mean about having blots talked about, if they weren’t just pest bites like Bill had thought hers was. “That’s right.”

The man rolled extremely dark eyes. “When I see Madam Pomfrey at supper, Miss…”
“Jones.”

“Miss Jones, I shall expect her to approach me or Professor Slughorn about which nutritive potion you will need weekly or, indeed, daily, and what arrangements will need to be made for your dietary supplements with the house elves, because you will by then have approached her.”

“Er… what, sir?”

The dark eyes went flat. “Before the end of the schoolday,” the man said, very, very slowly, “which is to say THIS schoolday, during lunch or a free period, you will go to the hospital wing. “You will tell the mediwitch explicitly, which is to say in small words and without dodging, that you do not eat meat or dairy, including anything made with eggs or butter. Unless I misunderstand?”

“Er, no, that’s right.”

“Someday I will be wrong about the fathomless folly of Gryffindors, and then we shall all have cake. Very well: you will tell her that. She will shriek at you. You will run away. She will find me and shriek at me. If she does not come to shriek at me by suppertime, I will go to your Head of House, Professor McGonagall, and then you will be sorry.”

“…Okay?”

“Doubtful. Are you doing this because of an allergy?”

“…What?”

“Or for religious reasons?”

“Huh?” Gwen stared.

“Are you,” he over-enunciated, “a Jainist?”

“Who?”

“Are you even a Hindu, Mahayanan, or Sikh? Because, if so, the acceptability of dairy, at least, is admitted by nearly all—”

“Look, it’s disgusting and we don’t have to and they told my Granddad to stop eating rich foods when he got gout and rich foods are all from animals and if that weren’t basically wrong why would it go bad faster than plants food?”

“I can’t go back in time and murder Ovid,” the man mused, pinching his giant nose as if he had a headache, “or Pythagoras. Seneca and Shelley would be no loss, especially to Mary Shelley, and if Plutarch were strangled at birth we might be rid of professional critics. In which case, no Dorothy Parker. And, then, had Mary Shelley been less miserable, the story might not have boiled out of her. Damn.”

They stared up at him. Bill considered grabbing Gwen and running.

The man heaved a regretful sigh, unpinched his nose, and glared down at her in annoyance. “Please think carefully about how important and how strict your personal philosophy is, as you will be putting your caretakers to extra trouble over your health on extremely short notice—”

“My mum wrote!”
He looked down at her silently.

“…Yesterday,” she admitted.

He lifted an eyebrow which somehow said, all by itself, without his making any noise, “Extremely short notice.”

Then he continued to look at her coolly.

“Er, but you were talking, sir,” she conceded, looking a bit abashed.

“To extra trouble over your health,” he repeated long-sufferingly, “which considerations they are not prepared for, and have never yet needed to think how to manage—for as long as you insist on entirely transcending your species.”

“On what?” Gwen demanded, gaping. Bill kind of agreed, though. Even if the thought of eggs were currently making him a bit queasy, people were not rabbits.

The maybe-teacher ignored that. “I will expect the both of you at ten sharp in the dungeon classroom. Attempt not to faint of hunger or die of malnutrition or,” he eyed Bill’s sandwich in resignation and distaste, “blocked arteries before lunch. I detest foreign bodies in my cauldrons.”

With that, he spun on his heel and stalked off for the teachers’ table, his dark half-cloak rippling out behind him with his annoyance at their life choices.

Gwen said in a stunned sort of voice, “He’s got a lot of nerve having a go at me about fainting of hunger. He was so bony his nose was poking out! Did you see?”

“Everybody’s noses do that,” Bill pointed out, grinning.

“Out of his skin!!!”

Bill gave her a no-it-wasn’t-come-on look.

“You know what I mean!”

“Hey!” Ron said, running up. “That’s the cove who made half the House go back and change their clothes three times and said we should bring all our books to breakfast and stop whinging it’ll do the upper-years good to practice their featherlight charms! What did he want?”

“He wanted Gwen to eat more and get vitamins,” Bill said. Putting it that way made him realize, and he decided, “I’m calling him Mum Jr.”

“You can’t call him Mum Jr.,” Gwen said, staring at Bill. “He’s so….”

“Mean?” offered Wood, who’d been watching like a useless lump, but what could you expect from a Magpies fan. The Magpies won too much; their fans were spoiled.

“I don’t know if he was mean exactly,” Gwen said, frowning. “I mean, he did up my muesli for me. But he was, I don’t know, a bit scary.”

“Super-scary,” Ron agreed, looking, for some weird reason, kind of proud. And, for some weirder reason, like he might start a fight with anyone who tried to argue with him.

Bill smiled loftily at her, and assured them all, “You haven’t met my mum.”
They gave him really big eyes, and Ron asked in an awed tone, “Your mum’s like Apothecary Snape?”

“Well, Bill backtracked, “I mean, Mum’s really nice when she’s not mad at you! She’s the best, our mum! But if you get dirty when there are guests—or she thinks you need feeding-up—or you Did It On Purpose—oh, Merlin, poor Charlie, poor Perce, I left them all alone with the babies and MUM…”

He had to sit down on the nearest corner of bench, overcome with… not guilt, exactly, because he had to go to Hogwarts. It was like his job, it wasn’t just an amazing adventure he got to do for fun. He was supposed to, and Charlie would come next year. But he was leaving them alone.

So he had to make it worth it.

He jumped up again. “Let’s get the books!”

“I have History of Magic first,” Ron said. “They said to bring a pillow but I think they were joking?”

“Nope,” said a passing tall girl with a blue tie, ruffling Ron’s hair with a commiserating sigh and without slowing down. Ron made stunned-scared-cow eyes at her. Her voice trailed back, “What a way to start your Mondays! Bad luck, firstie.”

“What are you talking about?” demanded a boy in a yellow tie, offering her his arm and grinning down. “History first is the best.” They walked off, debating the relative merits of naps and having extra time to check your other homework vs Actually Learning Something.

“What have you got after that?” asked Gwen, shaking off her Older Kids Are So Weird look.

“A free half hour, to go back and get supplies, I expect, then Double Potions. What makes it double, d’you think? It’s only a half hour longer.”

“I think it’s ‘cause you’ve got it with us! Brilliant!” said Bill. “See you in Potions, then!”

Ron grinned back, and headed back to join his table, waving, “See you then!”

Charms was interesting, but frustrating. The teacher talked for a while about remembering what it felt like when things around the house just did what they wanted or saved them when they were frightened, and pushing that feeling through their wands. Then he gave them homework about trying out different wand-grips from a chart and gave Faisal Fawley two points for asking if it was like something called mutters or mud-dress or something.

Then they got to practice, and that was where it got frustrating. About half the class did at least make their wandtips glow by the end of the period, but only Fawley got a point for making his glow bright, and nobody could manage proper sunlight. Bill tried not to be grumpy about it; he’d won points at breakfast, although that wasn’t from a teacher for doing well in class.

Professor Flitwick told them they’d all done really well for the first day, anyway, and smiled like he meant it. He looked a little flighty, but Bill thought he was nice like Dad, not in the way that their family’s nearest wizarding neighbor was nice.

Mr. Lovegood had, as Mum put it, a good heart, but you sort of got the feeling that his niceness was because he didn’t notice anything bad going on in the world everyone else was living in. Dad noticed everything, and he just… liked everyone.
For example, Bill was pretty sure that Fred and George had worked out how to need a wee at the same time on purpose. And they didn’t really think Mum wanted them to finger-paint on the walls. He was also pretty sure that Dad was on to them. It was driving Mum mental, and Bill and Charlie didn’t have to care, exactly, as long as they made sure the furniture stayed dry, and when someone was shouting Percy was still too little to notice why.

Dad did have to care whether the twins were slow or meant to be awful, because they and Ronny were all still in nappies and Mum expected him to do some of the scolding (Bill thought he was fighting a lost cause; when Charlie had sent a ball through the Fawcett’s window Dad had just been excited about how far it’d gone and took Charlie out to work on his aim). Mum was sure the twins meant to be awful, though she said ‘difficult,’ and Bill sort of agreed. Perce had been wearing ‘big-boy pants’ by their age, after all. Bill didn’t remember when Charlie had stopped needing nappies, but he thought the twins just hadn’t decided yet that being left alone would be worth a bit less attention.

Either way, Mum and Dad were both on Nappy Patrol every second they were both home. And Dad didn’t enjoy it any more than Mum did. But while Mum got all stressed about it, Dad thought it was funny. Even though he also agreed it was pretty smelly.

Professor Flitwick, thought Bill, was like that. He didn’t know what History class was like, for that older girl to feel so sorry for Ron. Maybe he and Gwen would have a terrible class to end Fridays with, and that would almost make it fair. Because starting the week with Charms was, he suspected, going to be great, once he’d talked to Faisal Fawley about mutters.

The Potions teacher was also nice, which was a big surprise after the way Mum Jr. had talked. Admittedly, Mum Jr. hadn’t said he was the potions teacher. Bill was willing to suppose he might not even have been trying to make them think that, if you decided that crack about bodies in his cauldrons had just been a joke.

Not that Bill found out that the Potions teacher was nice straight away. When he and the other Gryffindor first years got to the Potions classroom, Professor Beardily Up To Something was just striding merrily up to the door. He smiled at Bill’s class, and at Ron and the Slytherins, who were approaching at a dazed lurch. Ron had a splodge of ink on his forehead, and another boy was clutching a pillow like he thought it would run away with his wand. A girl, trying to be brisk but sounding mostly desperate, was saying to another girl, “Maybe if we learn to make Up All Night potion in Potions and take it before breakfast…”

Professor Beardily Up To Something instructed, with very twinkly eyes, “Wait here a moment, children, if you would.” He opened the door and drifted in, chiding the occupants in rather an amused tone, “I did think you’d make it at least two hours, boys. What seems to be the trouble?”

There was a noise like a very cranky auntie trying to scold someone over the whistle of a tea kettle, and then the door finished closing.

The kids, left stranded in the hallway, all looked at each other. Bill thought one of Gwen’s roommates was winding up to make a nasty remark, so he told Ron helpfully, “You’ve got ink on your forehead. Was History of Magic really that bad?”

“I fell asleep three times,” Ron said dolefully. He gave the girl who’d talked about potions a look like he wasn’t sure whether to smile or scowl at her and added, “Hopkirk kept pinching me.”

Hopkirk lifted her eyebrows loftily at him and said, “Shafiq and Snape said we had to look out for each other, and you were a snoring, piglike disgrace.”
“Of course he was, he’s a boy,” Gwen said dismissively. Bill said *oi!* and she grinned at him.

“You say that now, Jones,” Ron told her in tones so slow and dire the words weren’t even all pushed and slurried together. It made him easier to understand, but also a bit ridiculous. “You wait.”

“I heard the teacher’s a *ghost,*” one of Gwen’s roommates said nervously.

“Yeah,” one of the Slytherin boys agreed. “You can tell because he’s *dead boring.*” The rest of the Slytherins groaned. In a matter-of-fact sort of way, Hopkirk threw her blotting roll to bounce off the boy’s forehead, and caught neatly it on the rebound.

“Oh!”

“I like her,” Gwen announced in Bill’s general direction, and then bounced over to Hopkirk. “Hi, I’m Gwen Jones.”

“Of the Gwynedd Joneses?” asked Hopkirk, looking interested. A few of the other Slytherins were giving satisfied little nods, while Ron looked lost and the rest tried to look like they weren’t rolling their eyes.

Gwen blinked. “We’re from Anglesey, yeah.”

Hopkirk glanced around at the other Slytherins. It looked to Bill like she was counting votes. After a moment, she nodded decisively and shook Gwen’s hand. “Mal Hopkirk.”

“This is my friend, Bill Weasley,” Gwen gestured at him, and after Bill had waved agreeably at Hopkirk he stopped paying attention to her introducing her roommates in favor of crossing over to Ron.

He heard somebody whisper Granny Cedrella’s name. Dad had said that would happen and mostly it would mean that people were interested in what Bill was like. Dad’s mum had been quite interesting when she was younger, so people still knew about her and would be curious about her grandson. He’d said people were just gossipy like that, and the best thing Bill could do was let them get on with it while he got on with being Bill.

So he paid them no mind, and just asked Ron, “So all that fuss was just about the professor is boring?”

“I think,” said a Slytherin boy, “he’s a vampiric spirit who lulls people to sleep and eats their souls bit by bit to stay alive. Only he can’t do it in Hogwarts,” he added hopefully.

“Maybe that’s why they have him teaching,” suggested Wood. “If he’s got dozens and dozens of students to just sort of nibble at, he doesn’t have to eat anybody’s *entire soul.*”

They all looked at him. The Slytherins all had the sort of expression on that Mum always gave Mr. Lovegood, the one that said You’re A Guest And I’m Too Polite To Say It. So Bill voiced the collective thought of, “Wood, that’s *disgusting.*”

He suspected one or two of the other boys might have picked the word ‘terrifying’ instead, but best to leave that in the shade, as Uncle Giddy said.

“Glumbumbles do it!” Wood protested.

“That’s not what they do!” Fawley scowled.
“Is so!”

“Very nearly, Linden,” Professor Beardily Up To Something said from behind them, making at least half of them jump. “If you’re interested in magical creatures, boys, do be sure to have Professor McGonagall introduce you Professor Kettleburn. One can never start too early, after all. You may go in now, children; it’s as safe as any classroom, or library, ever is.” He nodded and smiled at them all, and wandered off in a swirl of light blue and yellow-orange.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Gwen whispered, edging up to Bill while Ron wrote down… what looked like Kidldenyerb. Maybe. His handwriting was pretty bad.

He thought about it, and shrugged. “That we should go in to Potions, I reckon.”

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[1] Chudleigh is in Devon, near Exeter and the edge of Dartmoor. The River Otter goes through that area, and has muggle towns called things like Ottery St. Mary.

Since Gwen’s family (I’ve extrapolated Welshness from her name and future career) is from Anglesey, her local team is Holyhead, but Tutshill isn’t too far away. Besides, it’s fun to support the Tornados, since their performance is a bit roller-coaster-y. Also, just at the moment she thinks the Harpies are gimmicky. (Besides, if she supported her parents team she would have less to fight with her mum about, although this is not a conscious motivator.)

[2] They only got lost twice. And nobody actually got eaten by the tapestry of Merwyn the Malicious, even when a weirdly vividly colored ghost with a soupy sort of voice gave them the wrong password and the tapestry glided off the wall and tried to roll around Gwen.

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Chapter End Notes

**Notes**: This letter to Asphodel is courtesy of Daashi, tweaked slightly by probably-Rita to suit The Prophet's purposes. Please send your own!
September 2, Potions Classroom

Chapter Summary

It's only the second class of the year, and Severus already wants to strangle Horace more than he wants to quit.

Horace is undecided.

Chapter Notes

**Warnings**: just because wizards aren’t interested in Muggle sex-and-gender norms doesn’t mean they have none themselves, or that there’s no overlap. Weasleys most emphatically included.

**Notes**: This chapter contains alchemical symbols. You cannot imagine the trouble they gave me unless you've tried to use some, and if your browser has difficulties... sorry I did my best. T.T

Thanks very much to whitehound for putting up a guide to special characters on her site at members dot madasafish dot com. This guide is not completely up to date, but it has a lot of great resources anyway, and was a very helpful jumping-off point while I was struggling with the ffnet tool.

Also to plutoplex, not only my baseline gratitude for encouragingly beta-ing this chapter generally but for agreeably jumping back into it when I realized on the day of posting that there were two pages I'd never shared (shame). Further thanks to hwyla, excessivelyperky, Kreiri, sir_i_exist, trickster_32, Chrystalline, MzLizzy, sephonered, DashummringeT, Tristitia, r00ney, Anarawells, Sparsile, and all the unsigned AO3 readers who've let me know since my last post that you liked something I've written, and to Daashi and nomedarte for sending in truly excellently evil letters for Asphodel two posts ago.

Yes, I should probably have been doing this since the beginning. Yes, this is quite late to start doing shout-outs. Your devoted author is one of the socially awkward types of human, it's a thing and should not surprise anyone who's noticed that James is the fella about whom I fail hardest at being understanding.

(It's okay, he's not in this chapter. Much.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sweetheart,

You're not worried, are you? I know retirement isn’t good to all couples, but your mum and I are still rubbing along well enough. I’ve joined a few little things and I’m writing a book about my career, so she hasn’t lost patience with me being about all the time yet. And we've agreed that if this goes well I’ll start on a more serious one about the history of the Assizes or a contrast of how
courts in different regions handle the same sorts of cases, so the horizon is clear. When will we see you and your boys again? I’m afraid Petunia’s still being unreasonable, but your mum and I can’t wait.

Love, Dad

Lily,

God only knows, because Merlin hasn’t a clue. —Remus

Dearest Beehive Ginger,

What? Moony and I are just roommates. I mean, of course I love him, but... I mean, what?

Dear Lily,

Er, Alice is beautiful and funny usually by accident but in a good way, and she’s amazing with the baby, and she could kick me teeth in if she felt like it but she even likes me enough to put up with me mam not thinking anyone’s good enough, so why wouldn’t I?

Sincerely but confusedly,

Frank

Evans,

What a question, but since if you can read this you’ve got past the wards on the envelope, you are yourself and benign and I’ll humor you. My maniac is magnificent, everyone knows that who isn’t stupid, and he wouldn’t like even the utterly harmless knowing anything else. Which is why I’m not signing.

(Incidentally, he’s laughing at me for thinking not-signing is useful, considering my handwriting. Not that he has any room to talk about anyone’s handwriting. Not him, I mean, he’s not here, but I can hear him doing it. And if you don’t know why that’s why, you’re not allowed to say you’re his friend anymore, and also you should get divorced at once for not knowing what love is. Which you should do in any case, if you ask me, because, though I loathe to say it of a kinsman, why, Evans, why?)

Sincerely,
not signing, I did say.

Lily,

I don’t know if I love my girlfriend yet, we’ve only been seeing each other a month or two. But she’s great. Thanks for not asking her name, we’re still keeping it to ourselves. You know how Sirius is.

Pete

Are you off your rocker? —S

Sev— I’m just trying to prove wizards aren’t all emotionally stunted. —L

That’s good of you. Don’t use me to do it. —S

p.s.: I note you didn’t say to whom you’re going to fail to prove it.
p.p.s.: Because your premise is faulty.
Now you’re just being difficult! —L

Always. And accurate. —S

p.s.: Your idea fails to take account of sex-based early-childhood cultural conditioning and is therefore more idealistically egalitarian than legitimate.
Idealistic egalitarianism IS legitimate! —L

When it puts on blinkers and lets optimism lead it by the nose, I must say ye neigh. —S
Do you imagine I can be trifled with? If you persist in sending me raspberries for every pun, I’m just going to save them up and make a chocolate jam for E. —S
Three paper airplanes and a cup of fruit is cheap for half an answer from you. ♥ —L

P.S.: that’s really sweet, Sev. Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone.
…I’m so proud. However, the next time you want to do something this ludicrous, put a Protean on a pair of notebooks. If you can spell raspberries into the fold I’m sure you can manage it. The thirdmissive nearly took a marmalade kitten’s ear off, and more importantly H.S. is starting to give me a look his face can’t handle and I mustn’t laugh at personal mail in front of all the infants. —S
You are a ridiculous man. —L
P.S.: owl me a notebook you can stand to be seen with and I’ll see what I can do.
P.P.S.: the raspberries weren’t a challenge, Sev, for pity’s sake. But thanks, I adore blackcurrents.
L— I know you do, idiot.

Valley-goddess of the perpetual sunshine of frondlike lethality,
You know I love every inch of you from the freckles on your hairline to your weirdly cold toes and bouts of extreme violence with hurtful shouting, with particular reference to bits including your eyes which I am not going to otherwise specify because you left your letter out. Which I am taking to mean that you want me to leave the answer here, but also means Sirius will probably get into it. And if he doesn’t, the sprog probably will in ten years and then he’ll be traumatized and I’ll have to give him THE TALK, which is never going to happen because I’m fobbing it off on Remus. You aren’t feeling neglected, are you? I thought you didn’t want to talk.
Your really overpoweringly adoring husband-for-life,
James

Dear Alice,
I’ve just done an informal survey, because Rita Skeeter (you remember her?) got me mad and told me it will never go well if you ask a wizard to explain why he loves someone. You might like to know that out of everyone I asked, including my father, Frank is the only one who’s less than completely ‘round the bend and even slightly qualified to be in a relationship. Both at once, I mean.
Yours,
Lily

Lily,
Color me surprised. I’d say ‘hands off, my husband is mine,’ but historically speaking you don’t go for the nice ones.
Alice

***

Even though Mum Jr. was lurking off near a window, Bill noticed him before anything else. You had to, there was just a sort of pull, even though he wasn’t doing anything. His arms were folded, his face was completely blank, and he had the kind of eyes where you could tell something was going on under there, and going very quickly. The eyes flicked over Bill and the other kids as they entered, and Bill felt they were doing something more than counting heads.

Ron started to move towards a seat, but Mum Jr. just looked at him—didn’t even turn his head, just flicked his eyes sideways—and Ron stopped moving. Mum Jr. gave the tiniest, sharpest nod Bill had ever seen. Then his eyes flicked again, this time to the desk at the head of the classroom. The rest of his face never so much as twitched, but it was still very clear that they were meant to look where he was looking.

There was another wizard from the teacher’s table there, a good head shorter than Mum Jr. but twice his size anyway. He was a very greying, balding blond. Bill noticed his eyes because they were a very pale green in his ruddy face, almost yellow but not, like gooseberries or grapes, not bluish-green like Granny Cedrella’s or the greyish lichen color of a few of the muggles in Ottery St. Catchpole. His waistcoat was old-fashioned, and looked soft but not woolly.
“Welcome, welcome,” he beamed at them, and there was a fussy note in his voice that made Bill think he’d been the cranky auntie shouting over the teakettle noise. “You can see the desks are two to a cauldron; each of you sit with someone from the other House and take out your potions kits.”

Wondering what would have happened if the numbers hadn’t been even, Bill waited only long enough to make sure Gwen and Hopkirk had started bustling to a desk together before hooking Ron, who looked relieved. “Cheers, mate,” Ron said. “I’m fair sick of everyone new telling me to talk slower.”

“If you’re sick of it,” said a very deep voice very quietly and very deliberately, from exactly behind them, “then talk slower.”

Ron, once he stopped jumping out of his shoes, hunched down in a grumbly sort of way. Bill, on the other hand, did not stop having his heart attack quite so quickly. He’d thought he was good at telling when people were sneaking up behind him! But of course people who weren’t the Terrible Twins, he realized now, wouldn’t be stifling giggles and tripping over their rompers.

The shadow passed on, although since everyone had now been warned only one or two other pairs of students shrieked and tried to leap through the ceiling when he crossed behind them.

Round-eyed, Bill hooked a thumb at the literally creepy probably-not-a-professor and just stared at Ron.

“I’ll take it from him,” Ron said in a disgruntled but I don’t want to tone. “He’s not trying to tell me to do something he won’t bother with.”

Across the room, Mum Jr. turned his head to look at Ron, something churning in his eye. It was a thoughtful sort of churning, though, not a scary kind. It only lasted a moment, and then he prowled behind someone else and made her hair stand on end even though she had actually been eying him. It was just like having a manticore in the room.

Except that Bill thought he probably wouldn’t have had a terrible Mum-like urge to make a manticore sit down in a nice trappy, squishy armchair and shove a cup of tea in its face.

“Sorry I said anything,” Ron whispered to Bill glumly. At Bill’s confused look, he explained, “He didn’t look like he was planning to do that to everyone. I think he’s just making it fair.”

Questions piled up in Bill’s head. Like, why would you think that, and how is creeping up behind them fair to anybody. He settled for, “What goes on down there?!”

“None of your business, Gryffindor,” said one of the Slytherin girls who wasn’t Hopkirk. Bill had been too busy last night trying to figure out how the talking hat could exist to pay attention to everyone’s names, which he realized now had not only been silly of him but quite possibly two kinds of rude at once..

Then the girl jerked and her back stiffened—although she didn’t scream—because four long, very pale fingers had drifted down to land on her shoulder. Lightly, like a moth. She looked up into a face that was just watching her, coolly curious. Bill thought he’d maybe seen an eyebrow twitch, just a little.

The girl got frowny around the eyes, and told Bill grudgingly, “That is to say, House business isn’t supposed to leave the common rooms.”

Some skin shifted around Mum Jr.’s weirdly dark eyes. It was very Mummish of him, except that Mum would have followed it up by putting her hands on her hips, glaring pointedly and, if Bill
didn’t put his laundry in the hamper smartish, yelling. Mum Jr. just waited.

The girl gave in crossly. “Weasley, is it?”

The hand dropped on her shoulder in what Bill thought might have been a commiserating little pat. As Mum Jr. went to stand a bit near his window again, the girl didn’t exactly look happier, but she did look less likely to bite someone’s face off. Now it was more like Charlie’s grumpily I-bet-this-is-meant-to-build-character face when he didn’t think it was fair to make him bring the dishes to the sink for Bill and Perce to wash and dry, since Mum and Dad both had wands.

Bill noticed that their actual professor was rubbing up and down the bridge of his nose, which was on the reddish side even without that, and had his eyes squinched shut. But then the professor took a deep breath, huffed it out, clapped his hands again, and beamed at them all.

“Now, then, everyone all settled? Kits out?” He waggled a finger. “And your quills and journals, don’t forget!”

There was a collective groan from everybody. Half the class had apparently spent the last hour and a half taking very boring notes, and the other half had had such a good time in Charms that they’d forgotten they might have to take any.

“And anyone who would like to forego a memory aid and be tested at the end of class has only to say,” said Mum Jr. from his window, folding his arms meaningfully.

The professor looked like he wasn’t at all sure what he thought about that and was considering saying something about it. In the end, he just smiled at them again and introduced himself.

(It turned out that Mum Jr. had his own name, too. Ron might have said it before. Bill promptly forgot it this time too: it was all over hissy edges. In Bill’s opinion, Mum Jr. had enough hissy edges to be going on with and didn’t need, as Actual Mum would have put it, to be encouraged.)

When Professor Slughorn took attendance, it took almost fifteen minutes because he kept asking students if they were related to so-and-so and how their Uncle Whoozit was doing these days. Bill had to answer about Granny Cedrella’s health and how Auntie Muriel’s new magazine was getting on and if Dad was excited about the new department at the ministry.

He had to explain that Dad wasn’t allowed to talk about work at dinner, but Professor Slughorn chuckled when Bill volunteered that he knew Dad was excited about their cousin Sirius teaching him how muggle motors worked. Dad was really excited about that. You couldn’t sit down in the living room anymore without moving a book on technomancy somebody hadn’t bothered to close.

When the professor moved on to ask Ron how the crup-breeding business was going, Bill felt exhausted, although he didn’t know why. He glanced around, and flinched.

Most of the kids were just flipping through the textbook, nodding off, or playing Witch Hunt where their notes should have gone. Bill was pleased to see, when he craned his neck a little, that Gwen had got all the vowel-noise runes in a word that looked like it was going to be ‘founders.’ Hopkirk’s stick figure only had shoes and a dress on, not even a hat or wand, and certainly wasn’t on a platform or tied to a stake yet even if Hopkirk didn’t play the version where the witch got a broom before you drew the flames.

But Mum Jr. looked like he was going to set Professor Slughorn on fire with his eyes and then skin him with his fingernails and then throw all his toes off the Astronomy tower.

Not looked, exactly—his face was still very blank. But there were waves of murder sheeting off
him, and his knuckles were a vivid yellowy-white against the soft, dark grey of his sleeves. He’d stopped looking like he was just leaning against the window casually: now he was coiled against it like he needed something to spring off when he leapt for the professor’s throat.

Bill suddenly thought he knew what had been making the teakettle noise.

Eventually, Professor Slughorn must have noticed, too, because he exclaimed, “Gracious me, will you look at the time. We’ll have to finish getting acquainted next cl—”

One of the glass things on Slughorn’s desk cracked so hard it sheared in half, with a noise like a ball hitting a window. The cork bounced the top part off the desk and onto the floor, where it shattered with a happy little tinkle.

Without a word, Mum Jr. flicked his wand at the shards. They flew up through the air and reformed on the top of the twisty glass thing, as if nothing had ever happened. Everyone stared at him, and he looked blandly at the professor, just waiting for the lesson to go on. Bill thought there was just a hint of color pinking that very pale face, but he could have been imagining it.

“—Later,” Slughorn finished, pretending not to be alarmed. He was worse at it than Dad when Mum told him off for getting muggle grease on her rugs. He made his way back to the desk at the front and beamed at them in a jumpy, distracted sort of way. “Now, then, which of you has done any cooking at home?”

There was an uneasy pause. Some of the girls put tentative hands up. A few more looked as if they didn’t want to be volunteered for anything, and Bill didn’t think he was the only boy who sort of felt it just wasn’t on to spring this sort of question on anybody.

Mum Jr. swept the class with a very sardonic eye and put his own hand up decisively.

With a shrug, Bill did too, and a few more hands followed.

“Good, good, you’ll have a leg up already,” Slughorn said encouragingly. Since he didn’t drag anybody up to the front of the class, there was a general air of relief.

Except from the window. Mum Jr. looked as if he violently disagreed and was actually biting the insides of his lips closed.

“Now,” Slughorn said, “the first potion we’ll be making will be a boil cure! And anyone who does particularly well can make friends with some of the older students with skin problems, eh, Severus?”

“That’s one idea,” Mum Jr. said, with a dry look that left Bill unable to tell whether he was joking or advising them in dead earnest. “If the lazy s—beggars are incapable of making a first-year draught themselves, make them pay through the nose as a warning about buying commercial goods post-graduation. You’ll be doing them a favor, especially if they catch fire.”

The actual professor closed his eyes for a second and appeared to count to five before popping them back open with a smile of strained joviality. “Who can tell me what we’ll need?”

Linden Wood put up a brave hand and ventured, “Snake fangs, and stewed—”

“How many fangs?” Mum Jr. asked softly. Maybe it was just annoyance with Slughorn being annoyed with him, but he sounded a bit dangerous.

“Six?” tried Wood uncertainly.
Mum Jr. inclined his head. “What size?”

“Er, the book didn’t say.”

“Miss Jones?” Slughorn asked, because Gwen had her hand very solidly up, and her jaw was set.

“Snake teeth?” she asked in a demanding, upset sort of way.

“Yes, indeed,” Slughorn nodded, looking perplexed.

Mum Jr cleared his throat, low as a whisper, and sort of flexed two fingers and dipped his eyes when the professor looked at him. The professor kind of bounced his eyebrows and leaned back (Bill was fascinated), and Mum Jr. said, just as solidly as Gwen had raised her hand, “Potions isn’t cooking, Miss Jones, do not be confused by the similarities in method. You can make substitutions in food, but you cannot make the same potion with two different sets of ingredients.”

“But,” Gwen started, but Mum Jr. held up a silencing hand.

“However,” he said, still very firmly, “in years past, some made a career of creating potions of similar effects to those which require ingredients considered ‘dark.’ You may well choose to make a career of re-creating common potions effects using alternatives to animal material in common potions, but you will first have to become adept in the usual way, practicing on the usual potions. I assure you, nothing goes into a potion frivolously, although of course the potions can be made frivolously. Any further discussion of your qualms in the matter should be held with your Head of House or with the Headmaster. Do you understand?”

“…Er, I did, sir,” she said, although she still looked rebellious, “but what’s qualms?”

“Qualms are misgivings,” Mum Jr. replied.

“Worries,” Professor Slughorn supplied helpfully from behind one hand when Gwen did not look enlightened.

Mum Jr. scowled. “To return to the matter, an asterix,” he said a bit loudly, flicking a star-shape onto the blackboard with his wand in case anyone didn’t know what one of those was, presumably because Gwen had left him thinking they all couldn’t read, “will lead you to the footnotes, wherein you will find information that will help you to make a potion that will cure boils rather than blanket you in them, as it very well might if your measurements are wrong. Does anyone know what size fangs?”

Bill risked a glance at Slughorn, who looked less annoyed than Bill had expected. He was more measuring Mum Jr. than glaring at him.

Hopkirk raised her hand. “The book didn’t say what size, sir,” she said. “I’m sure it didn’t, because I kept looking. But it said they shouldn’t be from a venomous snake, and you should use, er, four measures of the powder, I think, but it didn’t say what measures.”

Mum Jr. looked pleased, which was the first time Bill had seen him look pleased. He didn’t go so far as to smile. He explained to the class, “Where ‘measure’ is used for the first ingredient listed, without explanation, you may assume with some safety that it means ‘so many ounces per batch.’”

There was a pause, and then Professor Slughorn waggled his eyebrows meaningfully and made a writing sort of gesture in midair. There was a mass scramble to open ink bottles and scribble.

Ron put his hand up. “Er, some safety, sir?” he asked.
Mum Jr. looked more pleased, but left it to Professor Slughorn to chuckle and assure him, “You may rely upon it until your OWL year, Mr. Wagtail. Well, Severus, if you don’t mind,” he gestured at the blackboard, “four measures of six powdered snake fangs.”

Mum Jr. agreeably flicked words onto the board. Bill had to squint, because the handwriting was a bit tortured—spiders-got-into-the-inkwell, but with effort he could nearly make out:

ALL RECIPES IN THIS BOOK ONLY
ONE BATCH BREWED IN: Water[∀]x2Liter[L], Pewter[☿]Cauldron[Cn] Size[s] 2
∀x2L, ♂Cn.s2

“That's shorthand,” Mum Jr. paused to say, tapping the squiggly backwards-K looking letter. “Technically it means tin—you'll see it in Astronomy class; tin is ruled by Jupiter. However, it serves as a shorthand for pewter, which is a tin and copper alloy. This prevents confusion, as one can have copper cauldrons but if you try to brew in tin you deserve everything that happens to you.” He gave them a menacing look in case they were thinking about brewing in tin, and flicked another line up:

General Cure for Common Pustules

“It is generally called a Boil Cure, you know, Severus,” the professor commented, sounding as if he were trying not to have a headache.

“That isn’t half so accurate, though,” Mum Jr. pointed out sensibly. “It isn’t just good against boils, it targets all swellings with pus at their core that don’t originate from broken skin, from acne and styes to tubercular scrofula and buboes.”

Slughorn began, “Severus, we’ve discussed—” and cut himself off, either because Mum Jr. was giving him a confused huh-what-when look[1] or because he just didn’t want to get into it. Instead, he commiserated, “That’s quite true, m’boy, but I’m afraid they’ll never find the accurate version in the index.”

Mum Jr. paused, gave the textbook an annoyed look, and sighed. Slughorn looked as if he’d dodged a killing curse, which seemed a little over-the-top to Bill.

Erasing the heading, Mum Jr instead flicked up onto the blackboard,

℞ “Boil Cure”
a general cure for common pustular swellings, cysts, and nodules
1. 6 x common snake fangs, powdered, use 4³

“What’s a kist?” Ron whispered, looking horrified.

“Dunno,” Bill whispered back. Everyone around them was having the exact same conversation, such as it was. “Do you know what a stupluar is?”

Ron made a confused face, and Bill pointed. “Oh—I think it’s pusteller? No. …D’you think we want to know?”

“…No?”

Mum Jr. was drawing the symbol bigger. He tapped it, and pointed his eyes at one of Gwen’s roommates. “This means?”

“Ounces,” she said, sticking her chin up in alarm at being called on.
“Very good, very good,” Slughorn said. “Severus, while they have their quills out, why don’t you show them the rest.”

There followed a sharp little lecture, and the class wrote down ’20 grains (gr) to a scruple ( занятка), 3 занта to a dram or drachm ( dram), 8 драм to an ounce ( ounce) 12 драм to a pound ( pound), 14 драм to a stone ( stone).’

“Although you shan’t have to work in stones, and seldom even in pounds, unless you become commercial brewers,” Mum Jr. added. “They often have to make several dozens of batches at once. Now, if you will look at the scales you’ve bought, you’ll note the weights it came with are marked both in these measurements and in grams—”

“And I shall expect each of you to fill in a table of conversion, to be handed in next class,” Slughorn interrupted hastily.

Mum Jr. looked thrown off, then shrugged and flicked a grid onto the chalkboard. It had five rows in six columns with all the symbols at the top, and in the very bottom right corner it read ‘1gr = 3.24mg.’ The top left read ‘1st=5.222kg,’ and one in the middle said ‘8 драм = 31.12g.’

“What a memory you have, Severus,” the professor noted, looking slightly weirded out.

Mum Jr. threw him a confused look, and shrugged when nothing more seemed forthcoming. Not unsympathetically, he told the class, “If your tutors haven’t emphasized basic arithmancy, you may find a classmate to help you on this occasion, but you must each show your calculations.”

“And now that we have that sorted,” Professor Slughorn clapped his hands, “who can tell me what we do with the snake fangs?”

Bill caught Mum Jr. irritably stopping himself from rolling his eyes and not stopping himself from staring with impatient glumness at the nearest textbook.

Taking this for a hint, Bill started to reach for his textbook, but Mum Jr. rapped out, “One reads the chapter before class begins, Mr. Weasley.” Eyeing Bill a little coldly, as if he’d caught him cheating (which wasn’t fair at all), he suggested, “Would you care to take a guess?”

Bill gave up a bit, since he had a feeling that guessing would be bad. He said, “The book said what temperature but not how much water, sir. Unless we’re just supposed to heat it dry?”

“It’s on the blackboard,” Mum Jr. said irritably, smacking his wand into the line at the top with the upside-down triangle.

“Er… no offense, sir, but that line’s a bit hard to read.”

Mum Jr. shot him a what-the-hell-is-hard-to-read-about-it look, but fortunately he was forestalled before Bill was put in the position of having to explain that his handwriting looked like a flock of sparrows had sat in a chalk-pit and then done a line-dance on the blackboard and there were more brackets to keep track of than Dad’s office worked up at the start of Quidditch season.

“In the back of your book,” Professor Slughorn saved Bill placidly, “you’ll find all sorts of useful little tables and diagrams. The one you want, Mr. Weasley, is ‘Standard measures of Water By Cauldron Size.”

Gwen put up her hand. “'Scuze me, Professor,” she frowned, “but we were only told to bring one cauldron.”

“Quite right, Miss Jones,” he beamed. “As this book was written for Hogwarts’ students at your
level, all its recipes require a size 2 pewter cauldron, as Severus wrote here,” he waved at the
blackboard. Without even looking at Mum Jr., he forestalled whatever the younger wizard had
been about to say by adding, “You shall learn why the materials of your tools are important next
year, once you’ve got the basics down. Now, who can tell me what temperature…”

Mum Jr. sidled over to Professor Slughorn and whispered intently, “They won’t have time to brew
it Borage’s way at this rate, the slugs have to stew half an hour before they can even start heating
the base water!”

“Well, then, they’ll have to brew it at the start of next class,” Slughorn told him calmly. He was so
not-dismayed that Bill thought he’d never meant them to start today, even if he pretended to, and
had meant to go on getting to know them for most of the period. “I’m sure you can think of
something to keep them occupied once we’ve got the recipe sorted out, m’boy.”

For a second, Bill thought Mum Jr.’s head would actually explode. Then something seemed to
occur to him. He nodded sharply and banged out the door in the back that read Stores.

The class went through the rest of the recipe without him, which was a much more relaxed way to
go about it but with fewer pauses to find out the whys of anything. Finally, though, Professor
Slughorn went to the Stores door, rapped on it, and opened it. “Severus?” he called pointedly.

Mum Jr. came out holding a big, wicked looking knife and a basket of vegetables. “I hope you’ve
taken good notes,” he said, a bit sadistically. Bill was sure he wasn’t the only one whose eyes were
drawn to the knife. It wasn’t the glintiest thing about Mum Jr. as he elaborated, “As you won’t be
able to put them into practice for several days.”

He thumped a potato onto the workbench. Then he did smile, and it was awful. He asked, “Who
thinks they know how to use a knife?”

It turned out that none of them knew how to use a knife.

It was possible that Bill’s mum didn’t know how to use a knife.

He wasn’t looking forward to telling her.

They had to bring in vials of cut-up vegetables and powdered oats and chicken bones for
homework, and the table of conversion, and a foot of small writing or two feet of large about why
cutting things up properly was important, and a neatly copied-out recipe for the boil cure potion.

The only upside was that when Bill jokingly asked Ron if he thought the Gryffindors could get
away with powdering their oats during History class, Ron stared at him enviously and declared,
“That’s genius!”

It turned out that even a half-blind ghost with only half his mind in the present century couldn’t
ignore a whole class of eleven-year-olds industriously grinding their mortars instead of taking
notes, but that was okay. The dead professor wasn’t half as scary as Mum Jr., unless you thought
people really could die of boredom, and he didn’t take away more points than Bill’s class had got
out of Professor Slughorn.

They’d just have to do it under their desks next time.

When Bill told Ron how it had gone when they found each other in the Great Hall on the way to
dinner, Ron stared at him, open-mouthed, and then turned to Hopkirk and said aggrievedly, “See? I
can be a good Slytherin.” Hopkirk raised her eyebrows at him, and he explained, “Because I think
all these idiots are morons.”
“A good Slytherin,” said a dark, scary, amused voice from just behind Gwen, as Mum Jr. paused by them on the way to the head table, “sees to it that he has allies smart enough not to get him into trouble.”

Bill eyed him. He was, okay, Bill would admit it, scarier than Actual Mum—but it was the same sort of scary. And Bill was a Gryffindor; if Gryffindors were stupid they were stupidly brave, like Uncle Giddy said. So he asked, “Are we in trouble?”

Mum Jr. looked down at him consideringly and decided, “If you don’t all receive at least an E on your first Potions and History of Magic exams, Mr. Weasley… lingering, painful, dream-drowning worlds of it.”

And, looking rather cheered by this thought, he passed on.

“He definitely likes me,” Bill declared.

Gwen smacked the back of his head. Hopkirk got the exact same kind of considering look as Mum Jr., then nodded happy satisfaction and followed suit, rather harder.

Nerve-bendingly, even though Mum Jr. was in no way facing them, Bill was sure he heard a stifled snort.

[1] During Severus’s very Potions class (not counting all the ones with his mam), he heard they were going to do a boil cure, immediately started quietly explaining about how Lily should set up her potions kit, walked her through why cutting things up to their described sizes is important (“think of it like your mum said about baking, Lils, catalysts, like, and heat getting all the way through all the pieces at the same rate and the way the juices from a teabag ooze out differently than if it’s looseleaf—” “Oh! And, Sev, ew, tea doesn’t ooze, it seeps, is your tea moldy or something?” “Well, I’ve read about kombu-cha, it’s from Manchuria so I suppose it might be interesting to make, but I haven’t tried yet, you need—to not hold your knife like that when you’re cutting slippery things!”), and started them brewing.

When he was asked about his family he said, “Sorry, sir, just a minute, I think the fire’s too hot, I had it a second ago, it’s going to scorch the fang powder, this stupid grill keeps hiccups,” and Slughorn stopped and said, “How can you tell, m’boy,” and Lily said proudly, “Sev can feel it! But 250 Paracels means it should be more pumpkin-colored than satsuma in dim indoor light over common coal anyway, right? Because it would be about 1100 degrees Celsius if we had a thermometer?”

And Slughorn said, “Yes, indeed! Very good, very good, take a point each! And never fear, Miss Evans, we’ll teach you temperature-measuring charms by the time a few degrees really matters. Carry on!” and talked to Narcissa Black for ten minutes while Severus gaped indignantly and started explaining to Lily why a few degrees absolutely mattered all the time including right now, look, she could already see some browning in the powder and it was only ever supposed to melt once the wand-wave worked with the pewter to crystallize it, no, that’s not insane, think about it like boiling honey that’s gone solid, or making caramel. Only we don’t want to caramelize the snake fangs; it’ll still work but it’ll itch, so the flame really can’t be this yellow, dammit, stupid grill—!

During Severus’s second potions class, he asked why they had to do the boil cure a second time, and everyone looked at him funny, which he did not notice, and Slughorn told him it was, uh, to make sure he really had his technique right and it wasn’t a fluke. And so Severus said, Oh, Science! in an inappropriately happy tone of voice, and Lily started giggling while half of Slytherin stared at them like Can We Kill The Mudbloods Now and half of Gryffindor stared at...
him like Nerd. Why. Severus having enough time to ‘ask reasonable questions’ about the way the
textbook was written and about the course goals* did not improve matters.

What Severus remembers from his entire first, second, and third year of Potions classes is BORED
BORED BORED BORED (help me Lily and extracurricular reading, you’re my only hope)
BORED WHY IS EVERYTHING MEDIocre BORED booOO-OOO--OOOooored BORED
(why are these people trying to kill me this is not an appropriate challenge or distraction from
being bored) AUUGH WHY IS MY TEACHER USELESS SOOOOO SOOOOOO BORED.

What Slughorn remembers from Severus’s first through seventh years of Potions classes is every
single argument, Thank Salazar For Miss Evans, and getting drunk a lot.

* in Severus’s whole time at Hogwarts, only Delores Umbridge ever showed her students her
syllabus, because most teachers were not damn stupid enough to lock themselves into a timeline in
a school as volatile as Hogwarts without being forced to.

Chapter End Notes

**Next:** Slytherins being Slytherins. For serious.

**Notes:** Beehive Ginger is a real flower, Zingiber spectabile. It is extremely cool-
looking, like a glorious pinecone or, yes, a beehive. It is also not at all well-known;
Sirius was very grouchy and defensive about being asked personal questions about
something he doesn’t usually talk about out of nowhere, and made me look up the
world’s weirdest flowers to annoy Lily with.
When Severus said ‘marmalade kitten’ he meant a youngish Gryffindor. I was unable
to make that clearer because he knows he’s behaving unprofessionally by responding
to Lily’s paper airplanes during his first day properly on the job, and he’s very
paranoid (read: embarrassed) about that and didn’t want to leave a traceable record.
September 2, Slytherin Common Room

Chapter Summary

In which a half-blood walks a tightrope over a snake-pit without practicing first.

Chapter Notes

**Warnings:** The author is not pretending Hogwarts is a paragon of schools, Severus is not pretending he has all the answers, and Salazar is… Look, he's not claiming all Slytherins are great at it, ok?

**Notes:** Thanks to Kreiri, Jade M, hwyla, EurasiaAurora, WildSkyRider, Buzzardonic, myhomeisinyourarms, DeathGoddess, lupin5th, AnachronisticVerbage, noaacat, ChainedLightning (unless it's ChairedLightning, which seems less likely? Working from phone-notes...) Trickster32, Tristitia, MzLizzy, urcool91, MagicalTreeStump, PotionsChaos, JokerAtWork, flibbertygigglet, and excessivelyperky for letting me know, since my last post, that you liked something I've written.

Special thanks to plutoplex, of course, and to Jodel, who is being so amazing that I can't respond as quickly as I'd like. And since I've mentioned Jodel, it's time to recommend Red Hen Publications' brilliant essays again, and its gorgeous pdf-books. Especially the Slytherin Study Group adaptation. Required reading, delightful presentation.

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*The Prophet is saddened to report that this afternoon Harold Heralder (36) died after ingesting a vial of Boil Cure potion mixed with a mug of the Knight Bus's iconic hot chocolate. Heralder was a muggleborn graduate of Hogwarts's Hufflepuff House and a former Keeper for the Chudley Cannons, who had the excellent record of only fifteen crashes during his seven years as driver of the Knight Bus.*

*Aurors concluded the death to be accidental, telling The Prophet that Heralder, who had achieved a P on his Potions OWL and sustained several concussions during his Quidditch career, must have forgotten the erratic effect that sugar has on many healing potions.*


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When the Slytherins trailed in from supper, there was a certain amount of crowding around the door and groaning.

The Dread Adult Contaminating Their Sacred Space (Cleo thought everyone was overreacting; he was only using black ink) looked up from the enormous heap of papers and folders spread out in
front of him on a go table he must have enlarged. He informed them coolly, “You were twice
warned. Prefects’ meeting in an hour; seventh years who don’t know where to start with your
homework have until then to ask me. The rest of you, ask someone from the year above. I didn’t
take Divination or Muggle Studies, so don’t bother.”

Then he turned back to his papers.

Someone behind Cleo sniffed, “Who would take Muggle Studies?”

“Anyone who wanted a career in the Ministry,” the Naj said, this time without looking up. “Or
wanted to travel. Or loved the arts. Serious questions only, if you please.”

“How did you get back from the Great Hall before we did?” Anthony asked aggrievedly.

“Please tell me that was a first-year,” the Naj said flatly to the room at large, still without looking
up, pointedly ignoring the fact that the boy’s voice had not only broken but settled. Cleo flushed in
contact embarrassment, and tried to pretend she hadn’t before Anthony could notice.

She had a moment of intensely missing the days when he and the Black cousins would take over
the hearth-most sofa and all her year would sit around on the floor to read and play. She curled in
the corner nearest him of that selfsame sofa, to keep Yaxley from thinking of it first. On a sigh, she
announced, “I’ve got more than an hour’s worth of homework already, and it’s only Tuesday,” and
opened Apothecarial Astronomy: An Herbal.

Catching a corner of his mouth curling up over her book cover as the other kids grumblingly
settled in to work, she glowed with pride for nearly two minutes before she could make her eyes fix
on the page.

Probably fifteen minutes in, a group of third-years started complaining, increasingly loudly, about
how were they expected to memorize all of Ogham.

“Twenty-five runes!” someone moaned.

“Stop whinging,” snapped Chisterleigh. “You’ve only got to memorize the strokes and names your
first week, it’s not as if she’s going to make you reel off everything they do.”

“But she wants us to be able to read in them by Thursday!”

“I’ll bet you a galleon she didn’t say ‘fast,’ you little whingers.”

“Come here, the five of you,” the Naj said quietly, straightening up from the parchment he’d been
covering with a spiderweb of connected notes, not half so neat as an array. He always worked bent
over his paper, and read with the book right near his face, but apart from that he didn’t act like
someone who needed glasses.

The third-years looked at each other in apprehension, but then dragged reluctant feet over to him.

“Hands,” he instructed, holding out a demanding one of his own.

Clearly afraid the scary man was about to chop him off at the wrist, one of the boys hesitantly held
out his hand.

“Is that your wand hand?” With unerring speed, the Naj’s crow-feather quill darted over the backs
of his fingers. Cleo wasn’t surprised he used one of those; she’d had his ink death-of-a-thousand-
cuts her essays before, and you needed a really precise quill to write like he did without getting all
the letters bleeding into each other.

“Now the other.” The quill darted again, and he said, “Next.”

When he was done, the third-years had the Ogham lines slashed down the correct joints of their wand hands, and the corresponding Futhark runes on the joints of the other. The Naj told them, “You will discuss the rest of your homework in silence for the remainder of the hour. Look at the Futhark as seldom as possible, unless you haven’t had a subscription to The Prophet and need the practice. If I catch anyone hand-speaking in Potions, except with your own brewing partners about your potion, it will go hard for you.”

Still intimidated by the paltry bulk of their third-year homework (okay, they all had at least two classes more than they had the last year, but their work was still easy, especially in the first week), the five of them murmured Thanks-Sna-er-Thank-You-Apoth-er-uh-Merlin-Snape-that’s-so-weird.

“He’s the Naja, in here,” Cleo noted, turning a page.

There was a pause, with a lot of people holding their breath for the explosion. After a sigh, though, the Naj capitulated, “I suppose I am.” He added sharply, “In here.”

“Of course, sir,” Cleo agreed, turning the page back to frown at a footnote.

“At least that’s less of a mouthful,” Glenda muttered at her, making a face. “Still be weird, though.”

Cleo blinked at her. “He’s always been the Naja,” she pointed out, but Glenda just patted her hand condescendingly and dipped back into The Dream Oracle.

After a little while, the firsties started squabbling over which of them was doing their Potions homework completely wrong.

“The numbers are on the weights in your scales,” Shafiq bit out, eyeing them coldly.

“Only for one scruple and things,” a girl objected piteously. Scowling at the Naj, she said, “Nobody told us to bring an abacus to school.”

“You shouldn’t need one,” he replied, buried in papers again. “And if you do, you shouldn’t have had to be told what you’d need.”

This started off a howling.

“Did you think you were being taught maths simply to drive your tutors mad with your resentful recalcitrance?” the Naj drolly inquired. “Obviously you were going to need to be able to do simple calculations at school. How are you to manage Charms, Arithmancy, or Astronomy without geometry? Did you imagine you could get through Potions, Transfiguration, or Herbology without algebra? Even the most unformed of proto-Slytherins should be capable of rudimentary planning ahead.”

Cleo hadn’t been aware she knew anyone who used maths for anything besides Arithmancy, unless you counted measuring distances between stars. Now she had to stop herself making a gleeful noise at the mental image of a tiny Naj filling the margins of his Herbology homework with… with calculations about how much watering to do in especially dry spells, or soil balance, or something. Also at the mental image of Professor Sprout reading them and her big, kind face going all sideways: Professor Sprout generally did her measuring in handfuls.
“We didn’t know we were going to be Slytherins, did we?” asked the girl, aggrieved. “My family —”

“What sort of excuse is that? Hufflepuffs know that the first step of any job is to ready one’s tools, Ravenclaws should be clever enough to stock a cupboard, and Gryffindors who don’t prepare for their quests die,” he snapped[1], and strode over to sit down with them.

A drop of black ink dripped from his quill onto the carpet, and a metal snake stretched from the leg of a nearby unoccupied chair to lap it up. It didn’t greatly reinforce the chair’s varnish, but Cleo supposed every little bit spared the elves something in the end.

Thoroughly annoyed, the Naj grabbed the little Liverpool boy’s notebook and demanded of all the firsties, “Who told you to need a calculating machine in any case? You can add, can’t you? You have hands? You can manipulate a quill? Then there is no earthly reason… Any of you other drakelets who have unaccountably arrived at school unable to do bloody multiplication without bulky machinery, why are you not over here already?”

More than half the baby snakes, including a lot of the second-years and a few carefully nonchalant third-years pretending amused curiosity, scrambled into an apprehensive clump around His Grouchiness and his ill-tempered air-stabbing fingers. A few older students gathered around with an air of wanting to watch the fun, but about half of them had been struggling with Potions and Herbology measurements and nearly everything in Transfiguration for years.

Cleo wasn’t the only older Slytherin who took the opportunity to peek at his work. Afterwards, she and her roommate Glenda glanced at each other in bafflement.

She didn’t think he was writing in code or using warding spells. It was just that between his handwriting and the crazed spider-web slaphdash way his notes did not seem to care about which part of the page was the top, all she could figure out was that he thought alliums were a stupid idea he had to deal with because of stupid people and he wanted to rule them out at once.

After about ten kids had casually wandered over past his table to ‘see if there was anything on the notice board yet,’ the Naj said in a loud eye-rolling voice, “If you want to understand my homework, I advise you to first excel in your NEWTs.”

“But what are you studying, Naj?” Glenda asked, taking this as permission to stare at the scroll openly.

“Unbreakable curses,” the Naj told her with a sardonic little tilt to his eyes that made everybody think he was perfectly capable of casting one.

“The unforgiveables?” Yaxley asked, with his first evidence of interest so far.

“The unforgiveable ‘curses,’” the Naj sat back thoughtfully on his hands, “might more properly be considered overpowered, out-of-control jinxes. One does all its work in the first instant, the others require that the spellcaster maintains intention for as long as they want the spell to continue.

“A curse—most curses,” he continued, with a very slightly concerned frown at all the fourth and fifth years suddenly frantically scribbling, “are set, and the caster need do no more. That is why they’re crimes, where hexes and jinxes are merely discouraged and impolite, or misdemeanors at the worst. Hexes and jinxes are easy to cast, hard to maintain; it’s the reverse with curses. They may need sacrifice, but it’s a one-time sacrifice, and so in some ways easier. The spells we call curses cling to their victims until they’re broken or the victim dies.”
“Or the spellcaster does,” Glenda suggested, looking less sure than she sounded.

“In some cases,” the Naj agreed, “although only a complete nitwit with a brain of rancid chalk powder and an overpowering death wish would cast one of those. When I say ‘unbreakable curses,’ I’m referring to magic that leaves its victims alive, and will never leave them whatever anyone does afterwards, including the spellcaster. What the devil are you all taking notes for?”

“My brother said this kind of thing is on the OWLs,” Cleo explained.

“Because it is,” Anthony said like the most superior big brother on the planet, which he thought he was.

“Then I should think Professor Robards will be covering it.”

“I hope so,” Cleo agreed, “but we were supposed to get Dark Spell Theory last year and Professor Muldoon, um.”

“Mostly got excited about why if something is bad, it’s bad, we are bad people for thinking hypothetical situations could ever make bad things in any way not bad,” Glenda finished for her.

“I see,” the Naj said sourly. “I believe Professor Muldoon had an unfortunate encounter with an acromantula?”

“Lots of them,” Maeve nodded helpfully. “And Professor Imago.”

“That is most unfortunate,” the Naj said gravely. “I understand that Professor Imago was a well-informed and conscientious teacher, however specious his subject matter.”

A few people (including Anthony, and also Will Quartstave, which was not responsible of Will) snorted a little at the careful exclusion of Daphne Muldoon from his regrets.

 Ignoring them, the Naj told Cleo and Glenda, “In that case, I suggest you bring your concerns about Professor Muldoon’s legacy to Professor Robards’ attention, and ask him how to fill in the gaps.”

“Yes, sir,” they said, Glenda giving it a throaty note that made the Naj look at her in annoyance even though it was mostly respectful.

“Are you inventing one?” Yaxley burst out excitedly, as if he’d been waiting far too long to get the question in. “An unbreakable curse?”

The Naj gave him an are you mental look, not in an especially unfriendly way even though Cleo knew he knew Yaxley was hoping for something to get him in trouble with. “Unbreakable curses have very limited utility. If the spellcaster can’t erase or even mitigate his own work once the curse is cast, where is his leverage? Only over those he hasn’t yet cursed: the irretrievable can’t bargain with him, can make him no offers. All they and their families can hope for is revenge. To cast an unbreakable curse is to sign one’s own death warrant. The power would come from curing one.”

“Will you?” Shafiq asked, coolly curious.

The Naj shrugged. “No one yet knows why they take hold in muggles and wizards and in no other species. Once that’s discovered, it may be possible to take a further step. Since it seems all homework has ground to a stop, perhaps we’d best start the meeting. Perhaps the rest of you little sods will be less distracted working in your rooms.”
There was another pause, this one full of dropped jaws. Some of her Housemates, Cleo knew, had never heard language like that in their lives—or, at least, not from a grown-up.

The Naja smiled at them all, a wide gash of a smile full of crooked teeth and dark, glittering promise. “Go.”

The room was empty of non-prefects in about thirty seconds. Some of them had forgotten their books.

“Will Sluggy know we’ve started?” asked Alan Belchant, Cleo’s co-prefect, frowning.

They all drifted over to join the Naj cross-legged on the floor, since he didn’t seem to intend to pull up a chair at a table. Some came more reluctantly than others.

“Professor Slughorn,” the Naj said with light emphasis, “is having an early night.”

“Because you two were at each other’s throats all day,” posited Alan with a grin.

Naj pursed his lips. “I’m sorry you should think so,” he said meaninglessly. “We are both most concerned you should all take as much from classes as you can. That is not the subject of this meeting.”

“Okay, Naj,” Cleo said patiently, privately a bit amused at his attempted diplomacy. “You wanted to talk about whether the Houses are at each others’ throats, right?”

“In part,” the Naj agreed judiciously. His face warming a bit, he said, “I will say I was pleasantly surprised today. No one appeared to think that plotting the downfall of another was their first priority on their first day of class.”

“Nice change for you?” asked a droll Merry Quartstave.

“Very,” the Naj agreed, not joking. “In some matters of self-discipline, the House has forgotten itself, and that will have to be addressed. You were right in that tensions do seem to have eased a bit since my year graduated. We can’t take that for granted, however. That exhibition at the Sorting was precisely the sort of thing that will sink our reputation and leave the drakelets vulnerable again.”

“That was just Travers, he’s an idiot,” objected Will. Cleo secretly thought he’d been made a prefect mostly because he would have murdered any other boy who spent that much time around his twin and Sluggy didn’t like making big distinctions between siblings.

“I don’t care who it was just, and neither will anyone else,” Naj told him—not coldly, but his voice was hard. “A Slytherin took it upon himself to target a Hufflepuff first-year, the closest thing we have at Hogwarts to an infant or a puppy, and make her feel ashamed and worthless, in public. For no apparent reason, although declaring one could not have improved the situation. As he quickly made an equally public restitution, I think we may close the incident, except to remember it. But that our House gave birth to that impulse, and the notion that it was acceptable to exercise it, will be remembered.”

He looked around at them all, meeting all their eyes slowly. “I hope it’s clear to everyone how vitally important it is that Slytherin not be seen as the cause of any trouble,” he said somberly. “I don’t even say blamed—I say seen.”

“Not really, to be honest,” said Merry. “Even the Huffies get in trouble sometimes, Naj, it happens.”
“Of course Professor Slughorn and I do officially expect and demand uninterruptedly angelic behavior,” the Naj said dryly, and even Yaxley smiled grudgingly. In dead earnest again, he leaned forward a little. “I mean that, whenever there’s trouble, the first question in everyone’s mind mustn’t be Which Slytherin is behind this? All of you were present for the Fenshaw-Rosier meeting—”

“Yeah,” growled Yaxley, suddenly openly belligerent. “And after it we had to walk on eggshells for two years because you couldn’t handle four stupid Gryffs.”

Cleo thought that if Yaxley were smarter, he would have realized that the cool, idle look the Naj was sweeping over him meant I know where all your internal organs are and how to make you wish each one was dead.

“No quite, Mr. Yaxley,” the Naj said calmly, “but I shan’t trouble you with the subtleties for the moment.”

Will winced, and Cleo thought she even saw Shafiq’s eyelid flicker.

Cleo did not wince, because in her opinion Yaxley would have had it coming even if he’d noticed. Gathering herself, she said, “I heard they turned flying toffee-apples at a Halloween feast into rubies one year and four firsties broke their teeth.”

“If it was Those Four, it was probably only a duro charm,” the Naj said in his being-unnecessarily-accurate voice. “It was our year’s third Halloween at Hogwarts. They were clever and dramatic, but I think rubies would have been beyond them at that point. But who did what isn’t the important part of that story. The important part is who didn’t do what.” He looked at them expectantly.

With an air of humoring him, Merry suggested, “You didn’t kill them, which is good and we should not-do that?”

“In fact, Professor McGonagall insists I set their table on fire,” the Naj said dryly. “Although I’m sure I recall doing no such thing.” A few smiles ran around the room. “I said ‘if it was those four’ because I don’t know. I am convinced, but only because I have no reason to think anything else: I don’t know it as a certainty. And the reason I don’t know is that the teachers never bothered to find out.”

The prefects looked at each other. The head prefects looked at each other. Shafiq started to say something, then she started to say something else.

Finally, she looked straight at the Naj and said, in a pained voice that was less dignified and frigid than anything Cleo had heard out of her before, “I expect they were more concerned with the three feet of flames all over the Gryffie table that looked a bit like Fiendfyre and the three inches of solid ice covering our supper and our hands, Snape.”

The Naj rewarded this unbending by looking a bit sheepish himself. “I honestly don’t remember anything between hearing your teeth crack and realizing Lockhart was going to cast a spell in public if I didn’t stab him with a fork,” he told her.

She scowled at him, which was the first time Cleo could remember her looking like a kid at all. Cleo wasn’t sure whether he’d meant that he’d specifically heard Shafiq’s teeth crack, but Shafiq looked angry enough to be feeling personally embarrassed. “I expect you don’t remember breaking the common room door with green lightning, either!”

“Let’s not stray too far from the topic,” he said loftily, a little smirk playing around the corner of
his mouth. “Lockhart-induced difficulties are, thankfully, behind us.”

“You mean tantrums.”

“He didn’t go after girls, he just flirted with you lot,” Yaxley reminded her. Cleo supposed this wasn’t so much defending the Naj as fighting with his classmate. “I would have had a tantrum if he’d tried to snog me a week after I’d hexed all his hair off, too.”

“Ooh, ooh,” Will bounced, “I wasn’t there for that one. Was he doing that thing where he insists that nothing can come of it because he has a boyfriend but he understands you just can’t help yourself so he’ll take pity on you, and then he throws himself on you while you try to run away?”

“Yes,” Shafiq hissed, exasperated with everyone, “and then Snape threw lightning at the door and it cracked in half and started smoking and we couldn’t get any spells to work in the common room for a week besides the serpents and the portraits. Nobody could make the fire light, even the muggle way, because the smoke-siphon wasn’t working so the snakes in the grill kept eating all the sparks even when we brought in flint and matches. And it was January and the window iced over and we kept being afraid it would crack and it was freezing.”

“Professor Flitwick charmed it from outside,” the Naj reminded her, trying to be mild but actually looking defensive.

“I was there,” Merry reminded her, charitably ignoring him, “and Gildy didn’t just say Snape couldn’t help it, he said he’d knew Snape had been suffering the pangs of longing for him for years and years and making do with a pale substitute and Gildy was sure his boyfriend would understand Gildy taking pity on Snape on his birthday.”

There was a pause.

“Which boyfriend?” Alan asked.

The Naj scowled. “I beg your—”

“I think he meant his own? He didn’t say exactly, he said any loving boyfriend, or something like that. I was busy hiding behind the log pile.”

“Erk,” Alan sympathized.

“A week after Snape hexed all his hair off?” Will asked, in an I-just-want-this-bit-clarified voice.

“Technically it was the next week, but not really,” the Naj clarified in a slightly muffled voice. His eyes were probably closed, but Cleo couldn’t see them buried in his hands with his hair hanging in front of him like that. “Friday after supper, Sunday after breakfast.”

“Ohhh,” everyone chorused, instantly understanding that during what the Naj considered to be breakfast-time on a Sunday the fer-de-lance (who, as everyone had known perfectly well, was the Naj’s boyfriend, although no one had ever heard them say that) could not possibly have been in the Common Room.

Rosier might have been still in bed. Or he might have been perched on a tower somewhere in six layers of warming charms, painting the sunrise on the snow in a ‘frumpy working morning’ outfit Gilderoy would have killed to have for dress robes, in boots Gilderoy might have cut off his own toes for, grumping about why one couldn’t get sunrise-light at a civilized hour, like teatime. There was zero chance of him having been present at that hour to blink sleepily and tell Snape that the common room was getting too noisy, come back upstairs, what sort of time did Snape call this to
wear boots on a Sunday?

“As I understand it,” Merry told her twin, “and, mind you, this is fifth-hand but Barty Crouch told Reggie Black told Narcissa Black told Lucy Wilkes told everybody—Gildy immediately told Snape it was sweet of him to want to prove how beautiful Gildy’s head was unadorned and take his hair to stuff a teddy-bear with and Gildy didn’t mind in the least but he’d have to make sure his boyfriend didn’t mind either because frankly it was a little bit obsessive and might worry his boyfriend a little bit even though Gildy understood it was pure-hearted admiration. Which is why Crouch knew. Poor, poor Crouch.”

There was another pause, although this one was more of a moment of silence. Deeply, deeply commiserating silence.

“And that was the Friday,” Will said in the same let’s-just-be-clear voice, once they’d given Crouch his moment. “And then he said the taking-pity and the pale-imitation thing on Sunday.”

Something disgusted emerged from behind Snape’s hair. It might possibly have been muddy for ox-eyed ponds, but probably wasn’t.

“I heard,” Yaxley put in with an overly sympathetic smirk, “it was the first Hogsmeade weekend Potter had a date.”

Yet another pause. This one was filled with held breath and jagged eggshells.

Alan summed up, “So you’re saying it’s a miracle Naj just killed the door.”

“That’s good of you to say,” the Naj said, just a little too gravely with eyes just a little too helplessly wide. “And I don’t believe it was their first date, as it happens. But we are straying from the point.

“Which, Shafiq,” he went on, more grimly, “is that the teachers, that Halloween, cared about what might have been an overreaction but was a reaction and didn’t hurt anyone. Not about what had set it off by hurting your form—both physically and by showing first-years that even the public treats offered by this new home their parents had sent them to were treacherous and dangerous.”

“…Er, I don’t think anyone thought about it like that,” Yaxley said, eyeing him.

“I did,” the Naj assured him flatly. “You may not have formed the thoughts, but you learned the lesson all the same. I watched your scales harden, and your spines stiffen. That night there was a wizard at the end of the table who had friends in every House and every teacher smiling at him, and by the end of the year he only cared about DADA and Quidditch and he even suspected the Hufflepuffs were out to get him. That night, a witch sat across from me who was eager about everything new and met magic with joy, but it was a hard-eyed young lady who went home to her parents that Christmas.”

He watched the seventh-year prefects be uncomfortable for what felt like far too long, and then asked softly, “Do you remember what happened the day after, on All Souls’ morning?”

Shafiq’s lips went tight. Yaxley turned purple.

“Why did you think it never happened again?” the Naj asked quietly. “Did your Gryffindor yarmates complain of detention? Did their points fall? Did the professors give any indication of having known about it, that they’d stopped it themselves?”

They glanced at each other, and then stared at him in suspicious surmise.
He inclined his head, hard-eyed. “A gentle warning not to let themselves be… entangled.”

“Gentle,” repeated Yaxley, looking as if he could still taste the so-called cobwebs from last night.

They didn’t taste nice. Cleo had never earned them by herself—almost nobody did—but the Naj had turned them once on her whole class over Glenda’s bright idea that since Slughorn had already tottered beerily off to bed they could stay up celebrating a Quidditch win as late as all the older kids. He’d very sweetly offered them pillows and a bedtime story to keep them company up there if they were determined to stay all night in the common room.

They really didn’t taste nice. Not horrible, but it got to you after a while. A bit like mothballs smelled. Or maybe like when you realized someone hadn’t cleaned their teeth and it was you.

“The very softest of kid gloves,” the Naj inclined his head with a very cold pretending-to-be-a-smile, “I do assure you. But let us ask ourselves, why were the teachers so disinterested? They certainly never thought they were. They thought they were quite fair. Whenever they happened upon an incident in process, they considered themselves even-handed. But where there was doubt, it was never evenly distributed. And we ask ourselves, why?”

He waited, but they just kept looking at him as if he might explode.

“We ask ourselves,” he resumed, “why one side gets the benefit of all doubt. And I must think it comes back to what was said in the moment those boys decided I was their antagonist and they would be my enemies. Shall I tell you what happened?”

Since the seventh-years seemed as if they really, actually, did not want to know, Cleo nodded. The Naj kept speaking to Shafiq, though, not to her.

He said, “We were on the train, on the way to our first year, in September. I was telling my friend that she ought to be in Slytherin—she needed those lessons, I felt. I don’t think I’ll ever forget what they said.” His eyes narrowed, and his voice changed. They all recognized the offhand West Country self-confidence, which was eerie.

Mostly what was eerie was the Naj very-nearly managing a tenor, his voice lightening with his eyes full of something laughingly dismissive that didn’t suit his face at all as he parroted, “‘Who wants to be in Slytherin? I think I’d leave, wouldn’t you?’”

“Potter’s a blood-traitor,” Yaxley pointed out. He didn’t look unnerved. Cleo supposed it came of having no imagination.

“Which means he’s a pureblood,” the Naj pointed out in return, quite himself again. “My own pureblood grandfather completely lost interest in my family once I sorted Slytherin. He cared very much about traditional values, I assure you,” he added, a flash of hate passing through his eyes before he came back to them. “He followed old wizarding ways, he cared about bloodlines. And he despised Slytherin. That’s normal. In the general population, our House’s name is mud.”

Although Cleo was sure he’d chosen the word deliberately, he didn’t seem to like the taste of it any better than the rest of them. It hung heavily in the air.

Then the cobra swiveled its head and asked, very softly, “Eggshells for two years, Corban? That was ’76.”

Yaxley looked as if he didn’t understand the question—so did the sixth year prefects. Shafiq’s expression was more along the lines of I’d-pity-your-naiveté-if-I-cared.
The Naj scrubbed at his eyes, looked tired to death and a bit disgusted. “Right. What did Regulus Black keep from Narcissa and me about the year he and Selwyn were lead prefects because he couldn’t bear for us to know he was in over his head?”

“Oh, sweet Salazar, Reggie,” Merry burst out in disgust. “I don’t know what Sluggy was thinking —”

“Completely hopeless,” Will chimed in after his twin, scowling, “I mean, he’s nice enough, Naj, but he just spent the year skulking around like a scared little bunny—”

“And bloody Selwyn,” Yaxley snarled resentfully, “throwing her weight around—”

“But it’s not as if either of them was doing anything with it,” Shafiq agreed venomously, eyes flashing, so vehemently that Cleo jumped. “The prefecture isn’t a defensive game, it’s not there just to sit there and keep everyone else out of power—”

“I swear, Snape,” Yaxley agreed, scowling, “it’s as if they thought their whole job was to sit on Bast Lestrange.”

“Wasn’t it?” muttered Alan, who’d had a few unfortunate run-ins.

Even though she knew Black was the Naj’s friend and she wouldn’t have wanted to be in his shoes for worlds, Cleo had to tell her classmate, very firmly, “Not their whole job.”

“Ah ha,” the Naj uttered, not in a laughing sort of way. He’d moved on to rubbing down the sides of his nose, now, as if he had a cold and couldn’t find any Pepper-Up. “Let me guess. While Lestrange was occupying a great deal of everyone’s attention by being visibly, worryingly, and charmingly psychotic and Lockhart ran around like a loose niffler being distractingly vain and annoying, Thor Rowle set a sterling example of doing whatever the hell he wanted to whomsoever he liked so long as no teacher was actually staring in his direction, the Carrow twins started selling nasty ‘study aides’ to Hufflepuffs and muggle-borns, Cressida Thicknesse stole student pets and Kettleburn’s creatures so Lestrange could give her vivisection and chimera-making lessons in between their noisy semi-public shagfests, and Vivienne Twintrees perverted my art and got baby Ravenclaws to be her guinea pigs in the name of Experimentation. Meanwhile Lucinda Davis tried to invisibly sleep, eat, and if possible, shower in the library while Reggie tried to murder her with his eyes out of pure jealousy for her position as a private person without responsibilities, thereby making her vomit three times a week because she thought she’d somehow really made an enemy of the House of Black.”

“Wow, Naj,” Merry said sardonically after a minute. “It’s almost as if somebody who’d spent five seconds with their year could have predicted that.”

“They weren’t that bad,” Will was wrong out loud. “Well,” he amended when he’d seen everyone looking at him in disbelief, “Rowle was. And obviously Lockhart’s a mental case.”

“Nobody expects fifth-year prefects to take points from seventh-years,” Shafiq told him coldly while everyone else simultaneously weighed the hypothesis that Will had agreed to be one of Vivienne Twintree’s guinea pigs in the name of getting to tumble her. Cleo could tell it wasn’t just her thinking it: Merry looked revolted and her fingernails were sharpening.

“I do,” the Naj said, sounding casual but spearing Cleo and Alan with his eyes. It sent something fizzy and proud and alarmed down Cleo’s spine.

“What she means,” translated Yaxley, “is: Dumbledore expected us to clean up after them,
Quartstave, not you. So shut up."

“Psychos,” Alan muttered. Cleo, who’d been the one to find him after he’d got away from Lestrange and Thickenesse after the time with the pumpkin seeds, gave him a quick side-hug. “Why’d all the psychos end up in one class, to give us a bad name?”

“Bad apple principle, encouraging each other, I expect,” the Naj sighed. “Law of averages—that is, there has to be an especially difficult form sometimes, Merlin knows there was one in my year. The worst of them having at least power as much as the best, internally… I hate to think what my form would have been like if Mulciber had held the power.”

Yaxley and Shafiq exchanged a quietly appalled look.

The Naj made about a fifth of a face at Merry. “I had hoped someone would catch the more compulsive grotesques, at least, once no one was stopping them,” he admitted. “Salazar knows Narcissa dropped enough hints. I suppose we just taught them to sneak better. But what happened to Goldstein?” he demanded. “I was counting on her to keep Black and Selwyn reminded of their broader duties.”

“Er, she’s from a Ravenclaw family,” Cleo reminded him. “Her brother was Ravenclaw’s lead prefect when she signed up for her NEWT classes. I literally saw her look over and see him grinning at her really proudly when Professor Slughorn came around with the sign-up sheet at breakfast that year. So she took nine of them.”

The Naj threw up his hands. “Oh, for pity’s sake.”

“Didn’t you take ten?” Cleo asked him, grinning.

“That was a completely different situation,” he said crossly.

“How was that, Naj?” asked Merry, also starting to grin.

“We had Narcissa.”

“That,” Shafiq allowed (a little dreamily, Cleo thought), “is a point.”

“And we only had two to keep in check, both well within a standard deviation of sanity.”

Yaxley gave him a look that visibly disagreed with the number two.

The Naj addressed it only obliquely, continuing firmly, “Most of our year’s problems were external. And I gave up Quidditch, so I did have more time than in previous—”

“I heard Rosier hid all your books until you—”

“I could have managed.”

“How?”

“Wilkes liked it when I bumped Avery out of games,” the Naj said promptly. “She would have lent me hers. And Goldstein’s Ravenclaw brother in my year didn’t care about Quidditch. We studied together for half our classes anyway. It was just less trouble and more useful to let Rosier think he’d won.”

Shafiq’s head pulled back an inch and her throat spasmed, although her face didn’t change. Will’s jaw dropped for a second before he recovered himself, and Merry looked amused.
Not everybody was in Slytherin because they were twisty-minded. Yaxley just seemed confused, although he was smart enough to be suspicious. He asked, “What do you mean, useful?”

Pleased someone was making him spell it out, the Naj said, very distinctly, “The leader I supported believed that he was strong enough to make me act against my wishes. Because he believed it, without doubt, so did you all.”

“…Did it just get colder in here?” asked Alan, a little sardonically.

Personally, Cleo didn’t believe the Naj on this one. Or, at least, she thought he’d spun what happened so hard it had got dizzy and fallen on its face. She didn’t think for a minute he’d played a weak and useless Evan Rosier for a fool to make him into an intimidating figurehead whose strings the Naj could pull as he liked.

She was a hundred percent sure that in reality it had gone like this:

1. Lance had annoyed the Naj to get his attention, quite possibly by stealing his books.
2. They’d talked about it.
3. Lance had made him see sense.
4. The Naj had gotten all the concessions he felt were really important, such as Lance also not getting in the way of bludgers anymore if the Naj wasn’t there to be a more tempting target, but continuing to look after the players as captain instead of somebody who would let Reggie Black get avoidably clobbered by his troll of a brother.
5. The Naj had made a big show of crabbily giving in against his will and better judgment
   a. Because that always made Lance crow and grin and go all sunshiny-smug.]
   b. Which invariably made the Naj look like someone had whacked him in the face with a Beater’s bat and then get a hilarious helpless look like a sugar lump disintegrating as it dropped into hot tea.
6. They had both mysteriously vanished for several hours and come back looking like anyone who walked between them would spontaneously fry but, weirdly, both knowing their History homework cold.

“Black and Rosier held the House without challenge, without having to squeeze,” the Naj reminded Alan with one of his levelly challenging more-impatient-than-really-annoyed looks. “We have never had a year with less trouble in all my time here, or had the teachers or other Houses look at us with less wariness or less contempt, or come closer to the Cup. Name one Slytherin who did not benefit,” the Naj challenged Alan levelly.

“…Lestrange?”

“Lestrange made it through his seven years without being expelled because the House was under control. Try again.”

“Well, some of us think this whole ‘under control’ idea of yours is stupid, Snape,” Yaxley flared up again, which he’d clearly been looking for an excuse to do since the Naj had talked about spines stiffening. “My family is one of the Sacred Twenty-Eight. So is Najwa’s. Blakeney’s has been a Slytherin family for two hundred years, and the Quartstaves can trace their family back farther than the Gaunts!”

“Not reliably,” they protested, almost in unison. Since everyone had heard Will very confidently claim very legendary ancestors after one too many on Hogsmeade weekends and heard Merry recite what had to have been all of de Worde’s Lytell Geste by now at parties, Cleo supposed they just didn’t want to be dragged into Yaxley’s argument.
“This is our school,” Yaxley snarled. “It was made for us. We let the younger blood come in, but that was a decision we made, and we keep having to talk about it and see if we think it’s still the right decision. Because we let them come, or we don’t. Because it’s ours. The wizarding world is ours. They proved they were unfit to live with, that their filthy little minds have an infectious disease that can turn lethal any minute, like crickets and locusts, that religion of theirs. They tried to burn us out like roaches, and now we live our places, our way.”

The Naj weathered his hot, panting glare with a tilted head and frowning interest. Finally he asked, “What’s your point?”

“You come in and say we’ve got to, to—who do you think you are, anyway, to—”

“To you,” the Naj cut in cleanly, still giving him that look of mild, frowning interest, “since it matters to you, I’m Severus Prince-Snape.”

Yaxley blinked.

The Naj gave a thin little curl of a smile. “Not ‘farther than the Gaunts,’” he said judiciously. “Exactly as far. While the House of Prince is maintained by others I won’t live under its name, but legal is legal and blood is blood. Now: you had something to say, I think, beyond expressing opinions about my mother’s admittedly regrettable life choices. Which are rarely relevant and in any case, if I may speak plainly, none of your concern. What was it?”

“We shouldn’t have to keep our bloody heads down!” Yaxley yelled, throwing his hands out, his derailed train of thwarted indignation yanked right back on track.

The Naj sat back with a sigh, looking at him. There was a trace of exasperation there, but Cleo could see he was taking Yaxley seriously. “Corban, I think you misunderstand me.”

Yaxley crossed his arms and stared mutinously at the Naj, but he didn’t actually say oh yeah? He was still a Slytherin, after all.

“Yes,” the Naj answered him as if he had, “And I think you misunderstood Fenshaw, too. This isn’t about making muggleborn wizards comfortable. It has nothing whatever to do with that. To be frank, I’m not at all sure why you think it does.”

“I didn’t misunderstand Fenshaw,” Yaxley accused, his eyes hot but in control. “He just took over to look good. It was Rosier’s game. He made Slytherin act scared for years and defer to absolutely everybody, just because a half-blood couldn’t hack it at Hogwarts without everyone changing for him.”

Severus was usually pretty good at sneering insults off, but they all saw that strike sink right into his throat, and the venom pump in. He could contain his face, but no one could keep from going pale.

One slow, controlled breath. Two. Cleo almost flew out of her skin, wanting to go to him, just to put her hands on his back, it looked so bony suddenly, so small compared to Yaxley, unguarded. She’d known he wouldn’t let her when she was eleven and he was falling, choking, rising helplessly under Gryffindor wands. She knew he wouldn’t let her now.

[1] In later years, Severus would develop dark, lustful, detailed dreams of beating Albus Dumbledore to death with a first-edition Peter Pan.
(Or maybe a paperback. It would take longer, and not ruin the first edition.)
Chapter Summary

If at first it doesn't work, change tactics. If that doesn't work either, leave them wondering what the hell you meant.

Chapter Notes

**Notes:** This chapter took so long because I keep a page cushion and Severus, in chapter 125-or-similar, is being a whiny, slithering, avoidant little… Capricorn about talking to his mother. It was his idea to talk to her in the first place, so he has no excuse. I have pointed out to him that once he gets on with it I can focus him on other things, but nooo…

It was a bad place for a break. I’m sorry about that.

**Thanks** to louisemercury, excessivelyperky, Catalyst Brew, AllTheStrangeKrechers, Kreiri, Tristitia, mystormygirl1, KendraDyanna, BetaCors, ToxiiCwolves, Accidental_Child, blueontherock, fearformuninn, VashtaNerada, bookchan, TW Lewis, Magic 101, anyone I missed, and a whole slew of guests for letting me know in some way that you liked something I wrote.

Special shout-outs to louisemercury, who I don’t know what she’s up to lately but I’ve known her work and it’s excellent, and to Kreiri for reminding me that there’s a reason for character tags. Um. Oops?

**Trigger warning for real I mean it:** sexual harassment of a minor (or assault, depending on your definition; I’d count it). Any given character’s thoughts and decisions are only intended to show how that person reacts to an event, not how anybody else should react to anything.

**Less important warnings** for some armchair psychology which annoys even me but Severus was very sure of his moral impulse or something, idk. And for a return of that edda about Heimdall Severus learned in fifth-year Runes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Something happened behind black eyes between one blink and the next: smoke rolling through the night, a clock heaving to twelve with a conclusive click.

“Professor Slughorn has an hypothesis,” said the cobra—not Calmly, but actually perfectly calmly, as though Yaxley hadn’t said anything difficult. “He’s been following it for… I’m not sure how long, actually, sixty or seventy years. It’s more or less the hypothesis you’re espousing, Corban, if I understand you aright. It’s been translated several ways from the French, but I prefer ‘leave us to work.’”
Cleo could see that Yaxley was about to say something about families that needed to work. Which meant he was rattled by the way his barb had looked like it was going take but hadn’t. He’d known the Quartstaves (and the Lyttels, and the du Boises) long enough to know about the Sherwood-wide opinion that bankers and politicians were second in dishonor only to titled layabouts.

Fortunately for Yaxley, the Naj didn’t pause to let him get his sneer in. “The principle is that if the people are the right people, there’s no need for rules. They’ll do the right thing, nearly all the time, and control themselves very well, and all will be well. They’ll control each other, because more of them will be excellent than not, and they’ll want the good opinion of the excellent. Because they are the right people, brought up in the right way, and good behavior will be naturally met with rewards.”

Raising a sardonic eyebrow, he asked, “Whose definition of ‘the right way’ are we discussing, I wonder? Every Head of House has a different one. That’s intended.”

“Well, our Head of House’s,” Will suggested, not sounding very sure of himself.

“Which Head?”

This was such a blatantly stupid question that nobody dared to meet it with the obvious answer.

“Salazar Slytherin? We all try, of course, to be what we think he’d have wanted, but he didn’t exactly write us a philosophy book, and the writings that did come down need a certain degree of translating—not merely into our language, but into the context of our century. We know he had remarkably strong opinions about horse collars and garderobes, and which of you knows what one of those is?”

Merry and Will put up their hands.

The Naj rolled his eyes. “Which of you who have not spent summers hand-holding sight-seers around a tourist trap.”

Will kept his hand up. Merry elbowed him, hard, and he protested, “He said summers! I only did it for a week and then there was the thing with the crossbow in the gift shop and they wouldn’t let me back.”

“I remember,” Merry told him ominously.

“We were nine,” Will complained, looking hurt.

“I remember!”

The Naj eyed them, opened his mouth, and visibly decided his sanity would be better off without Will. Instead, he said in a dogged tone of long-suffering, “And there have been so many Heads of Slytherin since.”

Alan tried, “It’s got to be the one we’ve got, doesn’t it, whoever that is at the time? Anyway, that’s the one in charge.”

“What is his right way, then?” asked the Naj. After a moment, he elaborated, “What are his values?”

The silence stretched.

“All right,” the Naj allowed, amused in a distant sort of way behind the smoke and ticking, “we’ll
try again. What does he value?”

“Pineapple?” Will tried.

“Connections,” Shafiq took over crisply. “Fellowship. Hedonism, in the classic sense of comfort and happiness as valuable things in themselves, of unhappiness and discomforts as things it’s not only pleasant but good and correct to be rid of.”

“People being pleasant,” Cleo put in. “Behaving nicely, correctly, getting recognition for…” she paused. “Er, hopefully for doing good work, but getting recognition, anyway.”

“How well,” the Naj asked lightly, “has that been working out for him, would you say?”

“…He seems pretty cheerful?” Alan ventured.

“I’ll be clearer. Professor Slughorn is a Slytherin. He has adopted a method of behavior, *laissez-faire*, in service of a long-term, overarching goal: that his students, who are his legacy, should be successful within our world. That we should behave well and achieve and be remembered well, according to the dictates of our culture and traditions. Do you argue with this? Am I wrong to say it, in any way?”

He waited with no signs of wanting to hurry them along while they glanced at each other and thought it over. Finally, even Yaxley grudgingly shook his head.

The Naj nodded acknowledgement. “Now: Is his method getting him what he wants?”

“Okay, Naj,” said Merry, “you want us to say ‘not well,’ obviously, but he doesn’t seem to think so.”

“A frog in a cold cauldron set over a fire doesn’t think it’s being boiled alive, either,” said the Naj —somberly, not with any scorn. “The heat has to increase suddenly to realize, or you have to step outside the cauldron and see the flames.”

His lips thinned. “Here was my step outside: Professor Slughorn dragged me to a meeting of the Most Extraordinary Society of Potioneers to present my work this summer. Do you know how many Slytherins under the age of fifty were there to show their work and be recognized?”

Shrugs.

“Me. To discuss a project that will add to Ravenclaw’s glory, not Slytherin’s, that I never expected to bear my name. And I was only there because he realized about a week in advance that we had no representation. I still have the brochure, if you’d like to check. How many Slytherins have been heads of Ministry departments and Ministers for Magic since the Veil of Secrecy dropped?”

“Oh, Merlin, Naj,” Will groaned, “if we’d known there was going to be a history exam! *Loads.*”

“Precisely,” the Naj said dryly. “How many witches and wizards do you think are working in the Ministry today, in total?”

“I dunno, a couple of hundred?” Will said vaguely.

His sister looked like she was one word away from hand-delivering him to Professor Sprout for a new room assignment, possibly six feet beneath a flower bed. This was not uncommon.

“More along the lines of a couple of thousand, counting the DoM and the public-service
“peripherals,” the Naj said dryly. “It’s the largest employer in magical Britain. Care to take a guess at what percentage are Slytherin?”

“Sixty,” Yaxley said, his stuck-out jaw defying the trajectory of the Naj’s argument.

And also defying all probability. Even if a quarter of the population could have supplied more than half of its government, it wasn’t as if everyone had the same ambitions, and needing wages wasn’t really what a lot of Slytherins expected from their futures. Cleo didn’t, for instance, even though Anthony was going to inherit the bulk of the estate. Even if she had, her hopes for the future didn’t involve a lot of fiddly paperwork and never-getting-anywhere and waiting for her superiors to die.

“About twelve percent,” the Naj told Yaxley, not unsympathetically. “The ratio is higher in the Department of International Relations. If you take them out of the equation it drops to eight. Significantly more than half the eight percent are over eighty years old, and they’ve either held their positions draconically through force of will and cunning for decades, or been gently drafted into sinecures.”

“…Did it get cold in here?” Cleo echoed her co-prefect, trying for a wan little smile.

“How do you know that?” Shafiq demanded sharply, her dark eyes drilling into the Naj’s.

“I’ve been repeatedly exposed to Rose & Yew’s catalogue of miniatures. At wandpoint. Going back two hundred years, as I can generally only tolerate around three hours of that nonsense at a time.”

They looked at him.

“It was moderately clear by the middle of my fourth year,” he explained crossly, “that if I didn’t want to be the only Slytherin besides Mulciber in my Potions NEWT classes, I was going to have to either be a sounding board for someone’s art history studies or quit Quidditch.”

They kept looking at him.

“Narcissa considered that Potions class was mostly for working o—impressing Professor Slughorn,” he further explained, still crossly.

“So you needed Rosier to be there,” Cleo gave in and said what everyone was thinking.

He glared at her, but she thought he looked miffed rather than angry. “Or for him to convince Wilkes. In any case, since I wasn’t going to quit Quidditch—”

“You know, Snape,” Yaxley drawled, “if your captain wants you to quit Quidditch you’re supposed to quit Quidditch.”

“He wasn’t captain in our fourth-year, Corban,” the Naj scoffed, “and it wasn’t a strategic impulse of his, he was just fussing.”

“Fair,” chorused Merry, Cleo, and Alan. “What?” Alan continued, raising a fuzzy eyebrow at the Naj. “The first time I got dragged to a match you got knocked off your broom and then I thought that titchy Gryff Beater must have broken your fingers trying to make you let go of it.”

“He did,” the Naj said smugly, “or one of them, but that’s beside the point. The point is that I have spent hours upon hours helping Rosier swot for his grandfather’s exams.”

“I hardly think one bunch of artists’s records,” Yaxley started, dismissively.
They don’t only keep records of their own work,” the Naj cut him off. “That would be highly short-sighted. And every record includes a family tree and list of accomplishments, and the sitter’s Hogwarts House, or the equivalent. For the more current statistics, let’s not even discuss the way Lucius Malfoy complains about the ratios all the time,” he answered with a little grimace that was half sympathy for their sudden unease and, clearly, half annoyance with Lucius Malfoy. “He can’t get halfway through dinner anymore without going on a rant about how no one over there knows the difference between lobbying and bribery. It’s making Narcissa mental, because when Reggie’s over he’s started taking notes at the table.”

Shafiq didn’t exactly sniff, or even make a face per se, but her opinion of Reg Black’s table manners was suddenly a solid presence in the room.

The Naj sat back on his hands, his spine loose. “Slytherins are working in St. Mungo’s, one or two in reasonably responsible positions,” he said. “There seem to be some at the Department of Mysteries, although that’s harder to confirm. Many are caring for their estates in very traditional ways, breeding horses and tending potions ingredients and so on, or…” he waved a mystified artisan’s hand that gave Alan a sudden coughing fit, “doing finance and trade and whatnot. You get the occasional Quidditch player or inventor, and there are a few on the paper. Do you understand me?”

“You are saying,” started Shafiq, and had to stop. Ice formed on her words, but it wasn’t directed at the Naj now. “You’re saying that we are out of power.”

“I am saying,” the Naj said, speaking right to her, “that England, its magical folk, Brittania, that Brigid has spoken. She’s telling us, every day, ‘We do not want what you’re becoming.’”

“You think you’re so smart,” Yaxley said, leaning forward, matching the Naj’s trick of ignoring everything he didn’t want to answer. “But this was really dumb, Snape. Coming behind Sluggy’s back when you knew he was ‘having an early night…’ gave your hand away, there. Maybe you thought you could talk us around, so no one would go tell him you’re working against him, but now we’ve got you. If you—”

He faltered, because the Naj was looking at him as if he’d grown an extra head. “Working against him?” the Naj asked, as though Yaxley had been speaking Swahili.

“Saying he’s… saying he’s doing everything wrong, and…”

“If it weren’t for Horace Slughorn,” the Naj enunciated, straightening up and biting off every word, “the percentage of Slytherins in government would be zero. If it weren’t for his genius at networking, his boundless goodwill and generosity and ceaseless efforts on behalf of our House, even those from the best and most powerful families would only have futures of financial security and empty smiles of contempt from your out-House colleagues. Not a scrap of power. And even security only for a generation or two more, before your names became utterly meaningless. It happened to the muggle nobility, and it could have happened to you. It can. If not for Horace Slughorn, it would have already.”

Now he leaned forwards. “Have you forgotten? The Professor was at the Fenshaw meeting. Do you think him a fool? Did you think,” he snorted, “Dumbledore forced me on him, because Dumbledore loves me so well?”

A few smiles ran around the room. There was even an unwilling eyebrow-quirk from Yaxley.

The Naj joined them, sardonically, then leaned forward, suddenly thunderous. “Slughorn has been waiting decades for Slytherin to pull itself together and prove him right: that it’s made of the right
people. The best people, who will do the right thing and be excellent. To show its quality. To really behave well, not just ape it while he’s watching so he’ll ask them to a party. To behave correctly, as our ancestors would hope for us, to do good work and earn recognition. To be who Salazar Slytherin said we should be, not the pettiest that fools who hate us think we are.”

He took a deep breath, and the smoke rolled through his eyes again. It seemed to steady him. “I know—none better—that when everyone around you is telling you who you are, giving you the same name, it’s hard to remember they’re wrong. Backstabber. Cheat. Liar. Wicked, evil, cruel, twisted, reptiles, vermin.”

His eyes jerked to Shafiq, sitting next to him—not as if he’d meant to, but like he’d just realized, like a mediwitch when someone had just shown them a cutting curse someone had hidden. Cleo hadn’t noticed her do anything, particularly. Very gently, he added, “Cold-blooded. Unfeeling. Inhuman.”

It was like with Yaxley’s poisonous strike before, except that Shafiq didn’t have any smoke behind her eyes. Her face twisted at the last word and went all hot, and then the Naj had pulled her against his side and just held her there, tight, while her nails dug blood from her palms and she did grim battle with her own breath against his shoulder. “I know,” he said quietly, not quite apologetic, and laid a long, pale hand behind her neck.

Then suddenly a stare like claws, like a February storm raked over all their faces. “A taipan is her own defense,” a glacier creaked, icicles striping her black hair. “Except in this. If it is ever heard of again, even in insinuation, I will see you ruined.”

Yaxley drew in an unsteady breath, while Cleo was still trying to work out what ‘it’ was, then squared his shoulders. “I should curse you for doing that to my Housemate.”

Warm again so fast it made Cleo dizzy, the Naj smiled. “Good,” he told Yaxley fiercely, squeezing Shafiq a little tighter. “Yes.”

Taken aback, Yaxley eyed him. “You want me to curse you?”

“No, but only because you’re mistaken,” the Naj explained. “The impulse is exactly right.”

Yaxley started to say something, and then just eyed him, unwilling to admit he was confused.

“You had no right,” Shafiq said in a low, intense voice, although she didn’t pull away.

“I don’t ask for the right, when the need bleeds in front of me, the moment of opportunity is fleeting, and everyone else is too blind or too polite,” the Naj said matter-of-factly. “Quod succedit, facite.”

After a moment, she sighed, not happily. Her shoulders relaxed, though, and her fists unclenched.

He let them all settle a bit, let their nerves settle, let Shafiq get her face back in order and sit upright again, red-rimmed and a little quivery about bitten lips but in command of herself. Then he sighed, and spoke so casually that they only then noticed how tightly he’d drawn their eyes, how the chairs and rugs and game tables and even the fireplace had seemed to fall away from their little circle: not merely into irrelevance but out of their world.

“I didn’t really expect us to come to accord in one evening,” he remarked with a rueful little curl to his lips. “And we’ve all still got work to do before bed; I trust you fifth and seventh years will particularly want to start off running. So we’ll have to continue hammering this out tomorrow evening, unless there’s a crisis.”
He stood and stretched, and looked down at them. While no Flitwick, he was shorter than one or two of the taller boys even in Cleo’s year, certainly shorter than Yaxley, and skinnier than almost anybody.

Somehow he didn’t look small at all right now. The shadow of an almost-smile on his face wasn’t a threat, exactly, but it wasn’t a smile from pleasure, either.

“I’ll just leave you with this,” he said, summoning his papers with a flick of his wand. Cleo was so jealous; she’d heard they wouldn’t even start to learn silent casting until sixth year. “Slughorn was at the Fenshaw meeting. Afterwards, he didn’t merely allow the measures we decided on, he actively supported them. As a rule, he merely rewards what he likes and ignores what he doesn’t. When Slytherin came to a decision at that meeting, he helped make it happen.”

His face curled into an entire half of a smile. Even though Cleo would have quite probably walked through fire if their Naja had given her a good enough reason and promised to help her with the preventive spells and afterwards with the burns, that was hair-raising. She knew that his teeth were only crooked, but she was suddenly afraid of them anyway.

“You think the Head of Slytherin is blind to me?” he asked, so softly, the smile spreading darkly to the other side of his face. She would never have guessed his mouth could go so long. “Wake up, my own. He’s been praying for this all his life.”

He bowed to them. Properly, correctly, exactly as their grandparents had taught them. From the chest, his shoulders barely moving, not in a single, dutiful descent but the nod graciously following the bow: first among equals. Then he turned on his heel and left with his research. Their House’s doors opened for him, and closed behind him, without being touched.

(Cleo thought she saw his hand start to rise as he approached the doors, thought she saw his shoulders move a little when they swung open, as if he hadn’t expected that at all. He surged through smoothly enough, though, and didn’t turn while they could see him.)

Merry lifted her voice, her coloratura winding a very-nearly Greensleeves melody spookily around the hearthlit common room, notes as clean as starlight but just as far away, almost as quietly as the Naj had spoken:

“Runes he knew: young Kon well knew them,
Runes of honor and family runes.
Runes he used: men to preserve them,
Edges to deaden, the seas to calm.
Kon with Rig in runes contended;
Great was his craft and great his kenning.
This right Kon sought, and soon he won it:
Rig to be called, and skilled with runes.”

“Well done, Merry-Jan,” Will groaned disgustedly after a moment, the sudden strength of his Northern vowels blessedly and reassuringly mundane in the sudden darkness. “Tha’s put out the fire.”

“Er,” said Merry, a little sheepishly. She kept a better control over her voice, which shouldn’t have surprised anybody. “Professor Flitwick did say last spring he’d probably better start teaching me to incant this year.”

“That choir is a menace,” said Shafiq harshly, the sound coming from near the great window, close to the stairwell. Her skin was dark enough that, with only the last straining of twilight filtering
through the murky Black Lake, they could barely see her at all.

“Fear us,” Alan agreed solemnly, “for trilly we are treble and shall round-ly defeat you.”

There was a long pause wherein options were weighed, but since it was hard to aim well in the dark, everyone jointly decided the best option was to Firmly Ignore Him.

Alan made a sad noise.

“That choir,” Yaxley said, not so much harsh as disgusted, “is being infected by Essence of Ravenclaw.”

“Could be worse,” Merry pointed out, at the same time as Will pointed out, “Yeah, but it’s the whole choir being infected, innit.”

Alan said brightly, “Not really, but we think they’re really buying it.”

“Merlin’s balls,” Yaxley growled, “if this is more of that let’s all pretend we’re happy fluffy—”

Shafiq cut him off. “Snape’s right about one thing, at least: this is the start of OWL year and NEWT year for all of us but you sixth years.”

“We’re still starting NEWT study,” Merry pointed out warily. “Building our founda—”

“Which means that you two Quartstaves will be on patrol duty three nights a week to each other year’s two, as Yaxley and I were last year, although for the first week the two of us will accompany you fifth years. Thank you, Marion, for volunteering to start tonight.”

“. . .Reet,” sighed Merry. Despite also having been volunteered when it wasn’t his fault for once, her brother laughed.

Taking that for meeting-adjourned, Cleo made for the stairwell to the girls’ dorms, but before she got there, an enormous hand closed on her wrist in the dark. Her heart sped up and her other hand flashed to her wand, but the big former Beater didn’t yank or twist, only held her, rough fingers spread sweaty and hard over half her arm.

“Funny thing about old Snape,” Yaxley’s voice poured into her ear, hot and oily, the kind of angry that was pushed through a pleasant smile. “He thinks he’s some kind of guard dog, you know? Thinks we’re all his cute little lambikins. Especially sweet, swotty little blossoms like you, Periwinkle.”

“Did you like everyone calling you Crows-foot, Corban?” she asked, her voice steady. Her grip was steady on her wand, but he was only using one hand, too, and he was mostly behind her, pulling her not off her feet, quite, but up and back, a little off balance.

“Little Peregrine,” he crooned, which she supposed was some victory. “Won’t even use her own name anymore. The snake that helps, so eager to please, first to crawl up and lick the mudblood’s boots.”

She sighed. “Do you have some career planned where you think your NEWTs aren’t going to matter? Because I know you have homework.”

His voice came closer, until she could ugh, feel his breath on her ear, hear his smile go nasty. “He wants to wrap us all in cotton-wool, Blakeney. He thinks we’re babies. It doesn’t matter what you do for him, how much you jump up on him and lick his face. He’s never going to kiss you back,
he’s never going to touch you.”

Nothing but air grabbed her, low, smooth, sliding, secret and swift under her robes. She couldn’t help it, she gasped.

Yaxley’s voice went as deep as he could make it, mocking her. “He’s never going to fuck you, Cleo. You can bend over backwards and spread as wide as you want, give the rest of us a show, he won’t even notice. He’ll never fill you up even if you beg and rip your robes off. You’ll always be just a helpless brat to him.”

*I never wanted that,* she reminded herself, pulling fury up from her toes to distract herself from how, right now, she could have used a guard dog. From the air under her robes, still slipping against the pure silk of her smalls as if she were standing in a living stream, lapping at her, prodding.

She remembered suddenly, vividly, fighting with her mother about superstition and family tradition and ostentation and fitting in. Now her mother’s superstition was the only thing keeping that insinuating magic outside of her. Only she could keep his other invasions out.

*I never wanted it. I blessed his handfasting. He didn’t think I was a brat, he asked for my blessing, he counted on my help tonight.*

What would the Naj do? He wouldn’t fight. Not unless his brain had shut down from Potter-poisoning.

She flicked her wand, but not at Yaxley. The hearth re-lit, warm yellow light bursting out over the room.

Thank Circe, he jumped back.

Before he’d realized everyone had already left she was halfway down the stairs that fought off all boys past puberty with pendulums, paralysis, spiky bitey things, and really nasty semi-poisonous gasses. She tilted a cool gaze up at him and, in the bland, meek voice she’d used on Lily Potter before she had the clumsy bint’s measure, said, “I’m sorry to have to tell you, Lead-Prefect Yaxley, but not everyone’s as, I mean, not everyone thinks like you. Good night.”

She gave a little wave, and touched the wall. The stairs, the wonderful, obliging, understanding Slytherin stairs, flattened out into a steep ramp and slid her down and around the corner before Yaxley had worked out what she’d meant.

Darting into her dorm room, she put an extra ward on the door, just to feel better.

“Prefect meeting went that well, did it?” asked Glenda, looking up from what looked like the same herbal Cleo had been trying to read earlier.

“I don’t want to talk about it right now,” Cleo said, her chest tight. “Except, Yaxley is going to be a colossal problem and does anyone want to give me a hand?”

“With Yaxley?”

“Well, him too, obviously. Ideally with feeding him his bits, although I’d settle for making sure no one ever takes him seriously about anything again ever in his life ever.”

“Goosed her,” guessed Maeve wisely.
“No, look at precious, she’s mad! It’s to do with Se-e-e-ver-us,” Branwyn sang, grinning.

Cleo didn’t lash out at them, although Yaxley had her so wound up that for a moment she was tempted. She was going to need them, and they were her friends really. Her family, like McGonagall always told the firsties. And not like Yaxley, not the kind of family you drugged at Beltane so you could blackmail them into behaving for the rest of the year with photos of the sorts of things they drunkenly decided made appropriate chamberpots and glory holes.

“No, look at precious, she’s mad! It’s to do with Se-e-e-ver-us,” Branwyn sang, grinning.

“Both,” she agreed, “except he’s actually trying to make trouble and he’s being smarter than we thought he was, and I think it’s going to be bad.”

Because he was. He really was being smart. It wasn’t that she’d ever made any secret about supporting the Naj; she’d started admiring him too early for that to work, before Slytherin had really started to teach her what subtlety was.

Besides, some people just could not take a hint. Some people had to be hit over the head with an I’m-Your-Friend stick before they’d even consider it might be true, let alone believe it. Had to be hit a lot. Subtle had not been an option.

So it took no great intelligence for Yaxley to zero in on her as someone he should neutralize if he opposed Snape.

The way he’d raked her soil soft and planted seeds she knew were true, though. The way he’d made her stare at facts she’d never cared about before while her pulse was high and she was scared and throbbing. The way he’d forced her into association, tricked her body into sensation and expectation when there was nothing coming. Manipulated her chemical emotions like that, and all the time made her think about the most alive wizard she’d ever met, who protected her and believed in her in ways no one else did, who she’d never known how to protect back. Who sometimes felt almost as strong as the Headmaster, when he forgot that he could even find reasons to be scared of (for) the firsties.

The way that piece of filth had made her think about someone she’d always seen as a beaky, bony, fragile, ferocious, boy-shaped hurricane: not even as a grown wizard, but as a man.

She didn’t, in fact, think Yaxley had thought all that out. She didn’t know him well, two years above her own, but she’d watched them all over her books, like she’d seen the Naj do a thousand times, like Lance had over his sketchbooks. She thought she knew him well enough to be able to say: no, he wasn’t as thoughtful a plotter as all that.

Thoughtful plotters tripped themselves up. It was the opportunistic ones that were the worst. The ones with low cunning and quick reflexes and good instincts, who’d go for a vulnerable spot the moment they saw it without bothering to work out the whys and wherefores. Those were the ones who couldn’t be stopped, because they never knew what they were going to do next themselves, until they’d done it.

The jinx had stopped when she’d turned the corner, but it had done it’s work. She could be as mad about it as she wanted, but prowling around in her own brain like a helpless wet cat wouldn’t help. She could endure and let his nasty fungus prey on her, or she could shed a blighted skin and make herself her own again.

“So, plaintively, she said, “And it was both, and I despise that wanker, and I could really use a hand.”

“I’d love to,” Glenda said fervently, eyeing her around the chesty regions. “Merlin, hasn’t it been
the worst summer? My parents wouldn’t let me have one day to myself! But Maeve and Winnie tried to have a go together when we were all upstairs, er, trying to do homework…” She rolled her eyes. “And someone’s done something to the beds. Everybody’s. The boys’ beds, too; I went up to see and we asked around.”

“They won’t tie together?” she asked, dismayed.

“Yeah, and it’s worse than that,” Maeve scowled, sitting up. “The second person who tries to get on one just rolls off!”

_Thinks we’re babies_, Yaxley’s voice drifted through Cleo’s head. _Cotton-wool._

She shook him off. Hopefully, she asked, “Did anyone try the showers? Or the floor?” From the way they brightened up, just as hopeful, she gathered that they hadn’t thought of that. Instead of deploring the quality of Slytherins today, she grabbed Glenda’s hand and told the other two, “You can test it out in here, if you want.”

The spoilsport she wasn’t going to try and name (even though there was, really, only one possible candidate) had, it turned out, either not thought of the showers and floor or had mostly been concerned that everyone do their actual sleeping alone. Or maybe the buttoned-up—er, the silly and _definitely unknown_ person had assumed everybody wanted privacy.

Whichever it was, Cleo felt much better once she was scrubbed and clean and Glenda had replaced mocking magic with real, admiring, warm, toothy, lingering, solid friendship. Even if they couldn’t cuddle up after.

Cleo really wished they could have cuddled up after. Alone in her own bed, closeted behind her own curtains, without a friend’s bulk and snoring and distinctively long, curly hair to distract her, she couldn’t stop the thoughts she’d never had before.

Like long fingers on her neck, anywhere, everywhere, white and smooth as ice but warm, with big, knobby, very human wrists and knuckles (and knees? Probably also knobby knees). Eyes so fierce and focused and certain they made the world fall away. She’d seen him bared once when he wasn’t himself, when she’d really been a child. Yaxley was right: she’d never find out what was really there, never be held even as close as Shafiq.

She didn’t want to. If that happened, everything would be awful. She’d blessed his handfasting. She’d meant it. She still meant it.

Glenda was lovely and fun, and a great friend. So far, at least, there weren’t any misunderstandings between any of the four of them. Glenda was safe, she was good. But they were just friends, there wasn’t any real pull between them. If her clear voice shivered boys’ bones, or Maeve’s, it didn’t Cleo’s. And her fingers were awfully small.

She kept remembering empty air, stirring, seeking. Small fingers like Glenda’s and her own were no shield at all, no stopper, couldn’t rub that wicked ghost away.

She kept thinking that the sandpaper scrape of a sharp jaw a few too many hours past a morning shaving spell might do the trick. That was the only stubborn, revolving, indelible phoenix of an image that she could forgive herself for at all, and that only because she could tell when a grown wizard was using growth-suppressing topicals instead of fussing around with spells every morning.

Well past midnight, by the moon, Cleo Blakeney gave up on sleeping and went to the window with her parchment and quill. She wrote:
Dear Mum,

I’ll write a longer letter on Saturday about how my first week back and Prefect duties are going, but I know you’ll be happy to get this one. It boils down to: Apothecary Snape (he gets awfully snippy about Mister and Master and just about everything else, as usual; speculation is high again already about what crawled down his collar as a child and died) agrees with you about robe safety. He read everyone the riot act this morning about short skirts and wool fibers getting into potions, and jewelry, and probably quill feathers or something. I left for breakfast rather quickly, as I felt I’d got the gist.

So: I still think it’s a bit over the top, and even if it was a great diversion for great-whatever Percy there’s no need for me to flounce around like a peacock, but if it’ll stop me getting lectured every morning, I give in. Please send along a nice magically-neutral silk wardrobe that will protect me from hallway hexes and cross looks by Mr. Overprotective Wizard and let me get to breakfast in time to eat some of it before class. Yes, I promise I will really-truly wear all the silk, all the time, just as you asked, as long as it’s within school guidelines and not silly.

I hope you and Not-Professor Hdarars Mother Hen will be very happy together in the heavily warded tower with the slick diamond walls I assume you’ll mutually decide is the only possible option for sensible people to live in. Dad and I will console each other with tea and the kneazle and too many cakes.

Your loving, if exasperated, daughter,
Perry

(missing you and Dad again already.)

It occurred to her that she could, as a prefect, actually get up to the owlery even at this hour without getting a detention. As soon as the ribbon was tied around the parchment, though, the day caught up to her in a wave of grey exhaustion. The morning would be soon enough, and getting it around noon would worry Mum worlds less than if she could trace the letter back to 2AM.

Satisfied, she put the rolled up parchment and started back to her bed, but the open curtains and slick, rumpled sheets gaped at her like a wet mouth. Her hand started to shake.

She couldn’t go back in there. She’d been lying there, aching and tossing and poisoned. New shields her mother could give her to put around the outside of herself were not going to help.

She went back to the window, scrawled a few lines and rolled them up in a new ribbon, and cast the best fireproofing spell she knew. Then she crept upstairs, eyes peeled, heart pounding, and wand out, to the common room fireplace, and dropped in a pinch of her supply of emergency floo powder.

“Evander Rosier’s hearth, Rosier Hall,” she whispered, and hurled the scroll down into the fire as hard as she could, willing with all her memories of what baby-magic felt like for it to clear the flames and reach him before their green faded back to hot orange.

Maybe she was imagining it, but she thought she heard a startled, sleepy, “Ow! Wha…?” and a deeper, inquisitive, contented rumble that made her clench and quiver all over, especially inside. It sent her fleeing for the stairs like a terrified mouse.

Despite that moment of irrational, electrifying adrenaline, the moment her own door closed behind her all the tension fell right through her bare feet.

She had done all she could for the night, had started to do the right thing. In the morning, she
would send Mum’s letter, and that would be useful and safe and not in the least suspicious: everyone with good manners would be writing home at least once this week.

Her bed was just her bed again, the one she’d slept in for four years. Relieved by resolve, she had no more trouble sleeping that night—although the dreams were, deliciously and regrettably, about what she’d expected.

Chapter End Notes

Notes: The Slytherin Common Room’s defenses didn’t turn against Yaxley because what they picked up was two Slytherin students speaking calmly to each other while one used a pretty small-potatoes air-controlling spell. I'm afraid I established that their standards for when to interfere with only Slytherins in the room are pretty high when Mulciber and Avery were able to wrench Severus's arms behind his back and steal his books back in January '73. \
September 3, far too early

Chapter Summary

Two men in a boatload of trouble (to say nothing of the goat).

Chapter Notes

**Warnings:** ...creepy dolls?

**Thanks:** to Hwyla, Certainlittlefacts, Goldenfalls, blueontherock, Trickster32, cloudynightstars,, and some guests for letting me know, in some way, that you liked something I wrote. It meant even more than usual when everyone was (I assume) too pissed off about Cleo even to detail all the ways they want to murder Yaxley.

**Notes:** As a reminder, I already had Severus's timeline set when Deathly Hallows came out, and I didn't change it when JKR decided to retrofit her dates.

Bopped in the nose by a roll of parchment was certainly one of the more novel ways Evan had ever been woken up—novel since leaving school, at least. Since he was half-expecting Spike to be standing over him impatiently with both their bookbags, two seconds from dropping his school robes on his face, it took Ev a minute to sort himself out.

His nose was exposed because Spike was curled up mostly along his side, grabbing over his front with a resentful, possessive little scowl in his sleep. He seemed to have tried to grab Evan’s chest hair, and been thwarted by there only being a sprinkle. He ought to have been used to that by now, but had apparently tried anyway since he wasn’t at the right angle to get into Ev’s actual hair. Adorable, comfortable, and entirely acceptable, especially the leg-tangling, but slightly unusual.

Spike was along Evan’s side because Evan wasn’t lying face down, and he wasn’t on his stomach because they weren’t in bed. They were on the rug in front of the fire, and while cushioning charms could make the excellent, fur-like rug more than clean and comfortable enough for sleeping on one’s back, there were limits. One of them was breathing the tickly fiber of a thick-pile floor-covering.

Why weren’t they in bed?

He couldn’t remember for a minute, and then he saw the toasting-forks in their rack, gleaming cheerfully, freshly cleaned. That was why: Spike had stayed late to talk to the Slytherins after dinner in the Great Hall. By the time he’d come home he hadn’t been jumpy, exactly, but so chilly and serpentine and occluded that Evan’s chest had been one giant clanging warning bell.

So, instead of asking Linkin to cook so late, or Evan letting Spike do it when he was frazzled (or Spike letting Evan try when no one wanted to eat what would happen then), they’d just raided the Hall’s larder (in person, despite Linkin’s outraged sense of convention, because that was half the fun) and had a Toasting Things On The Fire Like Barbarians Night.
Evan had a feeling that they might miss living near all the take-away you could imagine before long. He was not looking forward to Spike trying to teach Linkin to make curry, never mind the dishes Madam Chang had taught him along with her language. Kreacher (Merlin, poor Reggie, Evan thought dutifully, definitely sad because Kreacher was definitely dead) had been furiously competitive about their cooking contests, but in a Quidditch sort of way. Spike wasn’t part of Kreacher’s household; his dominion over the kitchens hadn’t been threatened by it.

Linkin was going to be actually annoyed, especially since Spike wasn’t going to be able to show him how to make anything look as good as it tasted. Especially the curry. Linkin thought all stews were ugly anyway, and Spike thought they were playgrounds for herbs and spices and Linkin was a presentation snob, and Evan never won any points with anybody by pointing out that they were both right. Linkin would probably be all right with hot pot, at least; it was easy to work out how to serve that beautifully (as opposed to Lancashire hot pot, which Spike said was always a mess—not that you could ever trust Spike about plating).

But Spike didn’t even know how to make fish and chips; he said that when he’d seen it made it involved muggle machines with wire baskets, he was still vexed with the magical world for not explaining breading to him, and at least croutons were comprehensible. Hogsmeade didn’t have any chippies, either. The Hog’s Head didn’t get that fancy, Rosmerta didn’t put out any food that didn’t come out of a bag, and tiny little old Master Puddifoot would probably have shrieked and fainted in a spray of old-rose colored lilac if anyone had come near him with a greasy fried fish or a flask of malt vinegar.

(Ev was going to have to find out of he got any of his lace from Julilla Prince, come to think of it. A connection in Hogsmeade could be useful.)

Spike believed apparition solved the problem of distance, but apparating before eating was actually quite a bad idea and apparently the idea of planning for fish and chips was unthinkable.

Even if you knew that you were going to want it for Friday ‘tea’ because it was a sacrament for anyone who could afford it and therefore had the power to make you feel quite smug at escaping foul-smelling dull hellholes at last once a wee. And, moreover, to know you would in advance and therefore have it to look forward to. Evan would be the first to admit that Spike could be a bit odd, but Spike insisted this was just something Evan was too Southern to understand.

Theoretically one could send Linkin, but to ask an elf to bring home pre-prepared food was to ask for Months Of Sulking And Cold Tea. Or cold cocoa, at least, considering Spike’s teapot-jealousy. So that meltdown was probably going to be epic.

But as many problems as losing London’s take-away might cause, Evan loved the occasional Toasting Things On The Fire Like Barbarians night. He got to be the one who did all the complaining, because it was completely Spike’s show. And then Spike got to deride him for being an overbred silver-spoony goon. Which was almost unbearably warm-making, because Evan always knew what it meant when Spike trotted out old fourth-year insults like that.

And there was toasted cheese, and fresh fruit, and grilled fruit in little floating cast-iron pans. Sometimes there was bacon, and sometimes toasted cake to dip in custard, and kebab with thick, juicy chunks of anything that occurred to Spike. Spike was so good at kebab he could even stick-roast eggs, and when there wasn’t any table he didn’t seem to feel table manners applied.

Possibly Evan’s favorite part was watching Spike pretending to disdainfully ignore how much Evan loved watching him slide things off sticks with his mouth.

Feeding each other was high up on the list, too. Evan’s hands were sensitive—he supposed most
This was the first time they’d had a toasting night since Spike had brought Evan’s tree to life and sown his own arms with fluttering roses that strained inside his skin to meet Evan’s touch in the firelight. Ev wasn’t sure if Spike had actually been more provocative than usual; maybe it was only that Evan had been overtaken by still having this, with other things changing. It felt like a promise as much as the caves had: not just to stick with each other, but to stay themselves. Not their own promise, but one from the universe that they could.

Afterwards Evan would have been a bit worried about all the bites and nail-marks if Spike hadn’t been so smug, and made such a purring show with the bruise balm from the evidently extremely comfortable saddle of Ev’s thigh.

It was actually not in the least surprising they hadn’t bothered peeling themselves off the floor just to go to bed when there was a perfectly good blanket on the sofa. The amazing thing was that one of them had, judging by the toasting forks and the state of the rug, managed to shoot off a few cleaning charms. Spike, most likely but Ev felt good about it anyway.

He felt good generally, even though Spike had been too stretched last night to have any of the conversations they needed to have and those were starting to pile up a bit. They were mostly about making Severus understand that his job wasn’t actually to sit at Horace Slughorn’s heels twelve hours a day arguing with him and cleaning his classroom and doing his marking, anyway. Since Severus was already getting snarly about wanting more time at home even before trying to set any aside for his IAMB research, Ev didn’t think it should be too hard a sell.

With a contented little hum, he hitched his Spike a bit further up his chest, and shifted to curl in tighter around him.

The edge of the parchment pricked into his nose.

With a discontented little groan, he reached for his wand and, tipping his head back, examined the scroll for hexes and curses and dangerous powders and whatnot. It was probably safe enough, since the house wards were quite good about curses and Spike’s wards were better about malicious intent and dangerous substances. Still, you could never be so careful that Spike wouldn’t yell at you.

There was nothing on it but the everyday charms you found on the sort of thick, expensive parchment pureblood families bought without thinking about it—charms to stop the ink running and fading and make it dry quickly, and keep the parchment supple and repel pests and so on—and an extra fireproofing spell. Which meant it probably was from a pureblood who’d bought it without thinking about it, or had taken it from a family supply without ever reading the packaging. Someone who had bothered to read the packaging would have known that a post-purchase fireproofing spell was redundant.

It was addressed, a little shakily, Just Lance, please.

Huh.

Knew his Slytherin name, might use it naturally, without any hesitation or awkwardness in the handwriting? Any of something like two hundred, even if none of them had told their families.

Expected someone else to be with him who’d both know that name and respect the privacy of his letters? And wouldn’t bother casting privacy wards to make sure? Narcissa would have cast the wards anyway, out of habit and on principle and to tease Spike, so exactly two. And this wasn’t
Both his cousins normally used his actual name, anyway, and he couldn’t think of any particular reason they wouldn’t have used an owl like civilized people. Whereas option number three was mewed up in a big stone castle with a lot of other people who were mostly against her moving around at night, and who might take an interest in her business.

He nuzzled Spike around the soft skin behind his ear and murmured, “Minute.”

Because everyone in their dorm had learned to take it as a hard rule, by the second week in September of 1970, that if you got up to go to the toilet in the middle of the night and didn’t make a public announcement, Snape was going to wake up in a panic and hex you. It might be your footsteps that woke him, or the light going on or off, or the water in the pipes, or maybe just the air moving when you walked. No matter what you did, he was going to wake up, in a panic, and hex you.

Evan had learned, by July-ish of 1977, that nothing short of a sleeping charm was ever going to change that, and that not being where a waking Spike expected him to be would utterly ruin everybody’s morning. Everybody’s. Everybody at the school, and later, at the Wolfsbane lab. At least when it was just the two of them Ev didn’t have to shout.

Spike grumbled sleepily, but relaxed his grip and let Evan get up. Apparently in his sleep, he started twitching and fidgeting backwards until his back was flush against the sofa, and crossed his arms tightly across his chest.

That broke Ev’s heart a little, wrenched him forward a step, but he caught himself. Spike wasn’t actually having a nightmare, and it looked as if one of the baby snakes who was usually very well-behaved was in enough trouble to act almost as badly as Spike might. So he just tucked the blanket back around Spike again with his wand, folding it over itself for extra comfort and weight, and took the note into the en suite.

Unrolled, it just read,

Lance,
The ST said she was still my prefect.
I need to talk to you. Soon, however you can manage. You’ll tell him, of course, but I need to talk to just you.
Please.

Blakeney hadn’t signed it, per se, but reminding him that Narcissa had covered her eyes for being a minor while Ev tried to shove right through Spike’s face to kiss his soul was more than as good as.

While, at the same time, not too subtly hoping that he, too, still felt some responsibility to her, and reminding him that he and Spike had brought her closely into their circle and their secrets. But that ‘please’ at the end stopped the flash of knowledge-is-power from sounding like she’d had a threatening intent, kept it between-friends.

“Good girl,” he told the note, smiling.

With a tap of his wand, he erased her writing and, with a wave, summoned one of Spike’s too-thick but very convenient fountain pens. Balancing one of Spike’s bath-books over his knee as a makeshift desk, he wrote,

Dear Miss Blakeney,
Professor Slughorn told me you’ve been made a prefect—congratulations! And my condolences; it’s far more work than it’s worth, in my opinion. But it will open doors for you, as the dear old buffer would say, and I expect having Snape roaring about will take most of the work off your shoulders, as he did for me. Tell your poor suffering fellow honoree the same.

It’s been far too long since I had a chance to see your lady mother, and I hope you’ll convey my respects as her birthday approaches—and accept them yourself, having had one so recently.

I’m sure that, now you’ve turned sixteen, your parents will want to discuss your Majority portrait with my father or Grandpère before long. As your prefect, I feel a certain responsibility, and I must tell you that Grandpère and Dad both assume their customers want portraits in a certain opulent style that I fear you’re going to hate. I also rather suspect you’ll have a spot of trouble telling them you think none of their ideas suit you, and that you might be hesitant to confront older wizards of their stature with ideas of your own.

Your family can afford the best for you, so the best is what you’ll get: not just a junior magister with whom you happen to be at ease. I trust you understand how important it is to me that my family gives our clients not only portraits that you can just about stand to look at in the hall while alive, but that you’ll be happy and at home in for centuries. Rose & Yew has a reputation to maintain, Blakeney, and I can’t let your admittedly charming modesty mar it.

How about discussing it at your first Hogsmeade weekend? That’s the earliest that we could meet in person without setting up an appointment through anyone at Hogwarts, since, as you know, I have no current connection to the school. We can work out what you might really enjoy. I’ll tell you how they like to hear clients tell them things, so you’ll feel comfortable when it’s time to tell them what you want in a portrait.

If you can bear to wait that long before having such a pleasant discussion about yourself that I know you’ll thoroughly enjoy, we’ll plan for that, and don’t fail to tell Snape today to pass along regards to both your everlasting prefects. Should you have other thoughts I am at your disposal, but if I hear nothing I’m afraid I shall, out of the tenderest concern, have to rely on a terribly nosy busybody to assist in making earlier arrangements.

Most cordially yours,
E. Rosier, MM
Rose & Yew Studios
New Forest, Hampshire[1]

Evan frowned down at his letter, quill still in his hand, unsatisfied. He hoped she’d understand he didn’t think the matter could wait until October, but it really had been the only offer of discussing portraits in person that made any sense. It wasn’t as if Hogwarts had visiting days, and even if it had, they weren’t closely related at all. The only way to see her without inside help would be to use Spike’s cabinet and try to sneak around as a graduated adult without an escort, which, no, he had no intention of getting on the ghosts’ bad side, or attracting Peeves’ attention, or any of the suits of armor or other inanimate defenses.

In the end, he reminded himself, if it was so urgent she needed not only help but help-in-person-at-once, she could have stuck her head through the flames and shouted for him. Shocking behavior, of course, but no Slytherin worth her salt would let that stop her if she judged it necessary. Cleo had a good head on her little shoulders, and she had it on straight.

He rolled the letter up and re-tied it with her own ribbon. No sense leaving it about the house for Spike to find. Not before he knew whether this was something Spike ought to be told or was instead some delicate matter of Blakeney’s about which Ev’s battering ram who was going to see
her every day didn’t particularly need to know.

“Linkin,” he called softly.

To Linkin’s credit, the elf, in what Ev thought might have been one of his own baby blankets once but was now a kimono-like object, must have realized Evan wouldn’t called for him this late if it wasn’t important. He did look cross-eyed and reproachful when he poofed into the bathroom, but it wasn’t really what Ev would call a glare.

Then again, Spike and Linkin between them had really raised Evan’s standards when it came to glares. Besides, while mauve was a fine color for both roses and baby Rosiers, it didn’t suit Linkin’s skin tone. It was hard to take even Linkin too terribly seriously when he looked like a rhinoceros that had been rolling in red clay.

Evan held out the scroll. “Sorry to knock you up, old thing. This is an obligation come calling.”

Linkin was suddenly looking at him much more approvingly. He straightened up, more awake, and took the scroll almost reverently.

Ev might have been awake enough to write a semi-twisty letter, but he wasn’t awake enough to deal with Linkin approving of him. Not even if it was probably just for not procrastinating about fulfilling a duty. Therefore, he sailed over it without acknowledgment. “I need that sent to Miss Peregrine Blakeney, at Hogwarts, to arrive with all the other owled letters at breakfast tomorrow—or, this morning.”

The elf suddenly got a sense of hesitation about his flappy ears. He seemed to take in the darkness of the hall outside, Spike’s soft curled-up breathing on the rug, and the fact that Evan was writing a letter to a sixteen year old girl in the middle of the night, in the bathroom, two days after moving his partner home as a secret from his own parents. He looked like someone who thought his life was about to get difficult.

Evan nearly laughed. “Don’t be an ass, Linkin,” he said, amused. “I don’t know why the girl wrote me instead of Spike or Cissa when she needed help, but my first guess would be that she doesn’t think I’ll shout at her in public if I decide she’s been an idiot. I expect Spike will know all about it, once I know how to talk him out of shouting at her in public, too, but we’ll have to see what she says.”

“Master Evvie knows his own business,” Linkin said in what should have been a neutral tone, but actually dripped with I-doubt-it.

“Well, I mean to find it out, anyway,” Evan shrugged. Linkin looked a little less dour. “Speaking of, Mum and Dad haven’t mentioned recently if they mean to come home anytime soon, have they?”

“Linkin has promised to tell Master Evvie if Young Master or Mistress Callisto give warning,” Linkin reminded Evan patiently. “Mistress no longer expects Master Evvie to crayon on the silk wallpaper or order Linkin to give him cake for breakfast.”

Despite accepting this mockery as fair, or at least to be expected, Evan sighed. Mum and Dad might decide tomorrow morning that they missed the roses and be home by lunch.

“Mistress Callisto was a bride in this home herself,” Linkin reminded him, a bit sadistically. “She has studied the secrets of old Houses. Once she sees that the Hall has shifted to welcome Master Spike and see to his comfort, nothing Master Evvie says will fool her. And Linkin must answer
truthfully, if she or Young Master think to ask.”

“I know,” he said. “It isn’t as if she didn’t want Severus allied with us, Linkin.”

“Master Evvie knows better than that,” Linkin told him severely. “Master Evvie’s mother never wanted him to change his life without her.”

Evan locked his jaw, very quickly, around Then why did we live it without her every day? He made himself say, instead, “Well, he’s not a bride, just because he’s my Spike and I brought him home, that’s weird, Linkin.”

Severus was, he agreed with himself firmly, not in the least bride-like. Narcissa had pulled off a good impression. Reggie might do it well. Evan could not possibly have painted Severus in that role. Not in a million years. Not even as a satire. It just wouldn’t—it just wouldn’t.

Himself, maybe, although not in white. Not red either, for all it suited him, not with his hair like it was. Gold was traditional, too, of course… Spike might enjoy that, if they got a chance to celebrate their anniversary properly next year and there was no red involved at all. Evan hadn’t wanted to be anything but himself for their actual ceremony, but now that they’d got things settled and Spike would be less fraught over the whole idea, he might let Evan play around.

Evan felt a demented grin start to bubble up behind his teeth as he realized he could have a wedding night every year if he could just rationalize it to Spike plausibly. It would be in keeping with Madam Flamel’s blessing, for one thing. If they showed her they were honoring her wishes like that, and Severus never called it a morning curse actually in front of her, she might feel better about having her good deed rewarded by becoming a canvas for infant vomit.

And it would be even more plausible to Severus if he pushed for one of the equinoxes or quarter days—or two of them, six months apart! Probably Beltane for tradition, or, since fertility was not something they wanted, Lammas to feed the land or whatever Spike had been on about last month. Maybe Lammas and Imbolc would be credible? He’d have to read up before he tried to sell the idea, since Spike cared loads more about the traditional holidays than Ev ever had (you got sweets and presents at the modern ones), but Cissa would probably help…

Linkin was eying him skeptically and seemed about to press, but the opportunity, fortunately, did not arise.

“Ev?” Spike called sleepily, lurching gracelessly down the hall towards them with the blanket clutched around him. “’R’you ill? Fall in? I thought I heard—” Evan saw him blink owlishly, the bathroom light making his face harsh while the hallway was dark behind him. “Link—is everything all right?” he asked, starting to wake up faster.

“Nothing’s ever completely ‘all right’ in your opinion, Spike,” Ev said fondly, pushing off the lip of the bathtub and going over to snug him, “but whatever’s particularly wrong today, I don’t know what it is yet and it hasn’t started to smell.”

Spike started to say something and then, arrested and indignant, demanded, “How am I supposed to argue with that?”

“You’d have to be more awake first,” Evan laughed into his neck, “and it’s far too early. Shall we actually go to bed this time?”

“Yes,” Spike agreed vehemently as Evan steered him down the hall, letting himself start to droop again as he saw Evan wasn’t worried or upset, “but why is Linkin in the bathroom?”
“One of our mutual baby snakes sent a fearfully urgent note,” Evan explained. It was one thing not leaving a ribbon lying around to raise questions unnecessarily, and quite another to lie about a loose thread once Spike had already tripped over it. In either case, stupid to make things more complicated than they had to be. “They haven’t said what it’s about yet, but I expect they want to complain at me about how mean you are. They usually do, you know.”

Spike looked at him, sleepily bewildered. “But you think it’s funny when I shout at them.”

“Yes, but I had a lot of them fooled pretty well, Spike,” he said gravely, and tugged Spike down into bed with him. “Most of them think I’m the nice one.”

“You’re awful,” Spike declared, rather muffled, into the join of his neck, settling all over his back, stroking down his arm, and lacing their fingers together with a deep, contented sigh.

Evan didn’t think it was two breaths before he was out like a candle again. He lay awake himself, Spike’s mostly-silky, rather bony heat and negligible, well-distributed weight breathing comfort into him.

Not enough comfort to quiet the scampering rodent of unease that had been scrabbling around in his mind since yesterday. He’d staved it off with Spike and little problems and work, but now he was just lying here quietly in the dark, perfectly cozy, with Severus’s skinny bones shielding Evan from some amorphous, insubstantial everything, but not shielding himself. As usual.

His eyes drifted to the window seat, where Spike had kept Evan’s only baby toy (apart from the aforemocked crayons) because Spike, apparently, liked having something around to get angry about. Its glass eyes glinted in the moonlight.

He remarked to the stuffed goat, “I hold sole birthright to the home my family’s had to rebuild three times on the land that’s been ours six centuries. If the goblins ate all our money, I have a skill even muggles would pay through the nose for, and I can do it the muggle way when I have to. The only person I care two knuts about doesn’t even look at anyone but me, and our skin can prove it in any wizarding court or hospital if we need to, even if we didn’t tell anyone.”

The goat waited patiently.

“It doesn’t sound like a precarious sort of life, does it?”

The goat didn’t answer.

“All I wanted was to paint everything,” he pointed out.

The goat had no comment.

“I’ve noticed something, goat,” he observed.

The goat kept its peace, but its eyes glinted curiously.

“Every time I try to make anyone happy who isn’t Severus or Cissa or Grandpère, everything gets horrible and complicated and it never stops.”

The goat seemed a little skeptical.

“Actually, Narcissa never particularly wants anything from me that I wouldn’t do anyway,” he amended. “So I suppose I don’t know which group she’s really in.”
The goat’s embroidered expression suggested he was, perhaps, being a trifle dramatic.

“That is,” he further amended, “I’m mostly talking about making my parents happy, I suppose. The family at large, really. They’re full of rot, goat, did you know that?”

The goat forbore to express an opinion.

“You don’t see me thinking all Lucius and Mulciber’s ideas are brilliant and I should do everything they say just because I was at school with them, do you?” he elaborated crossly.

The goat’s glass eyes seemed to focus on Evan’s back.

“That’s not the same at all. When you prove he’s wrong, he doesn’t curse you, he just grumbles a lot and pretends he’s not all pleased you’ve been clever.”

The goat stared at him silently.

“Well, it’s not just with me, it’s Reggie and Evans too, at least,” Ev defended himself lamely.

The goat could stare at him all night.

“Look, do you know what I spent all day doing, goat?”

The goat did not know.

“Death masks, that’s what,” Evan told it. “I was all over the country in museums and chapels looking at ruddy death masks. And he wants me to go look at them in Rome and Egypt, although I might be able to get out of that if the British Museum’s got enough in the basement. Do you know what real death masks are like, goat?”

The goat didn’t know that either.

“They mostly look peaceful,” Evan told him, “Or slack, like they’re snoring. But they’re black and sludge all over your magic, goat. Some of them are crawling horrors and some of them feel like they’re screaming right through your head. Even the best of them are, are, I don’t know, did you ever go into the common room in the middle of the night and look out the window into the Black Lake and you could just see the movement of things in the water and you didn’t know what they were, except you knew they had teeth and all there was between you was glass?”

The goat had never done that, because it was a stuffed baby toy that Evan had never cared enough to take to school.

“Well, it’s extraordinarily creepy, goat,” Evan informed it, hearing his pitch start to rise. “And he wants me to make masks that make everyone who look at them feel that way. And why would you think he wants masks in the first place, goat?”

“To let us act in public,” hissed a dark voice in his ear.

Evan shrieked and jerked, and then he tried to curse Spike out but he wasn’t very practiced at bad language. Besides, Spike was laughing at him and he loved it when Spike was laughing at him.

“Nimue’s shaggy kirtle, Spike!” he spluttered, trying to hit Spike in the face with a pillow Spike was effortlessly keeping away from him. “Circe on a stake! How much of that did you hear?!?”

“My ears caught words like ‘Cissa’ and ‘Grandpère’ and ‘Mulciber, and then I was awake,” Spike said, lolling on an elbow and holding the pillow up in the air and away, eyes glittering with
amusement. “Because, however dulcet the voice that reads me to sleep on the regular, I have such a thing as a survival instinct.”

“A gentlewizard,” Evan informed him, trying to gather up the scattered scraps of his poor, slaughtered dignity, “would have gone back to sleep once he ascertained I wasn’t talking to him!”

“But I made sure that you were,” Spike replied, making his eyes huge and liquid and batting them appallingly.

“I was talking to the goat!” Evan exclaimed, pointing at it, trying to keep the excitement up to distract himself from knowing he was being completely ridiculous. “I kept addressing it directly! Goat, I said! Goat!”

“Yes, Evan,” Spike said patiently. “I know you said ‘goat.’ I heard you. That’s why I was sure you were talking to me, the only other sapient creature in the room, the one with whom you should be sharing your concerns: bound hand-fast to you, rightful ear and partner to your burdens, and a Capricorn.”

Evan gaped at him, jaw dropped in indignation at this barefaced twistiness, which made it really far too easy for Spike to swoop in, his long hands sneakily diving into temple-rubs and neck-rubs, landing into the kind of deep, endlessly tender kissing that left Evan hazy and humming, just rubbing his face into Spike’s strong, warm throat, each of them running lazy, claiming hands over backs and arms and into utterly sleep-destroyed hair.

“Could be really serious, you know, Spike,” he mumbled finally, when the snogging had tapered off and Spike had settled into thumbing slow circles over Evan’s cheek, half-lidded blinks lasting longer and longer.

“Very likely,” Spike agreed somberly. He paused so long Evan thought he was done, and then said, almost too quietly to hear, “Perhaps I should… bring a fish to the cat Smaug.”

“NO!” Evan shouted, sitting bolt upright. His heart was suddenly pounding, and he hadn’t worked out why yet.

Spike was staring at him, eyes large again, but not as if he was playing. He’d plastered a hand over the right side of his own chest, and didn’t seem to have noticed it. “Ev,” he started, but not as if he meant to say anything, really. It just came out of him, and then he didn’t have anything else.

They looked at each other for a minute, while the sudden sweat prickled and cooled on Evan’s chest and forehead.

Finally, Spike pulled his wand from the space between mattress and bedstead. He cast his muffliato spell, and another one that enclosed their bed in a tight dome of translucent, runny, soap-bubble color, against pensieves. Then he asked, with his head-tilty reasonable eyes, “Why not?”

“Spike,” Evan started, uncertainly, “I…”

Spike put up a hand. “Excuse me, Ev, I wasn’t talking to you.”

Evan paused. “You want to talk to the goat now?” he asked, raising his eyebrows.

It got him an eye-crinkle, at least. “That wasn’t my friend who shot up and bellowed in my ear, Ev. That was the lunatic who strikes in out of nowhere from the direction nobody thought of. So no, Evan, I don’t want to talk to the goat, and I don’t want to talk to my hearth, either. I need my ally. Put the fer-de-lance on, please.”
“…On what?”

“…Er, in the floo.”

“I’m not different people, you know,” Evan told him crossly.

“But you wear different cloaks, like the rest of us. Give over, Lance. Why not?”

Spike putting it like that didn’t suddenly make Evan’s mind go all cold and clicky and logical, like Spike’s could. He just got mad, and burst out, “I don’t care if Evans is getting incrementally less overbearing, I don’t like you talking to her, Spike! Her stupid-Gryff rubs off on you every time!”

Spike blinked, going up on an elbow. The moon on the lines of him, sinking into hair too fine to stay really mussed, made Evan’s fingers itch for charcoal. “Well,” he commented, an eyebrow sliding up, “that was out of nowhere, but I did ask for it.”

“It wasn’t,” Evan’s mouth said hotly, although Evan sort of agreed with Spike. “What do you think happens if you tell Dumbledore, Severus?”

“…I’ve kept faith with a promise that I made for good reason, and precautions are, perhaps, taken that might be a safety assist?”

“I’m going to kick you like Narcissa,” Evan hissed, his muzzy brain clearing up fast in outrage as it caught up with his instincts. “And when Whoozhiswhat realizes that Whatsisbeard was expecting an escalation? I’m the one who knows about the masks, and you’re the one taking three meals a day at the castle!”

Spike was silent.

Evan glared narrowly at him. “I don’t care if you didn’t think that far ahead at all or you thought other people MAYBE being GENERALLY forewarned about something they STILL wouldn’t be able to PREVENT was worth the risk to you and you were sure you’d be able to talk me out of danger,” he snarled. “Her stupid-Gryff is rubbing off on you and I DONT LIKE IT!”

Finally, after a pause so long that Evan had started to feel itchy and awkward, although not exactly embarrassed because he was right, Spike said mildly, “Ev, I was raised by a stupid-Gryff. You can’t blame it on Lily every time.”

“I can’t blame my mother-in-law for anything while she still doesn’t even know she’s my mother-in-law,” Evan said sulkily.

“Says who?” Spike asked, his mouth quivering.

“Says the tattered remnant of the good manners Linkin raised me with that have survived you,” Evan informed him haughtily.

Spike laughed right out loud and pulled him in to press their foreheads together. “Ev,” he murmured, smiling, stroking the backs of his fingers ever-so slowly over Evan’s face.

“You are not distracting me!” Evan told him. “You asked for—”

“Oh, I do apologize,” Spike drawled into the corner of his mouth. “I’m meant to be, what was it, grumbling a lot and pretending not to be pleased you’ve been clever? It’s past two after a day filled with children, Evan, terrible children, and I was fighting with Slughorn for practically all of it, and I’ve been woken up twice. If you’re expecting me to be on top form, I’m afraid I can’t oblige.”
“Oh.” Evan relaxed, and leaned forward into Spike’s comforting bones. Suddenly he was every bit as tired as he ought to be at this hour. “You won’t tell him, then?”

“If I do,” Spike promised, “you and I will decide together exactly how to do it, to keep from betraying the well-placed sources of whom we don’t exactly have a plethora.”

“Ha,” Evan agreed darkly. “And if we can’t?”

Spike was silent for a long, long time. Finally, he said, without emotion, “You don’t know the meaning of Coventry. You didn’t live through it, and it’s not your world. The Dark Lord knows Dumbledore knows, and I think Dumbledore suspects the reverse. They must both know me muggle-raised enough to know. When all the players know that such moves not merely sometimes must but really might be made, that real people can and will be ruthless enough to make them, decisions like that become not merely burdens but triple-edged. They can neither be made lightly, nor shirked.”

He was quite right: Evan had no earthly idea what he was getting all dramatic about. He didn’t want to interrupt the flow, but there was no choice. Lucius might know, but it sounded as if it wouldn’t be safe to ask. “No, I don’t know it, Spike. What does it mean?”

Spike gave one of those unbelievably fake Black’s-been-after-me-but-I-can-handle-it-I’m-fine smiles. “If you see a werewolf rampaging down a road, and by giving one person a shove you can make it stop and feed and give a crowd further down a chance to escape, do you do it?”

“Er… I think I throw a cufflink,” Evan told him, raising en eyebrow. “You put that curse-seeking cage-transforming spell on all our bits and bobs when you started working with Belby, remember?”

Spike’s face lightened for a second, his eyes crinkling slightly at the corners. Evan knew that in Spike’s head he was getting thoroughly snogged, and grinned.

“All right, sometimes an answer can be found by the sufficiently paranoid and well-prepared,” Spike allowed ‘grudgingly.’ More soberly, he said, “Coventry was a city. And then, or so common wisdom holds, it was a sacrifice to intelligence. An attack on it could have been countered, but not without making it clear that Coventry’s protectors could hear what its enemies thought secret. More was at stake than one township’s lives, and so they were abandoned to the fires.”

Spike let that settle coldly, and then he shrugged. “The city was rebuilt, of course, and as to the truth of the story, as to whether it was a true, considered, deliberate sacrifice…” He spread a palm. “The lesson remains.”

“And everyone important here,” Evan nodded slowly, “at least suspects that everyone else important knows it. And Whatsisface really seems to dislike Whosisbeard, so taunting seems… er, likely?”

“I think I’d have gone with ‘inevitable,’ myself. The professor fought the wizarding side of that war; the other, unless I’m very much mistaken, lived the terror of the muggle side in which the wizarding world did not interfere.”

“…Er, Spike?”

“Mm?”

“You realize that hypothesis opens up an entire cauldronful of motives that, that, that…?”

“Of course, I do, Evan,” Spike said calmly. “I’m not certain of his opinions, but if anyone knows
those feelings when I see them, I should hope I do. And I consider that the tack he started on with Rabastan more or less confirmed it. Why do you think I’m bothering to deal with Dumbledore to get protection for the heirs of extremely wealthy, powerful, and savvy pureblood families who’ve done quite well at taking care of their own for countless generations?"

Knowing he was rather white, Evan said, “You said it was because you thought he was going crazy and taking everyone with him.”

“Well, I do,” Severus agreed, looking puzzled.

“But now you’re saying—”

“Ev,” Spike said patiently, “right now we’re not talking about whether the spells he’s using are driving him crazy, we’re talking about what started him being so angry that he thought taking a bite out of magic that steals your self away from the inside was a good idea in the first place.”

“You think he’s lying about hating muggles, then?” Evan asked, feeling all turned around and lost. It was probably partly because it was the middle of the night, but Dad had always been so sure.

“Oh, I’m sure that’s true enough,” Spike said sardonically. “Despises, at least. Although whether he cares at all about them, apart from using them as bait for followers, I shouldn’t care to venture a guess. In my experience, it’s not the barbaric monsters who make your helpless years a terror and a hell that you really hate, though; monsters can only act within their nature. What else could they do if they know no better, or if there’s nothing better in them? It’s the powerful, civilized ones who could have come to help you at any time and never bothered, or only came, in the end, because they found you on a checklist they had to tick off before they could put away their paperwork and have tea.”

All the blood seemed to drop out of Evan’s body, straight through the mattress.

Spike frowned at him. “Ev?”

He couldn’t answer. He couldn’t move. His tongue was frozen in his mouth, his hot eyes somehow shriveling and swelling at once.

Spike frowned harder, and then stared. “Ev, are you—Evan.” He surged up and grabbed Evan’s face, kissed him hard by each eye. His lips were dry, but left Evan’s face wet. Spike folded him up fiercely, and hissed into his ear, “Christ, Evan, don’t be a moron. You were a child, for Salazar’s sake, and you and Narcissa dragged me to the hospital wing every chance you got, you got me out of the house the second you found a way. Don’t be stupid. I meant the Ministry, you numbskull.”

“Should have,” he managed, even the familiar, beloved comfort of Spike’s neck against his face not really helping this time, “summers, brought you…”

“Your parents wouldn’t have entertained the notion and I would have refused,” Severus reminded him, voice and hands both firm and certain. “I couldn’t have afforded one meal in the sorts of places you were staying, and if you’d suggested taking me without recompense I’d have hexed you. And don’t even consider suggesting you ought to have stayed home just to host me; you needed those summers to learn your craft.”

“But you went home to that,” Evan hiccupped, fingers clenching into Spike’s ribs. Spike wasn’t the sort of Slytherin to marry someone he hated to destroy them from up close, of course he wasn’t, he wasn’t, but Evan had known the sort of shape he came back to Hogwarts in every year.

“It’s not one child’s duty to rearrange another child’s home,” Severus said flatly. “Children are
meant to be protected by their guardians: their families, then those entrusted to watch over them, and then the law and its enforcers. My family failed because it was too weak and unsupported. An island to be an exception when everything around it collapsed into bitterness and poison. Hogwarts, to whom I was entrusted, did a very patchworked and indifferent job because it’s a battleground of competing philosophies with no overriding regulation. The Ministry, however, failed because it doesn’t know its job.”

Evan sniffed, hard, and clutched closer. It was in a steadier voice—a little wondering, even amused, though still pretty watery—that he asked, “Spike, did you actually join up to take down the Ministry?”

Spike hummed philosophically, still stroking down Evan’s back and neck. “Well. Let’s put it this way—when he or anyone else asks if I want or think we need revolution, I can very honestly answer dear God yes. But am I in favor of buying one with blood? It’s the sort of thing that happens, but I doubt the sort we’re likely to get would be worth it.”

“Such a cynic,” Evan smiled into him, winding into his hair.

“If we’re to believe what they say, who would the Dark Lord put in charge?” Severus asked, shifting Evan around a bit. “People like Lucius’s father, and Avery’s. If the current Ministry toppled and Dumbledore got to fill it as he liked, who do you think he’d put in charge? I think he’s actually quite good at basic character-assessment, although his preferences may be completely cracked—“

“You just think that because he likes you.”

“—But seven years at Hogwarts convinces me that the man could not, when it comes to day-to-day governance, organize his way out of a paper bag. He’d fill it up with well-intentioned, soft-headed idiots who believed excellent things and wanted to do all the things they ought, and didn’t know what or how to delegate or who to avoid hiring. In five years the Ministry would be exactly the same hotbed of stagnation and corruption it’s always been, except the upper levels would be more confused about it and might well honestly believe the things they wanted done were getting done.”

Evan pulled away to look at him with raised eyebrows. “So everything is useless and we’re all doomed?” he translated, tilting his head with a come on, Spike look.

“So we stay well-positioned, protect our own, and, of the rest, salvage what we can,” Severus corrected, “and watch for opportunities to do what will be worth what it costs.”

Smiling again, Evan settled back onto him, complaining mock-mockingly, “How am I supposed to argue with that?”

“You can’t.” Spike said smugly. “You’re a Slytherin; they brand it into your bones before they let you join.”

“Oh, right,” Ev realized brightly, winding a snuggly arm around his bare waist. “That’s how I argue with it: it’s so all-encompassing it doesn’t even count.”

“The best strategic advice is broadly applicable,” Spike huffed haughtily.

“Sure, Spike,” Ev laughed, “but it doesn’t count if you can’t apply it specifically.”

Spike opened his mouth, and paused, and blinked. In an er tone, he asked, “What am I to apply it to, specifically?”
Evan was about to laugh at him, and then he realized he’d forgotten, too. They stared at each other, and then Evan did burst out laughing. Spike just looked sheepish.

“Something about goats?” Evan tried. “And then you got awfully grim about Coven towns.”

“Coventry,” Spike remembered, sobering up. “We were deciding whether alerting anyone to the masks was worth, well, letting others know they’d been alerted.”

“Which it isn’t,” Evan insisted, also no longer laughing.

“I can’t not do it simply because of the danger, Ev, that’s the whole point.”

“You said you wouldn’t.”

“I said if I had to we’d work out together how to do it as safely as we might.”

Evan’s mouth twisted unhappily.

Severus’s quirked nearly-apologetically. “I’ve got to work it through,” he said, uncompromising. “Inaction is also a move that speaks, to those paying attention. And they’re both paying attention, you may rely upon it.”

Evan sighed.

“Now: in this case,” Severus said slowly, lying back and lacing his fingers behind his head so that a less-unhappy Evan would have been on him and his triceps in an instant, “what plan are we discussing?”

“Er… putting on very disturbingly serene-looking masks and, I assume, after the way he went on and ON about them, hoods, and doing upsetting things in public, maybe the sorts of things Bella and that lot like to hint they do in private.”

“A fear tactic,” Spike summarized. “Even if we reveal it, we’re not discussing stopping it—we couldn’t, without removing both you and your father from consideration, and he’d find some other way. If it’s not stopped, it’ll be revealed soon enough. The revelation will be a surprise, but in the moment it surprises, it won’t yet have the weight of storied dread I’m certain he means to attach to it.”

“Storied dread?”

“Shut up.”

Evan sniggered, and kissed his shoulder with obnoxious sloppiness. Spike sighed like patience on a monument, which was not a look he could pull off for longer than about two seconds.

He proved this by saying, “On the other hand, you prat, if its nature is known in advance, it will be known as an enemy, but one of unknown potential, and so already feared. What specific harm do we believe we know to be planned? No more than we ever have. We’ve never known the where or the how, or the probable victims—if even their attackers knew that in advance. All we’ve ever even believed ourselves to know is who. And that with no real proof, apart from Rabastan.”

Evan shivered at the memory of a muggle’s ruined hands and lipless mouth, and what he and Severus had done to a boy just a year younger than themselves. Because he’d had to be stopped. Because killing him wouldn’t have been a good solution in the long term, would have set off an inquiry, and would have made Spike unhappy.
(Evan hadn’t been particularly worried about the inquiry, and he was privately of the opinion that killing Rabastan would have, long-term, been a much better idea than leaving him eternally-frustrated, miserable, angry at life, and still able to use his wooden wand. But he knew when Spike was Really Bothered, and Bast was only one wand in Cousin Crazy-Eyes’ holster.)

“All right,” Spike agreed heavily—possibly with himself, because Evan’s imagination was still grimly in Dartmoor. “If we can’t, we can’t. But,” he added sharply, “that’s not license to give up, Evan. If we can, you must see it gives us value to Dumbledore, and builds trust. And if we can’t, we’ll have a hard time when he finds out, Ev. He may be cannier than some but he is, still, very much a stupid-Gryff, and he’ll use stupid-Gryff words like coward and faithbreaker, even if he doesn’t use them out loud. He won’t understand, Evan, I really think he won’t. He never does,” he added bitterly, “when there’s a Gryffindor way to make sense of anything, no matter how badly it makes one of us look.”

“All right,” Evan nodded, trying not to look relieved. “So. We’ve still got to talk about who’s going to make dinners, how you’re going to get fish and chips at least twice a season so you don’t get all sulky and snap Linkin’s head off, how to see each other more than once a day when you’re already worn to a snarl because you’ve absolutely never liked even one unit of child ever—”

“Oh, really,” Spike huffed, the corner of his mouth kicking up.

“Whether or not the detestable Evans really is so contagiously Gryffish that it’s absolutely necessary that you be kept safely away from her—the answer is yes, by the way—“

“Allow me to express deep sympathy for your perennial disappointment.”

“I notice you don’t go so far as to claim to feel any.”

“What a thing to say.”

Evan grinned. “Where was I? Oh—whether it’s reasonable to let Linkin clean in here since your job looks to take up so much more time now and this is, actually, part of his household and I’d rather let him do it than be glared at every time I poke my nose out—”

“It is not reasonable.”

“Why you’re fighting with Slughorn all day and what we’re going to do about it—”

“Yes, please, help.”

“Why you came home looking like a hailstorm; you never actually said before I tackled you, I don’t think?”

“No, but I think I’ve got that one more or less under control, or at least the process is going approximately as expected.”

“Good, but I’m still raveningly curious.”

“Just as you like,” he said agreeably. “It’s just snake pit, anyway.”

“I’ve been spending all week in museums and things sketching creepy dead people and I’m outstandingly bored, Spike.”

Spike eye-crinkled. “I said all right.”
“Er… let’s see… how to make at least a sideways half-hearted stab at safely grassing on probably
the most dangerous bloke in the country and, oh, yes, breaking it to our parents that we didn’t
invite them to our handfasting.”

“I don’t think me Da wanted to come. Or hear about it. At all. Ever.”

“Excellent, one out of four just might possibly not passionately try to vivisect us with butcher
knives, I love these odds,” Evan said cheerfully. Spike snorted. “Did I leave anything out?”

“You got a letter from one of the baby snakes at two in the morning through the floo, which means
they snuck up and used the Common Room hearth. Which, as the school really doesn’t encourage
this sort of thing, does not keep a student-accessible supply of floo powder. Which means they
thought it was enough of an emergency to dip into their own supplies on the second night of
school, and it’s not sold at Hogsmeade,” Spike reminded him helpfully. “So they’ll have to account
for it to their parents if they want more. So it’s serious. —Oh, and this was strange: a Hufflepuff
girl I don’t recall ever meeting before stayed after sixth-year Potions to give me Reggie’s regards.”

Evan nearly swallowed his tongue. “What?” he demanded, his eyes threatening to fall out in
delight.

“This… was strange and important?” Spike asked warily.

“Chocolate sauce in in my teacup,” Evan told him sympathetically, “you are the sorriest Slytherin
in the history of life.”

“That’s not news, Ev, but as curious as I now am, for which thank you very much, by the way, I
think it’s now closer to three than two, and you did promise you’d help me screen the Slytherins
for clothing disasters again.”

“…Circe’s pigsty,” Evan realized, horrified. “I didn’t, did I? Oh, Merlin, I did.”

“Right,” Spike agreed, and he wasn’t even smug enough about it to give Evan an excuse to smack
him, which proved he really was tired. “So is there anything on this laundry list that must be
scrubbed tonight?”

“…Mum and Dad could decide on a whim they miss the roses and be home by lunch,” Evan had to
tell him.

“How likely is that?”

“There’s no way to predict it, or Linkin would have told me.”

“Then we’ll risk it,” Spike said dryly, and, almost hesitantly, offered, “I have a free period
tomorrow afternoon.”

Evan snickered; it was such a Hogwarts thing to say.

Spike made a face at him. “Well, I do,” he said doggedly. “I fancy Slughorn thought he’d want a
break from me, and I’m supposed to be at school for my IAMB paper as much as to help him
anyway. I’m not taking every class. I’m going to need the hours for my thesis and, I have no doubt,
marking, but can you be home tomorrow at two-fifteen?”

“I will be,” Evan promised, although it was going to make his itinerary ridiculous, and pulled
Spike’s knuckles up to kiss. Brightly, he asked, “I don’t know about you, but as much as my eyes
hurt, I feel completely awake, don’t you? Bath, potion, nightcap, or shall I tumble you through the
mattress again?”

Spike stared at him in flat disbelief.

“Those were hours ago,” Evan reminded him, running his hands up rib-ripply sides for emphasis, nice and slow and possessive. “Anyway, we were having too much fun for me to just burrow in and feel you.”

“I cannot imagine,” Severus told the toy in the window, “why I thought for one split second that I was the goat-man in this bed.”

“Severus,” Evan explained, very patiently, “not five minutes ago, the only thing you were wearing was a bedsheets and your History Is Extremely Serious Face.”

Getting a little mad at him, Spike said, “Because this is about to get extremely serious, Evan.”

Ev went up on one elbow in his turn (and smirked a bit, just privately: Severus could be as high-minded as he liked, but just occasionally his eyes did stray, too). “Spike, you know what I did at those museums besides sketching death masks?”

“Annoyed all the docents by excoriating the existence of pointillism?”

“I love pointillism, Spike, you just can’t use it for illuminata memoria.”

“Then unless it’s buying hideous waistcoats at the gift shops, I presume I’ll never guess.”

“I uncursed eight bathroom taps and water bubblers.”

It took longer than Evan had expected before Spike unfroze enough to demand, “What sort of curse?”

“Nasty. Don’t worry, I was careful. And I was careful to make it look like the running water had worn them away, too; the degradation will all look perfectly natural if whoever placed them bothers to come back and see how they’re doing. I don’t think it’ll be traced back to me.”

And even if it is, he thought, what with Dad knowing I have to visit the same places he does for the same research, he’s never told me what he’s doing. He won’t think I’m defying him or deliberately getting in the way of his orders. He’ll just think I’ve got overly civilized instincts. Or, at least, he’ll be able to say so, and I’m sure he will. Rosiers have watched families who turn on each other over the hysterias of the day crumble over and over, after all; we know better.

“You didn’t think you should call in the Ministry?” Spike asked half-heartedly. “They do have people who handle that sort of thing.”

“I really, really didn’t,” Evan said fervently. “No more than we should have got rid of the strange little pussywillow. Questions. Complicated. Ugly.”

“Ah.”

“My point is, Naj, it’s already extremely serious. Just because we don’t know what Bella and that lot have been doing doesn’t mean they haven’t been doing it. And we don’t know who else is doing what. There are already muggles dead, and already muggles walking around who don’t know they’re dead yet, and the wizards who’ve disappeared are probably also dead, we don’t know,” he said. Most of what he was letting himself feel about all this was sympathy for Spike, who he suspected was going to take it rather hard.
“What do you mean,” Spike asked slowly, “walking around who don’t know they’re dead yet.”

“If you want to help them,” Evan said firmly, “the best thing you can do is finish finding out what makes unbreakable curses unbreakable.”

“You said you uncursed them!”

“Okay, thesaurus in my abacus, I said it wrong. The taps are the carriers, not the targets, and I unenchanted them.”

“The next time you see an object cursed this way, I want you to come take me to it.”

“No, Severus.” It was hard to see black eyes flash in anger in the dark, but Evan didn’t need to see. “How are we going to explain that? Excuse me, Professor Slughorn, I need to borrow my former flatmate, with whom I currently have no connection, out of your classroom on no notice and take him to a museum totally unrelated to his research.”

“You’re better at lying than I am,” Spike pointed out stubbornly, “and once a story’s out I can usually support it effectively.”

“That’s true,” Evan told him levelly, “but, funnily enough, I don’t think I’m going to exercise that particular talent in aid of putting you in the vicinity of an unbreakable degenerative death curse.”

He didn’t need to actually see black eyes flash in alarm, either. “Which you are apparently encountering multiple times a day, without a guide!”

“Yes, but I used to spend my holidays at Aunt Walburga’s place in London,” Evan reminded him. “Apparently-innocuous-cursed-object-detection may be the only facet of Defense Against The Dark Arts I’m more practiced in than you, but there is one and it’s that one.”

In fact, the cursed faucets and things were also enchanted to look subtly but decidedly unappealing to wizards; a sort of modified muggle-repelling charm that was really a quite good safeguard and, when you knew to look for it, very obvious. Evan still didn’t want Spike anywhere near them. He’d had to put a confundus on a muggle who’d looked thirstier and thirstier the closer he got to the bubbler, so they might have a compulsion on them for muggles. He wasn’t remotely sure whether the repellant or the compulsion would take effect, faced with a wizard who wasn’t a pureblood.

“Spike,” he said reasonably, “you have a schedule so busy we have to steal time from your research to talk about who’s going to cook. Which is, sorry, a foregone conclusion; it’s really going to have to be mostly Linkin for a while. Yes, I know you hate it, but the people who have servants have them because they’re too busy to do all those things.”

“That is not in the least always true, and when it comes to house elves—”

“We didn’t need Linkin at Diagon because our schedules reliably let us take care of our home ourselves,” Evan cut him off. “Now they don’t—at least, yours doesn’t, and mine isn’t reliable. We’re fortunate enough to have a member of this Household who’s already getting mad at us for not letting him do his job.”

“You can’t really call it a job when—”

“No, you’re right, I can’t. Elves don’t have jobs, they have vocations. It seems a bit weird to humans that they’ve all got the same sort, I know, but they love us without understanding our priorities, too. Am I to tell the elf who raised me, who considers he’s still strong and capable, that he’s not a part of my family and his contribution to his home isn’t valued? When he can see for
himself that what he can do, and wants to, is needed?"

Severus, after a moment, made an uncomfortable nk noise.

“I know you want everything in the world to be your job,” Evan went on, not unsympathetically, “but at least until the Christmas hols, our responsibilities are both a bit specific, yeah?”

“Teaching firsties to powder beetle wings,” Spike said scathingly. “Designing costumes. Evan, are we being got out of the way?”

“I,” Evan said calmly, “am, as usual, painting people from time to time, and talking to them. I am also quietly breaking down cursed objects that would cause a panic and a Secrecy-threatening incident if they were discovered, as and when I can. I am also helping Dad help Creeperface step up his program to take all his cunning little operations out into the open, so they can be openly and robustly countered.”

This time, the noise Spike made after a moment was a thoughtful and, if Evan did say so himself, somewhat admiring hm.

“Really,” Evan added cheerfully, “I don’t know what he’s thinking.”

“Oh, I do,” Spike said. “He thinks if people are afraid of something, he can save them from it. But it sounds as if he means to go a bit panto; he must be getting impatient.”

“Maybe,” Evan shrugged. “You’re the one who brought up dark arts dementia, and that was months ago. Have you noticed his eyes lately?”

“No, because the last time I noticed his eyes I got hexed into the ground,” Spike said flatly. “His eyes are completely unremarkable, I’m sure. Go on, then, explain how useful it is that I’m suddenly responsible for explaining the multiplication tables and long division to purebloods who have managed to get to fifteen and through a year of arithmancy without learning them.”

Evan couldn’t help snorgling a little at his poor suffering Spike. Instead of mentioning his strong suspicion that Severus was exaggerating slightly, he laughed, “I don’t think you’re actually responsible for that, Atlas.”

“Belt up, prignose.”

“Okay, okay,” he kept laughing, and dropped a sympathetic (though not apologetic) kiss on the scowly face. “You,” he said more seriously, “have been there two days. You’re supposed to be getting your bearings and the lay of the land, Spike! I know you’re best at patience when it comes to testing potions, but allow yourself time for reconnaissance, in the name of, whatshisname, Sung Fu?”

“Sun Tzu,” Spike scowled.

“Right, him. Spike, how many things do you think you can do at once, while keeping up a day job? You really are tackling a medical problem that actually is very serious and is making a lot of people suffer socioeconomically and be very vulnerable to bad actors, and will probably have other applications if you can solve it. You are also a reassurance that no more malicious ears are necessary where you are, and you’re keeping yourself too busy to be asked to make anything really nasty. You know that’s important, in itself. Finally, Salazar help us all, as far as we know you’re the only direct liason between the most powerful forces currently moving our times.”

“...Livia beata, I am,” Spike realized in a stunned voice, white all around his eyes. “Evan,
something has gone *horribly wrong* somewhere.”

“I know,” Evan agreed grimly. “And I promise, Spike, I’m working on the problem. I promise, Spike, I *promise*, I will tell you the very *instant* that I work out why it’s all Lily’s fault.”

There was a third eternal pause, and then the mufflato and the privacy dome burst into ethereal soapy-rainbow splatters when Spike started resolutely whomping a gleefully shrieking Evan in the face with a pillow.

And that, no doubt, was why a slender (but not young) Valkyrie leapt wand-first through their open window like a bloodthirsty gazelle, lightning crackling in her golden hair, to obliterate whoever was murdering her baby in his nursery.

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[1] This address was something of a convenient fiction; Rose & Yew’s main office was in Diagon Alley now. No one had ever felt it was worth the bother of changing the paperwork. People did still come with their easels and paperwork to take advantage of the good air and the quiet of the studio in the heart of the Rosier’s yew grove, anyway, and it underlined that the firm was successful enough to have more than one location.

Most of them didn’t know what was *under* the yew grove, even a lot of the more distant cousins. Or, at least, most of them didn’t know that the stories were true.
Chapter Summary

Severus's plans, and perhaps his cover, depend on how well Evan can stand up to interrogation on three hours of sleep. It'll be fine. It's not like Ev's ever hexed a bush for being rude.

Chapter Notes

**Warnings**: Discussions of and evolving feelings about terrible parental behavior and unwanted pregnancy. Also, I've just realized this is, effectively if not technically, an all-OC chapter. Sorry? Not sorry.

**Temporary Notes**: I was hoping to post this a week or two earlier, but I think it's justifiable since it's a) a very long chapter and b) probably the most often-edited one since Harry's birth. The next few being snappier, I'll try to reduce the wait, but my job is being changeable again and my roommates are, uh, also... requiring my attention...

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Especially those of you who COMMENTED! Please, everyone! Did you notice a thing in a chapter? Did you have a thought? Or a question? Did you feel like telling Evan he's adorable? Or an idiot? Or both? Let me know!

Never in his life, except on a broom, had Evan moved so fast. Before Spike had even found his wand (and Spike’s wand was never far from his wrist even in the bath), the vines were exploding out of his skin.

Some waved in a quick-moving, spiraling shield, trying to stop his mother from seeing what was going on in the room. Most were bundling Spike and his mouth and his wand up in the discarded blanket, carrying him through the hallway too swiftly for the stiff shock to turn to escape attempts.

He opened the door of the Vanishing Cabinet by feel, pushed the Spike-bundle and the Late-For-Work Bag and the Emergency Evacuation Shrunken-Trunk through, slammed the door shut, shoved a bookcase in front of it, groped for the marble handle of the iron-chased snuffer-pull in the floo, and slammed that shut.

It took him a wildeyed moment to remember where in Salazar’s stinking sock-drawer his own ruddy wand was. Once the vines brought it to his hand, he could dive under the sheets and do a
vestio and pull them back in.

Unfortunately, he was so rattled that he apparently thought he ought to be dressed in the sort of clothes he’d have worn to a very formal supper with all his most terrifying relatives at once. Which was a bit of a giveaway, if all the flailing greenery indoors hadn’t given his panic away already.

Even more unfortunately, by the time he’d pulled the sheet back over his head, not only had his mother settled herself coolly in the window-seat and turned the light on, his father was clambering in. Worse, he was doing it with a vaguely interested and amused face. Evan was pretty sure it was exactly like the one he himself put on when he was Really Lost or Really Annoyed or Planning Things.

“Good morning, darling,” Callisto Black-Rosier smiled complacently, moving the toy goat so Dad could sit down.

“Morning, Mum,” Evan said weakly, and summoned a comb in an effort to stop his hair looking like a strawberry-blond corkscrewing-porcupine had got lost in a haystack and stuck there. “Dad. How was… Egypt, wasn’t it?”

“Oh, we left Egypt weeks ago,” Dad shrugged, waving a who-cares sort of hand. “We’ve been in Peru.”

Ah, Evan thought. More masks, strong sacrificial tradition, six-hour time difference. “I hear they’ve got some lovely Spanish-style cathedrals,” he mentioned, considering switching from comb to wand and deciding against it. He was actually quite grateful to have something to pay attention to, something to do with his hands.

“Truly charming,” Mum agreed, watching him with a half-lidded predatory smile.

“And your mother and I have been refining that Stones of Memory spell we started working on with Costeau,” Dad dismissed the cathedrals. “We’ve got some interesting canvases of ruins—the spell’s not up to anything we can do a realistic painting from yet, but that makes it better, in a way, there’s superimposition, I’ll have to show you. You really ought to get off the continent, you know, Evan.”

“I’d quite like to,” Evan agreed, “but I haven’t explored it the way you and Mum have yet. I’ve been spending less time on architecture recently, anyway; got some crowd scenes and wildscapes that aren’t too bad.”

“All wizarding?” Dad asked.

Evan left the comb in his hair long enough to waggle a hand. “If you can call wildscapes one or the other, Dad. There was some fantastic light in Dartmoor; a bridge and some, er, green quicksand-y bits, and some flower fields in Bulgaria, I messed about with brushtrokes a bit.”

“If you’re going to display unrealistic paintings, you’re going to have to work out how to give them some kind of life,” Dad reminded him.

“I wasn’t going to show them,” Evan explained patiently, “I was just playing with the light.”

“Well, you ought to get on it.” Dad said stubbornly. “It’s one thing to have your Mastery, but Father won’t assign you any high-profile clients until you show more creativity than just painting what’s in front of you.”

Evan stopped tugging at a knot and blinked at him.
Dad blinked back. It was a why are you looking at me as if this is news blink.

It was very much news.

“Speaking of playing with the light, darling,” his mum put in airily, “have you done any charcoals recently?”

Evan tried, he really did, but his treacherous eyelid flinched at least a millimeter. He felt like Spike: it was horrific and unsubtle and humiliating and there was no way to stop what he knew was coming: his mum eating him for breakfast.

“You used to do such lovely charcoals,” his saber-toothed lethifold—er, mum—continued to stalk him nostalgically. “You’d send me studies of the castle from school, and sketches of your classmates. The ones you did of the leadlight windows and the molded ceilings were so charming. I particularly remember one sketchbook of monochromes you sent home—it was such delicate work for your age! Nearly all one subject, gracious, who was that…”

It was at this point that Evan, sitting on the bed, saw a sheet of parchment wriggle out under the door of the Vanishing Cabinet and the bottom of the bookcase. It shook itself like a wet dog, folded itself into a paper aeroplane like a Ministry memo, and zipped vengefully through the hall. It clearly was going for a nose-poke, just like the letter from the floo, but Mum reached out with her wand and caught it with a silent accio.

Because of course Mum did.

She unfolded it, read it placidly, and showed it to Dad, whose eyebrows did a gently perplexed thing that made Evan want to die. Aloud, she read, “Rosier: this is the precise experience I had carefully arranged my life in order to never have.”

Evan pulled the sheet over his head. He was clearly not going to be able to help Spike with the Slytherin-screening like he’d promised, too. And with the way his luck was running, there’d been a house-elf in there when he’d booted Spike through in nothing but a blanket. Or, for no sane reason but to destroy Evan’s life worse, Slughorn. Even, Merlin, DUMBLEDORE.

“Goodness,” Mum said mildly. “Evvie, darling, do you recognize the handwriting?”

“No,” Evan said, very definitely, without removing the sheet.

“Do have a look, dear,” she ordered.

He took another second of falsely shrouded protection to cry inside, then sat up reluctantly and took the parchment from her.

Well.

That explained why it had taken Spike so long (i.e., longer than the twenty seconds it would take to scribble savagely on whatever was at the top of his sad little writing table before even getting dressed) to express his displeasure.

He hadn’t written it: he’d pulled the runes off the Daily Prophet somehow (presumably yesterday’s) and… and transferred them onto the parchment. It wasn’t a sticking charm; the newsprint wasn’t stuck on the parchment, just the ink. And it really was the ink, because when Evan rubbed it with his thumb, that was how cheap Prophet ink smeared. Wand-copied text didn’t do that.
“So clever,” Mum said mildly. “I don’t believe I’ve seen that spell before. Darius, do you know it?”

Dad met Evan’s eyes with a not unsympathetic little sigh that meant While you unquestionably asked for this, Blacks are excessive. “Can’t say I’ve seen it either, dear.”

Neither had Ev. He had, however, suffered through Spike reading the story about the Amazingly Arrogant Victorian Detective And The Poor Half-Starved Puppy Somebody Trained Unkindly And Dipped In Phosphorus four-and-a-half times at school and once before the Potions convention. He’d only read it aloud to Evan once[1], but Ev suspected he knew the salient points by heart. Spike had refrained exactly zero times from ranting-or-grumbling about the handwritten word moor and idiots who had scissors and didn’t know what they were for.

“One might almost think the caster came up with it in the three minutes since being brutally and dizzingly expelled from a bedchamber,” Mum hypothesized brightly.

“You never know,” Evan managed, just barely managing not to drop his head into his hands. Cobras were the worst. They always had to make declarations.

(Such as Martyredly Not Barging Through The Cabinet Themselves, Even Though A Dresser Was Certainly Not Going To Stop Them. This was not lost on Evan. He knew that later on he’d feel warm about Severus trusting him back, to act and choose as well as to support. Right now he just wanted to scream.)

“Don’t you?” Mum asked, wide-eyed. “It’s terribly unlikely, isn’t it? Why, I can hardly think of anyone who’d be capable of spell-crafting at such short notice! Of course, there’s your friend,” she dipped her head to her husband in gracious acknowledgement.

“Eh,” Dad said. “My friend’s intuitive, but he doesn’t rush. And,” his voice cooled as he smiled, “as he is a wizard of rudimentary manners, I’d certainly expect him to mention it to me if he wished to dally with my son.”

Evan couldn’t quite prevent a revolted noise.

Apparently Dad didn’t like that either, or at least didn’t think it was respectful: his eyebrows slid up again. He couldn’t do only one at a time, like Spike, but it was quite bad enough.

Evan considered saying:

- I’m taken.
- Your friend is creepy.
- Your friend has ignorant taste in boots and lets his cobblers mock him.
- Your classmate is, obviously, being your classmate, almost three times my age.
- Your friend is turning into a monster and is so clumsy that it’s visible.
- Your friend is very possibly a lying not-actually-charming murderous liar who wants us, specifically, nastily dead.
- Why are we pretending not to know who Spike is; this is not merely slow death by humiliation but silly.

In light of Spike’s I meant to be there dammit and don’t you dare disavow me message, he settled on, “I haven’t dallied since I was sixteen. It was dreary, repetitive, and altogether too much like work.”

Mum’s head turned to him. She didn’t actually turn it more than an inch, but he imagined that
millions of years ago, dinosaurs with teeth the size of Evan’s arm had turned their heads just like that, and in Romania, dragons with necks the length of the Knight Bus did today. Sharp. Graceful. Lethal.

Dad gave him an interesting move sort of look.

“Well, I didn’t think so, darling,” Mum said. She was doing Gently Perplexed, which wasn’t really one of her specialties. She’d probably picked it up from Dad, although to be fair to her, he usually tilted vague rather than gentle. “But if it wasn’t to stop us seeing who was in bed with you, why all these dramatic measures?”

But by now Ev had given himself time to think of something to say other than Because even if Spike wouldn’t have folded like wet silk and defiantly told you everything the moment you blinked woundedly at him, some of the roses on his arms only grow in our garden. He therefore sighed patiently, and said, “Mum, you dove through the window wand-first with your hair on fire.”

“But of course I did, Evvie,” she returned sharply, the silver in her eyes sparking up again. “No sooner did I return home but I heard my child screaming.”

“I was laughing, Mum.” He was almost sure the following thought; which you might have recognized if you’d spent more than a season’s worth of hours total in my proximity in my whole life; wasn’t fair. Or, at least, he didn’t know that he’d have been a less quiet child if his parents had stayed home or taken him with him.

“It’s a bit late in England,” Dad said mildly.

“Oh, well, we woke up and we were talking.” Evan waved an ambiguous hand, “and then he called me a satyr and there was a pillow fight. Sorry about the family honor and all, but I’m afraid he was winning.”

His parents looked at each other, and then back at him.

“Well,” he said, in Spike’s being-just-and-exact voice, “he said a goat, but I knew what he meant.”

His parents looked at each other.

“I might believe it was Snape now,” Dad told Mum. “That lacked cohesion, credibility, and lucidity. I’d expect a better cover story from our offspring.”

“Except that you did, in fact, find it convincing, dearest,” Mum pointed out. “I expect my offspring to exploit the particular mentality of his audience.”

“True,” Dad agreed, and looked back speculatively at Evan.

“Of course it was Severus, you can ask Linkin,” Evan said crossly, “and you can’t jump out at him like that, Mum! Severus has an extremely predictable reaction to people coming at him suddenly with their wands out. He was taking dueling lessons with Dad’s friend all through Spring, and at this point I don’t think you’d be able to half-heart your hexes!” He wagged the parchment irritably at her. “You see what his adrenaline does when he’s already out of a bad situation and he’s had a minute to calm down? He invented a new spell just to yell at me for not letting him stay to human-shield me from my own parents! What do you think he’s like when he’s still got a wand aimed at his face?”

“I do love the way he talks now,” Mum told Dad happily. Evan sighed, and did not roll his eyes because he was not Spike. “No, darling,” she turned to him earnestly, “truly, you used to go about
smiling tragically at everyone and they kept on asking us who’d died.”

“I didn’t smile tragically, I smiled politely,” Evan said crossly, “and my politeness was quite often rewarded with enough sweets to share around, especially when Siri or Bella were there for contrast. And then I could bribe them to behave slightly better, so I don’t know what you’re complaining about.”

“As much as everyone enjoyed any improvement in Sirius and Bellatrix’s behavior,” Dad said placidly, “your mother’s quite right. People did keep asking us who’d died. They sent overseas mail-gannets to ask us who’d died. I’m sure Linkin could find the letters.”

Evan scowled, even though he’d been repeatedly assured that his face was not made for this expression and it made him look like an unshorn ginger sheep with a mouth full of horseradish.

“I should be so unhappy with a return to that sort of behavior,” Mum said gently. “It isn’t becoming to the heir apparent of a Noble House, and it’s not what a mother likes to see.”

Evan looked up at her, all the emotion dropping off his face. He wasn’t entirely sure what she was getting at, but he remembered Spike talking about literally seeing red, back in spring, and he was just about seeing white: cloudy, colorless blinkers sweeping in from all the edges of his vision. She never had seen it; she’d never been there to see it, and it wasn’t his fault they’d had an heir forced on them before they’d been ready. There was no reason in the world he and Linkin couldn’t have travelled with them.

She wasn’t looking at him, though. Spike’s parchment was back in her hand, and she was examining it admiringly. “So clever. Don’t you think he’s clever, dearest?”


“You were the one going on about creativity, Dad,” Evan reminded him, trying to distract himself into speaking, or at least breathing, normally.

Mum ignored them both, continuing to examine the parchment. “Scarcely a moment to think about it,” she said lightly, “without even trying, merely in reaction to his feelings, and he accomplishes what I’m sure I couldn’t have worked out how to do in years of trying.”

Evan was about to give in and explain that Spike had probably thought of this spell about six years ago, whenever he’d bothered to come up with the details, but then his mother looked up with a bright smile. “Do you know,” she continued chattily, “I wouldn’t have the first idea where to begin. Would you, Darius?”

Dad sighed, looking glumly at Evan. “Not really,” he admitted reluctantly. “Nothing we’ve tried has got very far. I don’t know who could think of a way to do that. House elves are really only good for maintenance and emergencies.”

“I’m sure I can’t imagine how he gets his ideas,” Mum agreed, and again, her voice was too light.

The pale, numbing fury retreated in a flailing scramble, leaving something just as hot and helpless pressing out behind Evan’s eyes, rather more damply. He looked down at the bedsheet, which was infinitely preferable to looking at his parents. Or at Spike’s parchment, which was not remotely what they were talking about.

He remembered Spike coming back from recent talks with Mr. Snape, shaken and happy and proud and suspicious and adamant.
Absolutely adamant that his bastard of a father was completely responsible for every drunken transgression, but not to be held responsible for any of them so long as he stayed sober. Remembered Spike insisting that Evan was free to burn that weak monster from the past in effigy if he liked, but it was a choice either giving someone hope and room to force himself to be better every day—or telling him he could never change and if he could it wouldn’t get him anywhere.

Ev hadn’t even tried to understand, although he hadn’t argued. Spike’s blood, Spike’s choice how it was treated, but Evan had no forgiveness for that man.

Spike had been a little kinder about Evan’s parents, for all he was so clearly unhappy with their parenting style that Evan had had to stop ignoring how unusual it was. He’d said that some people weren’t natural parents, or something along those lines.

Had Ev misunderstood?

Evan knew his parents hadn’t wanted kids, and was almost sure his grandmother had used the Imperius to make them have him. He’d felt he could understand their positions, after what they’d gone through. He thought he’d probably have got over it if his family did that to him, although he’d have been exceedingly annoyed.

If they did it to Spike he’d never have forgiven them, never. He couldn’t imagine what he’d have felt about a person that had been forced into Severus, no matter who that person was or how they turned out. Especially if they’d used him to do it.

Even though he did understand, he’d recently, occasionally, gotten a bit upset about his parents. Just occasionally, because Spike had got so angry for him that he’d realized it wasn’t his fault.

He’d already realized at school that the way he’d grown up wasn’t usual, the more he heard kids who weren’t his cousins talk about their families, but that could have meant it was just how his family did things. But when Spike got mad—Spike, with what he’d grown up in—Evan had been forced (at volume) to realize that being unwanted wasn’t a justice that was his natural duty to endure, or a reasonable ordeal that he was reasonably expected to overcome in order to prove himself better than his beginnings.

He tried not to be mad anyway. He understood them not being able to be around him, he really did. Except… what if he didn’t?

Presumably Nanny Melania had made them stay home with them until he was weaned or she’d died. He didn’t remember that. His first memories were of only seeing them at holidays, usually when Linkin had taken him to stay with one or the other set of Black cousins for a week or so. He didn’t remember them kissing him and making a fuss like other grown-ups had. He remembered they’d looked glamorous, though he hadn’t known the word then.

They’d started coming home when he was six. Just for a day or so, now and then, that first year, and it had all been very awkward. Dad had switched his crayons for pencils once, and taught him how to show time with shadows, and Mum had asked to take away some picture he’d scribbled that, Evan was sure, hadn’t shown any drop of special talent at all.

And then holidays had got more awkward, because while they didn’t start fussing or hugging like the aunties, they did start taking an interest in how he was doing with his drawing and his tutors and what Linkin was feeding him.

When he was eight, they’d started taking him on short trips. That was the first time he’d enjoyed
any time with them. They stopped being awkward when they started explaining old buildings and
telling him about things in museums and making him stop every five minutes to guess what
pigments would make this or that color.

Dad was quite relaxed about making Evan remember how many birds had been on a muggle
mailbox or what some man had said his daughter’s name was, and making him draw all of the
things, copy all of the signs, and map their walks.

Mum seemed to enjoy pushing him into a cloud of her friends and tailors and watching them fuss
while she sat back sadistically with a cup of tea. She said she couldn’t trust anyone else to teach
him to navigate a bazaar, an emporium, or a secondhand dark arts shop (this all mostly involved
watching her argue very sweetly with a lot of people, which, admittedly, was fascinating).

Once he got to Hogwarts, the family settled into a routine of Evan staying with cousins for the
shorter hols, with his parents coming for the day or two of the actual celebrations, and Evan
spending the entire summer abroad. With his parents.

He’d thought they were doing their duty, to the extent that they had to: making sure that the
Rosiers’ heir apparent was ready to serve the family business.

It occurred to him now that Regulus and Lucius were being given intensive training and practice
runs overseeing their families’ finances and estates, and he wasn’t. Evan wasn’t his House’s
current Heir like Lucius was, but he was in the same position as Reggie. And while he’d spent
more than a few evenings going over the books with Dad and even more with Grandpère, he hadn’t
been put in charge of them, even temporarily, even under supervision. Not ever.

There was a running joke among their friends that obviously Spike would do it for him, but
actually Spike was pants with money. Not that he was a spendthrift or a bad bargainer, especially in
his own field, but he was completely ignorant about banking and trade. He certainly hadn’t the first
idea what a large magical estate needed.

Nobody had even hinted to Evan, however obliquely, that his place in the succession might be
overturned for any reason. Not for politics, not for incompetence at anything, not because he
wasn’t in any rush to reproduce. But whenever he was with his parents, they did things his parents
enjoyed. Things they all, as a family, enjoyed. Not things it was their duty to make him do.

So what if Evan was wrong?

What if, however they’d felt about what his grandmother had done, it had taken them six years to
begin to get over it, not twenty?

What if they’d decided to face up to him, back in ’67, and come home to try to be his parents—and
realized, once they were paying attention, that he wasn’t a normal, noisy, running-around sort of
little boy, that something was wrong with him? What if they’d been afraid for him, not just
bothered about what it meant for the family or worried someone would make them try again?

Evan was pretty sure that, if his mother had been from a different branch of the Blacks, if she’d
been Uncle Cygnus and Aunt Walburga’s sister instead of Uncle Orion’s, she would have been
raised to think it her duty to kill him and start again. Only her duty, if she’d looked at her six-year-
old heir and decided something was fundamentally wrong with him.

But what if, instead of any of that, they’d said to each other, We do not have the first idea what
we’re doing, what if we only make it worse?
Maybe the right thing to do, or the normal-mum thing to do, would have been to roll up their sleeves and stay anyway. Spike’s mum would have. Although that was a moot point, since she was too stupid a Gryff to walk away from anything in the first place. Even when she by-Merlin should have.

But some people weren’t natural parents, and his had never prepared themselves to raise kids. When you were in the dark and it mattered, the Slytherin thing to do was to go carefully, change slowly, feel your way, stop often to check your progress and make sure you weren’t setting up traps to explode in your own face.

Maybe they didn’t hate him for existing. Maybe they’d been afraid to plunge into doing something they cared about and knew they were bad at.

He couldn’t look up from the sheets while he said it, and he knew his voice was too quiet. But he said, “Severus doesn’t get ideas, Mum, he just does them. He doesn’t know how, either.”

She stopped pretending quite so hard: her voice was gentler when she asked, “Do you know, darling?”

He shrugged, still not looking up. Even if his new idea about her and Dad was right, any answer he could possibly have made was private.

She hummed thoughtfully. “Do you know what we call an enchanted object, Evvie, when we don’t know how it works and only one has ever been found?”

He thought about mentioning that he mostly did know how things worked between him and Spike and just didn’t care to discuss it with other people. Then he realized that this wouldn’t do him any good, since it would still leave her not knowing anything, and just looked up at her warily.

She had a very hard smile on as she leaned forward gracefully, like Narcissa talking to Sirius. “We call it, my love, an irreplaceable commodity.”

“Also a grotesque,” Dad said helpfully, and got elbowed, and said ow, and shut up. Ev thought he’d probably been elbowed more for being deliberately wrong about architecture than for being obstructively spiteful, but, as Spike liked to say, in Slytherin, never one reason.

“Mum,” he said crossly, deciding not to dignify any of that, “it was Spike and you know it was Spike and you know perfectly well that you can check with Linkin to make sure that it was Spike —”

“I do know, dear,” Mum agreed placidly, “but I realize there’s a little talk I’ve neglected to have with you.”

“I had it from Granddad,” Evan said promptly, appalled, because what else could she possibly mean? “With Siri and Regulus. There were pictures and he used these incredibly creepy dolls, which was actually a relief because we were all afraid he was going to make the house elves demonstrate, but then he made us practice charms on each other and we were twelve, Mum, really, this has been accomplished, I promise.”

“Not that talk, dear,” she assured him, her smile going a little crooked and horrified as she, too, failed not to imagine her father forcing house elves to demonstrate.

“Oh. Er. Good?”

“Evidently,” she agreed.
“My dad’s saner than your dad,” Dad told her.

“Your father’s a monomaniac, Darius,” she replied without skipping a beat, “mine is merely concerned with preserving our culture.”

“As are we all, and work to that end, but hopefully few of us to an insane and obsessive degree.”

“To a mildly eccentric degree,” she conceded.

“Reggie says Granddad’s stopped complaining about Severus getting his muddy claws into the family recently,” Evan volunteered.

“No, dear,” Mum said kindly, “I’m sure Regulus would like to think so, but someone would have mentioned it to me had hell frozen over.”

“Ninth circle,” Evan contradicted automatically, as if Spike had been trick-questioning him.

His parents eyed him.

“Fourteenth-century literature is pre-Separation,” he tried, and then eyed the window behind them. A world of no, but if he dove for the hall really fast…

“No, dear,” Mum repeated firmly, and, being a Black witch and infernally efficient, did not say no what. She added ominously, “We can have that little talk another time.”

And again, declined to clarify whether she meant about letting Spike read him muggle poetry, about letting himself be poked into admitting a familiarity with muggle poetry about (shudder) muggle religion, or about trying to run away when she was trying to talk to him. Evan sighed dolefully. Knowing it drove Spike up the wall when Evan did exactly the same thing to him was, on this end of it, no consolation whatsoever.

“I’m sure you realize,” Mum went on chattily, “that before allowing you to make plans to spend even your sixth-year summer with Severus, I spoke extensively with him, and Regulus, and Narcissa, and Professor Slughorn.”

“With Slughorn?” Evan asked plaintively.

“Of course, darling, he was your Head of House and Severus’s favorite teacher,” she reproached him.

Evan snorted. “Not half. It’s just Severus’s favorite subject. He and Slughorn don’t even think they’re the same species, and I don’t mean snakes or blood status. You should have talked to Flitwick.”

She paused, looking a little disoriented. “What unexpected diplomacy.”

“Occasionally,” Evan said defensively, understanding her to mean that Spike hadn’t shown her any opinions that would have caused Evan’s snort. It was an unfair way to put it, in his opinion: Spike wasn’t always brutally rude, just at all the worst possible times.

Shaking it off, she asked, “Would you like to guess what they all agreed on, that persuaded me to allow the experiment?”

Evan shrugged. Since he’d been extensively lectured by every member of his family about leeches and clinging vines before both his fourth and fifth year, he suggested, “He takes it as a personal
insult when anyone tries to do anything nice for him, even at Yule and on his birthday, and bites people who try to stop him paying his share of anything?”

They looked at him again.

“Not with his physical teeth,” he explained patiently, and didn’t add unless it’s me.

“We certainly didn’t want anyone attaching themselves to your vault instead of you,” Dad conceded, and was polite enough not to add a halfblood with nothing from nowhere had to pass a higher bar than that before we decided not to have him killed.

“All right,” Evan tried again, “he’s got the sort of ambition that’s of as much benefit to our world as to himself, and he’s brilliant enough to get quite a lot of it done with the right sort of help, as long as someone can make him shut up when people being people make him crazy. Once he’s jaded enough to live in the real world without trying to hit it for being stupid every five minutes, he’ll be not just a credit to but a treasure of any House. There’s no need to laugh at me, Mum, that’s what he’s like.”

“If you say so, darling,” she giggled into her handkerchief.

“I do,” Evan said sulkily, “because it is.”

Dad sighed, and pointed out, “We could have just given him a grant, Evander.”

“I did say about the biting,” Evan reminded him.

“Researchers don’t think about accepting money for their work in the same way they think about accepting it for themselves,” Dad said coolly. “It amounts to the same thing in the end.”

“...Mum,” Evan asked, “I thought you came in with my father? I could have sworn I heard Lucius’s just now...”

Dad shrugged. “One learns from the expertise of one’s friends.”

Evan refrained from any remarks about his father’s taste in friends, which worried him. He shouldn’t even have had to restrain himself from expressing a dangerous opinion like that; it shouldn’t have occurred to him. Whereas in fact he rather wanted someone to notice he was taking the high ground and give him credit.

He hoped he only wanted it because he was missing Spike and confused about what his parents thought of him and very, very tired: that was not a clever thing to want.

“In any case,” Mum said, her voice still a little bubbly as she tucked her handkerchief away, “that wasn’t it. One more try, Evvie?”

Fed up, Evan shrugged again. “You thought I needed a bodyguard and he’s very, very paranoid?”

“If you need a bodyguard, you’re doing something wrong,” Dad pointed out. “Snape’s the one who upsets everybody.”

“That’s true,” Evan admitted.

Mum got up and came to sit on the bed with him. She put a soft hand on his arm. “Evvie,” she said gently, “your Severus got it into his head that a Muggleborn girl was his friend and he fought two Houses for five years to keep her. When he publicly and humiliatingly failed, he didn’t attempt
revenge, although it would have raised his standing considerably. He fixed his eyes on you, and according to Narcissa he only experimented elsewhere once, while you were exploring your options as we asked you to and not noticing his attention at all.”

Evan nodded. “He did mention that,” he agreed, “although he wouldn’t tell me about it. I can’t think why; he’d implied heavily enough that it was Wilkes to be perfectly obvious, and she’d have been delighted if he’d let her admit it. I’d been trying and trying to get him to have more fun, too; he can’t have thought I minded.”

“He did talk to Narcissa about it, evidently,” his mother told him. “She tells me he found the experience vile and Lucrezia was rather hurt.”

Evan stared. “He doesn’t find female bodies vile,” he protested. “And he doesn’t hate Wilkes.”

“No, dear,” Mum agreed. “Narcissa said he did eventually make Lucrezia understand that he simply couldn’t enjoy, er, having fun, as you put it, with a mere friend, even a good one.”

She sat back on her hands on the covers. “Do you know what else she told me?”

“Clearly not,” Evan said warily.

“She said that when the three of you were becoming friends, Severus took twice as long to relax with her as with you, even after clearly deciding to be her friend. When she asked him why, he said it was because you were the only person who both had constant access to him both waking and asleep, as his roommate, and had never appeared tempted to hurt him, taunt him, put something unpleasant in his toiletries, or suffocate him at night with a flatulent kneazle.”

“In fairness,” Evan said, “Avery’s cat just liked him.”

Evan had not liked Avery’s cat. Or Mulciber’s cat. He got along quite well with Narcissa’s cat, as long as he remembered to spell the fur off his trousers afterwards. Narcissa’s cat did not attempt to flay him alive or claim him as territory with scent-markers at every meeting. Evan’s dormitory had become a pet-free zone after one term.

“Or a cursed pillow.”

After a moment, Evan told her, “If you’re waiting for me to make excuses for Mulciber’s so-called sense of humor, you may as well stop.”

“She also said,” Mum went on without particularly acknowledging this, “that she noticed him allowing Regulus to touch his arm and shoulder—but not on days when he and Sirius had spoken amiably together, or were wearing their hair in the same way.”

“Mum, I know you’ve been in Peru,” Evan said plaintively, “but actually it’s three in the morning. Could you just say what you’re getting at?”

She reached up and put a hand on his cheek. “Evvie,” she said gently, “we supported your choice because the boy is, to date, unswervingly loyal. But that comes with a price.”

“Mum,” he started to sigh, “it really was—”

“Oh, I know it was,” she interrupted, “but I want to make sure you understand, Evvie. There’s a difference between ‘don’t enjoy’ and ‘can’t tolerate,’ just as there is between want and need. When you’re as old as your father and I, you’ll know—”
“No, he won’t,” Dad interjected, a little sourly. “Evidently.”

“You don’t have to experience things directly to know them, Darius,” Mum said sharply, and turned back to Evan. “You’ll know that some people need women, or men, or a certain color for their partners’ hair, or pretty shoes, or pain, or all sorts of things.”

Evan blinked to keep from rolling his eyes or making some other impatient expression. As if he didn’t know that now. But if he said so, he’d sound like a petulant firstie, which Mum evidently already thought he was. Or else she was doing some oratorical thing to build up to her point. Either way it would make him look more ignorant, not less.

Mum went on, “Without that one thing they need—nothing, or even revulsion. My niece is convinced, Evvie, and I agree with her: your Severus is too bruised, as she put it, to enjoy any risk at all, or to tolerate any companionship without complete comfort in it. She considers that to trust enough for that comfort, he needs the same sort of undistracted loyalty he himself finds natural. Is Narcissa wrong?”

Evan frowned. He was feeling rather menaced, but it seemed quite unnecessary. “I understand why she discussed it with you,” he said, possibly a little stiffly, “and I certainly understand why you asked her, but that’s really between—”

She smiled, as though that was exactly the right answer. “Of course, darling,” she said lovingly, “and I know you haven’t done anything foolish tonight.”

Then her hand tightened bone-crackingly on his jaw, and her smile turned into an entire knife drawer. Evan would have backed up right through the wall, except that she had him more or less by the throat and her eyes were crackling molten silver.

“And you never will,” Callisto Black hissed through that lovely, lethal smile. “Because my child, Merlin only knows why, needs that imprudent, overbearing, filth-veined lout. And if you ever destroy what drives him to meet those needs, Evander Rosier, if you ever destroy my baby’s health and happiness through folly or carelessness or stupid animal male greed, I will splinch you limb from limb. Do we understand each other?”

Evan stared at his mother. “Apparently not!” he exclaimed indignantly, her fingernails digging into his neck. “I thought you liked Severus!”

Over at the window, Dad’s lips thinned. It was the same look he’d had when Ev’s first reaction to a Tang dynasty fish-shaped vase had been did the glaze melt? Or maybe it was more like the way he’d looked when he’d introduced Evan to his ‘friend’ for the first time and Ev had remarked that it couldn’t be much of a friend if Dad couldn’t remember his name.

Evan did feel a bit rebuked, because he suspected Dad wasn’t so much angry with these unacceptable reactions as afraid Evan was going to stupidly get himself killed through them, but he wasn’t apologizing.

Mum wasn’t upset, though. Her grip relaxed, and slid down to be perfectly unthreatening on his shoulder. “Oh, Evvie,” she smiled, fond again, and leaned up to kiss his forehead. “I do, darling, but that doesn’t matter. He is all of those things—”

“Especially imprudent,” Dad told the toy goat. “And overbearing.”

“He’s excitable because he cares about things,” Evan shot back, glaring at Dad. “Which if—”

“He is all of those things,” Mum repeated firmly, which was probably for the best, “and you know
it, and it’s a difficulty, and he knows it.”

“Too right he knows it,” Evan sullenly seized the moment, although it was risky. “I could have got him to marry me years ago if everybody would just stop telling him that.”

“I doubt anyone has to tell him, Evvie, he’s a sensible young wizard, beneath all the…” she made a restrained gesture that nevertheless ably communicated Spike’s grouchy-swoop.

“He’s a sensitive ‘young wizard,’” Evan corrected, still sullen, “and he knows when people are sneering at him.”

“Well, you managed it in the end anyway, didn’t you?” Dad shrugged casually. When Evan gave him a huh? look he tapped his marriage torc, which he was currently wearing large enough to weigh down his cloak. Mum was wearing hers small, but only small enough for her arm, of course. They got awfully snide about artists who wore any but the flattest of finger-bands, although Evan held that even chunky rings didn’t necessarily mean you’d forgotten how to draw with the quill held in your hand.

(Spike was not on Evan’s side of this one. His opinion was based on potion-splashes interacting with metals and friction slowing reactions, and might therefore have been marginally less bonkers except that shield charms existed. Since this particular line of lunacy was exactly the same one that caused the carefully maintained, nearly-witchly hairlessness Evan rather liked, he wouldn’t have risked arguing even if he’d had some reason to think rings were important.)

“Ha-ha,” Evan said bitterly, hunching up and glaring down at the sheets. “Rub it in.”

He could, just, at the corners of his vision, see his parents frowning at each other—or, at least, Dad frowning at Mum; she was too close to Evan for him to see properly.

“Evan,” Dad said slowly, “We know you did.”

Evan dragged his eyes warily up from his knees and gave his dad a full-on, flat-out, Spike-quality, highly disturbed What The Blazes Are You On About Have You Gone Mental Or Did I Fall Asleep In The Middle of A Binns Lecture Because You Appear To Have Grown Three Extra Heads And This Is Neither Normal Nor A Sign of Blossoming Godhood LOCKHART So You Might Need The Hospital Wing Am I Going To Have To Stun You To Get You There stare.

Dad frowned at him. “The last time your mother and I were home, your bedroom was your bedroom, and the closet, and the en-suite. It’s now taken over half the south wing, I can see from here that at least three walls have moved, and it looks remarkably like the flat the two of you were sharing off Diagon Alley.”

“Yes?” Evan agreed with a puzzled air, still eying his father like a wand-wielding Gilderoy. “I’d asked Linkin to do something about it; it didn’t make sense to keep the flat with Severus going to work in Scotland, so I needed the place to be, er.” He took a diplomacy pause, and ended up with, “Suitable for long-term adult habitation.” Approvingly, he added, “I suppose it’s just because he didn’t want to make creative decisions for me, but it was wonderful to come back from Bulgaria and have home at home.”

Dad went on eyeing him oddly. “Evan,” he said, “house elves can do a lot of things, but they can’t shift load-bearing walls by themselves. Not the walls of their own houses.”

Evan eyed him back. “All right...” he said slowly. “Only, it seems that he did, and just because nobody’s caught an elf doing something before, I mean to say, I don’t know why anyone’s ever
surprised when one rises to the occasion to make their family happy.”

“No, Evvie,” Mum said firmly, frowning at him. “They can assist their wizards in renovations, and
you can help guide a house that’s had a foundational enchantment activated and is trying to shift
itself. They can’t do it alone. It would be like metamorphmagery, not transfiguration, and thank
Merlin for that. Can you imagine the chaos if one got into a temper?”

“But maybe when I asked him, that—”

“None of us in this room can tell the house how to change, Evvie,” she told him. “As its master,
your grandfather can, and it was built to adjust naturally to changes in the family. There’s no other
way to do it without breaking out sledge-hammers or…. or things.”

“Sledgehammers,” Evan corrected her absently, frowning. “I don’t understand. Why would it do
that? It wasn’t like this at Lammas, because Spike and I came back to look at it before we left the
country, and it was still like it used to be.”

“Yes, I heard about that,” Dad said dryly. “At length.”

Evan turned red and said with dignity, “Spike thought Linkin might need some encouragement to
make alterations in a room he’d kept exactly the same way for twenty years, and it seemed like a
good chance to experiment with abstract impressionism.”

“No doubt,” Dad said, even more dryly.

“I hate everything,” Evan remarked conversationally.

“I see crudity is catching,” Dad remarked in a similar tone, and added, “like social diseases.” He
pretended to think about it, and further added, “Exactly like—”

“Shall we have Linkin make you fish for breakfast, dearest?” Mum asked pointedly. “Or perhaps a
nice juicy mouse?”

Dad sighed, and drooped despondently at her over his moustache.

“Fortitude, pet,” she said dryly.

“Get over it, Ev,” Evan dropped an octave to drawl, also dryly. Cissa told him he sounded like he’d
cought cold when he did that, but he could tell people knew what he was doing, and knew he
wasn’t mocking.

Dad blinked at him in a wary, taken-aback sort of way.

He raised his eyebrows back and said, pointedly, “I assumed taste was hereditary.”

Dad started to make a retort. Then he visibly realized Evan had boxed him into a position where he
couldn’t insult Evan’s choices without either also denigrating his wife or getting uncivilly specific
and using an exhausting number of words. He gave Evan a look he probably thought was
inscrutable, but after dozens of Severus-and-Narcissa squabbles Evan could recognize grudging
pride when he saw it.

Taking the better part of valor, Dad said instead, “Regardless. The Hall would ‘do that’ if you
brought someone into the family and brought them home.” He folded his arms, raised his
eyebrows, and appeared to think he’d won.
“Then I don’t understand why it didn’t do it before we left,” Evan reasoned on, frowning. “Spike walked the wards with Mum and me at Lammas, and we all had bread and salt and wine and rose petals. He was the only one who did it barefoot, and he’s the one who told me to give the roses blood.” He turned his frown to Mum. “Do you think that after that the Hall just needed the catalyst of… er… of my tak—bringing him inside before it fully accepted him? Maybe we just didn’t stay long enough to see the changes before we went back to the Portkey Office.”

“Do you really want to know what I think, darling?” she asked with that knives smile again.

He eyed her, too, although with less of the Are You Mental shading. “Dad’s made that clear, thanks, but I still don’t know why you think I’ve suddenly gone suicidal.”

Her smile took on I’m So Glad You Realize That overtones. “It normally does take marriage or adoption for someone already born to join a family, Evan,” she said, not-very-deceptively gently.

He raised his eyebrows skeptically at her. “Er, maybe normally, but you just spent about ten minutes beating me over the head with ‘Severus is unshakably loyal, Evan, Severus needs the same kind of fidelity he naturally gives you, Evan.’ Which I’ve been telling you he’s got, given that everybody else in the entire world is either boring or creepy or Narcissa.”

“Perhaps a slight exaggeration?” Mum suggested, her handkerchief at her mouth again and her eyes dancing, although he rather thought she still (correctly) suspected him of lying and was still angry underneath.

Evan shrugged. “Okay. Some of them are insufferable or otherwise troublesome, which I suppose isn’t quite the same as boring."

“If we’re talking about insufferable,” Dad started.

“Your friend likes him,” Evan said, meeting Dad’s eyes coolly. “I believe your friend sees much of his younger self in Severus.”

“It’s extraordinarily generous of him, but he always was the most gracious of men,” Dad groused, folding his arms up, but Evan could see the point had gone home.

“Anyway, Mum, sorry to say it, but I think you’ve overlooked something,” Evan said, letting that lie.

“What would that be, darling?” she asked lightly.

“Severus’s blood-House.”

“He hasn’t got one,” Dad exclaimed, throwing his hands up with more energy than Evan had seen him show since he’d gotten his hands on a case of cobweb paintings.

“Darius,” Mum murmured quellingly. “Something about the Princes, Evvie?”

“He’s not part of that House, Calla!” Dad reminded her, completely exasperated.

“I think Evvie meant the bloodline rather than the House, dearest.”

Evan shrugged the distinction away. “Both I suppose. History of the family, anyway.”

They gave him go-on looks, one more inviting than the other.

“The first Prince of that name,” he reminded them, “was given it because everybody knew who his
parents were and he wasn’t able to claim either of their surnames. There was a bend sinister not just in his personal coat of arms but their actual House’s for what, two centuries?”

“Closer to three.” It was Mum who said it, because as steeped in the history of Wizarding families as the Rosiers were, it was the Blacks who were obsessed with keeping records. Aunt Dru liked to joke that her brother had only married Mum to get at the Black genealogies, and Mum had married him so someone would fix the faces on the tapestry. “I believe it was Henry Prince who changed it; Father always said he was an insufferable Gryffindor prig.”

He nodded, and asked her, “Do you remember when Narcissa kept insisting that Severus was actually a Black scion?”

She rolled her eyes. “I wasn’t aware she’d stopped.”

“Well, she’s stopped insisting on it at the top of her lungs until Spike starts debating the pros and cons of killing her versus himself, which is probably the best we’re going to get. She was a bit muddled about her arguments—”

“I thought they boiled down to his having Phineas Nigellus’s nose?”

“More or less,” he agreed, “but she went back and forth on how he came by it. One of her theories hinged on that half-century Acquilius Black spent teaching blood-magic at Hekate Minerva and how the Italian Princes were almost as bad as the Zabinis for, er, keeping their surname intact through matrilineal generations and that thing with the lips and eyebrows showing up in unexpected families.”

“That thing with the lips and eyebrows?” Dad asked, pursing his lips with a distinctly old-fashioned look.

Evan crossed his arms petulantly. “I haven’t had enough sleep to be a careful speaker, Dad; do you really want to me to be accurate and artistic about something I like that much?”

Dad’s lips screwed up in a completely different and much more sideways sort of disapproval.

“Right,” Evan concluded, with a sulky, vindicated satisfaction he thought he was probably stealing from Reggie. Or maybe Sirius, come to think of it. Reggie didn’t usually do vindicated-satisfaction, he just sulked.

After a very long, thoughtful pause, Dad carefully admitted, “We try not to remark on the degree of family resemblance between siblings within certain Houses.”

“Spike’s magical line hasn’t cared about formalities, a lot of the time,” Evan underlined. “And I don’t get the impression he grew up seeing a lot of marriages working out terribly well.”

“Oh, well, Muggles,” Dad reminded Evan, his lip curling, although he did look a little sympathetic about Spike having to stew in a place like that.

“Whoever they were, Dad, I don’t think he saw very much to recommend the condition. And the last time I asked him why he wouldn’t marry me, he got extremely upset over did I think we weren’t already committed to each other, was I behaving as though we weren’t? He got about as mad as you just did, Mum.”

His parents looked at each other again, doing that not-actually-mind-magic eye-talking married-person thing. It usually annoyed Evan, but he didn’t begrudge them right now. He could do it, too.
Mum turned back to him, and asked, “And how did you answer him?” Which was about six tests at once.

Evan made a face. “It would be a time-saver to share a vault so he wouldn’t be able to argue about who gets to pay for groceries, but if his magic knows he’s mine surely enough that the Hall accepts him, probably best to let that settle in, don’t you think, Mum? He won’t be easy about having his name attached to mine until he’s successful enough to feel more respectable. Beside, we’re trying to set off a time of change, aren’t we. Probably most prudent not to introduce more new variables than one can help.”

“Variables,” Mum repeated, eying him tolerantly.

“Especially ones that could be perceived as long-term vulnerabilities to be exploited,” Evan met her gaze with a decided chin, because they weren’t even talking about marriage now, although he went on to pretend that they were. “That’s something Spike’s always been concerned about; people thinking I’d be an easy way to get back at someone as provoking as he is.”

“You’re a Rosier and a Black,” Dad mentioned, with a serene face like thunderstorms gathering dozens of miles away.

“Yes, Dad,” Evan said patiently, “but I’m perfectly harmless.”

Dad looked at the gouges Evan’s thorns had left on the doorframe in his hurry to bundle Spike out of the line of inquisition. “I know,” he said mildly. “Your mother and I spent several favors convincing Abraxas of the fact, the summer Sirius left us. I believe his peacock muster still isn’t the same. Nor is the ceiling in the parlor at Grimmauld. as I recall.”

“I am a fluffy lambkin,” Evan said with dignity, “and the ceiling looks much better with watercolored hippogriffs than with all the blood Bella was going to get on it, and Malfoy’s ill-tempered ostentation of demonic polter-fouls attacked me first.”

Before they could get into it over the ruddy albino hell-chickens again, Mum gently interjected, “Severus disapproves of your strategy, dear?”

Shaking his head, Ev explained, “No, Mum, he sees the benefits. He just wants to be sure to compensate for its drawbacks. Our position wouldn’t be solid yet even if the country weren’t at an especially transitional point.”

Mum hummed, which Evan took for as much of a victory as he was going to get at the moment. But then she said, “Speaking of drawing back, I couldn’t help but notice that charming new cabinet in the sitting room, what with Severus disappearing through it and not making any sort of noise to indicate he’d hit the back.”

Evan nodded, looking a little rueful. “Not an uncommon amenity for Hogwarts staff, apparently. It could have been convenient, except that no one Dumbledore doesn’t personally spell into the wards can get through. I suppose it still is anyway, at least to have Spike more available.”

He hoped like mad they hadn’t seen whether his vines had actually gone in with Severus. He didn’t think they had, and he’d had that shield up between them anyway. They couldn’t have seen any details through all his flailing tendrils, surely, and he’d relied before on ‘all the way across the flat’ being too far for a pensieve...

“Could be useful regardless.” Dad said thoughtfully. “Not universally. Some possibilities.”

Evan’s brain tried to swear, and gave up. It wasn’t that he didn’t know the words, but they weren’t
in the habit of coming when he called, and the whole business felt awkward. ‘Rats’ didn’t really cover it when you might have just thoughtlessly painted a target on everyone who’d ever cared enough about you on pure disinterested principle to try and beat you to death with a textbook in case it would make you learn something.

“Well,” Dad said, smiling easily while Mum was still rolling her eyes at him for digressing to politics while she was still in the middle of Interrogating Her Child About Family Matters. “You don’t need to think about that, Evan. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

Mum blinked. Evan blinked. They blinked at each other, and both looked at Dad.

“Your mask sketches,” he explained. He didn’t sound eager or impatient, but Evan could tell that he would have done if he’d been Spike. “You won’t tell me who they’re for, of course, but we should start comparing styles so we don’t diverge too—”

“LINKIN!” Evan howled.

The elf popped in. He’d known at once when Dad and Mum had set foot on the home soil, of course, and he gave Evan a vastly unsurprised told-you-so look.

“Hi, Linkin,” Evan said in a more reasonable tone of voice. He proceeded to give at least two orders that they both knew had already been taken care of while Linkin’s wizards were discussing matters that didn’t ensure Linkin’s wizards would have a nice, comfortable night. “Will you please make sure that Mum and Dad’s bed’s turned down and their luggage is attended to? And you might bring them a warm drink and any Circadisynch we have left, seeing,” he turned to Dad with mildly indignant eyes, “as it is now past three in the morning.”

“Oh,” Dad said sheepishly. “Right.”

“Linkin,” Mum asked lightly, not bothering with diversions, pleasantries, or tactics, “did my son become handfast or wedded while I was away?”

Linkin gave Evan a dark look. “Mistress Callisto can see how the Hall has expanded Master Evan’s rooms,” he said, “to assist Linkin in making them a home for Master Evan and Master Severus, as Master Evan asked. To say Master Severus or Master Spike feels proper, Mistress, but Linkin knows most assuredly that Master Evvie’s name is still Evander Rosier, and Master Spike’s is still Severus Octavian Seth Prince-Snape.”

“I didn’t know that,” Dad said, eying Linkin with a conflicted face. Evan could tell that the first level of conflict was over whether or not to bother being interested, and it went several levels on from there. “That could almost a real wizarding name, except for the middle bit and the patronym.”

“Doesn’t Dumbledore have one almost as bad?” Mum asked lightly.

“Yes, and he’s a half-blood, too,” Dad reminded her.

What Dad had meant by I didn’t know that was Linkin knowing the full name at all was just as vocal a point to him as Severus retaining his worthless patronym and the matronym that wouldn’t claim him. House elves knew their families’ names. They just did.

“I knew that,” Evan said calmly. “His mother was trying to do about six things at once with his birth certificate. Clumsy, of course, but I’ll give a Gryffindor credit for it.” He grinned. “I’m sure we’ve gone high-volume full-name at each other a few times during arguments over the rent and the furniture and whether Linkin was allowed to come in and deep-clean. It’s a terrific name for menacing somebody with. Poor Spike. I bet his Mum did it all the time, and she’s just like him
“…Impossible,” said Dad, successfully diverted.

Mum lifted her eyes without quite rolling them. “Go on, Linkin,” she instructed.

“Linkin knows there are no wedding tokens,” Linkin said, starting to look agitated as his rock-solid certainty fought with his lack of hard evidence, his need to tell the heir’s wife the truth, and his need to keep the heir’s son’s secrets. Evan really felt quite sorry for him. “No rings, no torcs. Master Evan has brought home no new cup and no Prince cup, and the ancestral quaich hasn’t been touched. If there were ribbons or diadems, they must have been bledsungesúpan, enchantments to be turned to blessing-magic and taken in, not tokens to be kept and worn. Linkin was not told, not asked for help, Linkin has not seen, Mistress, Linkin doesn’t know—”

“I see,” Mum cut him off. She gave Evan (who was occupied by giving Linkin a weird look that he hoped said you are as paranoid a conspiracy theorist as my Spike, what have you been drinking) a speculative, affectionate, and rather weary look. “I see,” she said again, and sighed. “Well, dearest,” she told Dad, “I suppose it’s too late to make him really be a Hufflepuff.”

“It’s not too late to get a few hours sleep,” Evan suggested plaintively, as though this didn’t terrifyingly mean that she did, in fact, probably see perfectly. Linkin wisely took this as his cue to flee in favor of finding the potion that would reconcile them to their present time zone. “And then one might be awake enough to at least keep one’s eyes open long enough to look at sketches of masks, although probably not awake enough to make intelligent remarks.”

“Of course, darling,” Mum said soothingly as Dad brightened, and she bent to give him a peck on the forehead as she rose from her seat on his bed. “And later on I want to see the paintings you did on your Bulgaria trip, and perhaps we can look at some of the memories you’ve saved for examination in the pensieve and discuss composition.”

She gave him a serene and pointed smile with her hands resting gently on his shoulders.

“Most of my memories with the best landscapes end up in this dreadful little man from their Ministry of Tourism or what-have-you bringing Spike to me and then we have picnics and I attack him lasciviously,” Evan said bluntly, “so, er, no offense, Mum, but it might be best—”

“I’m your mother, not your great-grandmother,” she said, still serenely. He began to feel just a prickle of nail digging into his shoulders through his shirt. “I have seen you and Severus kiss before and I’m sure I shall know when it would be best for me to look away.”

He met her eyes solidly, and raised his eyebrows. “Will you?”

“Whyever not?”

“Well,” he temporized, because in the end he trusted and mostly-respected Spike’s admittedly-slightly-hysterical paranoia without completely understanding or entirely believing in it, “mine is not the extremely sensitive sense of personal modesty under threat here, so I think I’ll let the two of you negotiate in a day or so, while I do something that’s better for my health. Such as lighting myself on fire.”

There was a pause, and Dad raised his own eyebrows.

“Past three in the morning,” Evan crossly defended his right to be undiplomatic under conditions of great hardship. “I already said.”
There was another pause, and then Mum said, delicately, “Perhaps not too late for Hufflepuff?”

“No,” Dad disagreed gloomily, offering her his arm to escort her out of Evan’s rooms, “the barbarian is contagious.”

“Yes, and I kiss him a lot,” Evan yelled puerilely at their backs. He knew perfectly well it was useless and infantile and they were going to laugh at him in the morning.

He had also known perfectly well that there was no point in hexing the bush that had snagged his robes that other time he’d stayed up all night because of Spike-related fretting, and he’d done that anyway, too.

On the other hand, he didn’t lose all judgment and get sulky when he was drunk. Which would have alarmed Spike. So it was fine for him to occasionally get drunk, which he enjoyed, and he genuinely couldn’t keep from behavior that meant everybody really wanted him to get enough sleep. Ergo, everything was actually fine, and he was sure he’d believe it was as soon as the immense tsunami of sulky crankiness that had first crashed over and then utterly swamped his brain sometime in the last two minutes dried up.

Except nothing was actually fine.

But he’d be able to handle it better if Spike came back and they could go back to sleep together.

But Evan couldn’t go through the wardrobe. Certainly not tonight, and maybe not as long as his parents—or at least Dad—were staying at home.

He eyed the stuffed goat. If he were Spike, he’d just have to stare at it and feel cranky for a while for it to go up in flames. Was it stuffed with cotton, or wool? If it was cotton, maybe he could do something with that, especially if any seeds were still in there.

Linkin popped back next to his bed with a tray with a teacup on it, and eyed Evan.

Evan eyed him back. Sullenly.

Linkin snapped his long, knobby fingers, and Evan’s very-unnecessarily formal outfit was suddenly replaced by one of the soft nightshirts that he owned but didn’t usually bother to wear unless the summer was so hot it was impossible to sleep together without something cooling-charmed between them. This one was a dappled blue, like looking at the evening sky from under a summer tree.

“…Thanks,” Evan allowed grudgingly.

Linkin didn’t fold his spindly arms, since he was holding a tray, but his face showed he was thinking about it very hard. “Master Evvie,” he said reproachfully, “needs a nap.”

“I don’t think I can go back to sleep,” Evan argued. A very distant part of his brain that was, however unreachably, a grown-up no matter what time it was winced at his tone.

Linkin held out the cup with a drink-this-you-little-idiot expression.

Which wasn’t at all the same as having Spike’s nose slotted properly under his ear and the right warm weight on his back, his wrist circled comfortably with two fingers on his pulse. But it was homelike enough that the warm, spiced mead toddy was enough to turn the torrents of crankiness plausibly drowsy.
“I need to send Spike a note saying I can’t help tomorrow morning but he should still please come in the afternoon,” Evan sighed, drooping along with his eyelids as he sipped. “Will you write it and toss it in the cabinet in the sitting room, please? Really toss it, you won’t,” he paused to yawn, “be able to get your hand in there.”

Since he hadn’t warned Linkin off trying or forbidden him, he expected Linkin would. And when the elf couldn’t, his hair not having been keyed into the wards by Dumbledore as Evan’s had been (that bit had been perfectly true; you could learn a thing or two about how to use truths from a good Slytherin who was bad at lying), Evan further expected he’d report that back to Dad, who would then be satisfied. As a result of which Voldemort would not expect any Hogwarts-invasions by Evan, no matter what other schemes Evan had stupidly given Dad the wherewithal to dream up.

“Linkin will send Master Evan’s message.”

“We don’t have a big pillow, do we?” he asked. Again, the distant, unreachably adult corner of his brain wanted to beat his head against the headrest at the fretfulness in his voice.

Linkin held out his hand for the mug and, when he’d taken it, said, “Master Evvie should turn over.”

When Evan did, there was a soft thump and then something soft and weighty landed on his back. It smelled of dust and lavender a bit and it wasn’t half heavy enough, but Linkin had put whatever elves did instead of wizardly warming charms on it. Evan muttered “Mmthnks-kin,” into the smaller pillow under him, but he didn’t stay awake long enough to hear if there was an answer.

He did stay awake just long enough to remember to feel very, very sorry for all the poor kids taking Potions tomorrow—today. He should probably send flowers to the common room, but it would only confuse them.

Then again, that would be pretty funny, and Spike would take it as a personal message, a personal apology, and a personal affront. Which would be even funnier.

Evan’s dreams were wild climbing vines of thorny blue roses choking the walls of the common room, a raging hearthfire burning down the Forbidden Forest so his mum could toast eggs over it, and Severus stomping around shouting crossly at everyone with tiny goats springing up out of his footprints and bouncing up the castle walls. They were just lucid enough for Evan to be a bit disturbed with himself over how cozy they felt and, as he should have expected, he didn’t wake up until midafternoon.

[1] Not even once; Spike had switched them to a solid month of nonfiction halfway through, for what Ev realized now must have been werewolf-related reasons.
September 3: 4am, London

Chapter Summary

Padfoot goes down the rabbit-hole and chokes on a dust-bunny.

Chapter Notes

Warnings: Nope, you're on your own.

Except to tell you that so am I: this chapter is unbetaed because I did a chapter-shuffle at what might not have been the last minute if I hadn't decided 'I have no idea how much time I'll have for fandom over the next couple of weeks, and posting a short chapter after a long wait wouldn't be right.' So problems with this one are extra on-me.

Thanks to: to Kreiri, Thedoctorregrets, Krysania, muumi2three, Tristitia, lupin5th, acehollyleaf, ShadowsofWho, excessivelyperky, and a lot of guests for letting me know since the last post that you liked something I wrote. Special thanks for Kreiri for caring whether the story made sense, to Lupin5th for all the expletives (I assume they were expletives, lol), and to excessivelyperky for being a steadfast reviewer at your own pace and also POSTING ANOTHER CHAPTER OF WIDOW'S WALK! I haven't read it yet and I'm so excited!!!

Notes: Welcome to September 3, a day in which, according to the Prophet, the only thing of note was another spotting of Wizarding Britain's most eligible bachelor daring Diagon Alley in spite of the dreadful way those Aurors treated him over the summer. At the time of this post, September 3 is 87 pages long.

Sirius tossed and turned for hours and hours and hours before giving it up as a bad job. He debating trying to wake Moony up for a snog, but something about the way his friend was lying there, one hand fisted loosely, fretfully above his head, told Sirius Don't.

He rolled grumpily up out of bed and puttered around in the poky little kitchen of their flat for a while, debating the merits of the four-story chocolate gateaus, heaping bowls of knickerbocker glory, and mouldier-than-usual stilton he found. Nothing seemed to tickle his fancy, even the mounds of fresh halibut and slightly less fresh ferrets that made his ears prick up and his tail wag. The kitchen looked awfully grey, although sometimes it didn't. Maybe it was going to storm.

Heading downstairs, he ran his hands down the great, broad banisters of the ever-shifting staircases, jumping that one step that wasn't really there with the ease of a cartographer's long familiarity.

When he landed, it was in the much bigger, more bustling, stony kitchen he'd grown up loving. The friendly elves kept offering him tea and stoat sandwiches. He thought he ate a peach. Couldn't remember tasting it.
When he walked out, weighed down and drifting with an uncomfortably stuffed feeling he couldn't quite feel, he found himself in the library, or maybe it was Cousin Bathilda's basement. He had the impression that the walls were lined with books, although they were too shadowed to look at properly. So much dust choked the air that he could see the motes hanging about dispiritedly even though there was no sun to light them or set them dancing.

There weren't any lamps either, come to that, but he could still see the rows and rows of students of all ages—some looked well past a hundred, chained to their study-desks and scribbling industriously. He didn't think it was the best idea to have a baby doing an Herbology essay on Venomous Tentaculas, but there you were.

He moved between the columns of desks, and surely he was asking them how to get out. He knew he was, although he couldn't quite feel the rumble of voice buzz through his chest or throat.

Couldn't hear their answers, either, if it came to that. Not the words. Only the dusty dullness of their scratching pens, the heavy absence of breath, the weight of thorn-thicket words passing in painful, sleeping meaninglessness through thousands of dry and lidless eyes.

Couldn't hear them, but he knew their answer.


Even before he began to move desperately down the aisles, grasping brittle, mouldering shoulders and pressing his urgency at hollow faces full of disinterested pity, he had begun to lose track of time. By the time the wan scholars were falling away from him in clouds of must as he passed, he felt he might have been there weeks without a single hunger pang.

They were, he knew, falling back into place in his wake. He didn't have to look behind him to see them flipping slowly upright off the dull industrial floor, as though he'd never been there, as if he'd never been. He didn't know any of them.

Until, worse luck, he did.

Standing out like a corby among the pigeons (and that wasn't right, he favored greys these days, now they weren't locked into school colors any longer), almost hidden behind a stack of tomes he seemed to be scribbling all over out of fascination and not from duty, there was Sniv.

There was something about those huge books that drew Sirius's attention even as they repelled him: they felt like family. He was sure there was something wrong with them.

When he was drawn close, though, he saw Sniv was tracking ink all over a beautifully illuminated page with plants all over it. Poisonous, no doubt. Or maybe it was Sniv infecting the book. There was definitely something bad about it, though.

Whether or not he particularly wanted to talk to the man, ignoring the one off point in a sea of same wasn't something that occurred to Sirius. Feeling it inevitable, he came over and asked, and asked, and asked.

Sniv looked up with an insolent curve of his giraffe neck that felt so slow as to make Sirius wonder whether he wasn't a muggle robot really. He wanted to know (except he didn't care at all) what the question even was.

Sirius wanted to get out, and Sniv was sure he should just know. They argued, Sirius gesturing emphatically and Sniv making hard, cutting motions with his quill.
Finally, Sniv sneered at him to be more careful around pathetic vermin who knew just how to cock up and lock up fools who trusted out of nothing more persuasive than the arrogance of high-blooded hubris.

Sirius lunged for him, and although they went over in a harsh clatter of chair-legs and fluttering pages, it was his own bed he jolted up from, breath panting startingly loud in the dark, miles-worth of short inches from Moony, who (fuck you, dream-Sniv) wasn't vermin at all.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Regulus decorates his wall like a total Voldemort fanboy, and is fed sweets by an adoring house elf. Yep, that's totally what's going on here.

Chapter Notes

**Warnings**: Somewhat oblivious courtship between people on different sides of graduation, Walburga's A+ parenting.

**Format Notes**: I can never keep track of my formatting, so hope the letters at least... track? Suboptimal formatting for the footnotes, sorry about that, it's because I did too much work on this in Google Docs instead of in Word proper. They don't handle inserts the same way. But great thanks to plutoplex; she asked such good questions that this chapter is now three pages longer. In a good way, I think.

Lily,

Since you've asked: start over. Don't jump to conclusions, don't answer questions that weren't put to you. Everything before the last sentence is background; you can't address every issue in detail without costing your employer money in page-space, and perhaps costing yourself readers of limited attention span. Consider whether you're prepared to be the writer of a column that scolds its readers.

By which I mean, think about the worst thing Mam and I might say in response to every sentence you write, or your sister, and whether you're prepared to get owls and owls of that. I've seen the replies to the edits Belby sends off as part of a theoretically unemotional peer review process, and you wouldn't enjoy it.

Yes, all right, I wrote some of them for him. Some.

My suggestion would be to regard every querant as a brain-damaged first-year Hufflepuff, in terms of emotional maturity and analytical ability. They would not be addressing a stranger if they were not either dramatic beyond all conception or in a state of desperate confusion.

I would also, though I know you'll disregard it, suggest doing what you can to discourage letters like this, which are asking you for the advice of some professional, rather than the advice of a wise and caring friend they haven't met. In this case, the professional whose help they want is one Mr. Holmes. You really should pick a different one to answer, Lils, if only for reasons of liability.

S

P.S.: If anyone writes to complain of your not addressing borderline muggle-baiting behavior, you have a new letter to answer, don't you? And I do mean borderline: the law is for our protection more than theirs, or more exactly, for the protection of our world's secrecy. If it doesn't make trouble for the Ministry, no one cares. Don't complain at me; I didn't write it. Don't complain at me...
for the further reason that I never required specialty teacups in order to traumatize my relations.  
P.P.S: I'm so astonishingly glad to hear that your demon-child is recovered from whatever  
prompted him to vomit in the face of Nicolas Flamel's brilliantly talented and very amiable wife,  
who was at that time doing me a great honor.

Dear Sev,  
You know I'm not going to leave this poor woman unanswered, but I suppose you're right about the  
est. Most of the rest. Sometimes people just want to talk to someone who isn't involved. I can hear  
you talking about taking risks by telling things to strangers, but it's not so much of one if they don't  
know who you are, either, is it?  

Anyway, thanks. I knew when I took this job I could never get by without a little help from my  
friends.  
Love,  
Lily  
ps: I can assume it's a woman if she calls herself a mother, can't I?  
pps: I didn't use it on Tuney, I showed her!  
ppps: Did you have to return the original? In that state? I couldn't read it through all the red!  
pppps: That was Dumbledore's fault and you know it, Sarkypants Snape.

Lily,  
1. I know someone who was carried and birthed by a wizard who'd taken Amborella for the  
purpose. That wizard calls himself a father, not a mother or parent. The family involved is  
conventional to a fault. Based on this anecdotal data, I would consider it safe enough until other  
evidence presents.  

2. Petty drank her tea out of glasses for a month until I told her they were sold in a joke shop and  
it's a proprietary enchantment.  

3. I have a reputation to maintain.  
S  
P.S.: Evan says what I have is a compulsion. I might argue, except that taking this view got me out  
of helping McGonagall with her budgeting. Or possibly the class schedule. I was too alarmed to  
mark the fine detail.  

Dear Sev,  
You did not tell her it was a proprietary enchantment at thirteen. -No, what am I saying, you  
absolutely did. Good grief, Sev.  
Love (and some giggling),  
Lily  
P.S. Thanks for all this, really.

Dear Asphodel,  
I haven't heard from my husband in a week. Our owls can't find him, and the Aurors couldn't  
either. My mother says he's left me and it's only what she expected, but I can't believe it. His  
parents don't know where he is, either (I put a few drops of Lip Loosener in the tea). He hasn't
been close to them for a long time, but I'm sure he'd tell them if he planned to leave everything. They say if I'm worried I should call the Muggle Pleasemen, but my father says for muggles to help, I'd have to tell them about our world. What should I do?

Mother of Two

Dear Mother of Two,

Finding out the truth starts small. Decide whether your mother could be right. Are the Aurors still looking? If not, why not? If your husband left on purpose, he will resist being found but may have left 'footprints.' Do his friends know anything, and do they look guilty when you ask them? Is anything missing from your home, including papers or a journal he keeps? Has he done anything with money that's unusual or unaccounted for? Been seen buying clothes that are unlike him? Who might have seen him when he travelled? Has he ever talked about the muggle world as if he'd like to go back? Is there anywhere else he's talked about?

If you are right and he left against his will, someone else might try to prevent his being found. Has he talked about fighting with anyone, or doing anything that might interfere with someone's plans? Where can you find information about spells for finding family, and what can stop those spells and stop owls? Where was he last? What can the people there tell you? Who can you call on to help you look, and who can you reach quickly if you get into trouble?

Whatever you do, prepare to be surprised. Remember that your children will want the truth, but need to be kept safe.

Best wishes,

Asphodel

As he escaped from his father's study, the account-book had been heavy in Regulus's hands, and his heart heavier yet. His father hadn't seemed hung-over, exactly, but he had been bleary. Reg had put in a mistake on purpose this time, and Dad hadn't caught it.

And then there was the business with the week's menu. Dad had approved it with barely a glance, and Reggie had put down pudding for breakfast on Thursday. He'd put it down so he could have a laugh with Dad about maybe still being a bit young for this, and now, since Dad had uncaringly initialed all the entries, he was going to have to eat it.

Or admit to Mother he'd taken her assignment less than seriously. Or that he'd made a mistake. She didn't care if he was unhappy with the results of his choices when it was something little like this, only that he did what he was supposed to and didn't look weak about it.

Meaning no showing he was unhappy, no visibly questioning himself. Nothing but competence, decision, and the show of confidence that had always come so easily to Sirius. If he ordered nothing but light omelettes for supper on Friday and failed to provide an alternate menu against the possibility of Mother suddenly inviting people over to test him, he'd have to explain why they were eating eggs at a nice dinner, without making Mother look silly. If he asked for a Sunday roast for a day that turned out to be boiling, she'd tell him too bad, he should have anticipated the weather.

The point of this wasn't, as she'd impatiently explained after his horrified protests last month, to precisely mimic what he'd have to do when he was running his own household—of course he'd be able to revise his plans then. It was to force him to think ahead, and to learn do carry on in the face of disaster. To carry on without apology, even when it was all his own fault and other people were inconvenienced. If he could learn to do that, she'd said, she would have a son and heir who wasn't an embarrassment and a disappointment.

He supposed it made sense, but he never could help thinking Sirius would have done it better.
Except that Sirius would have just picked a few places to get take-away from, dictated toast for breakfast every day, and waved the budgeting away even if he'd ordered something truly disgusting from somewhere expensive on a day when Mum brought the whole Society for the Prevention of Impure Trafficking.*

The worst part was that Reg wasn't sure Mother would even mind that, as long as Sirius didn't get his take-away from Muggle places. Which of course he would do, largely out of spite. But Reg couldn't help knowing that this wouldn't be doing the thing properly.

He didn't strictly mind extra pudding in a day, except that if he had sweets in the morning he'd need a nap before lunch. And Kreacher, who would have stopped at scolding (and scolding, and scolding) if it had been up to him, had his instructions about what to do if Reg choose foolishly.

Case in point: Mother's enchanted duster was currently zipping happily around the house, cleaning windows and table legs and a frankly unnecessary number of cursed knickknacks, singing, "The baby is a piggy! Oink! Oink! Oink!"

Really, Reggie considered grumpily, he wasn't three.

He sighed now, and leaned back from the account book. What he really wanted to do was go to Hogwarts and talk to Spike about Dad—and maybe say hullo to Florean if their paths should happen to cross, find out how both their first weeks were going—but that was impossible. Or, at any rate, nowhere close to being the done thing.

He couldn't think of any other good ideas, when it came to someone to talk to. He'd asked Linkin about Evan already, lacking any better ideas, but Linkin had said Evan wasn't at home. Which meant, of course, that Evan was at home, and just hadn't got out of bed yet. But it also meant that Linkin thought he had a right to sleep in today, or he wouldn't have used such polite language about it to Evan's own cousin who know what he was like.

Nobody ever talked to Lucius about fathers, and Cissa would be sympathetic but would keep giving Regulus the baby to change. Which was pure devilment, because if she'd ever done it with her own pretty hands he'd eat his boots. It was much too early, both in the day and the semester, to go bother Madam Fortescue and see if Florean had written home to mum yet. If he'd been Lucius, he might have gone to hang around the Ministry and chat with people, but going without anything particular to chat about just made him feel awkward. He didn't know how Lucius did it.

As for his mates, Becca and Selwyn would both expect him to be good company. Reg and Thor Rowle had only gotten along alright, not really been friends, he didn't feel up to dealing with Gildy, and nobody wanted to be anywhere near Rabastan lately.

He didn't even want to know what Rabastan was up to—or Barty, now he'd got caught up in all that. That had always been true, of course, at least about Bast, but it had got much worse. Bast had always been, er, sharply whimsical, but it was getting closer to the surface.

Reg just wished he knew whether Bast was being encouraged. Bella had her ideas that Regulus tried to forget and never think or dream about,** but whose ideas were they really? Her husband was just sort of… interested in anatomy and ancient curses and had political opinions and a temper that fitted his interests perfectly, but Bella did what she did For A Purpose.

The real question being: was her Purpose really in service, or had she mixed up the Dark Lord's purpose with Mother and Uncle Cygnus's pro-Domination philosophy?

When Uncle Cygnus was drunk or in a bad mood or the news made him angry, he had been known
to say that muggles should be exterminated, rather than just brought under control. Andi and Cissa took after Aunt Dru, but Bella had always been closest to their father. And if the Dark Lord was as fiercely anti-muggle as that, Regulus hadn't heard him say so.

Oh, he supported Bella's initiatives, and he had his own projects. Reg had never heard him suggest anything so vicious on his own. Rodolphus would never have done anything so patient, so organized as setting giants on the border on his own, Mulciber had been told to make careful trouble so that the Aurors would be busy and the Ministry would be stressed about keeping the Statute of Secrecy intact, and of course He did support that revolting, leering werewolf in finding prey other than wizards, did support Bella's thing. Had, in the end, given it to her as an assignment.

Still, his own initiatives, Reg thought, were designed to make a statement; the victims were targeted but almost incidental, whereas Bella seemed to mostly want to make muggles suffer for not being wizards. Clearly he didn't mind if muggles died, or wizards who opposed him. But Reg didn't really have the sense that he cared enough about muggles to set their deaths as his goal.

Was that true? Regulus knew better than to think the handful of Death Eaters he personally knew about was the whole of their number. What were the odds that so many of them should be his age and his friends, when the Dark Lord was at least twice his age? It would be stupid to think he knew about everyone, when he knew for a fact that Evan's dad was very proud to be the Dark Lord's friend but Reggie had only seen him at a meeting twice.

If the Dark Lord had groups of followers that never talked to each other about it, they couldn't compare notes about what he said to them, what he told them their goals were or their tactics should be. For all Reg knew, there might be a group out there like those hippies Sirius used to talk about, who loved muggles but were angry at the Ministry for refusing to put a geas on them all to stop putting their chemicals into the air. Or a group that didn't want to rule or kill them but did want to destroy all their technology and make them forget it so their weapons wouldn't threaten wizards and their cameras wouldn't threaten the Statute.

For all Reg knew, he realized once he'd remembered that the idea of a rather mysterious and sort-of-old Slytherin always telling him the truth was stupid, what the Dark Lord really wanted was to force muggles into bombing wizards out of existence so he'd be the only one in Britain—a real Dark Lord, like the ancient ones who'd been kings with no competition.

When Regulus had been little and trying not to get obliterated by his cousins, he'd always known what Sirius, Bella, and Andi wanted, because they'd all tell everyone at least once. Then, if they didn't get their way, Sirius would get progressively louder, Bella would force someone to give over, and Andi would smile politely and take what she was after without asking again. Their methods were different (and Sirius's rarely got him anywhere), but when any of them started looking angry or dangerous or secretive, anybody with a memory had a good chance of knowing why.

Cissa and Evan hadn't been like that. Cissa only ever asked for things she seemed sure she was already entitled to, and she always seemed to be doing the person she was asking the great favor of allowing them the opportunity to make her smile. Evan didn't even ask for biscuits, he just said, "Oh, biscuits, thanks," if he was feeling particularly energetic, or waited around apathetically doing homework or sketching the wallpaper until somebody gave him one and told him to cheer up. Until Severus, anyway; then he'd started the annoying(ly effective) practice of patiently explaining to people why they agreed that what he wanted should happen.

Reggie didn't blame him for that. It was the only thing Severus both noticed and didn't take as an
unfair manipulation. It was, however, extremely annoying.

Neither of them ever, ever asked for anything difficult, not outright, but Narcissa had gotten the kitten and the husband she'd wanted, even though her father and Bella thought cats were dirty and her mother thought Malfoys were insufferably and pathetically new-money and thoroughly unworthy of her baby.

Evan had never seemed to want very much except for people to stop shouting and let him draw in peace, but nobody in Reggie's family ever stopped shouting until a parent hexed them to their room or Evan started making a stressed face and ten seconds later did something completely and unrelatedly mad. Even Bella had learned to be wary of Evan's stressed face.

What Regulus had learned was that if you wanted to know what Cissa and Evvie wanted, you had to see what they looked smug or relieved about after it had happened. It was no good paying attention to anything they said, or even anything they did. The only thing for it was to keep track of what made them happy.

The Black accounts-book had a line down the middle of each page. Slowly, Regulus wrote two lists, one on each side.

One said:

**Displeased:**

* RbL punished after behaving badly to apparently-m and getting cursed before ending it.
* Disrespect.

The longer one said:

**Pleased:**

* Orkney.
* Successful m-baiting.
* B's nights.
* S at Hw.
* Making PP think no one likes him but our set.

He brooded down at them for a while, and then said aloud, "Too much packed in there," and cut the page out and burned it. Then he brooded some more.

Eventually, he called Kreacher and asked him to take all the sketches and watercolors Evan had given him over the years off his walls and put them in a scrapbook. "Keep the frames, Kreacher," he instructed. "I'm going to need a lot of frames. Nice ones, to show I'm honoring what's in them. And before any of that, fetch me a cloak please."

"Where is Master Regulus going?" Kreacher asked, so as to be sure to bring an appropriate one for the occasion.

"Just into Diagon," he said. "So no hood! I'm just picking up some back-issues of The Prophet; nothing terribly formal."

"The weather is chilly and mucky, little Master," Kreacher said reproachfully. "It might rain."

"I mean it, Kreacher, no hood. I'll just put an impervious on, that'll have to do."
Kreacher wasn't happy about it, but he gave in when Regulus reminded him about being made to eat a brick wall last month and went off very promptly, snarling under his breath in the croaky voice Reggie still hadn't got used to about how cruel little Master was to keep Kreacher when he was so useless that the family couldn't even do their own menial errands when it was dangerous out, if Kreacher couldn't serve his family anymore his head should be in the hall so Mistress and Master and Master Regulus could be taken care of properly; even if it was by another elf, Kreacher could keep an eye on them from the hall so they wouldn't forget their duty…

"I don't want to hear that, Kreacher," Reggie said sharply, trying not to remember the feel of tiny, sharp shoulders under his hand, in his lap, the darkness of that cave, what Kreacher's voice had sounded like because Reggie had lent him out to someone who didn't appreciate the honor the Black heir had trustingly held out to them.

He left in a very bad mood, but came back in a better one. When he'd explained that he wanted to be more up on recent history so he could help his dad better, the people at the Prophet had been not just willing but eager to put together a trunk of old newspapers going back fifty years for him, and had promised to have it delivered.

And then the nice, curly-haired witch at Scribbulus had sold him a big box of pointing paperclips that would dive into a book (or, yes, a newspaper, she assured him) and clamp onto the pages with the word or phrase you were looking for, unwind, and, well, point. They were strictly banned at Hogwarts, but a hot item for more advanced scholars, she said, and talked enthusiastically for a while about how her cousin's impressive spellcasting when he'd fixed the problem of having to use them one at a time and flip past that page if they were all looking for the same word, or because his first batch had tended to cluster on the first match.

He ended up telling her about the books about Salazar Slytherin he'd borrowed so that such a chatty person wouldn't still be curious when he left, and then buying a second, gift-wrapped box when she laughed at him for thinking that Hogwarts teachers were banned from using everything students mustn't.

And then, after ordering some size-adjusting picture frames, he went and said hello to Madam Fortescue anyway, since he was there. He had to hide from Gilderoy a little bit at first and if Florean had written yet she didn't mention it (and it really was too soon to ask), but they had a nice chat anyway. And when Gilderoy had gone, Regulus took his seat and watched Lucy Wilkes explain to her gullible little boyfriend that even if you liked muggles the Ministry's current policies about them were quite disrespectful when you thought about it.

It was such a heated argument that Pettigrew didn't notice all his scones being stolen, and so Regulus got to be very remorseful and overpay Madam Fortescue for their tea. He went home feeling quite accomplished.

Even better, Kreacher was thrilled to be given something to do for Regulus that was going to take him days, between his other duties, and would have taken Reggie an extremely tedious month. Best of all, Reggie had started to solve something on his own, without asking Spike, Cissa, or Evan for advice at all. He went to bed that night quite smug, despite all the empty frames on his walls looking ominous and disturbing.

It lasted until breakfast the next morning, when the mail included a note from Spike saying that everyone in Slytherin was mad at him about being a complete failure at prefecting, it was his own fault for keeping it a secret when he was in over his head, and Spike would throttle him if he did it again.

This was bad enough (although he really should have expected it), but the bacon and eggs he quite
felt he deserved turned out to be the giant mess of strawberries, whipped cream, and meringue he had, technically, asked for. With a sugar pig on top.

* Or, as Siri had put it, a bunch of spiteful old harpies who liked to cluster at the doors of weddings involving only one Pureblood, threateningly taking pictures for acid columns in the society pages and giving the arriving guests the stink-eye.

**He couldn't, but he still felt so, so lucky that he was allowed to try, now, that nobody still expected him to be enthusiastic.
“Suppose you let me decide which of my students to expel,” Filius suggested patiently, but the boy just stared imploringly at him. Filius could tell he was thinking that, since he was 100% certain to be expelled, he’d just as soon be spared the shame of being, Merlin forbid, talked to about it.

Filius sighed. As kindly as he could, he interrupted the distraught babble about how expulsion was definitely the best option on the table and didn't Professor Flitwick have to help even the stupid worthless Ravenclaws? "Did you do it on purpose? Did anyone die?"

His sixth-year (a quite responsible boy, but not a prefect; no-one was going to be repeating the Regulus Black mistake anytime soon) only looked more appalled, not guiltier. Filius took that for a no. Further questioning assured him that no one had been maimed, intimately assaulted, turned inside out, or transfigured into either a dragon currently terrorizing Filch's cat or a mouse currently being eaten by her. Unable to get the boy to give voice to his dreadful deed, Filius resorted to the old Fail Better lecture.

That usually worked with his eaglets, but not this time. The quivering aspen just wailed, "But I won't have the chance! He said if my fingers were that useless he was going to rip their bones out, right down to the carpals, and grind them up to stretch the castle's flour supply so I couldn't get into any more mischief with them!"

Filius stopped. Filius sighed.

As kindly as he could manage through that much exasperation, he asked, "Mr. …Quin, did you, by any chance, come here straight from Potions class?"

Overcome with what was probably guilt and shockiness due to being shouted at more than real fear, Quirrell nodded with big, welling-up eyes.

"Right," Filius said, a little grimly. "Wait for me here. Right here. Do not leave the room. Do not
leave the castle. Do not write the aurors or your mother to give yourself up. Do not take poison, try to snap your own wand, or do yourself damage in any way."

Quirrell looked daunted, but Filius didn't repent of what Albus would have called overkill. He had, after decades of serving as Head to the only House that didn't overtly value and self-select for stolidity, social skills, a stalwart brave face, or unaffected, above-it-all sangfroid, long experience of delicate boys.

The one he was about to go speak with most emphatically included, which was why he was inclined not to take his eaglet's self-blame as justified, unless it turned out that he had to. Quirinus Quirrell, plucky and eager though he was most of the time, had dissolved into tears in his office more often than the three years surrounding him put together.

Moreover, the student Severus Snape had been infamous for shouting at Albus in his own office on multiple occasions, and as far as Filius could tell, Albus had only completely deserved it about a quarter of the time. Albus had always taken this calmly, with amusement when not with admiration, but most people weren't quite secure—or old—enough to take being shouted at as encouraging evidence of the shouter's adorable determination to speak truth to power.

Because you didn't leave even—or perhaps he meant especially—the intelligent ones alone with nothing but don'ts, he continued, "I would like you to write me an essay on why being in Potions class should have reminded you that having your finger-bones taken out need not end your magical career. If you need inspiration, you're welcome to have a go at my bookcases. But stay here. No length limit, and detailed as you like: I'm going to speak with your Potions instructor and I expect to find you still working on it when I return."

As he'd more than half expected, he didn't even get as far as closing the door before Quirrell's nose was plastered to his books.

On his way to the dungeons, he passed quite a few students peering down at him and whispering. Ergo, Ravenclaw detachment and/or Slytherin subtlety had failed dramatically.

That was why it was a bit anticlimactic to find Slughorn accompanied only by Filch and a pair of elves, directing them in cleaning up a hissing, spitting, sparking orange swamp in the back corner of the room. Where they'd contained it and pushed it back, sputtery, pewter-colored lacework patterns had been etched into the stone floor.

It needed a moment's taking-in. Filius had heard potions-masterly grumbling about melted cauldrons before—not just from British brewers, either. This was the first time he'd seen one in person, though he'd seen a few exploding ones in class as a boy. Ravenclaw had a hard rule about doing one's experimental brewing at least two floors away from all House bookshelves, and there were generally empty classrooms far closer to Slughorn's storeroom.

Clearing his throat, he asked, "Was anyone hurt?"

"Oh, it was mainly pride injured, I should say," Horace told him in that airy, cheery voice that meant he'd didn't want to talk to you, and had resigned himself to the necessity before you'd even thought about coming to see him. Filius respected that kind of foresight in theory, but it annoyed him in Slughorn's fussy voice. "A few burns, and one student's boots melted. I can't think what they were made of it, but it can't have been real leather."

Filius ignored this invitation to lecture on plastics. "I see Severus isn't here," he started.

Trying to head him off, Slughorn—sourly, as if his displeasure was something Filius remotely cared about—agreed, "No. I've sent him off to bed."
"To bed," Filius repeated slowly, turning the words over in his mouth as if they were some delicate, exotic foreign tongue, and walked into the little potions store-room so that Slughorn had to follow him away from people who didn't need to be involved in or privy to a discussion between two Heads of House. The elves might not have minded being asked to pause their work so two professors could talk, but Filch certainly would, and Horace's office had been moved a ways down the hall after the Great Frothy Almost-Amortentia Tsunami of '58.

"Come to think of it," Slughorn prattled on, "I don't believe I recall him ever missing a day of class, do you? It's as if no one's ever told the boy there's such a thing as not fit to work."

Closing the door behind them, Filius thought this might have been more touching if he'd thought for a moment that Horace was protecting his mentee and alumnus, as opposed to protecting the chap who was going to mark piles and piles of his essays and would not, if sufficiently upset, be above yelling at him. It did, regardless, make Filius wonder what his own face looked like.

Tempting though it was to shorten the conversation by ignoring the whole hook, it did sound as if, buried deeply in there somewhere, Horace was in possession of relevant information that Severus was very likely to hold back.

Besides, it was, at the very least, a show of concern from Horace for someone unlikely to run for public office. This being a practice Filius didn't wish to discourage, no matter how unlikely it was to turn into a habit at this late date, he said, rather neutrally, "He seemed all right yesterday."

Slughorn shot him a peevish Why Are Other Houses Useless look. Filius took no offense; even Pomona used that one occasionally, mostly when they complained about their students fighting. He himself saved it for colleagues who took the morning newspaper for gospel, but to each their own.

"And this morning I thought a lemur had joined us for breakfast."

Meaning Severus had had rings around his eyes, Filius supposed. Since it was not his job to evaluate how accurately his fellow-instructors' countenances could be described as bright shining morning faces, he skipped over the implicit criticism. While Slughorn had a point in that Filius was more responsible for a young agent he was handling than for an ordinary new hire, Slughorn didn't—and mustn't—know that. Besides, it was the only way to live with the man when he was being catty.

Instead of getting pulled into the childish argument his colleague wanted to distract him with, he suggested, "Perhaps you'd like to tell me your version before I speak to him. —No, I can't put it off, I've got a sixth-year in my office who's only just stopped crying and still thinks he's going to have his wand snapped."

"Oh, come now, don't you think that's something of an exaggeration?" Slughorn asked aggrievedly.

"I do," Filius deliberately misunderstood him. "What concerns me is that he doesn't."

Looking highly put-upon, Slughorn launched into an explanation of what the sixth-years had been brewing. Filius waited patiently through it until he got to the bit where salmon bile or whatever ended up in the wrong place.

"I will say the lad was quick," Slughorn said, with grudging approval. "Had a containment bubble around the cauldron before I'd turned around, and from halfway across the room. Not what I would have used, mark you. It could have gone badly wrong if the problem had been too much copper sulfate, and I'm sure I couldn't say how likely it is that he knew what was wrong from all the way over there," he gestured vaguely, "just from the sizzle and the smell, no matter what anyone says about his nose."
"And then what happened?" Filius cut in to ask. He didn't care about Severus's level of potions competence just now, or anyone's nose. Though it was always good to hear that one of his agents had good reflexes and had applied them properly in a crisis, and later on he'd have to find out if Severus had done a good risk-calculation or genuinely known what the problem was.

"I was going to calm everyone down," said Slughorn, peevish again, "but Severus started in interrogating the boy about every grain and dribble that had gone into his cauldron."

"And you felt it was the right time for that?" Filius asked politely.

"No, of course not," Slughorn very nearly snapped, "but he did seem to have the cauldron under control, and…"

"And?" Filius prompted when Slughorn just trailed off and looked uncomfortable.

"You know how intense Severus can be, surely," Slughorn said defensively.

Filius raised his eyebrows. "Were you afraid to interrupt him?"

"Afraid?" Slughorn looked genuinely startled. "It didn't occur to me to interrupt, if you must know."

That was both surprising, given the way gossip said the two of them had been at it all day yesterday and how shaken up Slughorn had been the day Severus had asked him to resign, and something to look into later. It might be useful, should it turn out to say more about Severus's skills than Slughorn's nerves.

"Besides which," Slughorn went on, a bit hastily, "you know Severus would wonder if it was sabotage first, you know how suspicious he is. And, after all, if it had been sabotage, there might have been a second round."

This was clearly an afterthought, and if there had been a possibility of a second disaster the first priority should have been to get the students out of the room. Filius wasn't going to harp on that now, not with Slughorn. He wasn't about to show the man that he was interested in Severus's talents in the realms of casual wandless compulsion, either, whether magical or purely charismatic. "What do you think happened?"

"With the cauldron, you mean? Oh, young Quirrell admitted he'd been experimenting. I can't see why Severus reacted so very badly, though; he and Lily Evans experimented in class often enough, and I encouraged them! You should have seen-"

"Yes, quite," Filius agreed, frowning. "Thank you. I'll go speak to Severus now."

"I told you, I sent him to bed," Slughorn frowned back, his moustache wrinkling up into caterpillar-like bristles.

"It's most unfortunate," Filius said in an agreeing sort of tone, and went.

The portraits were evidently feeling helpful; they not only told him Severus had, indeed, gone to his room, they told him where that was. He was grateful not to have to go ask Albus, which would have alerted the old meddler to the whole mess too soon.

His winning streak continued to the point where he was quite surprised about it: Severus opened the door for him almost at once.
Filius made a little considering noise. "Horace was right," he noted. "You look awful."

Severus just looked at him, instead of making some irritable and self-deprecating remark about his looks in general or even thanking Filius sarcastically.

"Let's sit down," Filius didn't-really-suggest, more kindly than he was certain Severus quite deserved.

Still without speaking, Severus and the grey suggestions of bags under his eyes stepped back to let Filius into his room.

Which was certainly smaller than the one Filius had moved into all those years ago, but then, Severus wasn't a full professor. Filius would have to speak to Albus about whether moving him to a room with a window might be wise, whether or not Severus wanted one. It was very likely to be important for outside parties to feel able to contact him without taking extreme measures to aid detection. He also felt it was a bit much that he had to conjure his own chair, but Severus could speak to the elves about that on his own time.

He started to speak, but Severus wasn't looking at him. He'd turned away to pull some tea things out of a largish mokeskin pouch he'd hung off the handle of his wardrobe, apparently on autopilot. It was a nice display of manners for a man apparently beyond speech, but Filius had to ask, "Are you awake?"

Quite apart from Slughorn's comment about napping, he'd had a look through Severus's school file before taking him on as an ICW responsibility, and there was a history of falling into altered states under extreme stress. Filius himself had caught him sleepwalking once. A fairly unlikely possibility under these circumstances, granted, but one never knew what might set off anyone who had something to be set off.

Severus just nodded mutely. He'd filled the teapot with a perfectly normal water-summoning charm, but he was just holding it in his two hands now, and steam was starting to rise out the spout.

With an internal sigh, Filius resolved to have a word with him about keeping one's light under a bushel. The Halloween incident had had a Hall full of witness, but attribution had never been proven. Besides which, the uncontrolled magical reflexes of a furious child were in quite a different category from a grown wizard casually using his hands as a stovetop. It could wait until Severus didn't already quite rightly expect to be reamed out. "Let's start," he said, "with why Professor Slughorn thinks you ought to have stayed home today in the first place."

Severus summoned a pair of teacups out of the pouch and poured. "Int n'matter" It was a lackluster, burned-out sort of tone, and his voice, alongside the other odd things it was doing, was dragging. "Tha'll nae see me shafflin'."

"I'm not asking you for excuses," Filius told him, after a pause to work out what that meant. "I want the root causes as well as the details."

"Ah." Severus had on what Filius could only think of as an I'd like to be sighing right now but may not have the right to face. "Well. If tha mus' know, I had a rather 'sturbing conversation las' night, and then Evan's parents came home shuddently at well past two in t'morning and he threw me through Vanishin' Cabinet from two rooms away."

"... Ah." Filius hesitated, and not just because the boy's accent was swinging about like a Seeker in
a hailstorm. Although it could have been just for that: it wasn't something he'd heard before, even in the boy's first year. The accent, yes, but not the instability. "Are the two of you having difficulties?" he asked delicately. They were far too young for him to be able to trust they could handle it professionally.

"Shouldn't think so," Severus said gloomily. "Although I certainly mean t'have words wi'm about his method of clearing a room."

"If it wasn't personally disturbing," Filius asked, "should I know about it?"

Severus moved his mouth indecisively. "There's nowt we know 'clusively worth risk of telling owt," he evaded unhappily.

Filius hmmed at him. "You realize that if I let you stop there, I'm extending you a great deal of trust."

"Oh, I realize," Severus said bitterly. "But you realize, I trust, that anyfing I tell you as might be acted upon rishks any sources it migh' be treeced back tae, and if there aren't many of those it has to—"

"Severus," Filius interrupted, frowning, "look at my finger, please."

Severus eyed him in alarm, and then looked at the raised finger suspiciously until Filius shone a lumos in his eyes, at which point he shied back, wincing and alarmed.

"No, keep looking," Filius instructed, but after a moment he lowered his wand. "It's no good," he said, half to himself, "your eyes are too dark. Did you eat anything today?"

"I don't try to eat when I'm upset," Severus said, more suspicious yet. "It don't stay down."

Filius paused. This was an indicator of terrible stress-management that Severus might not be able to afford if things got difficult later on. "We'll come back to that. Have you been dizzy at all?"

"No," Severus lied sullenly. "And even if us had been, I didn't sleep well."

Filius put his wand away in annoyance. "Severus, you are either falsely trying to make me think you have a head injury or falsely trying to make me think you aren't, and in either case, it won't do," he said flatly. "I am your handler, and—what?"

"Ravenclaws," explained Severus, who had a hint of a fond smile around his eyes. He added stoutly, "I don't."

"At this point, that's neither yours to claim nor mine to determine," Filius told him. "Are you asking me to believe that you don't have a bruised brain on the basis that you'd know what it feels like or that you didn't hit your head when Rosier 'threw you bodily from two rooms away'?"

It was a dim little closet of a room, but Severus's eyes still managed to flash dangerously as he leaned abruptly across the table, slamming his palms down and shaking the teacups. "He was protecting me!" he shot at Filius, voice quickly rising. "He wasn't angry, he weren't trying t'hurt me, he—!"

"Quiet," Filius commanded. There were cords standing out in Severus's neck, and whites around his eyes. "Drink your tea."

Severus's nostrils flared.
"Are you telling me you can't even keep a ginger and mint blend down?" Filius taunted him.

The boy's mouth went very small and tight, rather like Minerva's, and he defiantly took a drink.

Then he turned a bit green.

"You little fool," Filius sighed, rubbing his eyebrows as though that would help. "What have you been doing all day, eating ice chips?"

"He wasn't trying to—!" Severus started again, loud from the start this time as he shot to his feet.

Then he turned quite grey and rushed for the en-suite, doing his best to make it look as if he were storming away in a fit of temper.

Filius shook his head and snapped his fingers four times. He was quite pleased that it hadn't occurred to Severus to make any remarks about being called little by a wizard literally two-thirds his height, even when he was clearly not all there. That couldn't matter just now, and didn't, but it was a test passed. A significant one, considering that, for whatever reason, Severus had, of his own free will, joined a group that thought their racism a clever and socially-acceptable camouflage for the rampant, raging classism that, in a sane world, a clever lad of Severus's background would have wanted nothing to do with.

"What is the professor wishing?" asked the elf who blinked in, rather timidly.

"First," Filius said, "go tell Madam Pomfrey where I am. Tell her I need her expertise right away in sorting out either a stubborn young idiot with a concussion or an unusually accomplished malingerer. Then go to my office and make sure Mr. Quirrell is still there. Find him if he isn't. Tell him I've run into a complication and may be delayed, but he isn't in half so much trouble as he thinks unless he leaves my office without permission." Certain not in so much that anyone would make him eat his own fingers, and since Severus was submitting to questioning instead of yelling at Filius about the lad, probably not very much at all. "If I haven't returned there before mealtime, give him his there. Have you got all that?"

"Putter is delivering the professor's messages," the elf said determinedly, and vanished with a loud cracking noise.

Filius sat and waited patiently for several minutes, rolling his eyes when a toothbrush and a tin of stringmints slipped out of the bag and tried to sneak past him unobserved.

"You must really be under the weather if you thought I'd have left," he remarked when Severus peeked a bit hopefully back out into the main room, his mouth a scrubbed-looking red. "Sit down, and try drinking your tea more slowly this time."

Severus sat and sipped, not-quite-ostentatiously glum and browbeaten.

"Firstly," Filius told him, "I'm not accusing Rosier of hurting you deliberately, so comb your bristles. However, I strongly suggest you do some thinking about why you're reacting so strongly to the idea. I'm quite aware that the two of you have hurled bludgers at each others' heads on several occasions in a perfectly friendly way, and I've seen the dishes in your flat." The ones he'd seen looked as if they'd been repaired at least a dozen times.

Severus's shoulders curled in, and his face set.

Filius took this to mean that Severus was quite aware of what was going on in his own head. That was enough for Filius to be going on with when he had other matters on his plate. "Secondly," he
went on, "You're going to tell me what criteria you're using in keeping back this information you mentioned—or, rather, under what circumstances you plan to disclose it."

"Criteria," Severus said, which was the first word Filius had heard him speak perfectly crisply, though he blurred again at once, "of t'won't hurt anyone directly."

"If it happens," he promised, "or if I learn you've dizcovered it without my help, I'll tell you. If the shituation changes so that it looks as if more damage will be done by letting something happen than by rizking our sources, I'll tell you then. Right now there are littrally only two people who could be your source, and if you found out t'what you'd instantly know the who, and he'd know you knew, and he'd know wish was what, and…" he blinked, appeared to listen to himself, said, "Dammit," irritably, and resentfully took another sip of tea.

Filius nodded. "That sounds reasonable," he said dryly, "until one considers that it leaves you in charge of the risk assessment, instead of the two veterans you report to, whose expertise is at your disposal."

"I know," Severus said miserably, and stared at his cup.

Filius decided to let it go until Poppy had made her determination, at least. 'If the situation changes' sounded as if it could wait at until he was sure Severus was in a fit state to be making any decisions at all. He was, at least, sure that Severus was under no illusions about the responsibility he'd taken on with whatever-this-was, and what it might cost him to be clumsy or treacherous. "Then we'll leave that for now, but I expect updates, and I will be asking after them if too long goes betweentimes."

Severus nodded, as determined as the house elf, and the sharp motion turned his complexion elvish again, too.

"And now," Filius put his own cup down like the click of a sprung mousetrap, "tell me what happened in Potions."

Chapter End Notes

**Notes:** Yes, the debatably-best-and-nicest teacher in the school is more impatient and unfair than usual in this chapter. I warned you he was having one of his cranky days. I mean, I warned you quasi-obliquely, but as you're this far in, I assume you can read Quasi-Oblique. ;)

**Dialog/accent credit** to Trouble at Mill, as always, to the late Samuel Laycock, and to Nodal and Milner’s A Glossary of the Lancashire Dialect. Probably a few other pages, and youtube accent lessons/dialect poems, but those are my staples, and the main sources I specifically consulted for this chapter. A bit dated, but so are wizards?

No, that's a bad excuse; the truth is that afaict the accent and dialect have eased off except for Traditional Cultural Celebration purposes and a) I'm not sure how strong an accent was normal in the '60s and b) having Severus's speech be more modern would mean I'd have to do a lot more spelling-distortion-of-ordinary-words to get across the sound of his words. There's still some, but it would have been not only worse but even more confusing than this due to the concussion symptoms.
Speaking of, concussion symptoms can develop slowly (for example, in Severus's case here he wasn't slurring half so much at breakfast as he is now), taking hours or even days to develop, according to the Mayo clinic. Don't just check for symptoms immediately after and then think everything's fine!
James wanted to like the Muggle Underground, really he did. He wanted to be impressed by the advances his wife’s people had made completely without magic, and he wanted to have all kinds of brilliant photos of muggle technology to bring back to show Sirius, so he could laugh when Sirius failed to recreate them.

He had photos all right, but he was taking them for Dumbledore and couldn’t show them to anyone else. And while it was sort of brilliant that he couldn’t figure out how the turnstiles worked, the rounded ceiling felt lower than it ought to and it was giving him the willies. Also, he was sure he’d seen at least one rat.

A brown rat. So he couldn’t even tell himself it was Wormtail being a busybody and looking out for him.

And the smell was like nothing else, not even Sirius’s motorbike exhaust. He’d smelled worse (it was second nature to think about Snape here, although that reflex was making Lily angry again instead of just huffy), but this was just unnatural.

That was just it, wasn’t it? Of course it was unnatural: it was all technology-gasses and cold iron. But he’d meant to find it exciting. Instead, he was alone and it was all, just… chilly and smelly and brutal and show-offishly big and smooth and bland and grubby. James just wanted to leave.

In his whole life, he’d never felt more that being a pureblood was a real thing that mattered. He’d taken Muggle Studies, but it hadn’t made him feel like this, hadn’t prepared him for this place at all. He wanted to talk to Lily about it, but somehow he didn’t feel she’d be very sympathetic to his epiphany.

And there was no end in sight to the—well, of course there was no end in sight, the bloody tunnels went well beyond London proper. But it wasn’t like looking out over the ocean, it was more like
being in the Forbidden Forest at night before he’d won his prongs. Not just endless, but hemming
him in, hiding *things* that knew its cul-de-sacs and corners as well as James knew Hogwarts.

He was starting to consider that Dumbledore might not have thought this project through properly.
There might have been a chance of mapping the whole thing if all four of them had gone at it
every night—every *night*, when the trains had stopped running and there weren’t any people.
Without witnesses, four wizards could save dozens of lonely two minute walks by spacing
themselves out, everyone exploring a small area really thoroughly, and then moving along in
spaced-out tandem. The savings, as Remus had said when they were planning their own map,
would scale.

Or something like that. Less risk of missing things, anyway, even if it wouldn’t turn out to save
time.

But that wasn’t possible when Dumbledore wouldn’t let James share his project with the lads, and
he had to be at home all-night-every-night to help with the baby. You couldn’t predict when Harry
was going to wake up wet or hungry. He was too little, and James wasn’t asking Lily to handle it
every time. It happened a lot.

He thought he’d been there hours, but he hadn’t wanted to risk his pocketwatch by exposing it to
all this steel. Dad wasn’t unreasonable about accidents, but he’d be so disappointed if James
ruined his coming-of-age gift carelessly.

He really had to know the time so he could go home without leaving Lily in the lurch for her
Diagon errand, since Sirius hadn’t answered his floo and Peter and Remus were both working and
all Lily’s friends were short with him.

Since James hadn’t brought his watch and when he’d tried on a cheap muggle one his cloak had
killed it, he had, theoretically, three choices. He could squint at the clock hanging off the wall, but
it had skinny hands and no numerals and was right hard to decipher. He didn’t want to advertise
that he didn’t belong. He could ask a muggle for the time, but that was a bit risky, especially with
that clock right there, available to people who were used to it. He’d thought asking the ones who
worked for the Underground was his safest bet, because it was their job to be helpful, wasn’t it?
But they all had glossy, grimy white helmets on, or hair so short he couldn’t see the color properly
in this light. Besides, they were all dressed like Cannons fans, and that would blind anybody.

Not to mention the issue of his slightly sooty specs. He’d tried an impervious, but it kept wearing
off and he had to be alone to put it back on.

All of which boiled down to: he’d accidentally asked the same bloke for the hour three times
yesterday, and now they were all keeping an eye on him.

He could have risked asking some of the younger muggle men; a lot of them were dressed
colorfully enough that he could tell them apart, unlike the older ones in their blocky suits. If one
of them punched him it wouldn’t get the same kind of attention as when that middle-aged biddy in
the tubular skirt that barely went to her knees had slapped him just for being polite and told him
there was no need to be smarmy. But the ones who worked there kept him at the corners of their
eyes, like Pete when Sirius was in a mood. When Sirius was in a mood, Pete had been known to
threaten to tell the Tartan, or, later, to actually go squealing to Remus. And Pete was Sirius’s
friend; these muggles didn’t even know James.

His other reasonable option was using the shelter of the toilet to cast a tempus charm, but he was
never, ever, ever going into one of those again. He’d had four showers since the first time, and
cast a scourgify on his own nose (but only one, because he wasn’t ever doing that again either),
and he could still smell it.

So what he actually did was slip into a shadowy area where he was (almost) entirely sure there weren’t any of those cameras looking, wait until there weren’t any muggles looking either, and put his cloak on. It was the Marauder thing to do, anyway.

He hadn’t put the cloak on to come down in the first place because some of these muggles fair ran to catch their trains, and an invisible bloke who didn’t notice in time might get mown down.

He was also afraid, at some hours, that he might get pissed on, and he’d only put up with that from incomprehensibly fantastic specimens of humanity who were less than two months old and definitely had not been drinking anything smelly.

There wasn’t any risk of that in the service passages, though. James had worked out the rhythms for those a few weeks ago, and he felt perfectly confident going into them to check the time. He wished he could spend all his time down here in the inner workings, but Dumbledore needed the measurements for the platforms and the tunnels and everything.

When he was alone and able to check, he found to his dismay that he’d been underground barely two hours. It wasn’t even time for tea.

It must have been not getting enough sleep at nights, and the strange, quiet tense place he was in with Lily not shouting at him when he had this feeling that she wanted to. He just couldn’t face going back to that busy, hostile, alien platform with the orange-and-whites watching him. He told himself to be a Gryffindor, in case it would help, but himself snapped tetchily back at him that he wasn’t afraid, he was tired and annoyed and the tunnels needed mapping, too, and he had his cloak on already.

This was a good point, he told himself. He had to be invisible to map the tunnels in the working stations. And the tunnels, while creepy, weren’t dangerous to an experienced Quidditch player who know what not to step on and what to listen for that would tell him when to hug a filthy wall.

Cheered by the prospect of escaping all the eyes, he pulled out his notes and started charting away like anything, making excellent progress. Luck was clearly with him, too; he branched off the tracks before long into a tunnel with more dust than soot in the air, and even on the tracks.

Right when he was musing that it might even be safe enough to take his cloak off, he came along a curve into sight of a pair of muggles. One of them was slumped drunk on the ground, and one of them was perpetrating graffiti—with a brush, not one of those muggle paint tubes. He was only using one color; a pale, sickly green that glowed in the darkness.

Safe under his cloak, James approached carefully, curious. He didn’t give the game away by laughing, of course—gone were the days when he wouldn’t have realized it would be rather mean to make some hapless muggle think the abandoned track was haunted—but he did smile a bit at the crudely-painted skull, sticking a rather long tongue out.

Maybe he’d scuffed his boots on the floor, despite how careful he was being, he didn’t know. For whatever reason, the rangy muggle with the paint suddenly stopped with his brush dripping in the air. He turned slowly, exactly as if he’d smelled something.

It happened too fast for James to track him while on two legs. All he knew was that one minute the muggle had been painting the wall, and the next he’d dropped his blocky metal torch and shoved past James and been swallowed by the darkness—
But he hadn’t shoved with his hands. There’d been a knife, and if James had been wearing a different cloak, he didn’t know if Lily would ever have found out what had happened to him.

Sometimes being an animagus with a prey animal form was really inconvenient. He was sure Sirius would have knocked the muggle down, and certainly wouldn’t have stood shaking about it afterwards, paralyzed between the man he probably couldn’t have caught up with without a broom and the crumpled figure on the floor.

Ground. Whatever this too-smooth stonelike stuff should be called.

Even more carefully than before, he made himself step towards the drunk muggle. It might still be a drunk muggle who needed help, after all.

Until it couldn’t possibly have been.

James felt something in himself go out like a candle. Stiffly, mindlessly, he put back his hood and raised his camera. The cheap dragonhide boots, the blood-splattered wand, the footprints and dragging heel-lines in the dust, the intestines drooping and dripping, the face that could almost have been chewed off, the cartoonish green skull painted on the wall, sticking its tongue out, the rotted-away wall with its horrible turn-of-the-century posters that wouldn’t be cleaned up if the muggle police came: a wizard could use it all as an apparition anchor.

He apparated the nearly six hundred miles and barely needed to think about it, didn’t lose an eyelash. The only place in the world he could imagine being right now was by the great winged boars in Hogsmeade, so he could run through the gates to tell Dumbledore.

Chapter End Notes

**Notes:** plutoplex has an awesome memory for story detail. She reminded me of like four things I wasn’t taking properly into account or had forgotten from my own previous chapters. If you would like to be awed by an author's attention to detail, go read her story Crossing Lines.

James is moving from the current King's Cross St Pancras station to the original-and-abandoned one over the course of this chapter. Unfortunately I didn't find any good pictures of the original presumably because it's old and the currently functional station is snazzy, so the descriptions are more based on Aldwych Station (formerly The Strand), which was visually perfect but wasn't abandoned until 1993, as far as I can make out.

Until the Tournament, Harry had a watch that was not killed by either Hogwarts-in-general or his cloak—if you know where he got it, please let me know as all my books are in boxes. At the moment, since if I tried to solve all the Second Riddle Wars questions I would run mad, I am operating on the premise that one of these things is true:

1) It was a super-expensive winding mechanical watch with no electronic parts that that Dudley threw away after it wound down for the first time.
2) Harry bought it in Diagon Alley or Hogsmeade and it isn’t the kind that argues with
ambient magic.
3) Either tech had changed to argue less with ambient magic or whatever the watch cases in 1993 were made of are better not conducting it.

I should also note, in case it wasn't obvious, that the whole rigmarole with James needing to check the time is super-convoluted because James is having a hard time with realizing he's the kind of wizard who doesn't actually enjoy being in a crowd of strange muggles.
September 3: Spinner's End, Lancashire

Chapter Summary

Eileen doesn't even care whose fault it is. She just wants to know who to strangle, and how hard.

Chapter Notes

**Warnings**: the author does not endorse, support, or censor false equivalences or other logical fallacies from the characters.

**AKA**: plutoplex (who prevented a glaring continuity error, THANK YOU) was disgusted enough with Eileen to wake up at 5am to rant about it. You might be, too. That's totally fair. I could quote Philip Larkin here, but it would sound as if I were making excuses for her. I'm not. A family that's gone off the rails can take generations to find a comfortable balance again, but it helps if members don't stick to strategies that are making everything worse.

The last thing Eileen expected to see in her well-scrubbed, whitewashed kitchen was her son.

No word, no occasion, and it was the middle of the day. As far as she was aware, he should have been up north, at the school. He hadn't had time to come tell them he was back from Bulgaria. Hadn't even owled, come to that, and she'd had no such expectation. It was right odd.

But he'd come into the kitchen, hadn't stayed in the sitting room like a guest, so she just said, "Back, are you," and set her shopping on the table.

He started unpacking it for her without being asked (she hadn't particularly meant that he should do) and when he'd gotten his eyeful he asked, "Hash?"

"Don't show off," she chided, handing him the knife she'd meant to use and soaping up her rag instead.

The itty grin he gave her for that was warning enough for her not to bother rolling wry eyes when every bit of meat and potato that would have been roughly shredded under her hands was a perfect cube half the height of a die and every shred of cabbage was three inches long, exactly, three centimetres long, precisely.

She preferred her stew and hash meat slow-simmered into fall-off-the-fork scraps, herself, for the tenderness, so Toby was going to ask questions. That probably wouldn't be a disaster, these days, which was worth celebrating and reason enough to let the boy get on with showing off.

"I think we're the only ones in England who know what a knife is for," he remarked. "I explained to a gaggle of first-years yesterday, but even the ones who said they'd cooked at home looked at me as if they thought I'd skin them."
She lifted her eyebrows at his mildly aggrieved tone. "And what did you do to make them think so?"

At least pretending reluctance, he admitted, "Slughorn's decorative orange sugar-water might have had its phial broken a little."

"And how did that happen, I wonder."

"I'm sure I couldn't say," he replied, a bit glum but with furiously tightening lips, "but Slughorn was neglecting the lesson to quiz the first-years on their relations at the time."

"Hmm," was the only reply she made. That was the way of the world, wasn't it just. Slughorn was doing them a favor, making it so explicit, and the sooner her lad learned to look facts in the face and get used to them, he less miserable he'd be.

"It was just the neck fell off," he said defensively.

She said, "If you're finished with this lot, you may as well make yourself useful and give your scribbles a refreshing."

He looked up at her sharply. "Do it yourself. I went to some trouble to fetch you a wand."

"I'm wearing it." She reached behind her to touch its comforting weight across her spine reassuringly. "It's strictly for emergencies. It's easier for your Da to keep off the drink if it's his half of a bargain we both keep."

Severus looked deeply displeased with this reasoning, but he had the sense to say nothing more than, "If you think it's worth it."

"I've lived without a wand more than half your life," she reminded him. She'd seen pinkish four-month-old blue cheese reeking of ammonia less dubious than his eyebrows, but if he could let it pass, so could she.

"Which is why getting back into practice before an emergency strikes is imperative."

"Watch your tone, our Very," was all she said to that, because he wasn't wrong and that couldn't matter. If there was some disaster and she wasn't too dead to consider the question afterwards, Toby would see sense if he hadn't got sodden again. No matter how bad the risk could get, it would always be better than giving him her husband an excuse to falter.

Her son moved his mouth gracelessly, his nose going a little sideways with it. "You should let me carve them, where it won't cut a cord or the like."

"This house has a door," she reminded him sharply, "not a moat against the muggles."

"I know that," he complained, and crossly set to hand-squeezing half a lemon from the cold box and transfiguring her basting brush to a fine point.

She took the luxury of standing idle for a while, watching him paint a far more complex set of enchantments all around the place than the ones he was wand-scrubbing away. How long had they been there? Six years, she realized with an overwhelming urge to let suddenly-wobbly knees fail her over something so unremarkable as time moving on. He'd been fifteen when the last of them went up. After that summer, he'd never spent another night at home.

You'd never know it, watching him find every rune and array unerringly, without so much as
running a hot wand over the whitewashing to darken them. Most likely he still knew where her emergency tin was, too, well enough to banish money into it. Now he was back at the school, she could mail it back to him in the regular post if he put wizard money in.

He spent some time on the wall around the single outlet that gave them light and something for Toby to do when he was too restless to read. Before their glisten faded, she read the strokes to open a listening ear (which, in this case, meant boosting the reception. Toby never had quite made himself ask why he was getting channels they never paid for, or why the telly worked at all during the lean years) and ease the passage of the waters, which meant preventing bursts of the town's choppy electricity from causing shorts.

She had to remind him about the ones to help with the cleaning and the air and the muggle-dissuaders around the windows, but he needed no prompting to maintain the kitchen equipment so they'd barely need to buy ice or gas at all, or to turn over all the furniture and renew the runes for peace and safety. This time he added some for fruitful work and harmony. This, though she knew better than to comment on it, was forgiving of him, if not outright kind.

"That really shouldn't work," she did note while he was at the wall-socket. "I've always thought so."

"Because it doesn't resist," he replied, not going so far as to answer, "nothing in the world resists it."

"Speak English, our Very," she sighed.

He bit back what he surely thought would have been a stinging rebuke to say, "It's just runes in plain lemon juice, mam. It's not strong enough to make the electricity sit up and take notice. Lemon's for purifying and soothing and brightening; the planet that rules it is a messenger, a wanderer. He plays well with others to his own purpose and holds secrets fast until it's their time. Mercury slips-between and stays itself; it has no single shape. Mercury finds its way and goes its way without shouting demands. Even when it poisons it's quiet about it. I'm not fool enough to try this with some earth-rulled carbon ink, let alone a spoken spell."

"Hm," was all she replied, thinking with a private smirk how awfully Slytherin-like it was of him to make magic work with the telly by sneaking around it. "And here I thought you wanted to use a knife."

"On the furniture," he said irritably. "Not near the power."

"I suppose it's just as well two days back at school hasn't robbed you of all common sense," she acceded.

With an exasperated look that had a touch of fondness buried in it, he accused, "That being your idea of a compliment is why everyone thinks I'm rude."

"You are rude," she pointed out. "Look at you talking that way to your mam."

He smirked, and turned the sofa over to paint beneath it.

"It's not a bad job you're doing," she remarked, running her fingertips over his efforts to feel the stirring of them in her magic, so quiet and meek and smooth that no one who even noticed them would dream they'd come from her shouty lad's hands, "but I wouldn't have thought you'd have the time to come do it, up at that school."

He hesitated, and sullenly admitted, "They said I should shove off and try again tomorrow."
She turned sharply around from examining the windowsill. "Who said?"

"Madam Pomfrey." He hesitated. "Mostly."

"Student potions accident?" As unlikely as it would have been in the first week of classes when she'd been a girl, the steady trickle of letters she'd gotten had proved children today had no respect for... anything, really, but certainly not for timing.

Severus hesitated enough to tell his mother that whatever he was going to say next would be nothing but the truth, but not spoken in a spirit of honesty. "Yes, some bird-brained sixth-year thought a roomful of unstable cauldrons was the best place to test his theory that an E on his OWL makes him a potions master."

"My stars," she said flatly. "I can't imagine why a Ravenclaw thought it might be best to experiment where, if it went badly, there'd be grown wizards around."

"I didn't think they'd be bored enough for that on the first day of class! Start the first lesson brewing before getting the go-ahead, yes, fine, Ravenclaws, but not to muck about with it!"

"Horace Slughorn still spend everyone's first class chatting about their summers?" she asked with slightly raised eyebrows, and sat against the windowsill with her arms folded until he'd finished ranting and turning colors.

"Well, you look well enough now," she eventually cut him off, because she was half afraid he'd give himself an aneurysm. "Why did Pomfrey send you home?"

"She didn't send—" Despite his offense, he cut himself off and visibly reconsidered his tactics. "I might have been a bit loud," he conceded, retreating behind his hair a little. "The boy's cauldron melted."

"Telling-off, cup of tea, and back on the broom, for the both of you," she prescribed. If anyone had been hurt much, he would have said.

The hair advanced almost enough to hide his nose. "She, er, wasn't impressed with my coming to work with a mumblemumble."

"With a what?" she asked sharply.

"I should have just gone to see her before breakfast," he lamely tried to stave her off.

"Why? And don't mumble."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"I dare say you don't, my lad," she agreed, honing her tone again, "but as it's what you came for, you may as well get on with it."

He glowered, but since she was sure she was right she didn't let it trouble her. She wasn't surprised at his coming at it sidewise, either, but his expression was so far from anything she'd expected that it shot cold iron down her spine. "Mam... the first time he... what was it about?"

It took a second for her to work out what he meant, and then her feet were surging her towards the hidden tin of emergency floo powder. Someone kept being in front of her. "Get out of my way," she told it, in what she thought was a quite calm voice, all told.
"You're not killing anyone until I've worked out what's going on," he said in the same flat voice she'd used on him.

She tried to move around him. It oughtn't to have been hard, the way he still looked as if a stiff breeze might break him, certainly nothing like dodging her husband's bulk. He just kept on being in front of her, though, until somehow there were cushions brushing the backs of her calves.

"Sit," he ordered, and even talking to his mam there was no compromise in his eyes. "I'll bind you to the armchair if I have to."

She fought him eye to eye a minute longer, but he wasn't frightening her into fury or looking frightened himself, just being solid at her. It made her want to scream, thinking where he might have learned that, because he hadn't learned it at home. In the end, though, she sat.

On the sofa. Her extremely odd child looked pleased about that, and had the basic good manners to stop looming and join her on it. "I need to know," he said in an explaining-himself way, "and then I'll tell you."

"It was after the mill failed," she said stiffly.

"You do mean failed," he checked. "I don't remember… when it burned, he seemed, that is…"

"No, he coped well enough," she agreed. "There was work on the construction crew, and he knew the machines better than anyone."

He looked cynical.

It was true, though, and some other time she might have gone to dig up the careful 'blueprints' he'd spent his time on, the few times Toby had brought him to work, with Toby's penciled corrections and labels on the parts. Another time she might show them to the Rosier snake, if it was allowed to live.

Now, she just pushed on, "The construction was steady while it lasted, it wasn't like those day jobs he got filling in, making him angry—"

"Because he thought he could do it better?" his son asked, wry with recognition.

"Because he could only get unskilled work, and never to last. They said machines were more complicated in sweets factories than textile mills, and wouldn't give him a learning trial. He took it personal."

Droll, Severus said, "And here I thought my relationship with licorice was only complicated by their use of chloroform."

Eileen could have pointed out that the local lozenges had originally been meant for medicine. She could have theorized that when he talked about complicated he meant that Toby had had a dreadful habit of pretending he was in a good mood and had been glad to get work on the rare occasions he'd been able to bring a handful of rejected Jelly Babies or Victory Vs home. It had made him more frightening even to her, and she was nearer his size and had never been a raw nerve to other people's feelings the way her husband and son were.

Seeing as Severus, as well he should, liked to get things right, she instead said, "It was ether and chlorodyne."

He blinked. "I don't know that one."
"Chloroform and cannabis."

He blinked, taken aback. It might be foolish to say that black eyes could darken, but his did. "Ah," he said quietly. "No wonder Tessa Sprout's grass made me paranoid. Associations. Not an anodyne."

"Well," she said, working at brisk. "He was all right when we were looking forward to the steady work coming back—I won't say I didn't embarrass him and you didn't worry him, but he was all right. He didn't start drinking until they realized the contracts weren't coming back, or the profits, and the place went under for good. It was after that. He was drunk, we were fighting about money, he lost his temper. That's all."

"You weren't fighting about money," he said, flat.

"Oh, yes we were," she grimly contradicted him. "We were on the dole and he were spending it at the pub, but he didn't like my going 'round the houses. Oh no. Merlin forbid we should have anything solid to eat, or a rag to our backs. Beer and telly, that's enough for a family to live off."

"I remember," he inclined his head, just as grim. "But being about money doesn't make it about money."

"If you can't afford food, you can't afford pride," she retorted. "Not when your child's learning what he can get away with stealing."

Severus looked awkward and rebellious, but didn't choose to argue the point. He pushed out a long breath and looked down at his hands, crossed his arms tightly across his chest. "I—this wasn't what happened, but I had a bit of a brangle last night with Evan."

"What do you mean," she frowned sharply, "it wasn't what happened."

"I mean that wasn't when it happened. But we had one, it starts there. He has a house elf, d'ye see—"

She rolled her eyes. Of course the Rosiers had a house elf, Severus might as well have said the sky had clouds. She was only surprised they just had the one.

"Yes, I know," Severus misinterpreted. Her doing her best in the circumstances to raise him right and with his head on straight had only gone so far against growing up where he had, the way he had, doing more than a child's burden of chores without even muggle mechanical servants to ease the way, while reading the kind of books that Lily girl had liked.

He'd already developed a chip on his shoulder the size of his da's before he started spending his time with dainty young papery misses with maids, who could send for a carriage if they wanted to go two miles in a light drizzle. Some might have taken it for an inferiority complex. Eileen, who'd grown up with elves herself and then been subjected to Toby's mother, knew better. Sometimes she was amazed he liked magic at all, considering it made the little things easier.

He didn't seem pleased about the prospect of help now. He looked as resentful as he'd ever seen him. "Ev pointed out that I'll have to let the elf cook for him, now I'm working at the school. It's not the same hours as Belby's lab, there's marking and children to keep an eye on in the evenings and that."

"So I'd think," she agreed. "You were mad to take it."

He hunched but didn't argue with her, so there was something else going on underneath. "Possibly, but now it's done he's right. I... it's only sense. And there's no question of its being about money;
something very odd would have to happen before Evan ever had to worry about it, and I am drawing a stipend. But when he made me see it I thought I’d die of shame. It makes me feel like something filthy from under a rock with its legs crushed off."

"That's nonsense," she told him briskly.

A familiar flash of temper in his eyes shot adrenaline down her spine, though his eyes were only their usual hot black, like hers, not spitting gold. He didn't do anything besides tighten his mouth and clip off, "Nevertheless."

"Did you hit him first?" she demanded, suddenly afraid to her boots where she'd only been edgy before, and angry for him before that.

To her enormous relief, he only looked snide. "As a matter of fact, I was beating the stuffing out of him at the time."

She glared impatiently until he stopped being provocative and elaborated, "With a pillow."

Eileen kept looking at him.

"He'd been making bad jokes about Lily."

She kept looking, even more pointedly.

"It was a pillow fight, Mam, he was laughing!"

She rolled her eyes at boys generally, and especially the ones who scared her over horseplay. "And, what, he clipped you with an elbow?"

Severus looked annoyed. "No, he very deliberately threw me all the way down the hall and barricaded me into a closet," he snapped, not sarcastically.

Her exasperated relief shut off like a faucet.

"Sit down," barked her baby, who she'd never been able to save.

It took some explaining. Particularly the bit where he was apparently living in his boyfriend's parents' house without telling them.

"Why?" she asked, more out of disbelief than curiosity.

"I don't see why we should have to," he crossed his arms mulishly, "Ev's grandfather, maybe, but it's as much Evan's as theirs, and rather more if you ask me, seeing as they're never there."

"Yes, but why?"

"It was quite an expensive flat," Severus muttered, not meeting her eyes. She couldn't tell whether he was embarrassed or only giving her the one reason he had that sounded innocuous. "Good location. One person wouldn't be living in it."

"And here I could have sworn I heard you say Rosier'd never have to worry about money."

He glared at her. "It was our quite expensive flat."

It took her some time to work out why they were pretending not to be living together in the first place, since only muggles would have cared. As she had more than half expected, it boiled down
into Ellie's Boy Is A Panicky Young Idiot Whose Young Man Doesn't Argue With Him Enough.

She told him so.

"It seemed to make sense at the time."

"Seeming's not being, our Very. Why on earth were you trying to keep it from his parents?"

"We weren't, exactly." Severus said—slowly, not sheepishly, so he was planning on keeping something from his parents, too. "Only we weren't expecting to have to discuss it with them so soon. They don't really live there, Mam. They…. drop in. On occasion. Between trips."

"And there's no such thing as owls."

He said, very quietly, eyes on his da's paperbacks, "Evan lived in that house alone with the elf for all his childhood. Their only rights are legal."

She couldn't begin to think of any answer to that. Severus looked as if he couldn't think of any to expect.

They sat in the silence until Eileen found herself talking after all. "We nearly killed you when you were a baby, I think—don't look at me like that," she broke off irritably. "It weren't on purpose. Didn't know what we were doing, that's all. We were both afraid to pick you up, unless you were wrapped too tight to squirm away and we were sitting down, and there wasn't much time to sit down. I was terrified of dropping you when I'd promised there'd be no magic. We thought you'd just got over a colicky phase when you stopped crying, and I'd no friends to tell me different back then."

The betrayal had left his eyes, mostly. He'd just gone very quiet and cautious, which under the circumstances gave her body-memories of dark eyes listless in a tiny face. She would have shuddered, if she hadn't trained that out of herself years ago.

"What happened?"

"Your gran came calling, and barely left long enough to bully Frank Callum out of asking questions when she sent him to fetch her necessaries. That's when I learned about looking after muggles, with her health failing and all. She'd seen a few things in her time, your gran; what she couldn't do herself she could still tell me to."

He hesitated. "Did you get on?"

"We couldn't stand each other, what do you think?" she asked, surprised at the question. She didn't think she'd had one conversation with Irene Hind without coming away feeling ignorant as a goat, and despised for it.

He thought about this, and seemed to find something deeply satisfying in it. He always had been an odd child. "I suppose my grandfather was dead by then. I don't recall your ever talking about him, but you didn't about the Princes, either."

"Couldn't say. Not sure she knew who he was, tell you the truth. I know Toby didn't. It's why he didn't care about waiting until we knew each other better before we got married, I've always thought."

"And you didn't want a traditional marriage," he said quietly, "but you bound yourself just as tightly in the end, all the same."
If he was looking for her to justify not plucking him up and carrying him off into the woods, again, he could hold his breath for it. She did say, "I've kept every promise I've made since I was old enough to know better."

He shot her a look that wasn't sure which part he wanted to judge her over first. "Promises are tricky things. The spoken ones are slippery. Even written ones, unless so tightly created they're shackles. It's the ones that grow quietly between people that have power, but who can know what an unspoken promise means to the one on the other side of it?"

"You'll have to speak plainer than that if you want help, my lad." She took a secret delight in how annoyed he looked, and more from thinking how his face would look if she told him he got that nitpicking solicitor's mind from his da.

"I want," he said irritably, "to know…” he pressed his lips together. While she wanted to tell him it might be late in his life to start learning to spell tact, it was probably her duty as his mother to encourage him in sensible choices, however grotesque the results were likely to be. After a moment's struggle with himself, he went on. She thought she heard his vowels broaden out a touch, the ends of his words lose strength, although he didn't go so far as to start ticking a y into every diphthong it didn't belong in. "Used to be a deal of pancake makeup strolling about."

Evenly, she agreed, "Well, that's a fact." There still was, of course, but not quite so much. It was as if a plague had sat down and made itself comfortable, and had started crawling away slowly. Or someone had set a curse that couldn't quite hold together against even rusting factories.

Not using it herself had been one of her little victories. It had upset everyone, her not doing what a good wife in a bad spot 'ought' to, keeping her problems private, but no one had ever dared say anything. It might have made the times between Toby's bottle-dives shorter, but he hadn't dared either.

" Seems to us as some of it walked through that moat we haven't got to speak to you, now and again."

"Suppose it did?"

"Don't imagine I'm asking after anyone's specifics," he warded off her lecture about letting other people's secrets be. "All I need's to know whether anyone was under the impression it had been done for their own good."

She started for the floo powder again.

Firmly, he said, "No."

She glared at him, but sat back in the end, lips pursed. He looked embarrassed and defensive, yes, but resolute too, and that bullish squaring of his narrow jaw was sick, shaky terror transfigured or she'd never met her boy at all.

He hadn't said no because she was wrong, but she'd play along a little longer, until all the facts were out or he'd said all he was going to. "Just for the sake of the discussion, since I won't be telling you any secrets from my clowder especially now you're grown, let's pretend there've been one or five. What then?"

"I need to know the pattern.” He was done reminding his own mother he was a local, she was glad to hear; Toby could talk about remembering one's roots as much as he liked, but Eileen's roots were in York and in Hogsmeade. The first time Severus had come home with a real Hogwarts accent
sounding more natural in his mouth than his own, Toby had scowled but a weight had flown off Eileen's shoulders, as if she could feel the freedom their son had just won for himself.

It wasn't something she'd ever thought of before then, but she had suddenly seen him soaring away from the dull, bruise-brown mess of worry and misery her life had been then, and she'd been toweringly glad. The hope of it had given her a strength she'd never had before, though it might have come too late. Given it to Severus, too, maybe; he'd found other places to go for his holidays, after that. Maybe even given some to Toby, although she wouldn't go to say he'd been helped half so much by not having to worry about their boy's future as by not having to look at his long hair and listen to him mouth off and, apparently, not talk about girls in the right way.

Not being reminded to talk sense again, she thought, would be a good reward for remembering to talk proper. Instead, she asked, "The pattern?"

He nodded. "Starting with what sorts of 'for their own good' we're talking about."

Telling any stories without giving away any of her women's names to a sharp-eyed boy who'd grown up with their children took some finagling. Finally he sat back, something easing in his face. "In all these cases," he summarized, "'for your own good' boils down to 'be what I say and do what I like.'"

"You could put it that way," she allowed.

"Tell me about when it meant 'I must do this because there's an external threat.' There must have been one."

"You're one," she pointed out, eyebrows edging up.

He was instantly all ice. "I beg your pardon."

She just kept raising them. "And here was me thinking you'd worked out it was fearing you were too brainy for friends and too sensitive to get on without them that got your da worked up when he was sober."

The ice went stormy, which was better. "I'm not sensitive—"

She snorted.

"And one can have both friends and a functioning mind!" He rocketed to his feet and strode over to savagely inked a mote-repelling charm onto the windowsill. That one wasn't much good against the ever-staggering smog, but was surprisingly effective against bugs. She couldn't imagine what it was meant to prove.

"It's more the vinegar tongue that worried me," she told him frankly. "Merlin knows I never had friends at school as didn't want anything from me." She reflected. "Don't now either, mind, but there's a world of difference between neighbors trading help and nasty little girls using each other to stab each other in the back."

He got the what-to-judge-first look and held his tongue for the second time. This bout looked to be more of a struggle. "You're not describing what I meant." He held up a forestalling hand. "Yes, I know you mean that there was concern in it as well as splintered pride. While I don't disagree, I would prefer you not to start making—should I choose to make any sort of peace with him, it'll be for my own reasons."

"It always is," she said dryly. "I'm not excusing him, our Very. Reasons aren't excuses. All I'm
saying is, you asked about external threats. He was afraid of what the world does to boys who put anything above…" She groped. It was a piece of Muggle oddness she'd never understood, however long she'd lived among them. "Above being boy-like. You know, in that Boys Own Adventures sort of way."

"That Gryffindor sort of way," he corrected, only half-heartedly trying not to be snide.

"You don't know why he was so alive to it," she told him, now that he hadn't argued with her about reasons. She'd never brought it up with him before, because there was no excuse and she wasn't saying there was, but he might be old enough now to hear how being the son of a lone woman everyone knew from the music halls had twisted the man who'd twisted him.

"I might know more than you think," she retorted, "and just now I don't care. I meant people hurt because someone was intervening against an immediate threat to them."

"Such as?"

He shrugged. "Dislocating a shoulder ripping them away from a vampire, tackling them out of the path of an oncoming lorry, pushing them out the second-floor window of a burning building, hitting their head shoving them under the bed because the spouse's footsteps are on the stairs? Something like that. Tangible."

That took her a moment—not so much to think of an appropriate case, because no one would be forgetting the disaster with the Abernathies, the bar of lye soap, the goat, and the spade it ate any time soon, but to sort out her competing feelings of pride and what at his putting vampires and lorries in the same sentence as if it were perfectly natural.

"Might have happened once," she allowed. "Things do happen. What about it?"

"Tell me enough about what happened to know if it applies," he demanded.

Something odd was happening to his posture. He'd gone almost relaxed, but in a pouncing-cat sort of way, with calm, sharp, intense eyes. She almost felt that the pounding intensity in the room had gone comfortable. It hadn't, though, only cooler.

She might have said something about that, but she'd given up telling him to stop doing wandless temperature magic the first year they couldn't pay for gas for the stove. As long as nothing grew icicles or caught fire and they never had to explain comfortable air in bad weather to muggles, well enough. So far she hadn't had to explain the rule out loud, which was just as well. If she'd ever put words to it, he'd have found some loophole to hook his fingers into and tug at.

Whatever was going on in his head, she had to sigh. How was she supposed to know which bits he couldn't get on without knowing?

Clever enough to answer her exasperation, he asked, "Had he ever hurt her before?"

"She was the one who got him in the face with a spade, as it happens. But no, and not the other way 'round, either. They were fair young, and it wasn't in the bad years."

He looked appeased, if not actually satisfied. Or, at least, determination had taken a temporary back seat to fascination. "Why—"

"The goat did look a touch harried," she said. "What with the chickens and, all and it had been eating soap. Reckon she didn't know about the soap, didn't think as a goat with rabies should be nibbling on her man's hair—although," she added disapprovingly, "the soap can't have hurt him
any."

For reasons passing understanding, that got a glare out of him whose like she hadn't seen since she'd told him to leave a room instead of fighting back. If there'd been any reason for it, she'd have said he looked betrayed. "The contaminatory properties of soap aside—"

"Real words, if you please."

"You understood it, ergo it communicated, ergo it is real. What happened after?"

She frowned confusion at him. "I put a poultice on it. He's got a scar, but it would have been suspicious if he hadn't and he's right proud of it."

He waved that away. "When was the next time you thought one of them might be hurt?"

That one didn't take thinking about at all. "Oh, Severus," she sighed. "No."

"What one gets away with once, one may again," he insisted.

"Really," she said dryly. "And what have you got away with, my lad, to be so sure?"

"Not answering questions like that, for a start," he sauced her smartly.

"You know that old 'taste of blood' saw is hogwash."

"Not entirely," he said defensively. "Predatory animals don't commonly keep drinking milk once they're on solids and flesh."

"Severus."

"I know the pattern when it starts in anger," he insisted, annoyed right back at her. "I don't know the one where it starts..." he hesitated. "Out of an urgent benignity."

"Your man caring about you is not a cancer, Severus Octavian. Have a care that complete rot you're spouting don't spread to your tongue."

"I thought you didn't like him," he mentioned, amused and, if she was any judge, rather pleased.

"I don't," she snapped. "That snake-in-the-grass of yours—"

"House slur!" he sang out. Really quite happily, considering.

"—Is the most Rosierly Rosier to ever smile pretty and stab you in the back."

"He's more likely to agree with you that starting a trade war with goblins over pink clay is a brilliant idea," he said, looking unusually honest. "Backstabbing would be too much like work."

She might have snorted, but she was too busy putting a hand over her face. "Well, that sounds... specific."

"I thought the man was a prat, myself," Severus mused, "but he may have been a professional rival, as well."

"Severus!"

"What? I'm not getting involved in an Illuminator's Guild war!"
"Not even to stop one starting?"

"Oh, I suspect they've both forgotten about it by now."

She put a hand over her eyes. "Why?"

Even without looking up, she could feel her son judging her. "You really ought to have a subscription to the Prophet, Mam. Not in your name, I still think you're wise not to be on any wizards' lists, but you should get it. I'd be happy to make one for you, since it's my opinion you should have one."

She shot him a disapproving frown from under her fingers: if she'd decided to annoy Toby by subscribing, she'd have gone into Nottingham and made an arrangement. "Why, Very?"

"Well, Evan wasn't serious, and I expect Titus Andronicus or whatever the hell his name is got a bit distracted by the hoods invading the Portkey office."

She dragged her hand at least halfway down her face and stared at him, flat-eyed. "I've been meaning to speak to you about that."

"No, you haven't. Although that reminds me, Professor Dumbledore mentioned that he likes his new spectacles much better and thanked you for the opportunity to make the change."

"I heard you were taken into custody!"

"As a witness," he scoffed, and then remembered himself and added, "Mam." Not half contritely enough, in her opinion. "You also knew I'd got out of custody and was in Bulgaria by the time you knew that. Everyone was taken into custody. They wanted to get it sorted out before the Prophet went to press."

"Lily Evans said you were taken in for adding to the panic."

"Iexpect that's what Potter heard from Pettigrew. I was helping. It's not my fault even the Aurors who do have an imagination have to pretend not to."

She didn't want to know. She did not.

She did, actually, but didn't feel it would be useful to let him get excited about his own cleverness and brag over something that had landed him across the desk from an Auror. "Was anyone hurt?"

"The cattle stampeded," he allowed, with an eye-roll of resigned disgust.

She knew exactly what he meant, which was why she asked severely, "And what were cows doing in the Portkey Office?"

He scowled at her, because he knew what she meant, too. "I don't think there were any injuries," he said stiffly. "that resulted from hostile action, as opposed to chicken-headed panic in a crowded room full of hard, waist-high benches."

Ellie shook her head. "What you expect of people."

"I expected exactly that," he retorted, "which is why there weren't so very many injuries total, because I stuck as many of them as I could manage onto the ceiling out of the way."

Her mouth twitched. "Well. That explains that."
"I had a charming conversation with a Hufflepuff Auror who knew his Humphrey Bogart," he allowed, "but Evan and I had happened to be talking to a couple of Ministry officials when it started—one of them was our downstairs neighbor, so I couldn't get away, d'y'see. So I don't think they were much concerned with us, apart from making sure we hadn't been part of us, trying to ingratiate ourselves with Barty Trout. I mean Crouch."

While older than she, Bartemius Crouch had overlapped a few Hogwarts years with Eileen. She therefore didn't scold Very for that splash of vinegar, since he never felt reprimanded when he could tell you mostly agreed with him, and he generally could tell.

She did, however, lift stony, unimpressed eyebrows at him. "Anything else you'd like to spring on me, while I'm feeling forgiving?"

"Are you?"

"Not particularly, our Very, but how likely d'you think it is to get any better? You haven't distracted me from the question of what's got you so spooked, in case you were wondering."

The look of regretting all his life choices came back. As if he'd rehearsed it, he said, "I don't intend to deliver anyone any information until we've reviewed our strategy."

"What strategy?" she demanded, feeling really quite done with his Slytherinness, this conversation, and, to be truthful, everything remotely touching the world she'd left, up to and including the length of holly running across her spine.

"Telling you I can't tell you is really the best I can do, Mam."

"Tell me why you can't," she retorted.

"Because it wouldn't be currently advisable," he snapped back, and aggressively refilled her teacup. It was still halfway across the room. And then it wasn't.

Ignoring it, she urgently demanded, "Did you do something witless?"

He considered. "Not recently, I think. Just permanent."

It wasn't lost on her that this was the first time she'd seen him after that fight the two of them had had in front of her. She hadn't forgotten what that fight was about. Now, his first visit after that, he was fishing for reassurance about Rosier's likelihood of emulating his da.

She closed her eyes for a second, and silently counted to twenty. Then she tried it in Latin, then in Greek.

Twenty wasn't enough.

Severus didn't break and start shifting uneasily until she was at LXXVI. It was a feat of patience for which she was distantly proud of him, but about which she was also spitefully gleeful because of what that much commitment to patience gave away. She was sure she was right, in which case his behavior was deplorable and he ought to know it.

Once he looked uncomfortable enough to leave her assured that he properly felt her displeasure, it occurred to her that he'd come to see her.

Which meant he hadn't meant for anything he'd done to change things between him and his parents. That might just be more than she'd had a right to hope for, between the rough time he'd had in this
home and the karmic burden of what she'd done to her own parents—although on that count she felt entirely paid-up.

She wanted to sigh, but that would be giving in. "If you've done something permanent, our Very, you're meant to tell me."

She could see the massive effort it took him not to point out that she herself had eloped. That was some consolation. Not just because he knew he was in the wrong, but because he was learning not to spit out every drop of acid that washed over his mind.

Instead, he looked at her consideringly, and then tossed back a corner of his mantle and rolled up his right sleeve, displaying nearly flesh-colored knotwork above the elbow, looking more like scars than ink, except for being quite flat. She examined the intricate band of tattoo, barely darker than his flesh, with trellis written over and over, close-crammed runes making up its bold lines like brushstrokes, like wood grain.

"Do you think it'll annoy Da if I show him?" he asked as cheerfully as if his soul was the same age as the rest of him, which it never had been in his life. "Or will he take it as dockworker-like masculine nonsense and be pleased?"

"I think he's about resigned," she said dryly, "and that it's not as subtle as you think."

"Then I won't bother." His eyebrows, though, as he rolled his sleeve back down, told her that since he'd been missing so much information about wizarding ceremonies he doubted his father was any better informed.

"Does it mean anything in particular," she played along with him. He was being sly, telling her something in a way she could say later had meant something completely different, but after his last visit she understood he thought he had cause.

He hesitated, and hedged, "It's… a reminder of my obligations."

"I should hope my lad doesn't need reminding of those."

"Motivating, perhaps, at times." He hesitated again. "It's meant to mean something in particular. I don't want that meaning to change."

"As far as I can see, the only one trying to change anything's meaning is you," she snapped.

Naturally, he went somewhere strange and defensive with it. "I'm not trying to make any comparisons," he protested, stung by his own paranoid brain into seeing insults everywhere, even out of his own mouth.

"Did I say you were? All I see you doing is looking for reasons to be afraid," she shot at him.

He went very still. She couldn't see what was happening behind his eyes.

She folded her arms; she couldn't be having with any of that. "You know as well as anyone that one kind of untrustworthiness isn't all kinds. Your da's never given me more than a moment's suspicion he might do more than look at another woman, you know. Save your worry about your young man for what he might do himself, not what someone else might."

"And what is that," Severus said in a flat voice.

"You tell me." That was all she was going to say when he looked about yea close to not so much as
owling her for months on end and she didn't have all the facts.

"What he might do," her boy said, tight-lipped, "is decide the first hare-brained method of keeping things safe and peaceful for us that occurs to him is worth any lesser collateral damage, even to himself or me, and enact that method with no discussion, no warning, and no pause for thought. That's what he did last night. He's done it before. That's what worries me."

"Oh he's that kind of overbearing," she concluded sourly. "Can't say I'm surprised."

"No," he contradicted her choice of adjective shortly. "Da couldn't stand to feel ashamed—Evan doesn't know how to breathe through fear. He... strikes."

"Seems to me if he cares about you at all, he must have been afraid for about four years solid," she noted in a calmer tone. She didn't mind this so much; probably for the same reasons her very loudly Slytherin son did. At least, she didn't mind providing Very wasn't blinded by his heart, which would have been far from unheard of. "You made it sound as if you never had any good company in detentions, though. Doesn't sound much like striking every time he worries to me."

"That's because," he started to retort, and then sat back instead with an intently thoughtful face.

"Hmm," he uttered at last. "You may have a point. Let me know if there's a problem with the runes, and ta for the tea."

And then he was gone, with no further faretheewell beyond a loud crack. Which was why, when Toby came home from the library several hours later, she had a sore throat and was still swearing.

When she looked, later, he had sneaked wizarding money into her tin. Just enough for two rides on the Knight Bus.

Eileen had no idea where he'd found his regrettable notion that running away was a good first solution to any given problem; certainly not from her. He'd left enough coin for her to run with Toby, though, rather than from him, so she took a scrap of leather and made a compartment for them at the bottom of her wand-sheath, and let be.
September 3: Garden Studio, Rosier Hall

Chapter Summary

Severus expresses himself clearly and doesn't run off to do anything crazy.

Speaking of which, I have this bridge you might be interested in, lovely view of Brooklyn.

Chapter Notes

**Warnings** for the usual issues resulting from not-good-enough parenting.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I don't think this is going to work out, Evan," Spike said calmly as he let himself into the studio.

Evan promptly slapped himself across the face.

It hurt, but he was still in the cool studio that got the best evening light in the Hall, and Severus was still right there. Looking at him like he was crazy.

He pinched himself, and then grabbed one of the brushes, hovering patiently now that his eyes had left the bowl of veg, out of the air to stab his arm roughly with the back end.

He was reaching for a palette knife when the only things he really wanted touching him grabbed his wrists and stayed closed on them, warm and anchoring and almost too hard. "What do you imagine you're doing," Severus demanded flatly.

"I'm waking up," Evan explained, his voice too high-pitched. "It's always a nightmare when you say that, but that hurt and you're still here, but maybe if I went up and jumped off the roof; they say you always wake up before you hit the ground…"

The long, warm hands were cupping his face now, and Severus's face was so close he couldn't see anything but worried, incredulous eyes. "No one is jumping off anything," Spike said, which was decidedly not how these dreams generally went. And what if it wasn't a dream? They were handfast now, what if Severus had thought better of things now he'd realized what it was going to be like? No, it had to be one! "Breathe."

"No," Evan protested. "If I put my face in your throat and breathe, you'll dig your fingers into my neck and start telling me about all my character flaws and how they aren't in the least appealing and you should have known better since I'm naturally Gryffindor-colored, and then you'll spin on your heel and sneer at me and stalk off and slam the door, I know how these things go!"

Severus stared at him, and then one hand turned around so the backs of Spike's fingers were brushing his face. "I'd say you have quite reality-based nightmares," he said with a whimsical eyebrow up, "except that their premise is so utterly bollocksed."
Evan stared at him, possibly a bit wildly.

"I should switch to dreaming about cyclopean monohorned pentapods made of flesh-eating violet oatmeal, if I were you," Spike advised him. "At least then you'd be afraid of something reasonable, and have something to paint afterwards."

Evan felt himself start to shake halfway through the warm, possessive, mildly-concerned kiss that swallowed his attention then. Spike doesn't pull pranks, he reminded himself. Spike can be harsh, but he isn't mean.

The let's-be-accurate Spike-voice in his head reminded him of hundreds of Slytherin essays, some his own, sliced up with acid comments in jagged, spidery black ink dripping red despair.

Mean is Spike's native dialect, he amended, but he's never cruel just for fun.

He found they'd ended up leaning together on the floor, but it wasn't like after Evans—Lily had slapped him. The light looked the same; he hadn't lost any time. He'd only forgotten to control his knees.

"Spike?" he asked eventually.

"Lunatic?"

"What don't you think is going to work out?"

"Living somewhere that isn't completely ours, porridge-brains."

"Oh." He slumped down so his forehead was resting on Spike's collar. "Okay."

Suddenly sharp, Spike snapped, "Don't you dare give in just because I frightened you."

"Oh, I see, you think I enjoyed this morning more than you," Evan replied, dry enough to be very nearly Spikely.

Or so he thought, but Spike (predictably) managed to be drier still when he returned, "Unless you also tried to supervise experimental Ravenclaws while trying to manage a concussion, I rather think you did."

Evan stared at him. He'd thought the adrenaline had ebbed, but apparently it had just been biding its time, waiting for its chance. "Concussion," he repeated blankly.

In what Ev considered to be an obscenely brisk tone of voice, Severus said, "I've had all day to think about it—"

"I just woke up an hour ago," Ev noted, still blankly.

He hopefully waited for Spike to make a withering remark about which side of the lunch hour they were on, and did not get less scared when Spike just went on being brisk. "I've had all day to think about it," he repeated, "and if you treat an accidental injury like a great, important wrongdoing you have to make up for, I will almost certainly lose all perspective and do something regrettable."

"...Like what?"

"Like convince myself you might do it again, and do it due to heart failures I shan't elaborate or dwell on, as the idea is not, in fact, a relevant one. So you aren't going to apologize, or tell me you truly do care for me really you do, or make it up to me in any way. We're simply going to work out
how to make sure you never feel you have to do anything remotely like it ever again."

"Don't tell me I can't tell you I love you," Evan erupted, briefly too indignant to have room for the worry. "I adore you when you're being all competent and ruthless and clear-headed, and you know it!"

Spike paused, his tight-mouthed determined glint giving way to a quirky crinkle. "Well," he conceded, "as that cannot in any wise be construed as cozening or an apology, I suppose I must accept it."

"I don't understand what's going on," Ev told him plaintively.

"I need you to avoid acting like a man who hurt someone he lives with, and won't be able to stop himself doing it again the next time he loses his temper," Spike explained evenly. After a moment, just a touch too fast, he added, "I would also appreciate it if you didn't drink for a week or two. The smell of wine probably wouldn't do my head in, but I'd prefer if you could avoid risking it."

Evan had a powerful urge to put his head between his knees and hyperventilate, but he was fairly sure that would fall under the category of showing he felt badly. Also, he'd dripped the naples yellow he'd been using on the shadows of the squash onto his trousers when Spike startled him; he didn't particularly need a lead-antimony preparation smeared on his unprotected face. The charms in the cloth shielded his legs and he worked with fume-binders, but that wouldn't help if he touched the stuff directly.

"Because I know you were just trying to protect us," Severus went on, quiet and firm. "And so am I. Because if we aren't both very careful, knowing better won't stop me… getting confused."

After a moment's careful thought, Evan informed him, "You're a very difficult person to keep up with, and I wouldn't trade it for anything."

Severus very nearly cracked a smile. "I should hope you wouldn't," he said agreeably, "as everyone else who can manage it terrifies me and is either several times our age or has a regrettable predilection for platinum blonds and living in a manner I find silly."

Evan smiled at him, possibly for about thirty seconds too long. "How are you spelling 'manor'?"

"I'm not particular."

He was close enough to kiss. Which was good, because Evan didn't entirely trust his knees. "So living here won't do."

"I can't imagine how, myself." Spike looked expectant, apparently under the impression that living under Dad's roof was something Ev cared about enough to fight for. As opposed to something he'd reluctantly suggested because it would solve the problem of who was going to feed Evan when Spike didn't have time, as Evan's cooking lessons had been confined to potions class and his repertoire was limited to salad, sandwiches, boiled eggs, and stew.

And would, more importantly, solve the problem of how to stop Diagon Alley treating Evan like a very accessible and eligible bachelor without the dread flatmate Snape to scare people away from suggesting he bring them home.

"Well, they know you're here now." Evan tried not to be apologetic about it, since he'd been asked. It wasn't possible, though, to keep from sounding guilty when he admitted, "Talking to my mum on three hours sleep was, er, not likely to turn out well."
Spike glared at him, and didn't bother pointing out that it had been completely Evan's choice to do that alone.

"It wouldn't have turned out well for you, either, Spike."

"I would have had a head to keep," Spike retorted. "Some of us don't need nine hours to walk in a straight line."

He shrugged. "And some of us can talk around the truth without sitting down to think about it first." Spike made a sour face, but didn't argue. So Ev told him, "I need to kiss you again."

"...Do you?"

"You made the grumbly I Can't Argue With That face," he explained. "It's required."

"This is insecurity," Severus sterned at him. "Desist."

"Well, now it's unavoidable," Evan noted philosophically.

It took a while to get back on track, Spike half-heartedly pointing out that Evan would be sad if he somehow ruined his still-life from halfway across the room and Evan having to explain about initial experiments that weren't expected to turn out well while being much more interested in getting his mouth under Spike's shirt. In the end, Evan felt less insecure and had presumably stopped giving off whatever little signals Spike's brain was, out of habit, interpreting as guilt.

"All right," Spike eventually said in a gravelly, treacly voice that said the agitated anthill he called his brain had been nuzzled into submission and now he'd rather be napping. Evan deeply sympathized. "Your parents know I'm here. What does that mean, exactly?"

Evan cringed a bit, but avoiding getting yelled at now would bite him in the long run. "I didn't tell them about the caves, but Mum and Linkin are sure anyway."

Severus didn't tense against him. Which was a very mixed surprise, as it made the anticipation worse. He was half-glad he couldn't see Spike's face as he explained about house elves and their Houses.

"What about your father?"

"I don't know. He was more interested in comparing mask sketches. And in expressing how much you annoy him."

Going bright-eyed, Severus made a pleased noise.

"...Er?"

"Porridge-appreciation isn't universal, Ev, and preferred seasonings vary widely. Do you recall, at school, being unobtrusive and pleasant and yet still finding yourself being unaccountably provoked by Mulciber? Or, for that matter, Karkaroff?"

"You mean sometimes taking an easy and unsuspicious way to distract Mulciber from plotting clever little pranks on people who weren't from families he was afraid to annoy? Or stopping the bug-eater from drooling all over you so hard you realized and got uncomfortable?"

Severus twisted around in his arms to eye him with an inscrutable expression. Before long at all, it turned into the blandly smug look that Evan had learned (or possibly just decided) to interpret as
meaning *ha, Universe, he's mine, so there*. He hummed thoughtfully.

Watching him silently revise his entire strategy for dealing with Evan's dad, all the little turning wheels accompanied by an intrigued uptick at the left of his mouth, Ev found it necessary to tackle him again. Tackling someone you were already holding was a bit of a tactical challenge, but Evan considered himself a reasonably determined sort when he put his mind to it.

Not because Dad was about to lose his advantage if no one distracted Severus. That never worked anyway; Severus was only ever temporarily distractible. Just because.

"And other than that," he asked lazily, some little while after Spike had stopped protesting about silly things like we have to strategize and it's the middle of the afternoon, "how was your day?"

Spike's shoulderblades did an annoyed wiggle. While Evan regretted losing the relaxed slope of them, it was an awfully pretty little bunch-and-squirm. He quietly flicked a vine out to grab a sketchbook and pencil (holding back seemed pointless after last night, after Spike had caught him shadowboxing in Bulgaria, after Madam Flamel had apparently turned him into a flailing rosebush-monster and Spike had just grabbed him tighter) and started capturing the shadows while his hands zeroed in on that ever-present neck-knot.

"They sent me off," Spike said, trying to sound disgruntled while having his shoulders rubbed, "for making a Ravenclaw cry—"

"Firstie?"

"Hardly. Just wet. And before that, I got into a screaming row with Cleo Blakeney."

Evan sat up a bit, which obviously necessitated digging an elbow into Spike's back. Obviously. For leverage. Not at all because it was unlikely Cleo had needed to start off her morning with a row with Spike, especially after whatever had happened last night. Nor, indeed, as a hint that being elbowed would be less painful if Spike's back were more padded and less ripply. Purely for leverage.

"With Cleo?" he checked, incredulous. "I'm having trouble picturing this, Spike."

"My descriptor might be adjusted for personality," Spike allowed.

"You mean she was very quietly cross at you." Maybe it was her way of getting Spike to notice her enough that she could be sure he'd pass on her message?

"All I said," Spike complained, "was that if having her school robes made in silk was an option, she should have been doing it from the start, and she ought to keep a log of how it affected her class performance so we could finally do a case study, at least, towards confirming light armour doesn't interfere with spellcasting—because, really, why would it, it's not as if one is generally casting through one's robes—and did she have any particular tendencies in the accidental magic department, because theoretically it ought to help contain— why are you laughing at me?"

Evan failed to stop dissolving long enough to explain that it was because he was too spent to respond to this jaw-dropping failure of common sanity with the gobsmacked and appalled adoration it deserved. All he could get out right off was, "Oh, Spike."

Since that, apparently, wasn't enough to explain to Spike that this was not the correct way to address a young lady who, the very day after having a clothing-based encounter with you, had elected to change her entire wardrobe, he elaborated, "Spike, heart, no."
Thoroughly irked, Spike demanded, "Are you attempting to communicate?"

Evan found himself trying to explain, at the same time, both how bad an idea that had been and how perfectly it encapsulated everything about Spike that, however mental and disastrous, made the world alive and bearable. He didn't get very far, because he was laughing too hard. Feeling Spike's shoulders tighten up grumpily under his forehead didn't help. Fortunately he'd already finished his sketch; it would have been a dead loss otherwise.

Winding down, he snuggled his nose into Spike's offended back and allowed, "Well, I'm sure she'll forgive you; at least you didn't insult them or tell her she couldn't."

Severus shrugged (so Evan made a happy little noise and twined around him more tightly). "I would have done it myself, if I'd had money—don't start, I meant my own money."

"I didn't say anything."

"I could hear you thinking it."

"You could hear Narcissa thinking it; I'd learned about you and presents by the start of third year."

Severus made an unconvinced noise. "Well, I would have. There's no issue with it. It isn't as if there's a uniform, strictly speaking, no matter what Mr. Malkin wants his customers to believe. The school letter just says plain black work robes, it doesn't specify the material, or even the cut. I suppose silk slightly stretches the definition of 'plain,' but still."

"There's the jumpers and ties, though," Evan pointed out, wondering why what the robes were made out of had anything to do with it, so long as they weren't covered in frogging or frills or whatnot.

"Yes, but people alter even those all the time. Taking off the sleeves, transfiguring the hems... In fact, I recall a certain Hufflepuff who couldn't look at you without her tongue hanging out—"

"I can't help it if people think I'm pretty and like money, Spike."

"You were walking out with her for a week," Spike accused.

Evan shrugged, rubbing his nose into Spike's spine and not sure what Spike thought was worth an accusation. "She ambushed me with sex on the first date," he recalled with a smile. "She would have been able to paint me as all sorts of cad if I hadn't eased her out of being interested. I didn't like her enough to give her that much bargaining power."

"Ambushed," Spike repeated archly. He paused, then asked in a frowning voice, "Didn't you go to a Ravenpuff game on your first date? I'm sure you did. Lily, Lupin, Ben Goldstein and I sat together in the Ravenclaw stands to work on that Arithmancy project with the vectors; I'm sure I saw your hair across the field. And I don't recall you coming back from it especially late."

"Mmm-hm," Evan agreed drowsily. Spike's skin was all smooth and smelling like just-him instead of his soap in the aftermath of his freshening charm. As much as Evan loved Spike's soap, it was a nice change. He'd have to make a point of jumping Spike when it would be impractical to shower afterwards more often. "She got very excited when Hufflepuff was ahead, and bounced around a lot. And then she sort of went sideways until she was doing the bouncing on my lap and I found out she wasn't wearing any underthings."

"...I knew I should have shredded her spleen for sausage-casings."

"...How were you going to make a stretchy tube out of shredded spleen?"

Spike tried to wave an airy hand, but all he could really do was flutter his fingers against the floor. "I'm not that bad at transfiguration. But, as I was saying before you decided to re-traumatize me—"

"I was hoping you'd get jealous," Evan said sadly around the knob at the base of his neck.

"Too late. She, Wilkes, and Malfoy were—stop grinning, you realize I can feel that—were living proof that there aren't any rules about customizing one's robes, even if most of the children this year seem to have just accepted what they were given at Malkin's."

"Such a sad lack of imagination," Evan lamented, really not caring at all about anything except the coalfire curl of his hair over Spike's. Lily was right: Spike had already been jealous of his dates in fourth year. Everything about that was brilliant except for Ev being an idiot, and even that was all right since he'd learned better.

"I imagine the Slytherins will start getting creative now I've put constraints on them," Spike said cheerfully.

Evan announced, "I'm eyeing you in confusion."

"You've got your whole face mashed into my trapezius," Spike contradicted him tolerantly. "I can feel a single line of eyelash and nothing so wet as sclera or cornea. You're not eyeing anything."

"In my head I am," he explained.

The hum this earned him was, in Evan's opinion, extended to an unnecessarily sarcastic length. "I don't have some pressing desire to squash their individualism," Spike explained with (again unnecessary) patience. "I want them to learn basic safety precautions and practice how to get what they want without breaking the letter or spirit of rules that limit their options."

Evan stopped short. Not that he was, particularly, doing anything, but he had a distinct feeling of grinding to a halt. "You're going to regret that," he predicted slowly, "and, unrelatedly, I'm sorry."

"Pardon?" Severus inquired in an offended, eyebrow-lifting Didn't I Warn You tone.

"I'm sorry," Evan repeated. He was sure of his ground, even if Spike did have bizarre ideas about what it was acceptable to apologize for. "I was in the position to you that Slughorn is now for—"

"Never say that again!"

"For years," Evan pressed on firmly. "I didn't expect you to start being brilliant on day two, and I didn't see what you were up to yesterday morning. I just saw you were letting yourself in for it; I didn't realize you were doing it out of ambition. I underestimated you, and I'm sorry."

Spike was silent.

"Oh, give over, DF," Ev advised, tolerating him and his inability to take compliments in turn. "I didn't say setting yourself up as the obstacle fourth-year Slytherins have to work around isn't suicidal, I'm just apologizing for not realizing it was one of the points of the exercise. Did you, at some point, take a class in making things difficult for yourself that I wasn't invited to?"

Spike relaxed and started arguing that his stupidly brilliant plan was multifaceted and not stupid. Evan rested on him, quietly planning what they'd need out of a flat this time, occasionally pointing out how Spike was being silly, and smiling.
When he got back around to complaining about expecting more understanding from Cleo, Evan prompted him, "Say hullo from me next time you see her, by the way."

"If you insist," grudged Spike.

And that was it.

"She didn't pass along a hullo for me?" he asked, suddenly alert but just making his voice sad and neglected, in case Spike was just demonstrating his sterling grasp of social skills and actually she had.

But instead of realizing this hope, Spike dryly advised him, "Leave thinking you're the center of the universe for Luke and our elders, Ev; comparatively few people pause their tower of righteous indignation to pass along their regards to connections of the person they're yelling at."

"Just because you don't," Ev disagreed mildly. "Actually it's called 'a veneer of civilization' and is 'comparatively' common, although I will grant you that most people get it out of the way before they start shouting. What about Narcissa, though? Cleo can't have had a fight about clothes with you and not brought Narcissa into it."

"I don't see why not."

"...Really? You don't? You don't see how it would have helped her to instantly win without having to bother to devise even a half-decent argument?"

"...She did not pause, while hissing at me, to pass along any greetings to anyone. Which is not something I would have expected her, or anyone, to do. Why do you?"

Evan was silent, and then asked, "Was this before or after the morning owls came?"

"Just after lunch; she had a late package from home. Slughorn had asked me to tell her to remind her parents owls are meant to be sent overnight, I assume because he didn't wish his own name associated with any annoyance Armand Blakeney might feel, merely over school rules, and when I approached she was telling her roommates it was—" Severus stopped. He turned around under Evan (lovely), frowning. "Cleo wrote you last night?"

"I don't like this," Evan frowned, too concerned to properly appreciate Spike being a brilliant puzzle-solver. "I told her to have you send a greeting for both of us if she didn't think it was so urgent I'd have ask the Battering Cobra of Unsubtle Nosiness Who Has To Know Everything And Then Shouts About It to sneak me into school more quickly than might be properly advisable."

Spike took the expected pause to be offended, but, also as expected, let it go in favor of being worried and curious. "What's this about?"

"I don't know, Spike. Her note said she wanted to talk to only me, but she didn't say discretion was more important than haste."

"Which is quite unlike Cleo, though I suppose she might have meant you to take it as read," Spike frowned. While Ev didn't exactly let himself be distracted by Spike's letting go his ego in favor of the salient point, he also didn't fail to remark to himself that he'd somehow attached himself to someone who, having been conspired against and insulted, wasn't going to make Evan pay until the more pressing concerns had been sorted.

"...I'm alarmed," Spike noted warily, "so why are you grinning like a maniac?"
"Because I can multitask," Evan said loftily. "Now—"

"You can barely single-task."

"And yet I'm currently demonstrating that I can multitask better than you."

"She you didn't can't say at what's all wrong?"

Evan paused. "I'm going to get a quill and parchment," he declared valiantly, "and then you're going to say that again."

Spike burst out laughing, which was to say that his eyes crinkled up, his diaphragm quivered, and he smirked intolerably.

"I said I could multitask," sulked Evan, "not converse in mechanical code."

"It was a very simple 1:1 wordweave, Ev, not even veiled. I really would have thought—"

"Oh, yes, you just want to be right, Gordian Knot in my pasta, you don't care about winning at all…"

Spike shot him a look that Evan elected to interpret as adoration for his memory, but obligingly moved on. "She didn't even hint at what was wrong?"

He shook his head. "Not in the least communicative," he said grimly, "except through the lateness of the hour."

Severus sighed. "In some respects, it would be simplest to invite her to my room at the castle and let you two speak there, but I think a certain someone might get shirty, were I to be sacked for hosting an adolescent in my room unsupervised."

"Slughorn used to do it all the time," Evan said, not convincing himself at all.

"Slughorn did it in his office, not his bedroom. I don't have an office. Furthermore, he's protected by decades of not creating memorable scandals," Spike reminded him patiently. "He's effectively got tenure."

"Got what?"

"He would be much harder to sack than I would."

"Well, obviously; the Giant Squid would be harder to sack than you would."

"Thank you," Severus drawled drolly. "For so clearly illustrating my point."

"Because the Giant Squid is not employed," Evan elaborated, wishing Spike were the other way 'round so Evan could see his mouth screw sideways and his throat and eye twitch.

"Irrespective of the Giant Squid, we're left with a logistical challenge. I trust you agree that flaunting the vanishing cabinet would be wasteful with information in a way we're not yet pressed to be."

Evan had to take a second to decipher that, then agreed, "No, we shouldn't assume things are that urgent. Er, but my parents do know it's there. And Linkin. They don't think I can use it, though."

"We should never have come here," Spike said flatly.
"Well, we can see that now we have a second to breathe," Evan said philosophically.

"You mean I panicked."

"I mean we agreed it would look suspicious to stay," Evan reminded him firmly, "and didn't have enough notice to think it through and find a new place before leaving the country for a month on very short notice."

"But we need to do better, the next time we're shaken up like that," Spike said, tight-mouthed.

"I'll take care of it, Spike."

"We 'took care of it' together, last time," Spike objected.

"Er… not really, I just gave you veto power. I did all the scouting and talking to landlords and that."

"But you suggested two flats that actually looked out onto Diagon, one that was numerologically disastrous, one that was on a fouled ley line—"

"I didn't like that one, Spike, it was just the only half-livable one in the Alleys with a price tag that didn't make you turn blue."

"It was in Knockturn!"

"Literally the only one, Spike."

"And who was it checked the plumbing and the fireproofing spells and that the ceilings wouldn't leak and—"

"Yes, but I watched you do all that, and I've lived with you outside a dorm long enough now to know what makes you twitch."

"Hm," Spike grumbled.

Evan hesitated. "But, Spike?"

Spike eyed him suspiciously.

"You're going to have to trust me this time. I can take sketches for you to look at, but I can't bring you around with me."

"I realize that." Such reasonable-sounding words, but Spike was clearly unhappy about them.

"And there's something you're going to like even less."

Spike's eyes narrowed.

"You realize this is, as far as everyone else is concerned, going to be my home, right?"

"Yes…?"

"As in, just mine."

There was further narrowing.

"That means it's going to be suited to my circumstances."
"You're stalling."

Evan sighed. "This conversation would be easier," he told the window, "if we'd already had the one about joint vaults." It had, he reflected, felt slightly less deranged to direct his remarks to the toy goat. At least that had eyes.

He could see Spike lining up three or six reasons why it was reasonable for him to give Evan money towards rent, and realize none of them made sense because of Hogwarts giving him a closet (and a wardrobe) instead of a living wage. Immediately afterwards, he saw Spike decide to throw them against the wall anyway, just in case Evan didn't realize.

"No," he preempted Spike gently. "You can't. I'm not being nice because you're barely getting a stipend, Severus. I'm not even going to do you the lecture about what 'ours' means."

Severus looked so mulish that Evan had to grin blithely at him and amend, "Today."

Severus scowled.

Evan grinned wider, until the scowl went deep and scrunched-up enough to show he'd made his point. Back to serious, he pressed, "I have to insist about this because letting you contribute financially from the vault that's in your name would be careless. Goblins wouldn't talk, but bankers aren't the only ones who can look at where money goes. We've already got one Auror who would know where to start if he wanted to ask questions about us, my parents have suspicions, Linkin is only theoretically in the dark, Mrs. Prince was at our handfasting. And my solicitor is making enquiries about the Prince's marriage contract."

"Because I don't have a solicitor."

"You should, but that's besides the point, which is: it looks like what it is. Or, at least, what it was a few months ago."

"Same thing," Spike said, because he was stubborn and didn't want to admit Evan had been right. As if he hadn't already admitted things felt different now.

Ev refrained from making any airily pointed comments on that score. "The way I see it, we can start putting a much higher priority on keeping this secret or we can give up and post the announcement in the Prophet before all my relations take offense at not being told."

Spike chewed on that, not liking the taste much. Ev hadn't expected him to. Eventually, he sighed, "We were better at this at school."

"At school," Evan said, instead of in hindsight, not really, "the danger was clear and present. I didn't like it much, but keeping a distance between us outside the dungeons kept me in a position to help you."

"That wasn't—!"

"It wasn't your reason," Evan agreed. "It was mine. Game's changed, Spike. Looking allied is more useful than it is dangerous, for us both. It lets us do useful things that would be suspicious if we acted like strangers. Let's be honest—I don't think my dad is sure, but my mum absolutely is—"

"Mine, too," Severus admitted, sullen and a bit nervous. "I… she and Da don't matter the way your father does."

Evan paused; he wanted that story. It could wait till they were less busy and Spike had his hackles
down. "Well, there you are. At this point we're only guarding ourselves against public knowledge, and just because you are the DF of all DFs doesn't mean everybody—"

"He doesn't like you," Spike said.

"...Your dad? I am aware, Spike," Evan laughed. "It's funny."

"No. He doesn't," Spike said, with a meaningful arm-jiggle.

"...Oh. Er, does he have to?"

"Evan, as far as I can tell, he doesn't actively dislike Bast Lestrange."

Evan had to take a minute to examine this strange idea. He could understand being guided by other things than personal animus when choosing who to punish, but he felt that anyone who didn't want to stay as far away from Bast Lestrange as possible was lacking something fundamental. To wit, the most basic sense of self-preservation.

"You are insufferably posh," Severus said flatly. "Insufferably. I spent all of our first two years at Hogwarts on the verge of slamming your head into a wall every time you opened your mouth, and any time I mentioned you or Mulciber in a letter I was calling you the home-team Hooray Henries. Which, before you ask, was not a compliment, and I used it to reassure the nearly-sixty-year-old muggle-raised man with class insecurity," he gave Evan a meaningful look, "who is my father that I despised you and everything you stood for."

"...We were friends the second half of second year, Spike," Evan blinked. He'd caught the implication about Voldemort's presumed feelings, of course, given that Spike had delivered it with a sledgehammer and Mr. Snape only looked that old, but understanding Spike was important.

"It took a while to get used to you."

"Until we came back from summer break for third year," Evan guessed shrewdly, "and I didn't stop being your friend."

"...Shut up. My point is: you speak as if you're trying to yawn around a mouthful of toffee, and Narcissa and Reggie sewnd laik theaya ah kayah-fulleh hewlding sahmtheeng dillicut in theaya miwths."

"That's awful, Spike," Evan laughed. He'd heard the phrase 'vowels that could cut glass' before, of course, but he thought one of the ancient windows had actually cracked a little up top. In protest against a half-blood from a mostly Gryffindor family mocking Druella Rosier's daughter, maybe. The window would just have to live with it, or not, because Evan loved it when Spike was brave enough to lift his hawk's beak up pertly to tease Narcissa.

"I was spot-on," Spike retorted, "you're just not used to it from me."

"I meant," he said fondly, "that Slughorn and Narcissa would team up to skin you if they knew you could send that kind of social signal and aren't bothering."

"Bothering isn't the question; no one would believe it. I can speak like this and sound unexceptional—"

Evan laughed at him.

"—Shut up. As if I'm making a effort that's laudably respectful to wizarding standards, then, rather
than having the effrontery to be outrageously pretentious. I believe he made the same calculation at some point; you know his accent is too pristine to be unstudied. What does that tell you?"

"I'm sure I know everything I need to about him from from looking at his exquisite boots."
Voldemort's voice had also had a strange—strangely familiar—quality at Evan's last meeting with him. Not quite husky, almost reedy. But he was sure that wasn't what Spike was getting at.

Spike, as expected, looked as if he had noticed nothing untoward about Voldemort's awful boots of faking--it and gullibility, and possibly hadn't even noticed he wore them with socks. Which was to say: confused. "I mean that you know my theory about his background."

"No, I don't, as you don't have any suicidal theories."

Spike appeared to remember that they were in the open and hadn't put any conversation-protecting spells up. Evan would have felt badly about how rattled he clearly was on so little sleep, if he was currently allowed to feel guilty about anything.

"...Right. Well. Regardless of any chips that anyone may or may not have precariously balanced upon their theoretical shoulders."

"I got it, Spike," Evan smiled down at him, constitutionally incapable of not thumbing down his cheekbone towards his ear. Once he was there he considered he might as well keep it up.

Severus wasn't in the mood. "You don't look as if you adore him at meetings. To be blunt, you don't look as if you're paying attention at meetings. You aren't clamouring to kill or die for him. You're not doing anything for him your father couldn't do, you haven't shown him any brilliant successes, and Evan, he is a Slytherin. If we know nothing else about him, we know that. When we were talking to Dumbledore's friend, we called him a basilisk for a reason."

"...You're saying I'm a liability to you?" Evan tried to get his head around that.

"I think he might prefer it if none of us cared about anyone but him," Spike temporized, and then his eyes fell away. "Because," he said, sounding as if the words were giving him trouble, "devotion is a lever. It gives the beloved power over the devotee. You don't show you feel he has power over you, Evan. I don't think he likes that. He has a new policy about things he doesn't like, doesn't he."

"I don't think he'd do anything to me that couldn't be lived with," Evan said slowly. "Not to sound like Lucius, but my father—"

"Oh, god, Evan," Spike burst out furiously, hands shooting up to claw into his own hair, "are you going to make me say it?"

Not furiously. Furiously ashamed.

Evan stared, a bit blankly.

Spike let the ink of his hair slip from his fingers, but his hands were still clenched. One of them clenched around his wand, slashing out a privacy spell. "Who did you think I meant," he asked, very low, "when I kept saying our enemies might use us to control each other."

"...My cousin's gang? Someone who wanted some commission I got, or who was going to publish but you got there first, maybe. Or someone who wanted money, I suppose." He certainly didn't have to worry about either of them suddenly disappearing, although probably Spike's mum should be looking out for herself.
Severus's lips went thin. Silently, he shook his head. "Solely for my clumsiness, or insolence, or as a matter of training," he said, almost voicelessly, "I had, I think, taken his pain curse perhaps ten or fifteen times before Dartmoor.

"It's no matter," he raised his voice, as if volume would make it true, when all of Evan's muscles tried to turn into gobstones. "It doesn't matter, Evan! You know I have a restorative potion; it doesn't matter. I only mention it to show that he believes I'm his so absolutely that nothing he does will lose me—and that the man who believes this has just begun to use pain and humiliation as public lessons."

"We are going to destroy him, you and I," Evan noted, smiling distantly because he felt too glass-like to do anything else without shattering sharp splinters all over Spike.

"Yes, Evan, that's been the idea since it became clear that his movement wasn't malleable and neither you nor Regulus could bring yourselves to disappoint your more fanatically deluded parental figures," Spike said patiently. "To say nothing of the emerging health implications of his stated opinions for, best case, dozens of Britons, more likely hundreds if not thousands. Including my best friend, her parents who were, in their own self-comfortably conventional way, remarkably kind to me, and my mother."

Or, rather, he said it urgently, though there was something patient about it. But Evan was finding the air a bit wavery at the moment and possibly wasn't hearing him properly, or maybe not at the right speed.

"...And me da, I suppose. But that might take some time," Spike went on in his using-small-words-tolerantly voice, "and until there's an outstandingly effective opening I'm quite content to only invite his displeasure on my own account, at a rate I can more or less control, for the sake of managing his opinion of me. I don't think you'd like it much if he made me your whipping boy."

"No," Evan agreed, still feeling, and sounding, rather far away. "No, I wouldn't like that much."

"Whereas your father," Spike said, the thumb stroking the web of Evan's hand at odds with his brisk, sour voice, "whose opinion we are hoping he cares for, would not give a bubotuber's pustule.

"Last night Mum threatened to splinch all my limbs off if I scared you off," Evan mentioned. He peered down through the watery air between them, which did not feel very useful as far as breathing went, to try to see Spike's eyes properly. "She knows I can't do without you. She'd care."

"She's not involved, Evan," Spike reminded him impatiently, putting surprise aside. "That's moderately clear. Your father hasn't mediated a relationship between the two of them. He's made himself invisible to the kind of meddling Blacks normally do; the worst she could do is persuade others against him. He doesn't have a job or fortune or land or romantic interest to lose, as far as I'm aware, and your mother's diffused her sphere of power in Britain. Am I wrong?"

"...Well, diffused," he mostly-agreed. "Not eliminated, Spike."

"Evan," Spike sighed, "is it possible you haven't noticed that a witch has to practically jump up and down in his face and shout LOOK AT ME I HAVE REFERENCES! before it occurs to him that she exists and might be either of use to him or a threat?"

"No, I've noticed that. It's, er, odd. I've always understood he was Slytherin."

"Not odd if he's in his sixties, like your father, and I'm right about his background."
Evan wanted to ask what that was supposed to mean, but he was still feeling a bit looking-at-the-world-through-water. Forcing noise through his mouth was too much trouble to go to just to say "er?"

Spike seemed to read it in his face anyway. Evan tucked the warmth of that away for later.

"...It's a muggle—no, actually it isn't, it's—no. Another time. Only, since you have noticed, you'll agree with me that, in outrage of all common sense, he doesn't care tuppence about Callisto Rosier. And when I say tuppence, I do not mean two knuts, I mean tuppence. I use this term advisedly, in order to better illustrate that he a) assigns no weight to her opinion at all, and b) does not think like you!"

"...Okay," Evan heard himself say after a moment. He knew his face was still doing the Evan-is-not-at-home thing, but it was hard to care. "I'll get another flat instead of a cottage, then, so we'll have neighbors as an alarm system, but it's still got to have a studio and a room for me to do business in. That's why I thought two floors would be better."

"Does it have to? It isn't as if you don't already have access to studios and offices."

"Spike," Evan asked, tilting his head, "would you say it's like me to rearrange my routine while unnecessarily preserving an inconvenience that makes me get up earlier than I have to, all so I can travel to where Grandpère's secretaries can nag me for him and his apprentices can disingenuously bother me for tips while trying to steal my clients and ideas and he himself can walk in any time he likes and lecture me for going out in public in cheerful outfits and without using Sleeekeazy and tell me that if turpentine was good enough to clean Da Vinci's brushes it should be good enough for me?"

"...Mmnh."

Evan detected a hint that Spike might possibly agree with Ev's grandfather about Ev's outfits. Since this was not news and Spike's most fashionable days still looked like a mossy lamp-post had taken up clerical work, Ev did not choose to acknowledge his opinions in the matter.

Instead, smiling a little, he pressed, "Do you think my grandfather, who's been critiquing my work since my first packet of sepia pencils, doesn't know me at least that well?"

"All right, all right, point taken, you need them."

"Right. So it's definitely going to be more expensive than you'd like, and the cost will not be your business at all. But it can be another flat, if you think that's better."

"No, avoiding upstairs and downstairs neighbors is a good idea, if you can manage it," Spike said. His face had gone softer, despite the unspoken sartorial criticism. It made breathing and things easier. "Even permanent soundproofing spells, as we have learned, only do so much."

"Poor Neil," Evan said smugly.

"Save your sympathy for his wife. I grew up on a row of terraced houses; they're a reasonable compromise between privacy and a human alarm system, whatever else they are. We were on the end, but the neighbors were always leaning out their windows to shout at each other, and I used to think if someone had shared a wall with us—" He cut himself off, throat tightening. Evan coolly remembered that Mr. Snape was not, in fact, funny. At all, really. "That is, I'm sure you can find some similar compromise that isn't... one that's liveable. If price is no concern," he added.

Which was such a major concession that Evan almost felt like snogging him again, except that it
would have been all wrong. Instead, he had to take that mile he'd been given and run a league with it. "Oh, it's going to be liveable, Spike. The only reason my moving in and back out of home so quickly would raise no personal questions is if this were just a stopover while I set up a place that I can really work out of, host out of, become a real functioning branch office of Rose and Yew."

"I daresay your grandfather will be thrilled," Spike said dryly.

"Well, exactly. Do you mind?" He meant, of course, 'can you live with it.'

Spike made a face. "I'm not completely thrilled with the probability that your more importunate clients will pester you more if they know your bed is just upstairs."

"I did assume you'd be doing most of the warding, Spike."

Spike gave him an of-course look, then hesitated. "Will you move all our furnishings?"

Up until he asked, Evan had fully intended to. But they weren't the sort to shake things up every so often for the fun of it, apart from Evan adding new birds to their ceiling and switching out the skyscapes seasonally, and Spike switching out which books were on the handiest shelves.

Spike wouldn't assume he'd want to make changes, so he wouldn't have brought up the prospect if he hadn't wanted to himself. And Evan should have predicted that. It was a bitter draught, that the cocoon of safety he'd built up around Spike had failed—that he'd failed—but there was nothing to be done but own up to it and try again.

Slowly, he proposed, "We should keep most of them here. This is my family's House, so it'll always be a home to us, after all, if not home-home. We'll take the rug, and the sofa, but I might have that reupholstered for a new color scheme. Bring the best into our fresh start." He thought aloud, "I only have three sittings for the rest of the week and Theseus said he could only spare an hour tomorrow. I need to talk to Professor Tofty about what he wants for his granddaughter's wedding present, but I can probably get him to switch that from tea to lunch, or next week... if I don't spend too long on the masks project I should be able to do some initial surveys for furniture and wallpaper and whatnot and think about the colors; we can make a day of it this weekend."

"That makes sense," Severus said, in the soft tone someone like Narcissa might have used to say, It's perfect, darling, thank you.

"Ought we to talk to Dad about using the fellows Rose & Yew normally calls up for new branch offices?" Evan wondered, and then realized how difficult everything was about to get.

Things would be easier if he could trust Mum to run interference. She'd certainly tried to make him think she was on his side last night, but he was hardly going to use Spike's safety to test her. Even if Dad was keeping her out of Voldemort's business, she was Dad's partner and it was safest to treat her that way. Besides, she'd made it quite clear that she didn't trust anyone else's judgment about what was best for Evan, including Evan's. Just because they agreed he needed Spike so badly that a pureblood partner would be hindrance didn't mean they'd agree about other things. Such as whether it was acceptable for Severus to let himself be hurt for Evan's sake.

And even if he did decide to trust her not to talk to Dad, how was he to manage if he couldn't trust Linkin with his secrets? Which he couldn't: whether or not Evan was right to think that his elf loved him best, his orders would never come before Dad's with Linkin until he was head of the family.

"Let's try not to actually hand your da the key, with a ribbon on it—what's wrong?" Severus
frowned, which wasn't a surprise exactly, with how pale and overwhelmed Evan was feeling, but he hadn't quite expected it, either.

Evan tried to explain. He didn't feel it was going well—not that he didn't think Spike understood, but he could hear himself and it was pretty awful.

Spike listened anyway, continuing to frown thoughtfully, and considered the matter for a few moments. Then he nodded sharply and said, "Get off me."

"...I don't want to," Evan explained. He hadn't really noticed that his hands had curled around Spike's chest until now, but there they were. Spike's pulse under him seemed the only thing keeping him on the ground. No wonder Spike had wanted that from him; Evan was feeling quite jealous now.

"Nor do I want you to," Severus shrugged ruthlessly, "but you will. I need to talk to Narcissa."

Chapter End Notes

Notes: the sharp-eyed plutoplex, who kindly betas this story, had this to say about Evan's flat-selection strategy:

I imagine the situation thus:

Evan (thinking): I have found the ideal flat. Alas, my ridiculous boyfriend is too much a DF to accept it if I merely present it as a fait accompli. I know! I'll add 2 more options so awful he'll never accept them! He'll be tricked into the good one!

Evan (aloud): Spike, I have narrowed it down to 3 options.

Severus: Option 1 is awful and is in Knockturn and no no no. Option 2 makes my skin itch due to ley lines.

Evan: Okay, Option 3 it is then! But only because you insist.

I have very little argument with this theory.
Chapter Summary

Come into my parlour, said the spider to the other spider, who invited the other spider in to play parlour games in the parlour of the completely different spi—

TLDR: Anyone dumb enough to bring a problem to Narcissa deserves to be used to solve hers.

Chapter Notes

**Warnings about possible triggers**: domestic manipulation, dub-con assault, and more of a spotlight on series-typical slavery than we’ve had so far.

I.E.: Malfoys.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“It’s a parlour game, darling,” Narcissa smiled up at him.

Lucius had already had a tedious afternoon persuading the Prophet that the Muggle-Worthy Excuse Committee was a good idea, despite only one of its members being charming and none photogenic. And before that, he’d had a challenging morning persuading Father that it wasn’t worth risking his health going outside when Lucius was perfectly capable of reading through the gobbledygook (not literal, thank Merlin) to see where Gringotts was trying to cheat them this time.

Therefore, although he doubted very much that Narcissa was being perfectly straightforward with him, he was hardly going to say as much to her in front of Severus. It wouldn’t be worth it. He restrained himself to a more circumspect, “Why?”

Severus explained, “I haven’t been getting on well with the students.”

Lucius was astounded. Just astounded.

“If I at least show willing, I thought, Slughorn might be less likely to start petitioning to be rid of me before the first week is out. Narcissa suggested icebreakers. I am dubious about the utility of the exercise—”

“I’m sure at least two percent of them would realize you’re a lamb if you just let them get to know you, darling,” Narcissa said comfortably, a wicked glint in her charming blue eyes.

Severus paused. “I am dubious,” he repeated in a tone that managed to be at once fervent and dripping with irony, “about the utility of the exercise, but it’s my own fault for asking her advice and I do not wish to have my face taken off.”

Narcissa smiled like a placid angel, eyelashes fluttering down modestly to her cheeks. Severus edged away. He always had been a bright boy.
It seemed plausible, although his finely honed I’ve Known Severus Since He Couldn’t Talk Properly senses were telling him there was a dodge in it somewhere. Since Narcissa was in it up to her lovely cerulean eyes, he sighed inside and asked, “What’s your game, then? Aside from the asking of impertinent questions which, I must say, my love, is more in his line than yours, as a rule.”

Severus (on a knee-jerk reflex, Lucius would charitably assume) couldn’t resist saying, “That’s what you think.”

Lucius’s delicate porcelain doll of a bride kicked her friend in the ankle. Moderately hard, from Severus’s expression, which Lucius pretended he hadn’t seen. “It’s called Would You Rather, darling,” she said. “A bit of a girls’ night game, but it can be quite a challenge, between Slytherins.”

“But you don’t have to let Narcissa torture you,” Severus said, looking rather as if he’d just realized Lucius would have to get him back, in lieu of Narcissa, for ambushing Lucius with the question about whether he’d would prefer to be licked by Hagrid’s infernal canine or the Giant Squid. “Two people can play.”

Narcissa smiled gently.

Well trained, Severus amended, “You don’t have to let Narcissa torture you while I’m here.”

Narcissa continued to smile. A dimple appeared.

“I gather,” Severus concluded drolly, “that I am misinformed.”

While Lucius appreciated that it served Narcissa well to look terrifying in front of her know-it-all brat of a best friend, the implication that she had him hen-pecked as well was irksome. “Not that I’m not pleased to see you, Severus, but isn’t it a bit early for you to be away from Hogwarts on a Wednesday? And in your first week, too.”

Severus made a face. “When I said I haven’t been getting along with my students, I mean they sent me home for making a NEWT student cry.” He screwed up his mouth at Lucius’s raised eyebrows and further admitted, “And possibly threaten suicide. Or attempt it. I’m not entirely clear about what he did after he ran out bluberring. His Head of House was a bit obtuse on that point. Apparently the boy was under the impression I planned to feed him his fingers, as an actual item on my schedule.”

Lucius cranked his eyebrows up a further half-inch.

“The cauldron cracked halfway down the side!” Severus very nearly shouted. He probably would have really shouted, if he hadn’t been holding the baby. Well done, Narcissa. “It boiled right over and somebody’s shoes melted! I think it was starting to melt! He was supposed to be making Skele-gro!”

“How fortunate that, my Potions OWL being behind me, that combination of sentences is no longer something I’m required to understand,” Lucius remarked to no one in particular, and sat. “You’re quite right, my love, the need is dire.”

He also, though he would never have said so where Narcissa could hear him because he possessed such a thing as a single social grace, doubted the utility of the exercise as stated. It was, however, possible that Severus might learn something from being tortured after being foolish enough to admit weakness and, as his one-time prefect, Lucius approved. It was also likely that Narcissa
would goad Severus into being amusing—if Severus even needed goading,

“I knew you’d understand, darling,” Narcissa leaned against him warmly. “You start, Severus. You’re the one who needs practice.”

“It was your turn,” the graceless fool protested.

“New player, new game,” she said, sweet and firm.

“Ave, Domina,” Severus acceded sourly. Lucius chuckled. “All right, then. Example turn: would you rather play Seeker or Beater?”

“Oh, Severus, dull,” she lamented. “Beater, obviously; why even ask it?”

“Well,” he lamely defended himself, “if you played Beater, everyone would see you being vicious. Right out there in public.”

“Better that than to be everyone’s first target. Really, darling, what a waste of a question! Teenagers won’t respect you for being nice to them. No one would believe it for a moment, for one thing.”

They both looked at Severus, in case he planned to argue. He had more sense than that.

Today.

“Lucius, darling, show him how it’s done.”

“I don’t know how it’s done,” he started to protest. She gave him an implacably glimmering figure-it-out smile. “Oh, all right. Severus, would you prefer…” he groped about for anything, and settled on, “to sing a Celestina Warbeck song in front of Caligula or Nero? In Greek.”

Severus looked gratifyingly appalled. After being forbidden by a delighted Narcissa to reject all options or otherwise equivocate, he settled on Nero, on the grounds that one might survive by begging for tips from the master instead of presenting as a rival performer.

“You could do that with Caligula, too,” Lucius pointed out.

“Yes, but Nero’s vanity was predictable. His uncle, on the other hand, was mad as a spoon.”

Lucius acknowledged this as a fair and just point, but had to ask, “Why a spoon, Severus?”

Severus looked annoyed, though not quite to cut-your-heart-out levels. “Because it’s dull,” he said, in such a tone that Lucius could clearly hear the you idiot he had enough sense of self-preservation to at least not verbalize. “And distorts everything it reflects.”

“Really, darling?” asked Narcissa, interested. “I never knew that.”

“That’s because I just made it up; how the h—how in Salazar’s sock-drawer should I know?”

“You do spend half your life with your nose in a book, Severus,” Lucius manfully backed up his wife.

“...Rot,” Severus observed, more cheerfully. “I could probably have got away with that, couldn’t I. Narcissa! Would you rather be an incompetent conversationalist and letter-writer or a terrible dresser?”
“Well,” Narcissa smiled smugly at him, “as it’s been proven to me that a sufficiently determined Slytherin can, miraculously, get on while being both…”

Severus carefully eased one of Draco’s booties off him, and casually hurled it at her face. She serenely hexed his hair curly and shiny, and they both smirked as if they’d won. Lucius just waited for them to be done, because taking headache potions shortly after annoying Severus never went well for him, and he’d never been able to prove anything.

They went around a few times. Lucius gallantly pretended he’d rather be exiled from the use of wizarding gold than lose his wife (which would be a wrench, of course, but one had to live). After not being allowed to say the question was moot since she’d kill anything that tried to take her baby away, Narcissa finally said she’d give up her magic before Draco, as that wouldn’t prevent her forcing her sister to protect him in her place.

Lucius was getting ready to protest the idea of Bellatrix being given a child to care for, paragon though she was, but Severus got there first. He said, “You leave me out of it.”

Since he was bouncing a mostly-sleeping infant at the time, Narcissa just gave him an indulgent you-tell-yourself-whatever-you like look and soared on.

They all chose between a few gory deaths, but Lucius came down on the side of manhood and ruled the question of whether Severus would rather lose his hand or his bits to be out of bounds. After the question had been adjusted, the substitute answer of ‘Better my hands than my mind’ was so predictable that Lucius lost his head and told Narcissa she’d wasted her own turn now.

“Oh, have I?” she smiled in the way that meant he was going to pay. Unfortunately, Severus was still in the room, and the baby, so Lucius couldn’t respond as this deserved. “Do give me a chance to do better, darling. Let me see…”

“I’m supposed to ask his questions,” Severus pointed out, because he was a good friend despite being a brat.

“Thank you, Severus,” Lucius assured him manfully, “but I can take it.”

Severus gave him an I-won’t-cry-at-the-funeral-of-an-idiot look, but shrugged and sat back, rearranging Draco. Lucius couldn’t see the difference it made, but Draco started drooling in his sleep. Lucius had been informed he was meant to find this sort of thing heartwarming, as opposed to sticky and wet. He couldn’t wait for the boy to get old enough to speak and fly, or at least wipe his own face.

“If you boys are finished,” Narcissa ‘suggested’ archly. “Lucius, darling, if you had to curse your only heir infertile on his seventeenth birthday or marry him to a muggle—”

“Yes!” Lucius gasped. “That isn’t something to joke about!”

“No, but which isn’t?” she asked, with one of the sweet smiles that he usually enjoyed when she hadn’t just been revolting.

“It’s the same outcome either way!”

“It really isn’t,” her half-blooded friend said drolly.

Narcissa gave him a capital-L let’s not have this fight again now we’ve agreed to disagree Look. “Well, if you’re going to be delicate,” she said long-sufferingly. “If you were to die, would you prefer me to marry—”
“Narcissa,” her wonderful, fantastic, exemplary friend cut her off with an appalled little piece of a grin, “that is utterly not on. ”

“Oh, really!” she snapped. “Why are you men such—”

“Devotees of eternal monogamy?” Severus suggested, eyebrows up.

They both looked at him dubiously, but he had, apparently, been in earnest.

Narcissa sighed. “Severus, darling, you realize that’s just you.”

“Not at all,” Lucius said gallantly, bowing over her hand.

“Right,” Severus agreed, amused with her. “Paranoid enough to think that someone who asked me that question was thinking about killing me in order to run off with a third party who hadn’t been mentioned, however—that might just be me.”

“Not at all,” Lucius said fervently, under his breath.

“Inverterbrates,” Narcissa accused them crossly. “Fine. Lucius, in the event of needing to be obliviated, would you rather your friends put you under an Imperius curse first for the ultimate of plausible deniability, or to get your consent freely?”

“…About what,” he asked warily.

Severus looked at Narcissa and pointed approvingly at Lucius.

“Really, darling,” Narcissa rolled her eyes, “no one asked you which awful song Severus was going to have to sing in front of your dusty old emperors. I’m being very understanding, you know; you’ve already ducked out twice.”

This, he supposed, was fair. Ish. Or, at least, whether it was fair or not, her eyes were flashing with dangerous Black impatience. “Do I have to be obliviated?”

“Unless you wish to try to dodge the question, darling,” she smiled. There were no teeth at all showing, and yet.

He sighed. “I suppose a combination of Imperius and Obliviate should be avoided,” he conceded. “Shall I ask you one now?”

“Ought I to leave?” Severus asked, trying to be sour but clearly amused.

“Don’t be silly, Severus, I haven’t finished torturing you, yet, either.”

Lucius believed her. Just because she’d been mollified by his submission didn’t mean her splendid golden feathers weren’t still ruffled.

Severus sighed. “Well, our lead prefects aren’t likely to go easy on me,” he folded philosophically. “And half the witches in Slytherin are annoyed about my telling them their pretty shoes are useless in a fight and safety hazards in the potions classroom. And the greenhouse. And out-of-doors generally.”

“Are they really?” Narcissa asked dubiously.

“Useless in a fight, you mean? Possibly not, but no one’s kicked me yet to prove it.”
“Would you, I wonder,” Lucius inquired, “rather go about in the silliest shoes you’ve ever seen at Hogwarts, or with bare arms?”

“Assuming little to no chance of certain images asserting themselves,” Severus said judiciously, “the latter, I think. Less chance of crippling oneself trying to walk on a knife-point while unaccustomed, and while my arms are no one’s business really, Evan’s opinion suggests they aren’t fundamentally likely to cause mockery, even accounting for bias. One could use a modified bubble-head in the stillroom to protect them proactively, whereas any floating spells could only be cast after the fall had begun.”

“Couldn’t you just float the whole time you brewed?” Lucius indulged his absurd gravity.

“Do you really want to hear all about body-memories and why knowing from how high above the cauldron to drop ingredients affects one’s timing? Or—”

“You may stop speaking now; I’ve learnt my lesson.”

“That’s what I thought. Similarly, would you rather go about in your smallclothes or Muggle denims?”


“Oh, right,” Severus apologized to her. “I forgot that the incarnation of the platonic ideal of the peacock would quite enjoy strutting around in as little as possible.”

“Thank you,” Lucius said serenely. His wife and Severus both rolled their eyes, although Narcissa was subtler about it. “You like my peacocks really,” he told her.

“Nobody likes your peacocks, Lucius,” Severus told him. “They’re vicious, shrieking, feral compensatory mechanisms that you think look impressive cooked but, in fact, only look ghastly and sad.”

“Vicious, shrieking, beautiful guard animals,” Lucius corrected him.

“I’ll go so far as to grant you ‘both.’”

“Severus,” Narcissa asked playfully, “would you rather babysit Lucius’s albino ostentation for an afternoon, or be one of them?”

“Forever,” Lucius asked, “or for an afternoon?”

“Irrelevant, because you didn’t specify no use of tools or magic to be used while ‘babysitting.’ I would knock them all on their feathery posteriors for the duration and take the opportunity to get some reading in.”

“And steal all their tailfeathers,” Lucius supposed.

“And collect all their shed feathers, what do you take me for?” Lucius eyed him, unimpressed, and he conceded, “Perhaps one or two.”

The questions got progressively sillier, until Lucius began to feel hungry and suggested tea. “You’ll stay, Severus?”

“I ought to go back,” Severus wavered. “It might look like running away if I’m not back for the evening meal in the Great Hall, and I should probably repair matters with Slughorn first…”
“Just give him my regards when you see him,” Lucius offered airily. “It’ll do you ever so much more good than trying to, Salazar forbid, try to persuade him that what I have no doubt was appalling behavior was in any way justified.” Severus glared, but not in any way that suggested he thought Lucius was wrong. “I want to hear about why you let an incompetent infant upset you to the point they kicked you out.”

“An experimental Ravenclaw,” Severus corrected, not argumentatively. He considered. “It’s rather a long story, but I couldn’t sleep last night.”

It turned out to be long, but not so much of a story as a fretful outpouring of worry, mostly about Rosier. Apparently Rosier had reacted to the loss of his roommate by moving home, and Severus had a lot of thoughts about what effect his childhood home was going to have on him. And other thoughts about Rosier needing to travel but having such an unconcentrated mind that he might splinch himself every five minutes. And further thoughts still about how was Severus supposed to be properly on call when it was a proper trek over open grounds between the castle and gates and the Hogwarts floos were warded against travel to the point where it took half a bottle of commercial floo powder just to get one letter out?

Lucius stopped listening after the first few minutes. He enjoyed his tea with a concerned expression, sifting pleasantly through its balance of floral and smoky notes, occasionally nodding gravely.

“I wish there were something we could do to help,” Narcissa said, putting up a white hand to touch Severus sympathetically on the shoulder—and, not coincidentally, give Draco a soothing pet, because Severus’s fretfulness had upset him and he’d started to whine.

Her hand was white, but there was a discoloured blotch on the outside of her frothy sleeve. “Narcissa,” Lucius asked, “is your sleeve meant to have pink on it?”

She examined it, and made a vexed little noise. “Dobby!” she cried.

Hastily appearing, the idiot elf tripped over his own feet and landed on his long nose. Lucius and Severus were then treated to a very awkward five minutes as Narcissa got it out of him that he’d actually washed the laundry, with his grubby hands, in water, and put Lucius’s red hose in the same tub as Narcissa’s pale robes.

“I thought he was meant to learn basic competence when you sent him to serve three impatient pregnant witches for a week,” Lucius observed.

Severus shot up an inquiring eyebrow. Narcissa explained.

“Generous of you,” Severus said, dryly. “I suppose I can see your point; they are invested in the idea of being nice, which would make them feel uncomfortable about rejecting a gift, and more so about rejecting someone who was clearly trying hard to help. Unfortunately for your cunning plan, they’re also invested in being the sort of kind and generous people who’d never be firm enough with a poor downtrodden elf to risk its self-esteem.”

“Not a problem you’d have,” Narcissa laughed, running her wand over her sleeve so the pink stain faded away.

The elf shivered. As well it ought, for failing so badly in its work that its mistress had to amend its errors. It was so snivellingly pathetic that Lucius felt an unworthy urge to prod it with his shoe. To prod it, for preference, completely out the window. “No, it isn’t, is it,” Lucius mused.
Nobody heard him, because Severus was snapping at the elf to stand up straight and stop embarrassing its master.

“Yes, of course you should represent us with a modicum of basic dignity,” Narcissa exclaimed, completely exasperated, when the drip looked at her for confirmation.

“Severus,” Lucius continued to muse, “we’re still in your debt for all your assistance to Narcissa over the past year, aren’t we?”

Instantly suspicious, Severus said, “There are no debts between Narcissa and me, Luke.”

“The boy can learn!” Narcissa laughed.

Lucius pressed, “But I wouldn’t have an heir, if not for you.”

“…Child, Luke. A child. And I’m sure that’s debatable.”

“It occurs to me that—”

“I don’t want your castoffs, Lucius,” Severus snapped, following the direction of Lucius’s gaze. “Or your charity.”

“Bad Dobby,” the elf muttered, downcast. “Nobody wants poor Dobby.”

“Oh, shut up,” Severus said, exasperated with it, too, now. “If that is true, which I do not stipulate, it’s because you spend more energy annoyingly bewailing your failings than watching where you put your feet.”

The elf hung its head, but Lucius saw it trying to surreptitiously examine its oversized feet.

“You may not want my ‘castoffs,’” Lucius purred, “but I hear you’ve taken the occasional wager.”

“…I know better than to bet against Evan now.”

“I’m not Rosier.”

“Truer words were never spoken, and I thank God for it every day.”

“Do you really?” Narcissa dimpled.

“…I couldn’t honestly say it occurs to me every day,” Severus temporized, eyes slightly too wide and a bit of a curve to his mouth, “but if it did, I would.”

“Severus, this elf is no bloody use to me,” Lucius said flatly. “Narcissa, my love, I’m sure your grandfather is an excellent elf breeder under most circumstances, and Salazar knows I deeply appreciate the honor of the gift, but he may have let this one go too soon. I don’t have time to train it, and I don’t have the patience for it, and I detest waste.”

“Oh, and I have time,” Severus folded his arms. “And patience. Yes, Luke, absolutely. Those are precisely the things I have in abundance. And on the subject of waste—” he looked pointedly around at the room.

“I’m relying upon your lack of patience,” Lucius said sweetly, ignoring the insult to his interior decorating. Ignorance was not entirely Severus’s fault (it was Rosier’s, and Narcissa’s, and therefore not worth the trouble that mentioning it would cause). “Until New Year’s, Severus. That’s the bet. I’m giving him to you; if nothing else you’ll be able to get in and out of the castle,
if you live there and he’s yours, so *he* will be pleased.”

“I’m not hearing anything about a wager.”

“If you can turn him into a useful specimen in that time, you and Narcissa will decide what’s to be done with him, and I will explain matters to Arcturus Black and show you the pensieve memory.”

Severus’s snit paused. “…Hm.”

“But if, at the end of that time, he’s still an utter disgrace, I will decide what to do with him, and you will explain to Narcissa’s grandfather that both you and he have failed.”

Severus looked thoughtful, and turned to Narcissa. “I feel that, were I to make this bet with Evan, it would end up with him gloating.”

“That’s probably true, darling,” she sympathized, “but I’m rather afraid that, if you don’t make it with Lucius, it will end up in murder.”

“House elves aren’t murdered,” Lucius pointed out. “They’re put down.”

The elf squeaked.

“…I’m doing this for the challenge,” Severus crabbily and predictably caved, “and for Evan’s convenience. Not because I’m…” He screwed his mouth up again.

“A squish?” Narcissa supplied helpfully, and explained to Lucius, “That’s Evvie’s word. He says ‘marshmallow’ sometimes.”

“Not one of those either!”

“Of course not, darling,” Narcissa soothed him, her eyes bubbling over merrily.

Lucius summoned one of his older linen vests from the wardrobe. “Elf, your dedication is given into the care and honor of Potions Master Severus Snape of the line of Prince. Thusly do I discharge my duty to you: by entrusting your service to one who will hone your talents through the gift of much needed work. Do your best, for if you return unimproved to me when the year is over, you will not find your service so easy and pleasant as it has been.” The vest had reached his hand by this time, and he dropped it ceremoniously onto Dobby’s flat head.

Severus and the elf gave him surely-you-jest looks, identical except that the elf was terrified with an undershirt hanging off his giant ear, whereas Severus was incredulous, neatly if plainly tailored, and had a slightly larger nose. It left Lucius feeling rather pleased with himself.

“Dobby has been freed?” the elf asked quaveringly, clutching the vest and looking around as if the walls were going to eat him.

“Dobby has a new master,” Narcissa corrected him, half comforting and half warning, before the scathing remark about Dobby’s listening skills could escape either her husband or their friend. “Severus, give him an order.”

Severus looked almost as helpless as the elf. “Go wait for me in the foyer,” he said. “Quietly. I suppose you have to take the vest, if it’s been given to you, but I’m sure you don’t have to wear it as a bonnet. And while you’re waiting, you may decide whether to try and convince me I should call a sapient being by a name that properly belongs to a farm animal.”
Lucius barely raised his handkerchief to his face in time to cover the snort.

“Dobby doesn’t understand,” the elf wailed.

“‘Dobby’ is a name suitable for a cow or a fat pony,” Severus informed him.

“Tell him you won’t go and he should respect your name, Dobby,” Narcissa instructed experimentally.

Severus said, “Go.”

Dobby went, looking both surprised at himself and deeply apprehensive.

“He’s going to have a panic attack before I can even tell him where home is,” Severus predicted, all gloom and stress.

“You’ll handle it,” Lucius said cheerfully.

“Aren’t you going to need him?” asked Severus, looking as if he’d realized this point too late.

“Really, Severus, it’s not as though he’s the only one we had.”

“You'll handle it,” Narcissa said firmly. “Your house is a Rococo monstrosity of gargantuan proportions.”

She shot him a that’s-enough look. “Don’t insult Melly. We can get by for a few months.”

“And if we can’t, I’ll find one better suited to my House,” Lucius said firmly. Narcissa looked as if she thought he was underestimating some difficulty. He appreciated her not saying so out loud where Severus might use it to balk, however belatedly. “Honestly, Severus, this is a win for everyone unless he trips carrying a phial of something vile and blows up your bedroom.”

“You realize that could happen,” Severus pointed out, in a tone that said he was trying to remember he was a grown wizard who did not wail.

“You’ll do beautifully, darling,” Narcissa said, also firmly, and reached up to pat him bracingly on the shoulder.

Severus’s wand flashed out of nowhere, and he mouthed a word Lucius couldn’t hear.

Lucius blinked.

“I wish there were something we could do to help,” Narcissa said, her white hand up to touch Severus sympathetically on the shoulder—and, not coincidentally, give Draco a soothing pet, because Severus’s fretfulness and jolting-about had upset him and he’d started to make snuffly, unhappy noises.

“You could help me talk Evan into not living in that mausoleum,” Severus suggested, looking very stressed. “I’ve seen how they did up his bedroom, Narcissa, it looks like a hotel. And then his parents, popping in and out with no notice. I know it would drive me mad.”

Lucius looked at him, eyebrows high.

“Shut up,” Severus grumped.

Lucius took pity and offered to ask around about flats. About agents, at least, if Rosier would bestir himself to explain his requirements. Severus looked as though ten stone had been pulled off
his shoulders at this offer of support. They both knew Severus wasn’t deeply in his debt for this; it wasn’t as if he were putting himself out. It wasn’t even as if he weren’t going to charm anyone Severus wouldn’t, given more free time, have been perfectly happy to interrogate himself.

But Severus didn’t have the time, and all the dreary little landlords would have run screaming from poor Rosier after Severus had talked to them. They both knew that, too. Having Slytherin’s master favor-ducker put into a position to feel grateful to Lucius, even a little, made the afternoon a net win.

Even better, at the end of the night Lucius didn’t even have a headache from stopping himself throwing shoes at an incompetent servant who put things where he would inevitably trip over them. This had been the case more often in the last few months than was in any way ideal. Things had got so exasperating that, once, or twice, he’d actually done it.

Pleased, he mentioned to Narcissa as they prepared for bed, “I notice someone has finally taught our resident disaster that a competent elf does the clearing-up without showing his unprepossessing face.”

“Melly is a wonder,” she agreed, tracing a little stroking pattern on the back of his hand. “But don’t pay any mind to that distasteful oaf, darling.”

“Ideally, one doesn’t need to think about elves at all,” he remarked, his hand tingling where her neat, frost-colored nails had swept along his skin as he gazed into her enchanting blue eyes. “Apart from keeping the dairy stocked.”

She kissed his cheek with a demure little eye-flicker. Her breath just brushed at his ear when she asked, “Did you know, darling, Severus has no idea that I pay half his tailor’s bills?”

“Someday, you know,” he warned her, not wanting to try anything before he understood her game, “he’s going to find out, and—”

“Be annoyed, which shan’t be different from how he is the rest of the time,” Narcissa said airily. “He doesn’t have to find out, Lucius; he pays the bill he’s given, which is a fair price for the outfits themselves, if not the joy of fitting him, so he isn’t concerned. After all, it’s not really a favor to him. It would reflect so poorly on me if he went around dressed like he used to. Or, Salazar forbid, like Lucrezia’s odious little Gryffindor. Everyone knows we’re his patrons, after all.”

“But him.”

She smiled, very sweet but very satisfied. “He and I understand one another, and he doesn’t mind what anyone else thinks about it, since it suits me.” Her hand came to rest at his collar. “But what I was getting at, darling, is that I also can’t have my cousin going to pieces trying to live or work anywhere Severus agrees is appropriate. That was understandable right out of school, but it would reflect so badly on the family now, and Evan would know it, the poor thing. But you know how he folds whenever Severus is uncomfortable. It would be such a dreadful situation for him.”

Suddenly enormously pleased, Lucius modestly pointed out, “I haven’t done anything yet.”

“Still, my own,” she mused, “I should like to thank you, at least, for being so clever and generous as to think of it.”

Very soon afterwards, Lucius forgot for the rest of the night that Severus (or Dobby, or anyone) even existed. He remembered his offer to help Rosier find a place in the morning, but he had no
intention of calling in the favor on anything in particular, or soon. If there was one thing he’d learned from dear old Horace Slughorn, it was that small favors left to take root were what bound the strongest allies the most tightly.

Chapter End Notes

Notes:
* Yes, that was Narcissa putting a geas on her husband not to think about Dobby much, and magically cementing Lucius’s opinion of him.
* Yes, she was legitimately concerned that if things kept going as they were, she was going to get elf blood on her nice carpets.
* You can decide for yourself who manipulated who into what—and whether it counts as manipulation if everybody involved is manipulating everybody else into the same thing they all agree on.
* No, this fic has not just become more AU. Just more... undercurrenty.

Also, that warning about slavery will have to stand for all future chapters with Dobby. This is (I think?) the first time I’ve used it, because Linkin and Kreacher don’t think of themselves that way and it hasn’t really been an issue with Dobby in previous chapters. His standing and related matters will be something that has to be dealt with now, but I’m not going to warn for it every time.

So… I don’t think I’ve ever seen a fic that does quite what I’m doing here. I have seen a few where Winky adopts Severus in the second Riddle war, most notably excessivelyperky’s The Birthday Present, which is probably what seeded the idea for me, but nothing closer. If anyone knows of a fic that’s done something like this, though, please link me (or give me the contact info, if you’re reading this on ffnet)! I’d love to see how other people have thought about it.
September 3: Dartmoor, Devon

Chapter Summary

Lessons in self esteem for the blind, taught by Proto-Professor Seriously Visually Impaired.

Chapter Notes

**Warnings:** Last chapter was extra-Slytherin, so now you must deal with ranty suuuuper-awkward exposition. It had to be done to rebalance the universe, I don't know what to tell you. Comic relief next time.

Also, quick reminder that I'm not going to warn about slavery every time Dobby or another elf shows up. I will this time because this chapter really gets into it, but that's it.

**Notes:** This and the last chapter, put together, come with Boatloads Of Notes. Here they are.

Extra thanks to plutoplex this post for a lot of good questions and some important continuity catches. Also extra thanks to everyone who's commented or otherwise let me know you like this, this past month. That thing where I was trying to keep track and give thanks to everyone Myths And Legends/Opening Arguments style isn't really sustainable for me (I really am sorry about that, please don't anyone think your taking the time to comment or kudo is less than deeply appreciated), but I noticed a lot of y'all have awesome usernames.

"The first day I met you, I knew you were a sneaky little sod," Severus remarked conversationally.

This was true: Arcturus Black had given Dobby to Lucius during the reception, and Severus had seen the elf's face when Walburga Black came over ill not long before she would otherwise have been asked to make a toast to the happy couple. Severus wasn't entirely sure what had been hiding behind those wide, tennis-green eyes, but surprise hadn't been part of it.

He might have been concerned now about what kind of viper he was accepting into his home, looking back on that, but Narcissa had been very worried about what her aunt might say about a groom from a merchant family. And it hadn't just been her: both Arcturus and Orion Black had also, despite being better at faking surprise than a very young elf, relaxed slightly once she'd gone green with yellow blotches and started complaining about Luke's caterer. So Severus wasn't terribly concerned that it was something the elf had decided to do without being told to.

Mrs. Black probably wouldn't have said anything during the toast that she hadn't said a dozen times anyway, once to a reporter who'd had to be subsequently obliviated, but at least there hadn't been a spotlight on her.
In consideration of all the nightmare stories he'd heard about their family holidays, Severus had told Narcissa that if she was worried about her aunt, she should leave it to Evan. He'd thought this was an inarguable suggestion, and she didn't argue. She did hiss at at him for fifteen minutes about how Evan didn't plan and you never knew what he'd do and she didn't want her wedding reception to evaporate into charming sparkly soap bubbles. He'd pointed out that that would probably make for an extremely picturesque reception that would be remembered forever.

While she was yelling at him like a true bridal-gorgon, Bellatrix had wandered into the study and started coldly ripping him to shreds for, first, upsetting her little sister, and, second, having the unmitigated mudblooded gall to think his filthy opinions were of any value and anyone wanted to hear his feeble ideas.

Severus had just waited for her to finish with a polite are-you-done face, as one would a sleetstorm at a Quidditch match. It was the only way to get Bellatrix to leave.

That had taken him a while to work out. With Petunia, you had to be either sympathetic or so brutally rude she couldn't think of a way to answer you without ceding the moral high ground. Bellatrix never felt sorry for herself. She wanted you to know how much of an affront you were, but if you weren't getting the message and no one was going to help her, well, she had other things to do once she'd made her good-faith attempt to restore the world to order. Severus had learned (from observation of older students, thank you; he was, while inclined to be stubborn when he was right, not yet tired of his life) that there was no useful way to argue with her, even armed with truth, logic, common sense, the support of her favorite little cousin, and citations.

Truth hadn't worked out for him this time, either. The stakes weren't very high, especially compared to provoking Bellatrix, but he could have done without provoking tears. He'd minded Quirrell's less, and not just because his head had hurt too much to allow lesser discomforts in. "Stop that," he told the elf, not just exasperated but uncomfortable.

To his horror, Dobby stopped that. Stopped flat. There were still terrified tears welling from his elephant-sized eyes, but the noises cut out completely, in the middle of a loud, wet snuffle. Revolting and upsetting as it was, Severus was fascinated: that oughtn't to have been biologically possible.

"Oh, for pity's sake," Severus scrubbed at his eyes. "Are handkerchiefs clothes? If I pass you one, will you die of shock or magic loss or something?"

"Handkerchiefs isn't clothes, Master," Dobby said in a wavery, snot-choked little voice.

"FOR THE LOVE OF CHRIST," Severus calmly and reasonably noted, "THAT IS NOT MY NAME."

Dobby cringed so hard he was almost crouched on the grass.

Severus turned and started beating his head against the stone hut he'd taken them to. Evan would have stopped him, but Evan wasn't there. He did it gently, though, since two concussions in one day would be ridiculous even if magical healing did mean it wasn't muggishly dangerous.

After a few good thuds, a tentative little voice ventured, "M—Dobby's master is punishing himself?"

Severus sighed, and let his forehead rest against the stone. The possibly-prehistoric hut had been the first place he'd thought of, needing to go somewhere he'd be overheard by absolutely nobody. In retrospect, apparating here, where he and Evan had, in their small way, ruined Rabastan
Lestrange, seemed as recklessly, thoughtlessly Gryffish as everything else he'd done in the last two hours. "Why not."

Taking this for a less than rhetorical question, or possibly a pop quiz, Dobby said uncertainly, "Elves is punished."

"Your thinking is backwards," Severus told him without raising his head, or opening his eyes. "If you've seen wizards punish elves, it's not because elves in particular are to be punished. It's because humans punish."

"Wizards is punishing themselves?"

It was a wondering little tone. Far better than the hysteria, but Severus was still too rattled to have much patience for it. "Constantly." He sighed, straightened up, and went to sit on the very patch of grass where a helpless girl had been taken apart, very nearly literally, by a young Slytherin wizard who didn't think he had to care about someone so far beneath him. "Sit, if you'd like. I assume you have questions."

There were more shocked tears, but this time they seemed overwhelmed rather than terrified, and the accompanying babbling was well-calculated to make someone who wasn't Severus feel awkward, flattered, and possibly protective or outraged.

"Hm," Severus mused. "If I tell you to remember doing that, and feeling that, and ask you to do it again in a week or a year, just like that, can you?"

Dobby stopped blithering and slid him a cautious am-I-being-insulted-or-are-you-dense look. "Dobby is doing whatever his master asks."

"You needn't look at me like that," Severus said, raising an eyebrow and only just remembering not to put it as an imperative. Or to point out that Dobby was not famous for doing what his masters asked well. "I don't know your full potential; I didn't grow up with elves."

"Dobby knows, M—sir?"

Sir, he supposed, was acceptable. It still made him feel a bit of a class traitor, but it wasn't as bad as the other, and he'd have to get used to it if he ever did take over Slughorn's job. "How do you know?"

Dobby started wringing his ears.

"Don't fidget. Just tell me."

"Dobby knows because his new master doesn't know how to act with house elves, sir."

"Just because I'm not doing what you're used to," Severus retorted, "doesn't mean I'm doing it wrong."

"Dobby's new master is arguing with house elves, sir," Dobby said meekly. "He is paying attention if there is an elf in a room with him, just as if another wizard was there. Dobby is thinking his master is uncomfortable, sir." He cringed again. "Dobby is only answering his master's question!"

"Yes," Severus assured him, frowning thoughtfully. "Well observed."

Dobby squeaked in a quite different way, his eyes wider.
It was something to think about, to be sure. He'd forgotten to pay attention to Dobby one time, just once that he was aware of, and Lily was in danger because of it. Just as Dobby's then-master's master would have wished. No wonder elves wanted to be taken for granted, if they were playing a long game—or when they were being used to play one. And that made him wonder what the Veil of Secrecy was really for, and what undercurrents he was missing in the perennial Secrecy Versus Domination debate. Something to think about later.

"But I repeat, your not being accustomed to my methods doesn't make them wrong. And you yourself don't act like other house elves. Or, at least, not like elves attached to the Black family circle, or the ones I've met at Hogwarts; I confess my circle is limited. But they know themselves to be vital symbiotes to their families; you act like a parasite who knows you've been found out."

It had, he supposed, been too much to expect an elf brought up by Arcturus Black and not much further brought up by Luke Malfoy to understand words like 'symbiote.' Or, if not, Dobby was better at playing dumb than Severus was giving him credit for. After several years of watching everybody underestimate Selwyn, though, Severus felt himself a fair judge. So he said, "I'll explain feudalism to you later, but I can't be having with this 'Dobby's new master, sir' nonsense."

"But Master Severus Snape is Dobby's master now, sir," Dobby said with a tremulous obstinacy. Greatly daring, and showing more understanding of Severus than he would have expected if he hadn't known perfectly well that Narcissa complained about him behind his back, the elf added, "And he is a potions master, sir!"

"Not according to anyone that counts, yet," Severus said, just as obstinate.

"But Dobby's master is a potions master, sir," Dobby said cunningly. "Wizards is calling craft-masters Master, sir! And Master is not minding Linkin calling him Master Spike, sir."

"Oh, I mind," Severus said, droll. "I just know I can't stop him. You're drooping again! If you want to talk about Linkin, he doesn't call Evan just 'Master.'"

"Evander Rosier isn't Linkin's master, sir. And he isn't even Linkin's master's direct heir, sir, to be called 'Young Master! Evander Rosier is another wizard in Linkin's house."

"...I thought Linkin was Evan's father's elf."

"No, sir!" Dobby was too happy to be able to help. It made Severus queasy. "Linkin belongs to Chrysanthos Rosier, sir, and he is seconded to Darius Rosier. Darius Rosier is Young Master to Linkin."

"And then thirded to Evan," Severus supposed, but a moment later he realized the elf wasn't up to appreciating even lame wordplay. "Can't you just use my name?"

"No, sir."

"What would happen if I told you to?"

"Dobby would try, sir," the elf said unenthusiastically.

"Go on, then. Call me Severus."

"Yes, sssssMaster Severus." The elf hung his head. "Master will be punishing Dobby now."

"I don't think that's warranted," Severus said dryly. Dobby was looking confused, so he said, "You warned me perfect success would be unlikely, then came as close as you could."
That, he thought, was something the elf could understand. He seemed to, anyway. He also looked almost disappointed. Severus could understand that: one wanted to know what to expect.

Too bad for him. He'd find out Severus added, "Kreacher calls me that; it'll do, in private, until we can find a better compromise. With those who don't know you're with me, you should continue to use whatever you did when you were working for Malfoy." He hesitated. He thought Luke liked him, more or less, but that didn't mean Luke felt called upon to treat him respectfully. "Probably. How bad is it?"

"Dobby was to call Master 'Master Snape,' sir," Dobby said timidly, with an I-know-you're-not-going-to-like-that look. "Lucius Malfoy is saying Master is his client and how he is treated is reflecting on Lucius Malfoy."

Severus shrugged. "He's wrong, but you needn't tell him so. That's acceptable when you're speaking about me to others. As you point out, I've earned the title by British standards. Just don't use it when you're speaking to me: I wasn't raised to it, I don't like it, and I won't be having with that sort of affected, supercilious bollocks in my own home."

Dobby's eyes were very wide.

Severus, apart from being pleased the elf understood more words than he could be expected to dare to use, ignored it in favor of striding on briskly. "Now, in regards to your name."

"Dobby's name is Dobby, sir."

"'Dobby' is a name fit for a beast of burden who may or may not, as age or need dictates, be eaten."

Dobby's eyes got even wider.

"If your eyes fall out, I'm not putting them back for you," Severus snapped. He'd seen it happen to a bulldog once, back in the summer before after year. He'd stopped helping the local lads sneak into cinemas after that, and not just because they'd teased him for coming over ill over it. He'd had no intention of trying to be the only responsible scofflaw in the the pack. Which, was, in retrospect, ironic enough to make him cry if he thought about it too hard. "You're a part of my House now, if I have one—" He paused. "Do I have one? If I understand it right, you'd know, now, wouldn't you?"

"Master Severus doesn't have a House like Dobby's last master did, sir. Dobby could live with Master Severus in his two houses in the north, sir, without getting sick."

Severus paused, and blinked. Hampshire was north of Dartmoor, slightly, and Severus was living at Rosier Hall. Technically. Sort of. "Do you mean Spinner's End and Rosier Hall?"

"Rosier Hall isn't Master Severus's house, sir. Dobby knows it. Master Severus shouldn't live there."

"I quite agree. But apparently Linkin 'knows' I belong there."

"Yes, sir," Dobby agreed. "That house accepts Master Severus as a guest who has done it honor, and as part of Evander Rosier, sir. Master Severus has no roots there, sir. Dobby and his master shouldn't stay there long unless he comes to belong there more."

"...Did you know all that half an hour ago?"

"No, sir. Dobby was an erkling of the Blacks, and then he was a Malfoy elf. Dobby has never belonged to the House of Rosier."
"Hm." He wondered what Dobby still knew about his former households, what he'd Just Known about Evan when Ev was just a name on the Tapestry to him—what he'd known about Severus, for that matter—but that could wait. Ev would better know what to ask and how concerned to be. Severus was a bit worried about whether elves' natural magic prevented them betraying former households to new ones, And whether, if it didn't, Narcissa had been stopped by friendship from being sensible.

Assuming she knew what elves knew, which was perhaps not a good assumption. It was one thing for her to be let herself be friends with a lower-status ally with potential like Severus; that was exactly how a Slytherin in Slughorn's mold was expected to behave. Unlike Ev, who had literally had no one but Linkin and his tutors to talk to for months at a time for years, taking a personal interest in the help was not how she'd been raised.

And speaking of potential. "How would I come to belong there more?"

"If Rosier Hall becomes Evander Rosier's House, sir, then Master Severus will be its master, too. Even if Evander Rosier becomes its heir, Master Severus will belong more."

Severus was getting very tired of being third-personed. Or possibly five trochaic syllables were too many, especially in combination with all the sirring. He found it astonishing that the Dark Lord not only tolerated but insisted on this sort of excessive, archaic (and, with increased exposure, increasingly silly) formality. "All right. But then, you said there were two."

"Yes, sir. Master Severus is the heir of the house called Spinner's End—although it isn't a House, sir—and he is giving himself to the House called Slytherin."

Severus felt his eyes do something. Go different sizes, possibly. His left eyebrow definitely moved.

"Slytherin is only part of a home, sir," Dobby said humbly, "but it is a House. Master Severus grew up there. He is giving himself to it, as an apprentice does. Master Severus's magic has grown roots there. Dobby won't wither if he and his master live in Hogwarts, sir."

"If Evan and I find another place to live, can you stay in it and be all right?"

"Dobby will know when there is a house to tell him, Master Severus."

"What if you can't? Can you still spend a lot of time helping at this new place?" Severus thought there had to be a way to know that in advance, so as to prevent wizards moving into places that couldn't support elves, but maybe that was a question for Linkin or Kreacher.

"Oh, yes, Master Severus! Dobby can help wherever his master wants him to, as long as Dobby and his Master is both living in his master's home on wizarding land."

This was not entirely reasonable, in Severus's view; he felt there should be a ceremony or spell that would declare a place his home. Regardless of his own opinion, the declaration settled peacefully into the part of him that had felt it both proper and advisable to walk around Evan's estate barefoot at Lammas.

Oh, well. The question of whether Spinner's End qualified as wizarding land was irrelevant, since Severus had no intention of ever living there again. And a new place would become home quickly as long as Evan was in it and nothing so dreadful as Sudden Parents happened to tell him it absolutely wasn't really his, he supposed. If that couldn't happen fast enough, he and Evan had improvised around Hogwarts' ideas about appropriate mattress-size before. They could sleep in a closet temporarily, especially since their things were safer at Rosier Hall than they were and the
'closet' had a padded bath.

Ha! And he could use 'it has to feel like home to me or you'll have to do all the cleaning' to persuade Ev out of teasing him with egregious decorating choices like that vomit-shaded orange and green patchwork coverlet with all the nauseating swirlly bits Ev claimed to have fallen in love with back in '78 because it was 'so autumnal, Spike, it's really very soothing when you think about it, don't you think it sets off my hair?'

(Which it had, but in a way that made Ev's hair look like spun gold set in vomit.)

Evan would find the flaw in this argument in about seven seconds. Since that was as long as he had lasted, on that occasion, before dissolving into undignified snickering over Severus's expression, that was fine.

"Very well. Tell me how Dobby came to be your name—er." He stopped. "Unless it's something only elves are meant to know."

Dobby shook his head. "Sometimes elves are naming new erklings, but Arcturus Black is naming the erklings of his House, sir."

"I never liked him," Severus remarked. He knew he was harping on this point. After seven years of Snivellus, he couldn't let it go. There was nothing he could do about Kreacher, but Dobby was younger and didn't devotedly belong to Reggie's terrifying mother. "Are you stuck with it?"

"...Sir?"

"Did he magically imprint the name into your very bones?"

Aha! The elf was looking at him oddly now, almost like a normal person might. It was an enormous relief. "No, Master Severus, but Dobby is Dobby. Just Dobby the house elf, sir."

Severus considered. He didn't want to take anything away from the elf. It was bad enough to have taken the elf, although Dobby and Luke had been terrible for each other and Severus had been inclined to agree with Narcissa about the likelihood of murder. She'd sworn she hadn't made it up just because Severus had suddenly realized he and Evan needed help that didn't owe loyalty to a beloved parental enemy. It was hard to tell with Narcissa, much harder than with Evan, but he was inclined to believe her. Especially because he was also inclined to believe that Luke's 'elves are put down' comment hadn't been a joke.

"The thing about 'Dobby,'" he said slowly, "is that it isn't a name, exactly." The elf looked puzzled, so Severus elaborated, "It's a nickname. Usually given to animals in recent centuries, as I said, but really it's a derivation. Dobby, from Dobbe, from Robert. Dobbs is a fairly common surname where I'm from—common among the muggles, that is, but that's no shame."

Dobby looked the neurotic-and-terrified equivalent of Politely Pretending To Be Interested. The angle of his ears quite cheered Severus up. It was still mixed with an annoying helping of fear, but it was a start.

"And the name 'Robert' is special for elves," he went on, "though I don't know if you know it. It has another derivative, you see. And that one is special to Slytherins, and you're a Slytherin elf. Did you know that? That's you're a Slytherin?"

Dobby looked dubious. Progress!

"You are, you know," Severus assured him. "As I said, I knew you were a sneaky little bugger
when first we met. And now you're with me, and you said yourself my only House is Slytherin."

"But not Master's only home," Dobby said anxiously. "Or his only family."

"No," Severus agreed. "But it's a very great House, Dobby, an ancient house, nobler than any of these so-called 'noble houses.' It gives, and it gives, and it gives, and it takes what it's owed, and it does what's needed. Slytherin is greater than any family House, because it serves. And we who belong to it have to do it honor. You understand?"

Dobby nodded enthusiastically. He had relaxed a bit, as though this was the first thing Severus had said to him that wasn't Greek or Göbeldjukr. " Elves is always doing our best for our Houses!"

"Just so. And we don't do that by cringing and not washing our attire and thinking there's nothing we can do about a bad situation but wring our hands! If we belong to Slytherin, we are to be respected, or how can Slytherin be respected? You belong to Slytherin now. You always did."

Dobby looked dubious again.

Severus had expected that, but he scowled as if Dobby was being dense, the better to convince him to buy this. "The Blacks are Slytherins, the Malfoys are Slytherins, I am a Slytherin, and after the way you slipped away from Hogwarts right when we wouldn't notice you, on your mistress's orders, after the way you judged between what your master and mistress would want from you, decided who deserved your loyalty, judged last month that lying for me was the right thing to do and would do the most good—elf, you are unquestionably a Slytherin."

Now Dobby looked more as if he believed it, and was torn between pride and wondering if that made him a bad elf.

Strategically overlooking his unease, Severus stormed on. "From now on, the only time you don't show it is if I need you to pretend you are still Dobby, Lucius Malfoy's miserable and despised chattel. The rest of the time, you will do honor to me and to Slytherin by showing, just as Linkin does, that anyone you serve must be respected, because someone to be respected serves them. Do you understand?"

Dobby considered. "No, sir," he said. Not understanding didn't seem to bother him, now he was clear on his instructions.

Severus lifted his eyes to the scalding-blue September sky. They'd work on it.

"I don't want to take away who you are," he said, less reproachfully. "But everything you've been told about who you are is an insult, and traps you into thinking you're worthless and useless. I understand that. It's revolting. Are you willing to work with me—to help me, protect my family, serve what I serve?"

"Dobby serves his master, Severus Snape," the elf said. It was the most solid Severus had ever heard him sound.

"Yes, I know, but are you willing to," he said patiently. "I don't think I can give you to Evan without Linkin knowing and asking questions." Possibly not without Kreacher knowing, too, which would be an utter disaster even if all Reggie's direct ancestors dropped dead on the spot. "But I can give you back to Narcissa—I won't give you back to Lucius; you're clearly bad for each other. Or I could give you to Hogwarts; a lot of elves do very well there. Or you can tell me if there's something that would be better for you. A way to be free that wouldn't kill you, maybe?"

"Master Severus doesn't understand elves," Dobby said, almost kindly behind how scared he was
to say it.

"Maybe if I did, I wouldn't need you to answer. But I do need you to. Tell me, honestly: are you willing to be my elf, and to help me."

"Master Severus," Dobby said patiently (almost like a real elf!), "was there when Mistress Narcissa asked Dobby. And when Dobby didn't tell Lucius Malfoy."

"See?" Severus said, noting the distribution of honorifics. He wondered whether Dobby liked Narcissa better or just thought she was more family to Severus than Lucius was, whether through Evan's blood or for other reasons. He made an effort to smile in a way a near-stranger would recognize as a smile. "You are Slytherin."

Dobby looked slightly more willing to be convinced.

"The thing is," Severus told him, "I don't need a beast of burden; I don't need some downtrodden Dobby who needs a heavy hand on his rein and has to be told every step of every task. I need a clever, powerful elf who's always alert and will do whatever it takes to get done what needs doing."

He wondered if he should also mention limits on 'whatever it takes,' but decided it was best to get the basic message of competency hammered in first. It probably wouldn't be as easy as Dobby instantly becoming competent because he'd been ordered to be. There was, though, such a thing as a placebo effect, especially for magical beings. Details would come through practice. "I need an elf who can live up to the heroes of Slytherin: Merlin, Percy Blakeney, Robin of Locksley, Salazar himself: I need a Puck."

"Dobby doesn't know all those wizards," Dobby said timidly.

"You're going to. Can you read?" Severus frowned at the shrug that said not really. "We'll fix that, too. But for now, you should know that the Puck isn't a wizard. He's a hob, like you, and he has a real name, a good name. Two good names, as he is a good fellow. I'm not going to take your name away from you, Dobby. I don't want you be someone you're not, I want you to be the best of what you are. If I give you a name, will you consider accepting it?"

"Dobby will accept the name his master gives him," Dobby said, with that patient you-don't-understand-elves look again.

"Will you tell me if you hate it?"

"Dobby won't hate a name his master gives him, Master," Dobby said.

Severus cheered up again, despite the apparent built-in mind control. That had been, if not quite defiant, at least a bit pointed.

On the other hand, it meant that wizards could call their elves Toerag or Arseface or worse, and the elves wouldn't be capable of wanting to object. "Don't call me that," he said, careful not to make it an I-told-you-not-to. That might start the guilt-waterfalls up again.

"No, Master Severus."

"...Don't imagine for a moment I didn't notice you not promising," he noted, amused. "All right. We'll work on that; take devising something I can live with as a medium-term goal."

Dobby blinked. Severus ignored his struggle with not being micromanaged. He'd have to get used to that, since Severus was going to be exhausting himself micromanaging children all day for the
next nine months.

"I'm going to transfigure your name, Dobby, not give you a new one. So that you'll know who you are, and so no one else will, when I talk about things you've done for me. From now on your name is Robin Dobbs. When you're serving me as a Slytherin, you're to be as good and clever as the Puck himself, see, and when you're serving the family like any other house elf... well, Dobbs is a fine name for a gentleman's gentleman."

The elf stood up a little straighter, and mouthed, as far as Severus could make out on a mouth that long, gentleman's gentleman.

"Both those names mean you, now," Severus told him. "Do you understand me, Dobbs?"

The elf straightened quite visibly this time. "Dobby understands, Master Severus!"

"...I'll call that a start," he sighed, resolving to use both names until the elf got used to it, since evidently this couldn't be as automatic an obedience as 'stop that' and 'go.'

Until they both got used to it. As often as possible, so he could stop as soon as possible. There was probably some ritual he didn't know. If they couldn't sort it out on their own, he'd ask Narcissa.

He probably had time to add a short Wodehouse story to his and Evan's evening reading once or twice a week, if he was prepared to deal with faculty remarking on his missing dinner in the Great Hall. Not that he had the least intention of playing Bertie Wooster, or expected Jeeves-like perfection (or wanted Jeeves-like meddling), but he could see the elf desperately needed a model for service with self-respect.

He continued, "Robin Dobbs, the only time you're to be 'Dobby,' or answer to that name, is when you're pretending you still belong to Lucius. I'll need you do to that at least twice a week, for a little while; we can taper it off once he's used to your not being around much."

The elf's ears sagged. "Yes, Master Severus."

"I don't like it much, either," Severus agreed. "But it is vital that no one outside my family know that I have a new left hand." He paused. "Tell me the names of my family."

Awed at his new 'title,' the elf rattled off a brief list that mostly didn't surprise Severus, although he hadn't known his mother had two middle names. Or even one. They also mostly weren't related to him, unless you believed Narcissa's Phineas Nigellus nonsense.

"Right," he sighed. "I see I was overly broad. Narcissa knows already, obviously and we'll go tell Evan now. You'll be spending a lot of time looking after him for me. No one else is to know about you until I say otherwise. Especially not Regulus; he won't be able to keep it from his family. But none of them. Are any elves going to know?"

"Melly will know, sir."

"Not Linkin or Kreacher?"

"No, sir," Dobby said patiently, as though he'd already explained that already.

Severus supposed he oughtn't to encourage cheek, but it solidly beat the alternative. "Melly won't tell anyone, including Lucius?"

"Not unless Mistress Narcissa tells her to, sir."
"Well, we must trust someone, I suppose," he said, and was immediately sorry: Dobby, who couldn't be expected to know when Severus was being frivolous on such close acquaintance, was looking panicked. "Never mind. Melly isn't a problem, but just her, Narcissa, and Evan. Gowan might be safe to tell at some point, if necessary, but we won't tug the broom."

He couldn't imagine what Lily would say about this turn-up. He could imagine what Da would say about a son of his taking on an unpaid servant, and it would be unbearably scathing and Severus would deserve it. He had no intention of both deserving and receiving one of Da's rants, especially if it came while Da was sober. Severus wasn't afraid of his violent disappointment anymore, but if he tried to be reproachful Severus might just hex him.

"Master Severus?" the elf asked timidly. Severus made a go-on gesture. "When Dobb—D-Dobbs is thinking about his master's family, he can't follow all the bloodlines."

"You've spent too much time with purebloods. It's not blood that makes family, or no one could be truly married without children."

"But, Master Severus, Dobby doesn't know one name, sir!"

"What do you mean, Dobbs?"

"Do-Dobbs doesn't know, sir! She feels like family, a witch, older than a mother, but Dobbs doesn't know who she is! Dobby has always known all of the Blacks, and the Malfoys!"

"Ah." Severus relaxed. "That'll be me mam's mother, I expect. Jullila Prince, née Abbott. Should you ever find out it isn't her, tell me. If you know Lily and Reggie's names, I suppose it makes sense you don't know hers: we aren't sure, yet, whether she's part of us or an enemy." He paused, frowning, although he was tempted to smile a bit at what looked like the elf equivalent of his own frantically-taking-notes face. "You said all the Malfoys. What about Lucius's mother's family?"

"Abraxas Malfoy is not using a witch to get himself an heir, sir."

"...Right." I am a wizard, Severus reminded his father's shoc—startled son. Nothing to see here, good people, move along. "Hers is the only name you don't know? There isn't a wizard?"

"No, sir."

Severus nodded in relief: Severus Prince had not been on that list and was not his family. Whatever elf-sense was or meant, it (probably) didn't put Mam's mother in the same category with her father. "You must have other questions," he said. "You should: I want you thinking. Ask."

"Will Do-Dobbs be able to ask any later, sir?"

He smiled, judging a little positive reinforcement to be advised even if it made his face feel unnatural. "Yes. Whenever we're alone, or alone with Evan, and not too busy for it. If you ask and I am too busy, I'll tell you so. Though I do expect you to learn what 'too busy' looks like."

"Where has Master Severus taken D-Dobbs? House elves is always knowing where we are, sir," he clarified, "but Dobbs doesn't know this place. Something bad has happened here, sir!"

"Very, very bad," Severus agreed, putting his hand down on the ground next to him. There was no trace left of blood or molten silver, no evident threads from Rabastan's picnic carpet, no ripped muggle denim. "Wretchedly bad, Robin Dobbs. But I learned a lot that day."

About power. About evil, and how it could exist without anger, without passion, without caring at
all, without thought. About loyalty: about how far he was willing to go, what he was willing to risk, and why. About Evan. About the fine, fine line between defense and abuse, which seemed so clear until you were standing on top of it.

"I learned some very important things," Severus repeated, absently running his hand over the clean grass, "that I wanted to be sure of remembering while we talked, you and I. And I wanted to remember that sometimes it turns out all right, more or less, at least for a while."

The elf clearly didn't understand, and why would he? He also clearly put it down as Wizards Are Strange, which was fine in the short term. Instead of following up, he very rationally started asking about what was going to be expected of him. Severus answered as well as he could, with so much up in the air, and made sure to nod approvingly at the more thoughtful questions.

Approvingly, but nothing overdone. Just a little. Sh—crisply.
September 3: Garden Studio again

Chapter Summary

Evan has not had enough sleep to cope with Severus's brilliant ideas.
(He got, like, ten hours. I stand by what I said.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Evan stared, and went on staring well past the point where Severus had started to press his lips together defensively.

Realizing he needed to react quickly, or at least quickly enough to ward off any shouting and door-slamming that might attract Linkin’s attention, he pulled himself together and smiled his admiration. “If I ever get full of myself about how good I am about guessing what people are about to do, Spike, just say September Third to me, and I’ll shut up right away.”

There was a charged silence. Considering what Severus’s eyes were doing, Evan wasn’t worried. He even felt a little bit smug. If he was any judge, Spike appreciated that, too.

Breaking the moment to look down, Severus said, “You noted, I trust, how Evan said something that wasn’t quite explicable—a href="#anchor"*/a> and I looked at him in silence for a moment.”

“Do—Dobbs noticed, Master Severus,” Lucius’s most awkward elf stammered meekly. And oddly. Lucius hadn’t given the elf (Evan had been sure it’s name was Dobby) to Spike’s parents.

“Did you note my expression?”

The elf looked as if he didn’t want to admit he hadn’t been able to make it out. Evan kindly substituted, “At least, you saw what his face looked like?”

After receiving a nod that was less cautious than anxiously deferential, Spike said, “In future: if, following that sequence of events, you are dismissed immediately, you should assume—unless called for, and unless there’s anyone with us—that we are not to be disturbed for at least two hours.”

“Ah, Slytherin ambition,” Evan noted, grinning.

Severus shot him the particular annoyed look that meant Ev had made him think about curling up together, with or without a book, at a time when someone’s presence or the state of some potion made it (in Severus’s very wrong opinion) impossible. Evan considered kissing him, or at least taking his hand and stroking down his palm—just to prove how wrong he was, of course. He held back; Dobby was too new to his master to see him teased without getting upset.

Severus, far from appreciating this restraint, looked adorably suspicious, and eyed Evan warily as he continued giving his instructions. This was quite foolish of him, as it made kissing him rather harder to resist. “Under those circumstances, you are to actively prevent our being disturbed, and you are not to observe us otherwise in any way.”
“Unless called for,” amended Evan, still grinning. He couldn’t wait to hear what Narcissa had done to his poor Spike this time. There was probably some connection with Spike actively seeking her out, but, well.

“Which,” Severus scowled at him, “would be highly unlikely.”

“If I asked you how you managed this,” Evan asked him fondly, deciding to give both Spike and his cousin the benefit of the doubt until Spike owned up to being bowled over by the Cissagator again, “would you just tell me to ask Narcissa?”

“She just told me we were going to play a game and I should have a memory charm ready at a moment’s notice,” Severus said helplessly. “And fifteen minutes later Luke gave me the elf and bullied me out of arguing with him.”

The elf looked at Spike a little sidewise, but, with an air of noble determination and pleasure at his own cleverness, said nothing. Evan nearly burst out laughing, but didn’t want to explain the difference between your master has a cunning plan and your master is being ridiculous and modest to the poor thing in front of an embarrassed Spike. Embarrassed Spikes became prickly, and it might scare a nervous elf.

Back in their chambers ten minutes later, Ev had to stuff nearly an entire carrot into his mouth to keep from laughing at Spike. He was offending Dobby to his nonexistent boots by showing him around the kitchen and explaining how things should be set up exactly the same way as now whenever they managed to move, and how nobody but Severus was allowed to touch the tea things, and what never to break. Evan badly wanted to sketch Dobby’s expression at the implication that it was okay to break some things, but in fairness, Spike hadn’t shown him the set of Vigorous Debate flatware at that point.

Dobby actually argued at one point, devastated at being forbidden the work of making tea. Evan could have told him that it was only forbidden for Severus to find out, but this would have set a bad precedent. ...Er. Did that mean he was going to have to stop making his own tea when he was alone if Dobby could find out? It might just mean that. Rot.

Or maybe he could get his own teapot? But the last time he did that, Spike ‘accidentally’ gave it to Wilkes as a flatwarming present, and the one before that had been mysteriously transfigured into a watering can for the kitchen herbs. It had been mysteriously transfigured into a watering can four times in the first week, and then again a month later when Evan tried again, at which point Evan gave up and started wand-heating his tea water in a wineglass.

Severus was doing a not-very-comforting job of explaining that making tea for Evan was a point of possessive privilege for him—this failure due both to his incoherent, stiff-lipped, panicky Northern allergy to admitting he was a sentimental squish and also to his mentioning right out loud that teapots were delicate and they’d all seen Dobby trip over medical carts—when there came a strange knocking noise from the living room.

No one had ever bothered to knock on Evan’s door when he was a kid, but he still thought it might be his parents, exercising something like manners now that he wasn’t scaring them by enjoying himself.

No parents presented themselves. In fact, no one at all was in the hall. It wasn’t until the noise came again that they realized the knocking was coming from inside the Vanishing Cabinet.

“I need to set up a bell in case of children,” Severus remarked, eying the cabinet as if it might bite. “A variant on the Protean charm might do it.”
“Just stun them if they’re not Dumbledore,” Evan patted him. He opened the door once Spike had drawn his wand.

A shining silver phoenix swept magnificently and translucently out and circled the room. Coming to a resting hover in front of Severus, it flapped expectantly until he reluctantly held out an arm for it to roost on. With a complacent settling of its feathers that was more realistic than Evan had expected, it spoke. The beak didn’t flap like a mouth; Dumbledore’s mild, husky voice poured out as if the fake bird were singing.

“Severus,” it… communicated creepily. “If you are recovered, I should be pleased if you would join me for a small excursion. A matter has arisen on which I would value your opinion.”

As the apparition dispersed like mist, Severus sourly remarked, “I suppose this is what it’s going to be like.”

“You left the emergency bag at Hogwarts anyway,” Evan reminded him. “How did it knock, do you think?”

“If he isn’t standing in the hallway, I’ll ask,” Spike promised. “Could be useful. Er… what do we do with him?” He nodded his chin at Dobby’s eyes, peeking out from the bathroom where they’d stuffed him at the sound of the knock.

“I was going to go talk to estate agents—”

"Estate agents?!"

“Property managers, then,” Evan corrected himself peaceably, although it was absolutely going to be estate agents. For all Spike’s talk about human alarm systems, he’d decided a freestanding house he could surround with pretty, secretly-terrifying trees would suit them better. Besides, if he didn’t at least get a referral from the estate agents he knew, they’d be offended. Where was the point in that? “I’ll take him with me. If there’s an elf, no one will bother showing me places with unfixable problems, and they’ll know we can handle fixer-uppers.”

“Can we?” doubted Spike.

“Yes, Master Severus,” Dobby said firmly.

Spike made a skeptical noise, but shrugged, tenderly brushed the backs of his fingers down Evan’s cheek, sighed in profound annoyance, and went into the wardrobe with square shoulders. Before the door had finished closing, Evan heard him demand, “What’s HE doing here?!”

Since it sounded outraged rather than alarmed, Evan didn’t worry. Looking down instead, he asked, “What are you calling him ’Master Severus’ for? I took it Lucius gave you to him.”

At this really quite mild criticism, if you could even call it that, Dobby collapsed into a puddle of wailing terror and started trying to hit himself in the face with six of Severus’s favorite books. It was six because Evan didn’t see why he should let Dobby get away with giving himself a concussion if Spike wasn’t allowed to do it, and kept floating them away from him.

“Master won’t let Dobby call him Master!” he cried. He didn’t fight for the books, but grabbed for the fruit bowl instead. “D-d-dob-Dobbs has called himself DOBBY! Dobbs is a BAD, BAD ELF!”

Evan didn’t even let him touch the bowl: it was a gorgeous, vaguely shell-shaped piece of venus flourite that, despite its present occupation by three lemons, two golden silverleaf apples, and a
bunch each of green grapes and black radishes, was meant for scrying. It looked like the middle of a Mediterranean ocean or a bright, starless night, and besides which had been his graduation-and-housewarming present from Aunt Dru.

Levitating it carefully into the safety of the kitchen, he pinched the bridge of his nose. He’d seen Spike do that. It never particularly looked as if it made Spike feel better, and it wasn’t helping Evan now. “Sit still and be quiet.”

A quivering sense of restrained hysteria remained, but since it now accompanied blessed silence, Evan didn’t comment.

He thought about telling Dobby that it wasn’t his fault Spike was going to need training in how to handle having power over someone, but that wouldn’t do at all. And also wouldn’t help.

Neither would remarking out loud on the subject of what he’d like to do to Spike for landing him with a bundle of raw nerves. Although that might frighten the elf less than what Evan currently wanted to do to Dumbledore for yanking Spike away with no notice when he was already frazzled. After living with Lucius since Narcissa’s wedding, Dobby might think that Evan not only meant it but meant to follow through. Even worse than being frightened, he might try to help, and then Spike would scold.

“I don’t have time for you to punish yourself for annoying me with self-recriminations,” he decided. “If you not only think you’ve failed badly enough to warrant an undignified display like that but think your master would agree with you, you can come back here tonight for your punishment instead, and water the roses in the dark with all the creepy country noises.” It was true they didn’t have any demon peacocks, but a goat screaming in your ear was enough to make anyone jump out of his… loincloth, in Dobby’s case; Ev would have to do something about that, and would definitely not leave it to Spike. “But take care: if you decide you deserve to be punished and then Spike tells me you were overreacting and making a fuss for no reason, I shall think of something else.”

Which would probably just be deep-cleaning all Evan’s brushes by hand with smelly turpentine instead of Spike’s brush-cleaning potion, but fortunately his ominous face (rather to his surprise) did the trick.

Dobby gulped, but also looked reassured, as though at least now he knew where he was. He stopped trying to dent Spike’s books on his face, at any rate. Spike might not have approved of Evan’s methods—or would he? Ev wasn’t sure; half Spike’s head was back at Hogwarts where detentions were perfectly normal—but Evan was pleased enough with the results.

“Right,” he said, satisfied. “Will my grandfather’s elf know you’re ours without being told? You have to tell us if he will; he might be obliged to tell people who’d be obliged to tell people.”

Dobby shook his head.

“Are you sure? It could be a real problem, you know. We wouldn’t turn you out, if you were worried,” probably, “but if he knows, we have to handle things differently than if he doesn’t.”

The elf looked cowed, but shook his head again. “Master is asking, too, Sir. Linkin doesn’t feel any different to Dobby—Dobbs,” he offered as evidence. “Dobbs should feel the same to Linkin, too. Dobbs is still the elf of the spouse of a Rosier heir-presumptive.”

“Narcissa’s sort of heirship isn’t the same as mine,” Ev pointed out dubiously. “It certainly isn’t formal or anything.”
Dobby just gave him a confused look, as if he didn’t in the least see the difference between being in the actual line of succession and just being someone of whom older witches tended to approve. Considering that witches (or, at least, witches related to Evan) were considerably less likely to care about documents and legalities than sane people or even other Blacks, that was probably fair.

“What about—” About to mention Kreacher, Evan hesitated. Kreacher was meant to be dead, and even if Dobby knew he wasn’t (Evan wasn’t sure how that worked; Linkin didn’t talk about other elves much), talking about him in unveiled terms would be a bad habit to get into. Besides, he wasn’t the only potential boggart from that wardrobe. “What about Black elves?”

With more assurance, “Dobbs is also still the elf of the spouse of a Black scion who hasn’t left the family and doesn’t wear its name. Lucius Malfoy and Master both aren’t on the Tapestry, so elves of the Black family isn’t knowing Do—Dobby like other black elves, Sir.”

“Lucius is on the tapestry,” he objected.

Dobby looked a little scared, but didn’t back down. He’d be hitting Evan with spoons for sneaking dessert in no time, Evan had no doubt. “Lucius Malfoy’s name is in the tapestry, Sir.”

Evan moved his mouth unhappily. It was true that a name wasn’t a portrait, in lanomancy as in illuminations, but not even Spike’s name was on there; surely a name was more than nothing. “I suppose there’s no helping it if that’s not enough.”

Which, come to think of it, wasn’t true--it just depended on whether elves had to think about things to realize they knew them. Dobby was able to reassure him on this point, although the explanation about when elves did and didn’t think it appropriate to anticipate instructions was, to say the least, involved. Ev might be able to get Regulus to do something with the Tapestry. He just had to figure out what and how.

“Well, we’ll see what we can do. For now, do all you can to avoid anyone’s finding out—really all you can short of attracting more attention, definitely don’t kill anyone. Given that instruction, can you be seen helping me publicly?”

“If Lucius Malfoy is reminded, he will remember lending Dobby to Master, Sir,” Dobby said brightly.

Evan made him explain. “Covers all her corners, does Cissa,” he remarked afterwards. “I hope. Come on, then. Low profile. If anyone asks, my cousins are so generous, lending you to look after their poor helpless artistic-type friend me, what with Linkin so busy helping Mum and Dad settle in after their trip to Peru. You’re just so honored to be serving kind wizards like them that you’re overwhelmed by your feelings and can’t even find the words. Got it?”

Dobby nodded so vigorously that his long nose bobbed. “Dobbs understands, Sir! Master’s elf Robin Dobbs is acting as Lucius Malfoy’s elf Dobby today!”

“I really must speak to Spike about flying everybody he meets certifiably around the twist,” Evan remarked conversationally instead of trying to follow the turbulent moniker cascade. “I’m sure most people don’t drive people mad quite so literally. Come along, then, we’ll start with the estate agent I used after school. She’ll be delighted not to have to restrict her imagination to Spike’s budget this time. I might need an oilskin,” he added thoughtfully, smiling at a mental image of her drooling over the commission she’d get for a place Evan could afford.

Then he sighed: Dobby was (Merlin knew how he’d found it after just Spike’s kitchen-based tour) holding out Evan’s rain cloak. “Thank you,” Ev said gravely, banishing it back to the closet.
“We’ll work on hyperbole later.”

It is, of course, explicable to readers who have read *The Adventure of the Yellow Face*. However, as this is, as well as being a Holmes story, a *Victorian-era story that involves race*, I don’t necessarily recommend that readers who haven’t should.

Chapter End Notes

**Next**: The White Queen jumps down the rabbit-hole. Everyone’s doing their best to be respectful, and yet somehow it’s still like Sherlock vs. Anderson down here.

**Notes**: I had to switch from Word to Pages semi-recently, and it's messing with my formatting. Will have to change the way I deal with footnotes, and have not quite decided how. Sorry for any visual disruption in upcoming chapters.
Chapter Summary

The White Queen jumps down the rabbit-hole with Tweedle-determined and Tweedle-dubious.* Everyone's doing their best to be respectful, but somehow it's still like Sherlock vs. Anderson down here.

* Which wizard is which bitch? You decide.

Chapter Notes

Warnings for gruesome-ish low-tech forensics, speculation, manipulation, and so much inappropriate bickering.

Notes: AS I POST THIS there is a total eclipse—or, if you like, a Super Wolf Blood Moon--slowly blushing above my street! No doubt in an hour it'll be suitably ominous, but just now it's kinda pretty.
For everyone being hit with (I think this one's name is) Harper, keep warm and wear your yak tracks.

Also: I have no idea what I'm talking about with this CSI stuff, but that's okay because neither does Severus.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On the other side of the Vanishing Cabinet, Albus also considered that his young friends needed to be instructed in the fine old art of hyperbole. In his case, he just wanted James and Severus to stop using it about each other at the tops of their voices in the middle of the hall.

Or the top of James's voice, rather. Severus was being at least as unpleasant, but at least he was moderating his volume. Some might have said he was hissing, but it was getting more and more like whispering. There was this to be said for them: although they seemed unlikely to stop arguing or protesting each other's presence to Albus until Doomsday if left to it, they also followed him automatically through the castle and out towards Hogsmeade while they bickered.

"Pleased though I am that you recall each other so fondly," he interjected, turning to face them once the gates of Hogwarts had closed behind them, "we really must be about our business."

"And what, precisely, is that business?" Severus demanded icily.

"And why does he have to come?" huffed James. He looked as though what he really wanted to know was why he himself had to go down into the darkness again.

As a kindness to a very young Gryffindor, Albus did him the courtesy of not replying to a question he hadn't voiced. "I shall explain all when we arrive," he said breezily. "James, would you be so good as to take my arm? And now if you, Severus, will take the other, I shall take us to the gates,
and then James can apparate us side-along most efficiently."

"He doesn't look as if he wants to go anywhere," Severus noted bluntly, though whether this was because he was blind to James's restraint in the name of courage or because he didn't feel obliged to be kind, Albus wouldn't guess. "Suppose you tell me where we're going, and I shall follow you there with a greatly reduced chance of being splinched by his reluctance. Always assuming our destination isn't, for example, the steaming lips of an active volcano. In which case, much as it revolts me, I should have to take his part."

James stared at him, disgusted.

With unruffled superiority, Severus declared, "Someone has to think of these things."

"You don't have to insult the professor!"

Albus was less certain as to who had been the primary target of that cautious skepticism. He was not even slightly tempted to stir up trouble by saying so. It was so charmingly protective of them both.

"Aren't you doubting his so-important Gryffindor courage by assuming he'd avoid somewhere absurdly dangerous? Or do you think he's insulting you by imagining that you wouldn't be willing do the same?"

Fortunately for their chances of getting anywhere before midnight, James had to pause to think about it.

"The objection you're looking for," Severus supplied with saccharine helpfulness, "is: I have a child to think about."

"We are going," Albus hastened to explain the difficulty with Severus's plan while James went an angry red, "under the earth, to a place James has seen today. While it may have once been given apparition coordinates, they've long been out of use. I fear it would be but a poor use of our time to seek them out." He'd also thought it a good idea to bring a spare wand, as it were, or at least a third pair of eyes, to stand lookout while he observed Severus's observations, but didn't wish to play into Severus's volcanic silliness.

Severus looked cross, but took Albus's arm without further complaint—and with a lack of awkwardness that showed it was a familiar gesture for him.

Had Albus possessed any doubts that he was in the company of a fellow worshipper at the cup of Ganymede, that would have resolved it. Slytherin did tend to the old-fashioned gestures, but even in that corner of the Wizarding world it was gentlemen who commonly offered their arms to ladies—when not out of custom then for the simple reason that men tended to be taller. Even the joyful turbulence of these modern times had not turned the pulse of gallantry upside-down, eroded though it was.

With a touch of friendly concern, he wondered whether he ought not, perhaps, to speak to Severus about presenting such a tell. Of course hinting at having an attachment didn't matter when Albus had helped to arrange his handfasting, and James was unlikely to pick up on it. Still, it was sloppy, and Albus had really thought Severus too disciplined, when his temper was under control, to send out unwanted signals. In fact, he'd rather been relying on that.

Then it occurred to him that perhaps Severus had done it to, not to put too fine a point on it, tell Albus something. Such as, perhaps, that Albus was in his bad graces for drawing him away for the
arm upon which he was more accustomed to lean.

Thus it was with a smile on his face that Albus appeared along with his students in an only-moderately nauseating crack of displaced air in the dingy abandonment of the old Underground station. James wasn't bad at this at all, for such a young wizard. It was, Albus supposed, one of the benefits of being single-minded and determined.

Smiling didn't last, though it rallied a little when Severus made a swallowed yelping noise and slashed his wand with a vehemently whispered, "Nendum revelio!"

Albus looked in concern at his startled face, though he noted that the fear in it had eased. "Are we not alone, Severus?"

"There are birds down here," Severus said in a delighted tone that made James look at him in suspicion and outrage—which wasn't really just, Albus thought, as Severus had not yet been told why they'd come. "And loads of reptiles, bats, rodents, and insects, of course, but really some quite large birds; I would have thought only sparrows and the like, if any diurnal birds at all, but—oh. Er, no, Professor, no one seems to be near us, though I think the spell brushed a tram on the the move perhaps half a mi—oh." His gaze had finally swept the floor by the wall ahead, and he finished grimly, "That is, no one living seems to be near us."

The body had not, properly speaking, started to smell yet, but the reek of hot iron, chilled, cut ruthlessly through the must and mold.

Both young men started forward, but Albus kept his grip on their arms—with a slight squeeze, in Severus's case. To his gratification, this was enough. The hope fleetingly crossed his mind that Severus occasionally found the time to go dancing with his young man, since at least one of the two knew how to take someone's lead. He had to admit that it was difficult to imagine Severus doing so willingly.

"A moment of silence won't interfere with our task—or of prayer?" he checked, suddenly remembering that when Severus lost his temper, Merlin's was not the name he naturally gravitated to when swearing.

Severus shrugged indifferently. His eyes were blank as he looked at the body. In horror, Albus supposed; his face was paler than was its wont.

James looked torn between finding something to suspect in Severus's reaction and thinking Albus was mad or wasting time. He also looked out of his depth, however, and held his peace.

Albus regarded the dead man. He didn't yet know who it had been, and the crumpled form seemed to stand for every life snuffed out in the light of his dear friend's cruel schemes, for every life that might pass if things went badly with young Tom, for every family torn and maimed. He apologized, silently and in grief, for his failures, for the necessity that drove him to use this poor fellow as a lesson and a test.

Lifting his head from its place bowed to his chest, he promised the dead man that his passing in pain and fear, pointless though it had been, would be neither wasted or unavenged, if Albus could help it.

With a sigh, he released the boys. "James, I am grateful that your first thought was to inform me. It was quite right of you."

"It wasn't," Severus contradicted, looking straight ahead and down, his lips tight. "This is what
Aurors are for."

James scowled. "A bit stupid not to go to the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot when you have the chance, Snape."

"No, it isn't," Severus argued, turning to him with passionate frustration. "A judge is there to weigh evidence, not gather it!"

"I see I have failed your literary education," Albus began lightly.

"That is certainly true," Severus retorted, "as you have had literally no impact on it."

"I shall have," Albus continued as though uninterrupted (and also as though he didn't notice Severus looking as expectant as if either his criticism or his lapse into what barely qualified as wordplay deserved a response), "to lend you my copy of the Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee as soon as possible."

"I don't care if it's been done before in real life," Severus retorted.

"The books were merely based upon," Albus tried to assure him, but found himself under the wheels of a steamroller.

One whose wheels were coated in acid. "Whether it has, then! There is such a thing as investigatory bias!"

"Look, what do you want us to do?" James broke in impatiently.

"Quite right," Albus approved his bid to bring them back to topic. The wizard before them would not be aided or honored by their stopping before his cast-off bones to delay his justice with arguments over process.

Despite Severus's intimation that he intended to do everything himself, he had every intention of bringing the Aurors here as soon as he'd finished with the boys. He would have brought them before bringing these two, in fact, if he'd had any hope that they would agree to preserve the scene for less official investigation, or brought them concurrently if he'd thought James wouldn't immediately turn to them and find every possible way to persuade them to suspect Severus. As matters stood, official justice would have to wait some little time—but it was unkind and pointless to be profligate about it.

"Gryffindors," Severus snarled, looking whitely at the body. "Who cares if something is done in the right way, the way that will see it accomplished well and unimpeachably, or by the compromised or unqualified. Just so long as something is done."

"James and I will return with Aurors when we three have finished here," Albus assured him mildly. "For the moment, I should like your assessment, as one alive to the politics of the moment."

Perhaps fortunately, before James could protest his own political awareness, or at least that of others unburdened by Severus's associations, Severus scowled. He accused, "This is a test."

"I have been reliably informed," Albus agreed cheerfully, "that everything is."

"The longer you delay in bringing them," Severus pointed out stubbornly, "the more at risk the crime scene and the less at risk the perpetrator."

"I recognize that you haven't their training, my boy," Albus assured him, "but I think that, like me,
you recognize the use of adding the insights of the amateur consultant to a conventional investigation."

Severus gave him a purse-lipped wry look. "Am I to feel flattered?"

Albus smiled. "If you like. Certainly I expect this exercise to be revealing."

The purse went deeper, and more deeply cynical. "You'd risk derailing a murder investigation for a skills assessment?" he demanded.

Appalled, James opened his mouth to agree, and then realized who he'd be agreeing with and looked tortured.

"The perpetrator has already had time enough to make a very clean start, and at this point I don't think the benefit of a functional delay will be greater to him than to my grasp of the situation," Albus assured them both. "While the Aurors are not under my governance, they work closely with the Wizengamot and, well, perhaps somewhat less closely but in a spirit of brotherhood with the other esteemed body I have the honor of directing. While they may share your disgruntlement, Severus, I'm sure they will accept my decision that such a delay is worth it."

While Albus wouldn't have dreamed of outraging Severus's sense of dignity by calling what he did next a pout, he felt quite comfortable calling it a facial 'harrumph,' and even re-setting it, in the privacy of his own imagination, into a more weathered and red-veined face wearing puffy white mutton-chops.

"Right. Well. I came in from there," James pointed with an if that's QUITE settled, may we get on with it tone, and then started in surprise because of the vial Severus had thrust in his face. "I'm not drinking anything you give me!"

"It's empty, you ignoramus."

"What the," James cut himself off, glancing guiltily at Albus. "What the blazes do you expect me —"

"You'll want Professor Dumbledore to supervise my examination, I confidently assume," Severus explained, curt and, in Albus's opinion, a touch snide with defensiveness. "However, the area has not yet been secured. I suppose your long expertise at setting traps and ambushes has left you half-competent to detect any?"

"Merlin's pants, Sni—Snape," James exclaimed in disgust, but started off—in good faith do to as goaded, Albus assumed.

He didn't get far, though, due to Severus stepping solidly in front of him, vial still held out uncompromisingly. "The professor should take your memory, in case you die before the Aurors can ask you questions."

James stared at him. More confused than angry, he asked, "Are you threatening me right in front of Dumbledore?"

"Severus is merely suggesting a wise precaution," Albus stepped in soothingly, "considering that we don't know quite what happened to this man and have, in the time since Severus cast his detection spell, been speaking in these echoing caverns at a normal volume. Have you given a memory to be put into a pensieve before? You won't lose it entirely."

He explained further. Meanwhile, Severus pulled what Albus instantly recognized as a fountain pen
from a trouser pocket and a tiny wire-bound notebook out of, apparently, his jacket sleeve. He unshrunk the latter, made a face at it, and opened it from the back.

"You should call an elf to bring it safely to the school, sir," Severus said when James was done. "In case something happens to us here."

"You really are the greasiest," James began heatedly. Perhaps he'd been set off by Severus's tone, although Albus had personally counted that more as a wary testing of limits than deference.

"An excellent precaution, Severus," Albus slid his voice through their bickering as quickly as he could manage. "I believe I can even better it." He tapped the stoppered vial with his wand, banishing it into his office safe. It was the most efficient way, but he did admittedly take a particular comfort in the privileges of his connection with the castle when his charges were at their most childish. "And now, James, if you would secure the area?"

Severus instantly complicated matters and made things more difficult for himself by shooting a spell at James's feet. "Stand still!" he complained when James yelped and jumped over it.

"You are MENTAL!"

Severus, alas, succumbed to the temptation to raise his voice, if not quite to match James's volume. "The professor and I have not been here before! The Aurors will be able to discount our footsteps when they do their examination, but you were here at the time! If you leave footprints now as well as then, asking them to distinguish between those marks is asking quite a bit, I should think, since I gather this all happened within the hour."

He paused, and saved James the heartache of admitting he had a point by asking more civilly, "Ought we to mask ours, as well, sir?"

"And this," Albus agreed cheerfully, "is where the experience that accompanies decrepitude comes in handy." He raised his wand. "Parameo intacto."

James looked baffled, but Severus disapproved, "All the Romance languages will be coming after you for your crimes against Greek."

"My dear boy," he smiled in protest, "I didn't make it up." While Severus seemed to be struggling not to look gratifyingly surprised, Albus explained to James, "You may go where you like and touch what you like, now; the area will accept no new traces, so long as you care to move nothing."

James yelped, "Why would you teach him that?!"

"My blushes, Potter," Severus purred. "Professor Dumbledore has merely demonstrated the spell. Once."

James stared at him, slightly open-mouthed in outrage, then spun on his heel and stomped off, snarling detection and warding spells.

"That was fun," Severus remarked. It was, for him, quite a chipper tone.

Albus sighed. "I had hoped that, under the circumstances, the two of you—"

"You gave us a task to be done in proximity and under the supervision of a Hogwarts faculty member," Severus spelled out, suddenly hard-voiced. "It creates an atmosphere, sir, and he was already shaken. 'Remain untouched' only prevents the area taking new impressions, I trust? Ones it accepted previously will still be legible?"
"Yes, yes," Albus sighed fondly, and waved him on.

Severus didn't go. It was absurd of Albus to have expected him to, really. "Will it disrupt the spell if I take a sample, or will it merely be seen that I did?" And then, with pointed eyebrows when Albus had indicated that the latter was the case, "But perhaps that, too, is best avoided."

"I've brought you in your capacity as a ground-level consultant for the International Confederation of Wizards, Severus," Albus reassured him. "Your presence here is quite legitimate. I shall not be bruiting about the name of my assistant, but you needn't fear to do what you must."

"Hm," Severus politely doubted him. "He's right, you know. You shouldn't have taught me that."

"Do you intend to share it?"

"No" Severus said coldly, "but I didn't intend to share the levicorpus, either. You shouldn't have taught me where he could see." He turned on his heel and strode away towards the dead wizard and its grotesque grave-marker, the ends of his hair floating behind him as though to emphasize his... concerns.

"Are you familiar with the sigil?" Albus asked his back, smiling. It wasn't entirely unfamiliar to him. In the spring, one or two reports had crossed his desk of a spell of the red-sparks persuasion, in the shape of 'a head vomiting out its tongue' according to one witness. It had drifted above an arson site and the woods where a young witch, affianced to a Muggle musician, had been badly beaten. There had only been the two instances where witness were reasonably sure of what they'd seen, both in April. The Aurors were still keeping it under wraps.

Severus turned and looked him straight in the eye, slowly and deliberately. Albus caught a flicker of relief that had to do with his sending James away before asking. "Can't say I am, sir," Severus enunciated, clearly and blandly.

It was a bit overdone, but better safe than sorry, of course. And Albus was grimly delighted to have that confirmed.

Albus joined him in order to commit it to memory. "What can you tell me about it, or conjecture?"

Severus looked up from where he was running a glowing wand over the man's clothes. "I don't know what you think I can tell you that your own eyes can't. The paint bucket is right there. The body-leaver even left his brush." He hesitated before turning his attention to said brush, flexing his hand as if he were holding one of his own. His mouth turned unhappy. "Do you want a very preliminary conjecture?"

"I should be delighted," Albus assured him. The gravity of his tone was very nearly real, out of respect for the dead wizard, but he couldn't help it if Severus's exactitude was both endearing and entertaining.

"I'm going to speak as if these observations are fact," Severus cautioned. "It's just as likely that this is what investigators are meant to think." He hesitated again, and then, exasperated with life, amended, "Judging by mystery novels it's as likely."

"Understood. I must say, Severus, you're taking this rather well for someone who's previously encountered similar tragedies only in mystery novels."

Black eyes flashed outrage in the dark. "I have assisted my mother with births and laying-outs," Severus hissed, stiff with fury. "I was on duty at St. Mungo's during the giant attack. If you mean to accuse me, as well—"
"Peace, Severus, peace." Albus laid a soothing hand on his shoulder. "I meant what I said, and no more.

"I don't know what you sent me to Madam Nell for," Severus complained, still bristling but less angry than aggrieved, "if it wasn't to keep my composure at times like this."

Albus blinked speculatively. "I think she must have taught you rather differently to me," he mused. "But this isn't the time. Please, continue."

Severus nodded sharply. "All right. In the style, then, of a credulous idiot: This was was done to a wizard by a muggle."

"To Gordon Greyson, of Ravenclaw," Albus said. "Quite accomplished with Arithmancy, as I recall, but no great hand at Charms or Defense. Tell me, though, why were you convinced he was a wizard on sight? Had you met?"

"Well, there's the wand holster," Severus said, as though he didn't think this evidence very convincing. "But beards aren't so common with professional muggles. He's not dressed casually, isn't tanned, and doesn't have worn-down hands. Someone could have put one of Malkins' robes on him, and even put him in underrobes, and look at those shirt-cuffs, but it would have taken either time or a switching spell, and these clothes fit him. By which I mean that the patterns of wear are appropriate to his joints. They aren't, really, when clothes are transfigured to fit someone. And while long hair is more common on muggle men these days, it really isn't on adult professionals, and even the ones who do wear their hair long don't queue it. He did it himself, too; it's off-center, done over his shoulder."

"Muggle sailors," Albus began, with all the confidence of one who had quite admired the Navy uniform and, perhaps, read one too many Hornblower books where Cuthbert could catch him at it.

"Not anymore, sir. If I may continue? In the style, then, of a slightly less credulous idiot: This was done to a wizard by a werewolf of at least minimal means, or with backing, who is able to navigate the muggle world with some level of competence."

Albus looked at the ruined face, which was a very sad and unpleasant thing to do. "Why do you say muggle before werewolf?"

"Because I can tell the difference between sharp teeth, claws set in a living appendage, and a gardening fork," Severus replied. just as acidly as if everyone could fluently read such signs in flesh. "Look." He tapped clawed fingers with his wand and then slashed the air, leaving a shimmering silvery trace in the air, and started on a long discourse about pressure and spacing, about the relative shapes of claws, fangs, talons, teeth, and human nails, and, horribly, about angles in motion.

While the lecture did make him optimistic about the boy's potential talents as an educator, Albus would have preferred to skip it. He had quite liked writing with broad-nibbed quills, up until now.

"So much for hands and paws," Severus continued in a finishing-up sort of tone that Albus devoutly hoped wasn't a false promise. "The size and spacing of the holes would vary for fangs even in a human mouth, and a vampiric one would leave marks where only two holes at a time were regularly-spaced. The wounds aren't consistent with fangs, any more than claws—what."

James had wound his way back to them, and was listening with a peculiar expression. "Nothing. No, something. Why," he demanded suspiciously, "are you ruling out werewolves?"
"I'm not, unfortunately; a werewolf can hold a garden fork as well as a human at this time of the month. But I hadn't finished."

"Big surprise there," James muttered. "I've been gone ten minutes and he hasn't finished."

"Five," Severus said in a provokingly silky tone. "For which reason, I wonder that you have."

"I'm efficient," James said, pulling smugness over anger.

"I'm sure."

"You were saying, Severus?" Albus sighed.

Severus made a discontented mh noise. "Further evidence against a werewolf-typical attack: the victim's beard isn't matted from dragged saliva. Nor is there any smeared blood on his face, as you might expect if the instrument had contained broad elements, like a palm, or the backs of fingers, or a face."

James made a noise that might have been spelled hurk.

"Quite," Severus agreed with what Albus considered to be undeserved nastiness. "A most unpleasant prospect."

"Yes, it is!" James snapped indignantly. "And you know I think it is, so—"

"What I know," Severus interrupted him icily, "is that you have just sufficient neuronal wherewithal to realize when your friends are in trouble, and don't strongly object to creating collateral benefits for others while you save them from themselves."

James threw up his hands. "You're impossible."

"Implausible, perhaps, but despite certain people's best efforts—"

"Boys," Albus quenched the burgeoning disaster quietly. "Had you finished describing the evidence against a lycanthropic attacker, Severus?"

"If I said that, I spoke too broadly." Severus settled back to business with a final glare for James. "I could also mention the minimal blood-smearing on the paintbrush-handle. There is some, here, but not to the extent you'd expect if the killer had attacked a living person using their bare hand as a weapon. And I should note that it will be quite possible to tell whether a magical victim's open flesh was exposed to steel or some other iron alloy—"

James gagged again, turning a pale green.

"Or to saliva or even skin cells infected with lycanthropy," Severus wound down, looking at him with annoyed contempt. "There's no question but that Belby's lab could determine the latter. But if you look at this brush handle, sir, you'll see why I can't rule out a lycanthropic attacker, as you call it."

Albus approached, knelt over, and felt his eyes widen. "Good heavens."

The handle was made from smooth bakelite, not wood. While not damaged in a way Albus would quite have described as 'broken' or 'crushed,' its grasping-point had been compressed by a large fist, so that Albus could see the impressions of not only the fingers but the points where strong, pointed nails had dug in and displaced the material.
"Nails as weak as the average human's couldn't do that," Severus said dispassionately. "Look at that almost triangular shape to the holes. Nearly clear of blood, you'll note—which could mean the damage was done to the brush before the attack, but they're a different shape from the facial wounds—what inflicted those was flatly rectangular, whereas here you can see the arch at the insertion points. Unaugmented human grip strength would also be unable to mold a cold plastic handle in that way."

It wasn't merely because James was looking at him in some desperation that Albus asked kindly, "Did you have any particular sort of augmentation in mind?"

"Not really." Severus was peering dubiously at the handle again. "I know what I'm meant to have in mind—or at least what would be the most obvious answer—but vampires and veela as well as werewolves have human-sized hands and superhuman strength. Nails can be transfigured to claws quite easily, and can have their material transfigured only slightly less easily. Even taking unbreakable curses out of the equation, it could be any of a dozen kinds of imposed magical strength. Strengthening Solution comes instantly to mind."

"It would."

"Yes, it would, Potter, as it's not merely commercially available but so in demand by family farms and manufacturing concerns that I might go so far as to call it mass-produced by wizarding standards. There are charms as well. All I can say with any confidence is that the victim was meant to be found, and the perpetrator intended to muddy the waters. Mostly likely to divide Wizarding Britain's suspicion between muggles and werewolves."

"You think the killer was a wizard, then?" Albus asked.

Severus looked annoyed. "First, unless Potter has some special talent for sensing glamours and polyjuice, if a wizarding individual it's as likely to have been a witch as a wizard. The size of the hands suggests a wizard, but again, magic exists, and families like the Selwyns tend to have witches who can match most wizards for height and breadth. Second, it could just as easily have been a muggle or lycanthropic terrorist—less likely to have been a vampiric one, due to the low profile that race has been keeping on our shores, but I wouldn't entirely discount the possibility. They enjoy political games as much as the next human monster."

"Werewolves aren't monsters!" James shouted, frustrated.

Severus stared at him. "Humans are monsters," he explained, his tone further explaining that James was being deliberately foolish. "As a rule."

"Solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short?" Albus asked, stroking his moustache with one hand to cover the smile.

"I should say 'homo homini lupus,'" Severus drawled, "but I do believe Potter's head would explode in ill-read outrage. Wait, that would be both excellent and appropriate. I shall say it straightaway."

James looked helplessly at Albus, who, in what might have been a somewhat strangled voice, reminded Severus, "Had you a third point, Mr. Hobbes?"

"Who?"

"Yes: I can't imagine a wizard who both hates muggles enough to frame them as a group and would have the street savvy to buy a piece of Poundworld rubbish like this." He gestured with disgust at the brush in its paint, ignoring James pointing at him, urgently and with wide eyes, and Albus
shaking his head with a sharp frown.

He didn't believe it for a second, and didn't think James truly did, either. It was true that Severus had been away from Hogwarts for several hours and that killing was beyond few men, but Albus was confident he would have noticed even a dedicated Slytherin masking fear. Severus was purely annoyed about James's suspicion, not anxious at all. This was merely habit for James, and not an attractive one.

Apparently oblivious, Severus finished, "It's not fit to whitewash with."

"Now he's just making up words," James complained—plaintively, if you asked Albus.

Severus flicked his eyes in that direction, but only said, to Albus, "There are bristles in the paint on the wall, see? There, and there. There's no old paint on the brush, and I don't smell turpentine."

He paused, for some reason, to look warily at James, who tilted his head nobly and said nothing, with an air of smugness.

More suspicious than appeased, Severus hurriedly continued, "A brush that sheds on its first use would be very cheap indeed. I didn't take Muggle Studies myself, but I have helped the lower years with their homework often enough to know that British wizards think muggles shop at quaint country market stalls or Harrods, or, in privation, places that would be quite at home in Knockturn. Maybe Marks & Spencer. They wouldn't sell this," he eyed the brush, "at a Sainsbury's, and discount stores are decidedly not on the curriculum."

"Might it not have come from a pawnbroker's?" Albus asked, assuming that was what he'd meant by the reference to Diagon's least savory offshoot.

"Do those really still exist?" Severus asked dubiously. "I'm sure we would have had one 'round our end of town if they did. * In any case, don't pawnshops deal in things of moderate value? This brush is completely rubbish, Professor. Decidedly factory made, and without interest taken in the quality. Even the hairs are plastic."

"You can't tell that just by looking at it," James said flatly. "The brush is in the paint."

Severus gave him the you're-being-difficult-just-for-the-sake-of-it look again. "Look at the ones in the wall. Uniform length, no tapering, flat black where they're not painted over, and thicker than natural fiber. Except for whiskers. But, again, there'd be tapering."

"Very well, Severus, I'm convinced," Albus said gently, though he hoped no one would ask him what, exactly, he'd been convinced of. "If it is from a discount store, what do you consider the significance of that to be?"

"Finding one, and knowing what it was likely to have in stock, would require dedicated footwork or specialized knowledge from a wizard," Severus replied instantly. "And if the buyer were dressed or behaving in a way that seemed strange to the cashier, it's odds on they'd remember. When your margins are tight, you don't muck about with money."

"I don't think anyone would try to use Gringott's money in a muggle shop," James said slowly, "if that's what you mean."

"It isn't," Severus said, for once as naturally if he were speaking to a fellow-creature. "I meant that lower-class shops are more vulnerable than higher-end ones to both petty theft and to suspicion from those that police listen to. People living like that are more inclined than many to impolitely pay attention, and cement the encounter in their memories by discussing it, if they sense something
off about a customer."

"But they'd still sell to someone 'off'?" James asked impatiently.

Severus shrugged. "You never know who'll do what really," he said, "but I'd imagine many would. A sale's a sale."

"So that doesn't help narrow it down at all!" James exclaimed, exasperated.

"No, but if the Aurors find the right shop it raises the odds—"

"And how many shops like that are there?"

Severus shrugged again. "Hundreds, I expect. Into the thousands, quite possibly."

"Well that's exceptionally useful! Ta ever so!"

"I am merely," Severus said coldly, "thinking aloud. At Professor Dumbledore's request."

"He didn't ask you to waste time spinning theories that circle back to nowhere, he asked you for answers!" James said hotly.

Chilly but amused, Severus contested, "If true, that would have been 'exceptionally' foolish of him. The professor knows full well that, dammit, Jim, I'm a brewer, not a detective."

James gasped in outrage, or at least offended startlement. Albus, too, was surprised, to say the least. "What did you just call me?"

"Ask your wife. I was asked for observations." Turning back to Albus while James was gaping in further outrage, "I don't suppose you want me to try to work out what the victim had been doing earlier? I could give it a go in the spirit of the consulting amateur if you like, but I imagine the Aurors will have spells for that that."

"No, no, that's quite unnecessary," Albus agreed, relieved by the opportunity to leave their latest pointless, knee-jerk squabble in the dust. "I would, however, still like you to tell me whatever you can about this sigil."

"Well, it's stupidly done," Severus replied promptly.

James gave him another of those helpless don't-know-what-to-make-of-you looks, but Albus had to lift a hand to stroke his moustache again. "What do you mean, my boy?"

"Do you recognize this very pale, yellowish green?"

"Pus," James said, torn between genuinely trying to be helpful and playing along with a dangerous madman.

To Albus's gratified surprise, Severus inclined his head and agreed, "A fair description. However, muggle paint in this shade usually means-let's see. Solis-no, nox, localized light will work faster. Lumos maxima."

Albus almost preferred the return of the grim dimness after Severus's first spell brightened the whole area. It was an exceptionally dirty and run-down chamber, and the old posters lent an air of surrealism. In the light, the young wizard before them (Gordon Greyson had been, at least, still young enough for both hair and beard to appear uninterruptedly brown at first glance) seemed even more diminished, and his blood stood out starkly.
The return to using his wand as a torch didn't make Albus feel any better, and the brighter, whiter light made him flinch. At least it reduced the possibility that a working train's conductor would see a glow down a tunnel where no glow should be and alert someone.

"And now," Severus addressed them, "if you will both put out your wands."

"Don't do it, Professor!" James blurted, staring at Severus in sudden—or, at least, renewed—wild suspicion.

"Don't be ridiculous," Severus sighed irritably. "Coming down' here wasn't my idea, you know. I didn't even have any warning."

"That doesn't mean you won't take advantage—"

"Severus," Albus inserted himself. He thought James would appreciate it, and Severus's rhetorical failings were paining him, as an educator. "The nature of your objection agrees with James' premise."

"Exactly!" James said, as though he felt Albus had justified him.

"Only because he wouldn't understand reasonableness if it bit him," Severus retorted, looking as though he were restraining himself with great difficulty from snider commentary yet.

"Like you would!"

Severus smirked. It was a very particular sort of satisfied smirk.

Albus, who did not make a practice of imagining even of-age children in the throes of passion and who found the thought of the doughlike Mr. Rosier in such a state to be particularly upsetting on several levels, put himself forward again. "James, Severus is in my employ. I should like you, if you can, to try to trust my judgment."

"I trust you, sir," James protested. "He's sneaky!"

"Not comparatively," Severus purred again, "but I do appreciate the compliment, coming from one so advanced in the quality himself."

James opened his mouth to shout, but Albus didn't have to intervene. He stopped himself, looking unnerved.

Severus had the grace not to pursue a victory in which Mr. Filch, for one, would have backed him wholeheartedly, and went on in a much more businesslike tone. "If my hypothesis is correct," he assured Albus, "there will still be light whatever I do."

James's mouth twisted and he raised his wand. Instead of simply putting out its light, he conjured a leather loop bearing a long, elegant bell in the shape of a Chinese lantern lily to hang off Severus's wrist.

"That was impolite, James," Albus chastised, regarding it with mixed pleasure at an ill job well done, "though I must say that, with apologies to Severus, were I still Hogwarts' transfiguration master I might feel obliged to give points to Gryffindor."

"Much obliged, sir, thank you," Severus regarded him with annoyance, and looked down at the bell without any change in expression. "Shall I try to take your handkerchief, Mr. Fagin?"
"Who?"

"Had that been the goal," Albus said lightly, "I believe it would be James overburdened with bells." To his deep gratification, Severus's eyes lightened, and even crinkled at the corners.

"What?" James tried hopelessly.

"Never mind, never mind," Albus chuckled soothingly, "Severus, are you willing to assuage James's mind in this way?"

"Are you asking it of me because I may have to grow accustomed to being importuned by children afraid of the dark?" Severus enquired with mock earnestness.

Albus sighed as James scowled.

"Oh, fine," Severus bit off crossly. "Just put out all the lights, I'll wear your bloody security blanket."

James started to make a heated reply, but Albus held out a hand and tried to silently point out that he was, in fact, getting what he had asked for. With mutual glaring and much silent harrumphing, all the wands went out.

It didn't leave them in the dark. Quite.

Albus nearly wished it had. In the strong light from their wands, the skull and its long, wagging tongue had been cartoonish. Now, shining a bold and sickly green in the newly echoing blackness, it was a skin-crawling grotesque.

"I could further illuminate my point," came Severus's voice, sounding quite pedantic and unaffected, "by waiting out the effect, as this whole affair has been so mugglishly executed that I'm only minimally concerned about a curse kicking in when the sigil's light goes out. But I fear Potter might panic. In any case, the duration will differ depending on the chemical in the paint. If it was zinc sulfide it might be only a few minutes, but it's so bright that I think the base might be strontium aluminate. In which case we could be here for hours."

"Are those real words?" James's voice came plaintively out of the gloom by Albus's elbow. "In English?"

"No."

"Severus…"

"Isn't chemical nomenclature technically Swiss?"

"...I don't think the Swiss would say so..."

"Having met a few Swiss brewers at some of Slughorn's parties, sir, I'm afraid you might be wrong about that. Regardless, I suspect the paint won't fade quickly. You might as well bring the light back so I can take off Potter's idiotic teddy-bell without giving him an excuse to hex me."

The chamber being lightened to mere oppressive gloom again, Albus gave Severus a Look to communicate his feelings about provoking one's friends and allies out of nervousness.

"No pun intended," Severus lied, feigning meekness.

"What pun?"
"It was earlier. I shouldn't worry, Potter, it's not in the least surprising you missed it."

Albus, moving to the sigil to rule out the possibility of a curse, didn't turn again, but he did sigh.

"...Right. So it's 'stupid' because it'll fade?" James asked dubiously. "That'd make it even creepier in the dark, if you ask me."

Albus winced, but Severus nodded, saying, "That was why I was initially concerned about some spell being attached to the fading of the luminescence. But no—the problem, from the standpoint of one trying to leave a frightening message, isn't that it fades. If I hadn't brought bright light to it, to give it a brief but intense charge, it wouldn't have glowed at all. Or, at least, not much, not just from our ordinary lumos spells at a distance."

"The diamond exists already in the charcoal," Albus murmured, flaking off a sample of paint with a strand from the brush in it, "gold in fire. I hold in my hand the magic hammer.**

Both of the boys looked at him blankly. Albus was going to explain, but Severus said in an almost offended voice, "I shall be sure to send Madam Nell your regards to her esteemed husband when next I speak with her, but I see nothing here that can't be explained with simple chemistry.

"Nor, do I," he confessed, smiling. "It was merely a thought."

"Also," Severus complained, "considering the substance from which phospheros was first derived by his compatriots, don't you think that references to holding a magic hammer in one's hand are rather crude?"

James looked dubiously at his own wand—the wooden one in his hand—but wisely elected to stay out of it. He had the look of a boy three quarters of the way through one of poor Cuthbert's classes. While Albus didn't regret bringing them both, this was probably their best-case scenario.

"Never mind, Severus," Albus said, closing his eyes in a pain of sensibility and only just resisting covering his face with his hands. "You were telling us why you believe this paint was a foolish choice."

"Don't you know?" Severus asked, surprised.

"I'm not familiar with the compounds you mentioned," Albus told him. "You were saying that their luminescence is activated by light, I believe, but the phosphorescent materials in an alchemist's toolkit are lit by the air."

"Paint made from those compounds stores light," Severus corrected, satisfied. "The light isn't waiting in the paint to be activated; the paint has to take it in before it can be released. As it were. Which is why using it down here was either an ignorant error or inexplicable through what we currently know."

James muttered something.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said, just like you to hedge all your bets!"

"I only take bets I want to lose."

"...What?"
Severus smirked, and turned back to Albus, ignoring James expounding on how mental he was. "This area is clearly abandoned," he said, gesturing.

Then he glanced at his chiming wrist in irritation and vanished the bell. "As I said, glow-in-the-dark materials—I use that as almost a brand name, I'm not talking about just anything that glows—store up light, and then release it in the dark. And this place isn't ordinarily lit, let alone well-lit. There's nothing for the paint to store. Any investigators would have found the scene just as we did, barring the gentleman's further decomposition. Unless Potter interrupted and prevented some further setup, no one need ever have come in here to be confronted with a glowing and macabre spectre."

Albus hummed thoughtfully. "And what can you conclude?"

"Planning, acquisition, execution." Severus began.

James made a sick and incredulous noise.

Severus rolled his eyes. "Not that kind. I can conclude little from this about the person who was here and carried out the crime—he might have filled one of the other two roles as well, though probably not both. Perhaps neither. He might not have known about the design flaw, or not cared, or not dared to voice any objections to the plotter. As we've established, the materials-acquirer must have known something about the muggle world. The plotter either didn't care about creating the effect we assume they wanted, or didn't give the executor—"

"Executioner," James muttered.

"—Detailed instructions."

"And what do you think?"

"That I don't know enough about it to have an opinion."

"Do you have an instinct?"

"Yes, but it's thoroughly unsupported and therefore quite irrelevant."

"Indulge an old man," Albus encouraged him, smiling.

Severus looked edgy and put-upon. "My entirely unsupported instinct," he emphasized, "is that someone told the killer to create a glowing menace. Whereupon the killer thought to himself, 'As if I could do that in the unbroken darkness without a wand,' though I don't know if he was forbidden to use one, so as to frame muggles, or didn't have one in the first place. But my instinct is that he thought, 'As if that could work without magic, I'll just do what it takes to make it look like I tried. If it works, well enough, and more likely I'll just play dumb if you flash bastards ever even find out that muggle paint can't do what you can; I'm sure to get away with playing dumb given what you think of me.'"


Severus shrugged. "I doubt the killer is a polite person, in his heart. People don't both get asked to do vicious jobs like this and perform them competently and calmly without a great deal of built-up anger or natural sadism. Those marks in the brush suggest someone treated vilely by wizards as a matter of course, who has to smile and take it. Passive aggressive by necessity, actively so when the opportunity presents. That's my instinct."
"Just because he's evil doesn't mean he isn't polite," James retorted. "Look at your pal Malfoy!"

Exasperated, Severus asked, "Do you have some basis for that character smear, or do you make the accusation because he's a Slytherin whose way of speaking jars your impeccably posh nerves?"

"My what?"

Severus opened his mouth, looking scathing.

Therefore, Albus hastened to speak first. "Let us, indeed, reserve accusations for where we have evidence. James, what do you draw from this poor wizard's circumstances?"

"I think Snape's making all that sh—that stuff up to confuse you, Professor," James said with a set jaw.

"Of course you do," Severus scorned before James had even finished speaking. "I've been quite clear about the limits of my speculation, thank you—"

"While claiming you're an expert on muggle paint and things!"

"While claiming I have some rudimentary awareness of the world I live in, and of the sort of novelty product that's advertised on telly and in the backs of comic books. Which, as brewing professional from a certain area who was once a twelve-year-old boy despite your best efforts, I do! For Merlin's sake, ask your wife!"

"What does MY WIFE—"

"SHE GREW UP WITH ME!" Severus bellowed back, his wand slicing what looked like a sound-containment charm into the air. The shouting might have simply been to make himself heard, because he went on in a tone more moderate in volume, if not in infuriation. "Christ, give it up! Stubbornness isn't a virtue when you're only using it to be an idiot! I've told you repeatedly I've no wish to interact with her in that way! You've seen that my inclinations are firmly engaged!"

"With another red-haired," James nearly sputtered with quick-risen fury, "green-eyed—"

"I am not responsible for coloration coincidences!" Severus retorted, eyes snapping. "Nor will I lay bare the bones of my home to the unjustifiable incredulity of your prurience!"

Albus would have interfered at this point, the last word seeming ill-fitting as well as unkind, but Severus was gushing words with scarcely a pause for breath, let alone between them, though his pace sounded as deliberate as if he were carefully selecting each one.

"Evan has told you to look on me as her brother, and since Lily agreed with him, your opinion is irrelevant! How many times do we have to go over this? Or is your plan to cut a new mother off from all her friends so she forgets how to move in the world, and is entirely reliant on your beneficence and at the mercy of your so-whimsical entitlement?"

Now Albus did lay a hand on his arm. "Severus. Let us all make sure our accusations are supported, shall we?"

Flushed, with whitened rings around eyes gone stony, without shifting his glare from James's confused and offended face, Severus gritted, "He's always thought it his right to decide who she could have as a friend. Whether or not either of us can recognize reasonableness, sir, I'm not sure you even know what a warning sign is."
"That will do, Severus," he said gently. "As I believe we have completed our initial observations of the victim, I should like you to apply, if you would, your considerable talents to examining the surrounding area. See if you can determine the killer's escape route, there's a good fellow."

"That's likely to work out poorly for me," Severus said bluntly, the mottled flush receding but the skin around his eyes still comparatively pale. "He'd claim I'd tampered with the evidence."

"Well, you probably would," James muttered, but he looked troubled and sounded half-hearted. Severus threw up his hands.

"Very well, very well," Albus sighed. "You've had a long day, after all, and I suppose we should leave something for the Aurors to do."

"I was speculating," Severus reminded him, sounding at the end of his rope. "Everything's been left for the Aurors to do!"

"Oh, but I've found both your contributions quite valuable, my boy," Albus said cheerfully.

"Have you?" If Albus was any judge, and he flattered himself he was, Severus would, had not currently been working at Hogwarts, have used a snider tone even than that. "I can't see why you brought us both here at once—"

"To have someone free to keep an eye on you," James said at once, contradicted by every discussion Albus had had with him and his little friends about Severus for going on a decade.

Most particularly the one just after young Harry's birth. Albus had hoped then that he might be getting somewhere, but in the end he'd had to hold back from declaring bluntly that Severus's position had returned to Hogwarts for patriotic reasons. Fortunately, James had been so worked up about the idea of making any promise that might protect Severus's secrets than he'd quite forgotten to ask what those secrets might be.

Albus really felt quite sad about it. While he was never inclined to make plans-as-such where young egos were involved, it had occurred to him on multiple occasions that if one could convince Lily Evans, Severus Snape, and Sirius Black to harness their three quite different minds to work on the same problem in tandem, that problem would almost certainly dissolve like tissue within the month.

He had any number of problems to which he would have dearly loved to treat with Lily's conscientious awareness that sanity and compassion were never inappropriate, Sirius's outside-the-turtle delight in Trying absolutely anything that didn't remind him of his family, Severus's methodological and critical intensity of focus, and their joint creative enthusiasm. Alas, he knew quite well that it could never happen so long as Severus and James insisted on hatefully misunderstanding each other.

That worthy latter, despite his continued insistence on that misunderstanding, was now raising Albus's spirits to some degree by looking troubled. It wasn't much to go on, but Albus had quite given up on any sudden, dramatic breakthroughs on this project. At this point the smallest indicators might be taken as hopeful, and, promisingly, Albus thought that muggles might have called the way James spoke 'autopilot.'

Severus started to retort, but then looked at him more closely. To James's evident disquietude, he just turned back to Albus—albeit with continued derision. "Unless it was to foment some mad—that is, in the unlikely hope of turning us into bosom chums."
"Oh, I shouldn't go so far as that," Albus said lightly, "but as I have given up trying to put your conflict to peace by keeping a distance between you," he eyed James, who looked sullen, "it is my dearest ambition to help you get along as colleagues, my boys."

James made an unconvinced noise, but didn't speak.

Less scornful now than darkly amused, Severus, opined, "That might be overly ambitious on a human level while at the same time being, from one who holds your several august offices, sir, a bit disappointing."

It occurred to Albus to wonder whether the sirs suddenly peppering Severus's speech (was it sudden?) were a pattern made originally to placate someone else. A distasteful thought, but best not to pursue it for the moment. Airily, he said, "Man's reach should e'er exceed his grasp, Severus. But I believe you've had quite a long day. Would you prefer to wait for me in my office, or discuss Mr. Quirrell in the morning?"

Resigned and unsurprised, Severus said, "Tomorrow." His eyes warily crossed Albus's. Albus thought, not quite distinctly:

unless he's bloody sacking me, which might be a sodding relief as sodding Walrusface is bollocksing everyone up as usual - taking me out of the equation will only hide the problem - don't even know what her problem IS yet - everything's a disaster and it's only Wednesday - we've been shouting over a MURDERED MAN over Potter's pathetic, insecure sexual territorialism - christ what if he has a ghost and is watching us squabble like he never mattered fucking disrespectful insupportable don't even know if he has a family probably doesn't have a pureblood spouse if he's doing his own hair off-center by hand-not-wand probably just trying too hard - didn't know the spells - MoreVulcanThanTheVulcansClimberMudblood like me and look where it got him can I go fucking homevan now

It was barely a microsecond, everything layered in a heap of thoughts rather than one idea after another, before dissolving into a petulant cloud of cathartic profanity mixed with sickened, overwhelmed, burningly-furious-at-the-universe anxiety. Albus had the sense that someone small was at the center of that feeling; it felt protective, defensive.

Despite mind magics of the more defensive variety not being remotely his specialty, he was able to back away before anything else boiled through at him. He would have to have a word with Perenelle.

"Not to worry," he soothed, only winning himself a suspicious look, as though it were his fault Severus had forgotten to occlude while indulging in a mental primal scream. "It will keep. Always presuming it isn't your intention to——"

"It is my intention," Severus said firmly, before Albus could say some kinder version of hunt down that poor little Ravenclaw and shout at him some more, "not to speak to any more humans until tomorrow."

"Then I shall see you for breakfast," Albus replied, gently ignoring the piteous do-I-have-to-eat-with-people look, "and afterwards, I'm sure Professor Slughorn can spare you for a few minutes."

This time, Severus's harried look was accompanied by a distinct I'm sure I haven't done anything awful enough to account for a year of THIS, no matter what Potter thinks before it dissolved again into dismayed and incoherent resentfulness. Albus's feeling that he needed to speak to Perenelle was becoming quite acute. This was nothing like legilimency. Legilimency was the search for memories. He hadn't pressed in, he'd had no sense that Severus had been trying to communicate,
and the only reason Albus had known they weren't his own thoughts was that they'd been nothing he was remotely likely to think.

Cheerfully, he said, "I shall be taking you, James, to give your report for the Aurors, but I think I've asked all I can of you, Severus, for the moment, unless you've changed your mind about doing your own examination of the larger area."

This was less an invitation than a reminder of James's suspicions. Despite all the sorrow of having to issue it, Albus was pleased to be working with someone who not only could take a hint but (judging from the expression which, while not quite sour, was so distinctly old-fashioned that it might have been patented before the Roman occupation) understood it.

That, however, wasn't why he missed Severus when the boy had gone. Rather it was because James turned out to have a better grasp on his native manners than Albus had been crediting him with. As soon as Severus had gone, no compunctions about sharing suspicions with Albus seemed to remain. It was bad enough initially, but then Albus had, for the sake of Severus's cover, to insist that James reveal the identity of Albus's deputized helper to no one.

These muggle caverns did echo so.

* Google informs me that his hometown does have a place called the Swap Shop… established 1985.

** Albus is quoting an essay by Victor Hugo

Chapter End Notes

Notes: I apologize to Poundworld. I'm sure it and other 99p stores are not, in fact, universally shady with uniformly terrible products. Severus is from Cockbill Street and a DIY chauvinist, you know how it is.
“…no,” said The Publisher, his doughy little moon of a face blank with awe around the clever fawn-colored eyes. “—what am I even looking at?!”

“Magnificent, isn’t it?” the author beamed down fondly at his manuscript. “Every Dashing Young Wizard’s Guide To The Splendours of Hogwarts (and Environs),” he read out with loving relish. “By me. Gilderoy Lockhart. I don’t blame you for being confused; the cover is a bit drab at the moment, but I have—”

“Why does your first chapter open with six paragraphs describing your reflection in the Black Lake when you rowed over in your first year?”

Gilderoy blinked, taken aback. “Should it be more?” he wondered. “I quite realize,” he assured The Publisher, “that the approach to the castle is of Great Dramatic Moment, and should be given all due attention, but I was only wearing my school robes, you know.”

“Mr. Lockhart,” said The Publisher, too blown away to think of anything relevant to say, “after six paragraphs describing your shoes, school uniform, and hair, and four more reflecting on the innocence you, as a ‘tiny tot,’ are about to lose to the ‘rough and tumble of laddish life,’ you call the castle ‘big and grey.’”

“It certainly is,” Gilderoy agreed benignly.

The Publisher waited encouragingly. Gilderoy wasn’t sure what he was waiting for, so he tried one of his better smiles. Bast always said they were the best thing he had going for him.

“I guess I can’t argue with that,” The Publisher murmured coyly, his eyes rolling back in his head from the sheer force of his lust.

Gilderoy responsibly turned the intensity of his smile down out of kindness to the poor man. He was at work, after all. Besides, as charming as the Mandarin collar on The Publisher’s robes could have been, his jaw was quite the wrong shape for it and he was wearing it over a brown turtleneck.
“Look,” said The Publisher, eyes shining with sympathy and lust, “I can see you’ve put a lot of time into this, but even if it were the sort of thing we were looking for—I mean,” he added in a sudden burst of outrage at the postal system, “Did you even get our owls?”

“Oh, I was afraid of this,” Gilderoy exclaimed, bringing a perfectly-manicured hand to his lips, and then leaning across to rest the same hand on The Publisher’s slightly hairy wrist. After all, it was only right to give him some consolation while apologizing, but really Gilderoy could only spare him an indirect kiss even if his magnificent manuscript hung in the balance.

He wouldn’t have minded, but he hadn’t been passionately shouted at by Snape for ‘acting like a streetwalker’ in over a year and, as sweet as it was of Snape to keep reminding Gilderoy how much he cared, it wasn’t right to worry the poor man so. One had to take care of one’s eardrums. Besides, it was always disconcerting when someone was so passionate at you that you forgot they were, really (although Gilderoy would never say so), rather homely in the face and dressed horribly on purpose.

It wasn’t as though Gilderoy didn’t enjoy Snape incompetently flirting with him—not per se, as Barty would say. Only those sessions were always terribly confusing, and one of the life lessons Gilderoy had thought it very important to pass on was that Snape Always Finds Out.

He’d stricken the paragraph that said so, with some regret: Snape wasn’t going to be a fake-prefect anymore and so incoming children probably didn’t need to know. But Snape did always find out.

You couldn’t so much as offer a few kisses to find out what was usually on an exam without Snape dragging you out into the extremely scary forest to be shouted at. Not that he ever explained what it had to do with having a nice walk out of doors in the city, but there was no use trying to keep up with all the things that upset Snape. Especially when a centaur might shoot you for trespassing at any moment.

And it was very noisy with wild animals who knew where but probably everywhere, and Gilderoy got so scared he kept forgetting Snape was ugly. Anyway, Snape never explained why he had a problem with something so harmless as taking walks in the first place if it wasn’t a cover for jealousy (which Gilderoy had thought it was at first, but Snape wasn’t jealous of Barty or of anyone Gilderoy snogged just to be nice), and Barty was never sympathetic afterwards and if you told Reggie (who usually understood Snape, or at least did better at it than anyone else Gilderoy might ask for advice) he just closed his eyes like he had a headache and wrapped his arms around his head and chanted Why Me Why Me or Ne-ver-Mind-Why-Just-Do-As-Spike-Says.

And it was all just terribly confusing.

But Snape did always find out, so Gilderoy thought he’d better stop The Publisher before he suggested anything that would get Gilderoy into trouble he been peacefully free of for quite some time.

except no one would bother

He continued, very sympathetically, “I quite understand, old thing, but it just isn’t meant to be.”
“Right—er. Do you really?” The Publisher asked, all concern.

It didn’t quite make sense, unless he wanted to be quite sure that Gilderoy understood his admiration, but since Gilderoy did, he nodded earnestly. “I do, it’s perfectly natural and you mustn’t be ashamed of it,” he assured The Publisher sympathetically. “Only the thing is, I have a boyfriend.”

“…Good?” asked The Publisher, a little helplessly, caught up in his despair.

Gilderoy nodded sadly. “And I care for him very much, you see. Otherwise I shouldn’t mind at all.” He compassionately allowed The Publisher as long as he needed to recover from the disappointment.

As was occasionally the case when Gilderoy had to disappoint people, The Publisher changed colors a couple of times, but he didn’t get violent or noisy about it, just very slowly and with delicate disappointment said, “I see.”

Pulling himself manfully together, he said, “Well. As I was trying to tell you, Mr. Lockhart, you won’t find anyone to publish this. If you wanted to do another history, that would be one thing, but Hogwarts is very down on anyone selling guidebooks and things. They say it’s impossible to keep them accurate, and it isn’t fair to the muggleborns, and the kids should be allowed to get to know the place for themselves anyway.”

Gilderoy frowned. “It’s not fair when older children know all the hiding-places,” he pointed out. He wasn’t sure exactly what wasn’t fair to the muggleborns; if there were a book to buy at Diagon they could buy it when they got their textbooks, couldn’t they, just like anyone else? It would be better than not having a book to buy, wouldn’t it? But either way, it certainly wasn’t fair to first-years that older children, or firsties from other Houses with prefects who didn’t stop them exploring, had a chance to find shortcuts and passwords and places to jump out from and so on. So where did fair come into anything?

“I’m just telling you what they say,” The Publisher tried to soothe Gilderoy. He was one of those brisk types who seemed to be tired all the time. That sort of thing, like when Snape shouted at him for trying to get ahead while also shouting at him to have some respect for himself, left Gilderoy confused. He found it appealing, somehow, but also had a sneaking suspicion that this sort of person wouldn’t pay attention to him properly in bed, so why was it appealing? He’d tried acting that way at Bast and Thor, but they’d just laughed. Since there wasn’t anything unusual about that, it didn’t tell him anything.

“—on the Wizengamot. Er, Mr. Lockhart?”

“I wonder what I should write instead,” Gilderoy said brightly, since it would be rude to tell the man that Gilderoy had been wondering if Gilderoy had a special ability for sensing prick size, like Reggie’s friend Goldstein had for not getting lost and Snape’s dimwitted prefect had for making lights do what he wanted.

Or maybe it wasn’t a special ability of Gilderoy’s (he’d been mistaken before) and he’d just brilliantly noticed that massive pricks made people tired and annoyed. It might be a boon to mankind if Gilderoy designed special pants to cradle them better so they’d be less irritated? That would be a worthy next project! But either way, it would be rude to share thoughts like that with The Publisher now that Gilderoy had already had to disappoint him. “Can’t argue with the Wizengamot after all, can we?” He laughed lightly, sending the man a roguish wink.

“…Best of luck with that,” The Publisher said after feasting his wide eyes on Gilderoy one wistful
moment more, his tone going all flat as he realized Gilderoy was about to leave him. It was, really, very sad for the poor man. “But I might suggest that whatever you write next, if you must—”

“It’s so kind of you to worry for my eyes!” Gilderoy burst out, clasping his hands to his chest, and then waved a finger at him. “But needn’t fret, my stamina is remarkable!”

Then he realized that this might have been taken as taunting the poor fellow about his availability, and hastened to put on a contrite expression.

“…Right,” The Publisher said slowly again, clearly very concerned for the health of Gilderoy’s beautiful eyes, gazing strickenly into them as he was. Gilderoy was about to earnestly assure him about only writing in good light and all of that, but the man recovered himself and suggested, “Well, if you really must, I strongly suggest not writing out your own name six times a page.”

“Really?” asked Gilderoy, astounded. “But my friend Regulus Black told me it’s much better not to write in first-person, and he’s ever so clever, you know!”

“…Well,” The Publisher said, still slowly, the odd look on his face bearing mute testimony to his sudden, burning jealousy of Reggie, “I’m not saying he’s wrong. Just reconsider putting your full name in all-caps every other sentence.”

“Hmm,” Gilderoy agreed pensively, “yes, I do see what you mean.”

“Right,” the man said, relieved not to have upset Gilderoy, “it’s a bit jar—”

“First-person would take up much less space over the course of the book, especially with a distinguished name like mine,” Gilderoy happily concluded. “Leave more space for the gripping narrative, eh?” He winked again, and gave it a sparkle.

“…Sure,” The Publisher agreed, becoming unenthusiastic as he saw Gilderoy get ready to leave. “We’ll be really looking forward to that.”

“Well, of course you will!” Gilderoy exclaimed, and, getting up, bent over the desk to gather up his manuscript. He decided to graciously give the clever-faced little man a kiss while he was there, just on the cheek. “Never fear,” he assured him, “you’ll be seeing Gilderoy Lockhart again, and sooner than you think!”

As Gilderoy left, he heard a faintly gasped, “Oh, Merlin,” and hastened to close the door quickly. It was quite natural for the fellow to give in to his urges, and since Gilderoy had stirred him up in his office in the first place it was only thoughtful to make sure he got to wank undisturbed, without his boss swanning in through an open door or something.

As Gilderoy wandered down Litre Alley towards Diagon, stopping to loudly admire the samples in a couple of illuminators’ windows in case he needed them later, he had to admit that he was feeling just a touch… unjauntified. It was… well.

Not disheartening, of course, for the staunch heart of Gilderoy Lockhart would never fail!

But it was sad to have put so much time into a project that would never be accepted no matter how good a writer Gilderoy was. The time was lost, and he’d already shown it to everyone who’d ever read it, evidently. It was as if his little book was dead.

He sighed, and was just about to remorselessly cheer himself up when someone started screaming behind him.
He wheeled, gallantly pulling his wand in a swirl of nearly-golden robes (they were only a golden tan, sadly; Barty had said the really-golden ones he’d wanted to buy were stupid. While Barty always said things like that, Reggie had reminded Gilderoy that, as a good Slytherin, he shouldn’t wear any more gold than the hair he was born with).*

Then he got knocked back several paces, and if his manuscript hadn’t been spelled together it would have gone flying all over the cobblestones.

“Don’t you dare pull a wand on my baby!” snarled Snape’s ginger friend Helen, her own aimed unerringly between Gilderoy’s eyes. She was, yes, clutching a howling bundle. “I’ve heard about you, Lockhart!”

“My dear lady,” Gilderoy assured her, “I merely, on hearing the screaming—”

“Babies cry, it’s a thing they do,” Snape’s ginger friend Helen continued to snarl. “I’ve heard about you, Lockhart! I don’t care what spell you were trying to do—don’t!”

“My dear Madam Ovtroi, I assure you,” he began to placate her, but stopped uncertainly when her face went all scrunched-up and her wand lowered a bit.

“Your dear what did you just call me?” she demanded incredulously.

“Isn’t that your name?” Gilderoy asked, his smoothness slipping a bit in uncertainty. “Ovtroi? You were Head Girl, weren’t you? A Gryffindor?”

“Two out of three,” she conceded, eying him.

“But that’s what Narcissa Black always called you,” he explained, triumphant because Black was always right. “Helen Ovtroi.”

Her face went all twisty again. “Well, wasn’t that…nice…of her,” she said in a strange voice. “Suddenly I need a drink.” She looked down at the baby-bundle, which had not stopped making angry noises, albeit quieter ones now, and brightened. “Ha! I can have a drink! You’re buying me a drink, Lockhart.”

When Gilderoy had brought over a pair of butterbeers to the Leaky Cauldron table he was, apparently, sharing with Snape’s ginger friend whose real name was Lily Potter (Black must have been joking, since she never was wrong), the baby-bundle had somehow not-really-disappeared under her shirt. It was extremely upsetting, so he pretended it wasn’t happening. “Well, then, Mrs. Potter, what brings you to Litre Alley?” he asked jovially.

“Oh, a friend suggested I do something for the Prophet,” Snape’s ginger friend explained, “and I’ve been talking to them about it but they’ve got a lot of rules. So I came to talk to some of the magazines…”

She kept on talking, but Gilderoy’s mind had suddenly exploded with possibility. A serial column, the very thing! Why hadn’t he thought of that? It would be much steadier money, and he wouldn’t have to try and make one dull topic stretch out for a hundred pages, and his picture would be on it every week! If it were a magazine, they could take a good picture, too—perhaps illustrate the column with Gilderoy dashingly doing instructive things!

“My dear Mrs. Potter!” he exclaimed, reaching across the table to clasp her wrists with his most scintillating smile. She was stricken to the point of alarm by his beauty, but he probably didn’t have to worry about letting her down gently since she was married with a baby? Probably? “You must introduce me!”
“Must I?” she asked, demurely charmed.

“Ah-ha-ha,” he chastised playfully, wagging a finger at her like The Professor as he realized what the problem must be. “You mustn’t mind what House I was in, my dear Mrs. Potter, that would be most unkind! I think of myself as more of a Ravenclaw anyway!” he concluded, and winked rogishly. “Why, they even used to call me the feathered boa, you know!”

“I’m sure there was some dimension in which that made sense,” Snape’s ginger friend said, sounding almost exactly like him except that she wasn’t using her voice to tell Gilderoy how good she would be at tying Gilderoy up and spanking him for made-up reprehensible offenses like ‘not making sense’ that ‘made Snape very irritated.’

She drained her glass and set it down. “Thanks for the drink, Lockhart, I forgive you for being an utter nutter and drawing a wand on a crying baby, since I can see your heart was more or less in the right place. This time. I won’t be so understanding if it happens again. Have a nice afternoon.”

“It is a lovely afternoon, isn’t it?” Gilderoy agreed, and helped her up like a gentleman to squire her around the Alleys until his charm overwhelmed her and she brought him to a cobbled-together bunch of sheds that were barely more civilized than tents. They were full of drippy barrels and big machines that looked like witchfinder tortures and streams of flying metal squares, which Gilderoy supposed was the reason they’d been put at the very far end of Litre Alley, so far down that they couldn’t be smelled from Diagon Proper.

He turned to find out what Snape’s ginger friend meant by it, but she just warmly encouraged him, “I’m sure you can take it from here,” and apparated away with her extremely fussy baby.

Resolving to take this vote of confidence to heart, Gilderoy strode confidently into the steamy, inky maze, and began making friends.

Only an hour or so later, one of his new friends (who was going to be a good friend because she was a photographer) had led Gilderoy out of the mess of sheds and back to Litre Alley’s mouth, at the south end of Diagon Alley proper. She brought him through the splendid bronze doors of the Publishers Guildhouse and then past a series of variously grand rooms.

Gilderoy soaked it up, from the shiny brass-framed book covers and newspaper along the walls to the armchairs in the corners with coffee tables at a comfortable height to write on to the series of lush

*shabby*

flying carpets, threadbare with age but kept so clean those bare threads gleamed, lining the floor.

The Photographer was anxious for Gilderoy to understand that it was only trading in flying carpets that was illegal, not owning old ones, and that the Guild had made sure to get permits just in case, because the carpets were part an integral part of the BRICK.

“And what is that, dear lady?” Gilderoy asked. He barely had to feign interest at all, because this was where he, an up-and-coming young brilliant author, belonged.

“The Book-Rescuing In Catastrophes Kit,” she explained. “We can’t just put watering spells in the ceiling and leave it at that, obviously.”

“Of course, most foresighted!” he agreed, peering into a room whose placard read *Ancient Archives. Curator: B. Bagshot, Asst G. Mattelock.* If there were any books in it, they were locked in great wooden cabinets, and if either of those worthies were present they were invisible and
capable of breathing without disturbing thick layers of dust.

After passing identically deserted archives for four other eras, twelve rooms that looked as if they’d once been the offices of actual newspapers or publishers before being put behind glass, Gilderoy started to see elderly wizards snoring at their desks with textbook covers framed behind them, and finally, around Dust & Mildewe Pub. Chief Editor T. Dewhearst, Gilderoy started to recognize the book covers. It was also around this point that the rooms started to be occupied by witches and wizards who were awake and might even, though it was hard to tell behind the frosted glass, have been doing some sort of work.

The room Gilderoy’s new friend The Photographer brought him to was Whizz Hard Books, Chief Editor T. Misslethorpe. She knocked and stuck her head in without waiting for a reply, calling, “Toto? I’ve got another one for the magazine.”

After a daring match of wits with a quite good-looking gentleman, Gilderoy strolled away in possession of a Great Opportunity. It wasn’t Instant Glory, alas, but The Editor had already promised all the best columns to other writers who were probably his friends. Gilderoy understood that, of course; The Editor couldn’t break his word. Gilderoy would have to prove his superiority by making the best of an assignment that every housewitch would be desperate to read!

With The Photographer on his side, he could do it very handily, too, since Care of Magical Creatures had been his best class. The others had been far too much work with almost no return for it except his Housemates’ riveted attention when he tried to practice—er, showed off his astonishing

*that’s one word for it*

Charms work. Kettleburn, for all he looked like a patchwork monster, made sense, and so did his homework.

Altogether it was in a very good mood that Gilderoy went back to the Leaky Cauldron for his supper.

Only he didn’t end up eating there. They were serving a mutton stew, which neither did justice to the triumph that had been Gilderoy’s day nor felt particularly like something that Gilderoy Lockhart, Rising Magazine Star, should be seen eating in public.

He also didn’t much care for the Leaky Cauldron stews; they were always gluey and burned-tasting. But that wasn’t the point.

Someday he might be obliged to Patriotically Endure in order to be seen Eating The People’s Food As A Gracious Gesture Of Noblesse Oblige, but just now he thought it was better to be seen where the best sort of people went to relax.

Just at the moment that seemed to be Fortesque’s—at least, Reggie was going there a lot. It was a bit dear, but if he was about to start making weekly money he could probably afford to eat at places like that on occasion more than he could afford not to be seen there.

The calculation paid off even better than he’d hoped, because The Lovely Lucrezia was there with her lumpy disaster of a boyfriend, so he’d have somebody to talk to. He didn’t even have to be charming at the lump, because The Lovely Lucrezia waved him over to sit with them.

“Gildy!” she called cheerfully,

*might use your full name, considering she prefers her own*
and pulled a seat over from another table.

“Ah,” he bowed to her, notdeeply but grandly, “the lovely Lucrezia! And of course your
gentleman companion needs no introduction,” he concluded. Beneficently, because he tried not to
be involved in All That Mess.

“Lockhart,” the Potter-Black tagalong greeted him gracelessly.

He’d mostly needed no introduction because Snape’s dimwitted prefect had kept on insisting
behind Snape’s back to the inimitable Miss Black that if they just murdered him, they probably
wouldn’t have to murder their mutual cousin, Reggie’s awful but very handsome brother. Which
only went to show how dimwitted Rosier was, because everybody knew Pettigrew was only
Potter’s yes-man.

“We were just celebrating Pete’s first day at his new job,” explained The Lovely Lucrezia. “It was
very exciting.“

“It was more exciting than my last job,” the tagalong demurred.

“What becoming modesty!” Gilderoy exclaimed, reaching across to chuck the tagalong on the
cheek rather than under the chin, so The Lovely Lucrezia would know he wasn’t trying anything.

Which she did (although the lumpy disaster edged back faithfully despite his wide-eyed lust),
because she was playful instead of extremely frightening indeed when she chided him, “Don’t you
try anything, Gildy, this one’s mine.”

“My dear lady,” he exclaimed, splaying his fingers over his heart, “you know I would never dream
of poaching!” He’d certainly, despite The Lovely Lucrezia’s ideas about how well the generally-
overlooked treated anyone they did manage to land, never dream of poaching a dumpy little
splodge with watery eyes, buckteeth, and no dash or fashion sense. Barty was generally
overlooked, and he didn’t look like that. “But come, come, Pettigrew, tell all!”

Lucrezia’s lump looked as if he couldn’t believe a magnificent specimen like Gilderoy was really
interested in him. Of course Gilderoy was interested in what he had to say! As great a triumph as it
was to have gotten his foot in a door he hadn’t even realized existed this morning, he didn’t mean
to be writing about garden gnomes forever.

“Well,” the lump gave in, eager to assuage Gilderoy’s curiosity once he felt assured Gilderoy
wasn’t merely being polite, “there was this enchanted potion-spewing garden hose.”

Gilderoy became aware of something hovering by his eye, and looked up. It was a menu.

“Sorry, luv,” The Waitress apologized, finishing setting the menu down beside him. “Didn’t mean
to listen in, only I couldn’t help hearing your friend there.”

“It wasn’t so bad,” Lucrezia’s lump reassured her. “It was just a boil potion—although it was a
bloody strong one—so they only called in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts crew, not the upper-level
DoMAC people.”

“I trust for dear Lucrezia’s sake that you weren’t hit, Pettigrew!” Gilderoy said jovially.

“Er, no, we didn’t come on until it was all secured. Which was nice,” he admitted, “as I’ve got
rather tired of spending all day either scanning the maps for improper wand-flares or trying to pick
apart old curses some muggle tripped over when their dotty old great-aunt’s will finally got
executed.”
Gilderoy had stopped listening halfway through the first sentence, because clearly this Misuse of Magical Artifacts crew was where the story was and showing the waitress he valued her establishment enough to talk very seriously to her about which tea to choose was more important.

He picked the one that was neither her personal favorite nor the most popular but that she seemed to think the posh customers bought. It wasn’t the expensive one she was telling him the posh customers bought, of course, but Gilderoy’s school strategy had paid off for him very well.

Unlike people like Barty and Snape, who’d taken too many electives because their brains were filled with rabid bookworms, he’d realized that most of what you needed in life was to be able to get along with people and their pets and look like you belonged wherever you were. A chap who had that covered could get other people to do things for him, even if it was just to show him up.

It was also important for someone who planned to travel to know what plants to avoid before going into a new area. And to make sure one would always look one’s best, because it was so much easier to convince someone to lend a tent than to try to charm up all one’s own gear.

Besides, doing well with personal care potions helped him make sure to keep old Sluggy feeling flattered, and Sluggy didn’t get offended when one only cared about being good enough at potions to get what one wanted from them. It was also important not to upset Professor McGonagall to the point that she gave him detentions, and since Charms were a wee bit tricky he had to do a lot of memorizing so that his exams would compensate for his wand being difficult. So he’d put some effort into those classes.

But there’d been absolutely no reason to spend one fraction of a second on History of Magic, since he didn’t care about taking an OWL in it. Binsey couldn’t even assign detentions, since he couldn’t remember anyone’s name, and he certainly couldn’t write ‘detention’ on a paper Gilderoy hadn’t given him. Gilderoy hadn’t even bought the books.

That left him with the same course-load as everyone else, despite his three electives. And an extra hour of study, as long as he brought earplugs. And Binsey’s homework seemed to take twice as long as everyone else’s, except Arithmancy, so it was just like having ten or twelve extra hours a week.

So despite taking two other electives, Gilderoy had been able to pay very good attention in Divination, especially after little Flitwick had been so understanding about his not feeling he needed NEWT-level Charms. Of course, Imago took the teacup nonsense seriously and wasn’t teaching what Gilderoy and the other Slytherins were really there to learn, but that was all right. The prefects were always ready to explain how to use the class properly.

Which meant that Gilderoy could look at the minute movements of the waitress’s shoulders and work out which tea to order so the other patrons would look at the color of his teapot and be impressed.

When it got to him, he didn’t care much for the taste, but tea was dull as a rule anyway, and he was perfectly capable of pretending to be delighted. He was delighted, as a matter of fact, because he’d clearly got it right. He would have been almost sure he’d got it right even if there hadn’t been anyone posh around to glance casually at the color of his teapot and fail to have any subtle little sneers or pitying glances: it was the kind of completely boring tea that didn’t make Reggie purse his lips for just a second the way he did.

“Pictures of his kids and the flying motorbike he and Sirius are working on,” Lucrezia’s lump finished.
Gilderoy blinked elegantly at him over the delicate steam of his teacup and his even more delicate manicure.

“The most dangerous thing around?” the lump tried. “Weasley sticking his pictures in everyone’s faces? Other than the rakes chasing the bobbies. And if the bobbies hadn’t believed that the sprinkler had got everyone with LSD or something things could have got a bit tricky. Only they did believe it, and the healers got to everyone, we think, so we didn’t have to explain away why LSD would give people a rash. So Fudge got to tell Crouch our first job went well and we’ll probably still have an office tomorrow.”

“What a heinous crime!” Gilderoy gasped, because he seemed to be expected to say something.

The lump shrugged. “It was only a boil potion; it would really only have been a prank if it hadn’t involved the muggles.”

Because Gilderoy had taken Divination, he instantly revised his plans. It would have been nice to have a splendid supper at the teashop and impress Barty with his refined lack of appetite later on, but It Was Time To Go, Right Now. He could pick up a curry just as easily—or, better yet, go down to the market, pick up some odds and ends to slap together, and make his new employer delighted with him by distributing loads of free advertising that would make sure everyone bought the magazine and read Gilderoy’s column.

“What?” asked Lucrezia’s lump in response to her biting her lips thin, instead of taking the out like a sensible man. Gilderoy signaled the waitress with as much haste as he could manage without looking hasty.

“So,” The Lovely Lucrezia said in a careful voice, “whether it’s a prank or a crime depends on who the victim is, sweetie?”

The lump looked enough less lumpish for Gilderoy to briefly reconsider his hasty-exit strategy: he looked simultaneously alarmed and annoyed. It made Gilderoy almost want to stay and watch, except that anything having to do with Snape generally had a blast radius of several hundred meters and Gilderoy was wearing his nicest cloak.

“Sort of,” the usually-a-lump said, “in that we have laws in place to protect people who can’t protect themselves.” He looked almost clever for just a second, and then gave her a stupid-and-melting look and suggested, “But if you were thinking of punishing me—”

“You don’t get ‘punished’ for hurting my friend, Peter,” Wilkes said sharply, her voice suddenly ringing out. “You get forgiven for it, if you’re lucky.”

The whole restaurant was looking at them, and then the waitress earned a quite large tip by starting over with the sandwiches menu. The murmur of self-involved conversations resumed.

“But that wasn’t what I meant,” the Lovely Lucrezia said in a softer tone as the moderately-terrified waitress approached.

Gilderoy’s old friend had something like her seducing-a-date face on; it wasn’t exactly that, but Gilderoy could tell there was something she was circling in on. She wasn’t just talking, or even just lowering the stakes. She was hunting, and it was a hunt she’d been on for some time.

Gilderoy did not want any part of it, or to know what it was about. At all. This was raising all the hairs on the back of his neck that meant what he called Upper Year Business. At least, he’d called it that until Bast’s brother had married The Inimitable Miss Black’s older sister and they’d all spent
a summer off together. After that it hadn’t just been Upper Year Business anymore, but Gilderoy still preferred that it shouldn’t be his business.

He’d had to throw himself into Quidditch to make sure not to have time for it, and he’d really had to put in more time than he could spare just to stay on the reserve roster. The dimwitted captain had been very jealous of Gilderoy’s flying genius and youthful good looks and Snape’s obvious hopeless feelings for him, and had not wanted him there at all.

“It isn’t really fair, though, is it,” Wilkes went on, soft-eyed, as if she were just finding something to chat about with her boyfriend when clearly that wasn’t it at all, “for the Ministry to take better care of them than it does of us? I mean, they live off our taxes, not muggle ones.”

“Are you sure of that?” the usually-a-lump said, acting as if he hadn’t been rattled. He was quite good at it; Reggie’s awful but very handsome brother had probably given him a lot of practice. Gilderoy knew all about that sort of thing. “We did used to all be part of the same government, and the Minister for Magic does report to the Prime Minister still. I mean, okay, nominally, yes, but she wouldn’t bother if she didn’t have to. And we could always just obliviate everyone who knows about us, so there must be a reason not to, yeah? A lot more of them pay taxes than our people; I’m not sure just wizarding folk could pay all the Ministry wages. Besides, it’s not just about taking care of them, Lucy, the Statute of Secrecy is for our protection…”

“Actually, my dear lady,” Gilderoy told the waitress insouciantly (probably insouciantly; he could ask Reggie later; Barty didn’t have patience for that sort of question; definitely dashingly), “as much I was looking forward to sampling your delightful assortment, my friends appear to be getting philosophical. I’ve far too much to do to be drawn in to such an involved discussion, however fascinating.”

“Uh-huh,” the Lovely Lucrezia said at him fondly. “Remind me why we let you learn to read?”

Gilderoy grandly ignored her in favor of settling up, and left them arguing comfortably over whether it was right to treat muggles like either children or farm animals. Neither of them seemed to have a very decided opinion. Most likely it was just something to talk about while flirting, like Quidditch. Perhaps he might have stayed after all, but Lucrezia’s lovely eyes had taken on such a shrewdly patient glint that it was probably for the best.

The market went so well that Gilderoy made it home with not only enough congratulatorily discounted sausages and veg for a quite a supper but also a congratulatory free bottle of wine. It wasn’t a good one, of course. No one would go that far for a job like this. But it was a start!

He whistled jauntily as he cooked, and set the table beautifully. Around when the trainee aurors would be getting out of their last classes, he lit the tapers and put the food under a covered dish Reggie had enchanted for him with a warming charm, and waited for Barty to come over for supper, as they’d planned. Enterprisingly, he wrote up a little piece on Lucrezia’s lump’s interesting afternoon, in case the magazine would be interested, and went up to his block of flats’ owlery room with it. Even if someone else had got in first, it never hurt to show willing!

Eventually, he replaced the sputtered-out tapers, and had a little of the food. Just a little, and he scourgified the plates afterwards. He’d still want to eat with Barty. Classes must have run late. It was just as well he had to light new candles anyway; the old ones had only had a few inches left in them and this was much more romantic, all nice and warm…

CLICK!

Gilderoy yanked his head up off his perfectly clean plate, just like the unaccountably melancholy
dozy feeling had been yanked off of him. “Well, well, well,” he said fulsomely, trying to joke to prevent an argument. “Look who’s finally made it—what are you doing?”

“Fixing your clock,” Barty said, sitting down across the table and lifting the dish cover. He frowned down at it, his adorable sandy eyebrows pulling in. He’d pulled the blinds down, too, which left Gilderoy hopeful about what sort of an evening they were going to have. “It’s gone fast. What sort of dog’s breakfast d’you call this, then?”

“You’ve had a bad day,” Gilderoy surmised wisely.

“Not really.”

“But fear not! GILDEROY LOCKHART TRIUMPHANT rides to your rescue with bangers and mash!”

“...Spiffing,” Barty applauded him, with that peculiarly Barty sort of dry warmth that people less perspicacious than Gilderoy might mistake for withering sarcasm.

“I even got some parsnips to put in the mash,” Gilderoy told him proudly, “so it won’t be ‘boring.’”

“Fantastic,” Barty said, eyes drifting to the ceiling in delight, so he’d probably finally smelled it. “I’ll just change, then.”

“But you look magnificent!” Gilderoy protested.

It was a bit of an exaggeration, but Barty was out of his trainee’s robes and Gilderoy was all for that. He was wearing something almost like a dragon-breeder’s outfit; a tunic over a high boots and trousers, with his hair bound back. Not Mugglish trousers, of course, but more like the tight ones Reggie liked to steal from his dead great-great-grandfather. A dragon-breeder’s outfit would have been rather brighter, though. They needed to be able to find each other easily. Barty’s outfit was all black, and it turned his hair almost blond—although not, of course, as spectacular a blond as Gilderoy’s.

“Do I?” Barty asked, coyly trying to appear indifferent.

“I thought you’d put it on for me,” Gilderoy pouted winsomely. “So we could play Cunning Spy and Homme Fatale.”

“Not really,” Barty said. “They were just for an exercise. And now I’m knackered, so not tonight.” He picked up a sausage and examined it dubiously, skewered up on the end of his fork and dripping juices a bit.

“It’s not burned,” Gilderoy pointed out.

“That,” Barty drawled, “is what worries me.” He put it down and poked the mash.

“They’re not raw, either,” Gilderoy

careful, sulky

said airily.

Barty shrugged. “I don’t want sausages.”

“You like sausages,” Gilderoy reminded him, and, puffing up with pride, began, “These are lamb. I got them half-price because—”
“Well, I don’t want any today.” He made a face and Gilderoy, remembering he’d said how tired he was, tried to be sympathetic about whatever was wrong. “I used to tease Reggie for going off his feed, but I had to watch a ‘friend’ of Bella’s eating today, and I think I’m off meat for a few—”

“You were with Mrs. Lestrange?!” Gilderoy cried, shooting almost to his feet.

“What do you care?” Barty asked, insouciantly trying a bite of mash. “Huh. This isn’t bad, actually. Still a bit dull, but…” He reached for the pepper-shaker, and started trying to turn the mash grey.

“She’s trying to steal you away from me!” Gilderoy explained passionately, bracing his palms on the table to emphasize how distraught he was and also so that the light would pick out his hair properly so that Barty would realize what he was risking!

“She’s really not,” Barty said coyly, digging into his mash. “And even if she were after me, or I her, stopping over on occasion doesn’t mean I belong to you. We’ve been over this.”

“You’re just trying to make me jealous,” Gilderoy pouted becomingly.

“I wasn’t aware I had to try,” Barty said, and it was so terribly Barty of him, raising just one eyebrow like that. “You get worked up without any help from me.”

Gilderoy continued to stare at him tragically.

Barty sighed. “Not that it’s really any of your business, Gildy, but if it makes you feel better, I’ll remind you she is my cousin, and not like that freckly bloke from sixth year was your cousin.”

“That doesn’t matter to the Blacks!” Gilderoy reminded him.

“…Fair play to you there,” Barty conceded, still eating his mash in an admirable pretense of coolness. It was a brilliant display of hard-to-get, but Gilderoy didn’t want to play when Mrs. Lestrange was involved. She was beautiful and dramatic enough to be very nearly creditable as competition, and Barty got concussions from his training sometimes. The dimwitted prefect had kept telling Snape he wasn’t allowed to give himself concussions in case he made bad decisions everyone would regret, and if they could do that to Snape they could do that to Barty. “If she were going to play games with her husband, though, I’m not the one she’d be looking at.” His mouth did a twisty Snape-like smile of modest humility.

“How can you say that,” Gilderoy cried, tossing his hair back in anguish, “when you come back from seeing her with lipstick on your neck??!”

“I have no such thing,” Barty sighed becomingly, and forked up more mash. “Really, Gildy, can’t we get through one dinner without melodramatic fits?”

“Is that so!” Gilderoy demanded. He shot up and rounded the table, diving through Barty’s playful swat to swipe his finger through the little swipe of red at Barty’s throat.

It wasn’t the right shade to be ketchup or passata, or in a mouth-shape, really. Gilderoy was hoping he’d find Barty had nicked himself trying to shave with a blade to save Gilderoy’s tender skin just before coming over. In the first moment that he tasted it, he felt relief.

Then he looked at where he’d swiped. There wasn’t even the tiniest of cuts. If Barty had nicked himself recently enough for the color to be so bright, or kept re-opening a little cut he hadn’t noticed, he should be bleeding again, shouldn’t he, just a drop?
“Barty,” Gilderoy asked, frowning, “why—”

“Nescio,” Barty sighed, and Gilderoy got a lovely, sleepy, warm tingly feeling all over. He’d been worried about something, but it seemed very far away. “Honestly, Gildy, this is the third time this week. Even dogs learn.”

“Did you want to play puppies?” Gilderoy asked hopefully.

“What?” Barty stared at him. “No, I want you to use that stupid ‘scales of optimism’ thing of yours and stop making me go through this every bloody time I come over.”

“It’s a shield of optimism,” Gilderoy reminded him gently, dreamily letting himself be manhandled back into his chair. Barty was really quite deceptively strong, it was so nice. “I don’t have to call it scales now we’ve graduated. I’m going to have been a Ravenclaw, you know. Like you! It’s ever so much easier to talk to people when they think you’re a Ravenclaw, don’t you think? And they even called me the feathered boa, so it shouldn’t have been scales in the first place.”

“Whatever.”

“Anyway, I’ve been using it all evening,” he pouted, winding a finger through a curl and tugging at it, in hopes of giving Barty ideas. As happily warm and swimmey as he was, it felt safe to admit complain, “You’re always so sarcastic at me, Barty.”

“That’s because you’d try the patience of Merlin himself, and he let himself be sealed into a tree,” Barty retorted, going over to twiddle with the clock again. “No, don’t get up.”

Gilderoy sighed, and started hopefully and loudly fellating a sausage.

Barty turned at the noise, and his mouth quirked a little in that genuinely amused smile Gilderoy had never quite made up his mind about. “You know, sometimes I think I prefer you this way,” he mused. “You’re still mad as a spoon and the dimmest bulb in the greenhouse, but at least I’m nearly sure you’re on the same planet I am. Maybe I should see about meeting you at the door with a Tessa Sprout special, what do you think?”

“My body is a temple,” Gilderoy pouted, opening his shirt to demonstrate. “I only eat biscuits to be sociable.”

“You’d be sociable after you had one. Put your shirt back on.”

“Because you want to take it off me yourself?” Gilderoy asked hopefully, taking up his fork again to give his sausage a long, suggestive lick.

“We’ll see.”

“That’s what I like about you,” Gilderoy remarked, wiggling less suggestively than demandingly into his chair. “Even when you haven’t made up your mind you’re so decisive.”

“We only learn the best from dear old Dad,” Barty said sardonically.

“Wait!” It was hard to feel alarmed through all the sweet buzzy honey-like warmth pouring through his veins, but Barty had headed for the door! “You’re not leaving, are you?”

Barty turned back around and tilted his head, looking thoughtful and even a little playful. “Am I?
Well, I do still need an alibi. Persuade me.”

“…My head’s all hummy,” Gilderoy admitted sadly; he couldn’t think of anything. “We can do whatever you’d like. Look, Barty, I even put parsnips in the mash, and they’re really hot sausages, not boring at all.”

“You’ll do whatever I say?” Barty seemed to be turning it over. Gilderoy knew what he was doing with his body to make it look longer and to draw Gilderoy’s attention low—Gilderoy could do that, too, to (he wouldn’t tell Barty this) more universal success. But it was succeeding with him. “I can do whatever I like to you?”

“Of course!” Gilderoy agreed, as indignantly as he could manage through the humminess.

“I know,” Barty admitted, looking as if he was trying to pretend to be sad but wasn’t. “But you shouldn’t make it so easy, Gildy. All right, then—I won’t leave, I’ll come in again and we can start over, how’s that? But you’ll have to help.”

“GILDEROY LOCKHART is a paragon of helpfulness to all admiring damsels everywhere, and even to the occasional adorable and rather clever auror trainee!”

“…Right,” Barty sighed, pinching his forehead. “Good. Well, if I’m coming in for the first time, I haven’t eaten anything here, have I? Why don’t you take care of that—do not swallow that sausage whole, good grief, Gilderoy.”

“I could!” Gilderoy protested.

“Your stomach wouldn’t like it.”

“I have to hide the evidence for your game; this one’s all been chewed on, look.”

Barty sighed and vanished it for him, right out of his hand.

“You’re so good at charms, Barty,” Gilderoy mentioned, admiring his boyfriend’s amazing talents. Charms so often went wrong when Gilderoy tried them.

“I’m a prodigy, all right,” Barty said dryly. “Make the mash look like it did when I came in and maybe I’ll teach you something.”

“Just you wait there for onnnne minute,” Gilderoy promised him, in his best and most caramelly tones. He took the platter and their plates into the kitchen and fussed a little. When he brought it back out it didn’t quite look like something out of Auntie Edinette’s magazines, but was about as good as when he’d brought it out to Barty the first time. There were some spoon-marks on the platter, but there had been the first time, too, and the plates were clean.

The lovely wonderfulness was interfering a little with his shield of optimism thank-you-very-much; everything was so nice that he couldn’t be worried enough to think of why he shouldn’t be worried. That, he was sure, was why it had occurred to him that Barty might have left.

He hadn’t, though; he was poking at the clock again.

“Oh, leave that and come in and ravish me,” Gilderoy said—not annoyed, because even normally he could certainly never be annoyed with Barty, but not completely patiently, either.

“In a minute. I was going to teach you something, right?”
“Because you’re awfully clever,” Gilderoy agreed, reminded. “Will it take long?”

“Not if you sit down and do as I say.”

“GILDEROY LOCKHART is agreeableness incarnate,” Gilderoy said graciously, and sat.

“…Right.”

“Unless I’m meant to disobey you and be punished?” he asked hopefully, remembering what the Pettigrew lump had tried on the Lovely Lucrezia.

“…Not just at the moment.”

“But later on,” Gilderoy suggested, buoyed up by the wonderful warm confidence that everything was perfect.

“We’ll see. What I want you to do now,” Barty instructed, “is to forget that you’ve seen me tonight, and forget that you fell asleep after you put the food out, and forget how much of it you made. And I want you to remember that I am going to come to dinner tonight, at six, and to remember that you wanted to tell me all about whatever you were so excited about before.”

“Oh, yes!” Gilderoy remembered. “Barty, I wanted to tell you—”

“I could tell. ‘Gilderoy triumphant,’ please. Rowle could have worked it out. You’ll tell me in a minute. Do you have all that straight? You haven’t seen me tonight, though you’re expecting me. You’ve just set the table, you put that pepper in the mash because you know I like it, and you’re bursting to tell me your news. My cousin Bella is a highly respectable witch who only has eyes for tall, dark-haired blokes, and there’s nothing odd about my spending a little time with my very accomplished cousin.”

“Did she teach you what you’re going to share with me?” Gilderoy demanded, willing to be appeased. It made him feel even hummier.

“…Sure, Gildy. Yes. Let’s say yes.”

“Oh, well,” Gildy allowed graciously. “So long as you’re not leaving me out.”

“I have long since realized,” Barty told him (or, rather, the ceiling) long-sufferingly, “that leaving you out doesn’t get me anywhere.”

Gilderoy beamed. It was his absolutely best smile. He would have remember Barty saying that when he had the magazine photographer take a picture, so he could smile just like this again.

“You have all that, then?”

“I’m not stupid, Barty,” Gilderoy reminded him fondly. “You’re just coming in now, all agog for my Fantastic News.”

“That’ll do,” Barty sighed. “Now, watch carefully, and maybe you’ll learn something. Such as what not to notice, the next time.”

“I’m ready!” Gilderoy agreed, leaning sparkingly forward over clasped hands.

“I doubt it,” Barty said wryly. “You never are.”

Gilderoy adoringly tracked the curve of his wand, the odd
familiar!

upward twist of his wrist, and blinked as the pale greenish light hit him full in the face to the sound of Barty’s quiet, “Obliviate. Tempus augeo.”

He opened his eyes from blinking, and his unusually dashingly-dressed boyfriend was just stepping in, closing the door behind him. Gilderoy glanced at the clock and beamed: he’d got the food to the table just in time.

He must have, although the second hand seemed to be going rather slowly and through the cracks in the blinds he could see it was darkish for suppertime outside.

only it isn’t… is it?

Clearly he had, because the clock read just after six and here was Barty, letting himself in after training, right on time. It was going to be a perfect evening.

* Not that Gilderoy particularly cared about being a good Slytherin. They were all out of school, after all, so it hardly mattered, did it? But his friends got shirty and offended when he pointed this out, even though they were mostly quite reasonably attractive and shouldn't have needed to rely on something that didn't matter in the least to shore up their egos. This line of argument hadn't gotten him very far, so he'd only bothered the once.

Chapter End Notes

Notes: Drinking while breastfeeding a 1-month old was probably not the best idea. Any parenting classes the wizarding world has are not going to be easily accessible to muggle-borns, and she's not spending a whole lot of time with either her own mother or Eileen (who also had sketchy-at-best parental education). No, Severus, that doesn't mean you may blame Harry's adolescent obstreperousness on Gildylocks' driving Lily to drink.
September 3: Midnight

Chapter Summary

There's nothing more annoying than starting a hobby with an old school friend and finding out he's doing it better.

Chapter Notes

**Warnings:** biowarfare. Associated nastiness. Unambiguous character.

**Notes:** This one's short, so I'm shooting it off quickly. Please note I did not say nice and short. Lest I scare you off, let me add that an upcoming chapter (which, yes, will have Severus in it) will be, oh... 40% ornery old foxes snarking at each other and 80% sexting at work.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Terror in the tunnels!**

Gordon Greyson, of High Wycombe, was brutally murdered yesterday in the Muggle London Underground after leaving his job at Wiseacre's Wizarding Equipment.

Mr. James Potter, founder of the popular Marauder's Moon line of novelty charmed toys and wearables, encountered the murderer outraging the body yesterday afternoon in the abandoned Aldwych Station near the Strand. "At first I thought it was a couple of drunk blokes doing graffiti," said Potter, "but the one on his feet turned like an animal and ran at me. I think he was trying to stab me, but he didn't stick around to make sure of it."

The body was found eviscerated, with a mutilated face, beneath an incomplete painting of a skull with a protruding tongue, done in glowing muggle paint. It was still wet when Mr. Potter summoned Wizengamot Chief Warlock Albus Dumbledore and a deputy to the scene. Examination by Aurors showed that, while Mr. Greyson had been killed with a knife, his facial wounds had been made by fangs or sharp teeth.

St. Mungo's revealed to The Prophet that Mr. Greyson's post-mortem showed his condition resembled that of wizards who have died as a direct result of lycanthropic attacks. On the day of the murder, the moon was in its waning crescent stage: the most recent full moon was the eclipse of August 26th, and the next will be on September 24th.

"But that's quite common," said Miss Dolores Umbridge of the Werewolf Registry. "Many of those foul beasts have so completely given in to their monstrous natures that they stop even looking quite human. They can infect good witches and wizards with their horrid curse at any time of the month."

An expert on werewolves who asked to remain anonymous told The Prophet that Miss Umbridge's assessment of the damage 'feral' werewolves can do is exaggerated. Our source reports, "Victims of
extra-lunar lycanthropic attacks never become full werewolves themselves. Their scars are no
easier to heal than other curse wounds and they may get more irritable at the full moons, but they
keep their human minds at the full, and don't transform."

This assurance, even if accurate, must be cold comfort to Mr. Greyson's wife and their two
children.

Asked what he was doing in an abandoned train station in the middle of the afternoon, the inventor
explained that he was working on a birthday present for his father Charlus F. Potter, famed for his
youthful discovery of the Barbados Gum-flower used in his popular haircare potion. "He used to
take me out on walks when I was a kid," Mr. Potter explained with a bashful rub at his own
enthusiastic black tresses, "and we'd sit down afterwards and map out where we'd been. Dad
doesn't get out much anymore, so I thought I'd make him something a bit different. Suppose I'll
have to think of something else now, I couldn't—it wouldn't be right," Mr. Potter concluded,
voicing an unprintable expression of sympathy for Mr. Greyson.

The Aurors are pursuing their enquiries, and state that they have no suspects at this time.

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**Dozy:** Good work. Specify it was a steel knife and put in a reminder that most werewolves were
made from Muggles. Bring it to me for a final check before it goes to print. For the next edition, I
want a retrospective on the Year of the Blood Moons. Write it yourself, and make it a tie-in if
anything new happens before then, but put RS on the background research. If she's not sure where
to put the focus, send her to me. Tell her to start a file on Potter. My information says we may get a
complaint from Dumbledore about what left the facial wounds—add the phrase 'most likely,' then
swing by Layout and tell them to prepare for a correction box once we have a confirmation one
way or another from the Aurors.

Regards,
B. Cuffe

Mr. Cuffe,
Will do. Got a minute before press? It's about these new quills.
Rylandos

---

Carefully balancing the letter on its silver tray, Cranny knocked at the door, fingers trembling in
the grip of bad news. The bell rang, and so he went in, sealing the door behind him too tightly for
even air to pass. He pressed his long, knobby finger to the circle that would make everything in the
room so very clean, and then waited for the light to fade. When he and his letter were safe for
Master, he put on the white cloth mask that would protect Master from his breath and stepped into
the inner chamber.

Lounging barefoot in his armchair with legs spread, Master demanded with his hoarse voice,
"What news?"

"Cranny has a letter from Young Master," the elf bowed. He delivered it into Master's open hand.

"Very well," said Master, when he had read it, shifting painfully as if his hips hurt him. Master
wasn't looking well; he had a rash on his hand, and sores around his lips. "The article will be in the
morning edition, I suppose?"

"Yes, Master."
Master didn't speak to Cranny for a while: he was penning his own letter, using the hand with the rash. Once sealed it, he held it out. "Tell the owl this is for Tom, and to wait in case he wishes to reply at once."

"Yes, Master," Cranny bowed, and hesitated. "Young Mistress is worrying that quills may not be clean enough for Master's health. She is saying she can get a pen that will write like a quill, if Master is wishing."

Master's jaw tightened and went forward. His pale eyes were very cold. "Tell my daughter-in-law that it is well of her to be so dutifully concerned for my health, but she must not allow her client's filth to corrupt her. I am a wizard: I write with a quill. Anything else?"

Cranny swallowed: his master had grown impatient, but since there was other news he must tell it, in case Master needed to know. Master was not in his worst of moods, but Young Mistress's kind thought had been found unsuitable and annoyed him. Cranny had been afraid it would, but Young Mistress had ordered him to make her offer. To offer it when he was already angry would have been so dangerous. "The elf Dobby is no longer with the household, Master."

"Died, I suppose," Master said without interest.

Cranny breathed again. He had been bad for not anticipating his master properly, but he could just throw himself down the stairs for punishment. If he did it where the house was empty and no one would know but the portraits and Melly. The portraits wouldn't ask questions, and Melly always said she was a Black elf and didn't belong to Master at all; she barely even cared about Young Master. She would let Cranny do what was right without scolding him, unless she thought it would make Young Mistress unhappy. Melly could scold very hard, but it wasn't a problem since Little Master had stopped being so sick all the time and Melly had decided his being a sick new baby wasn't because Cranny took care of both him and Master.

"Of fright, no doubt. I suppose we shall have to return it to the land of our own House, though it was only with us a short time. See to it."

Young Mistress had cautioned Cranny against telling Master what he hadn't asked to know. Once, this would have been advice Cranny would be foolish to follow, but Master had grown impatient these days, as he coughed more and passed in and out of fevers and the sores bubbled over him. It was all right to follow the advice about Dobby, because Cranny had gone to threaten Dobby about keeping Young Master's secrets and Dobby had said that Young Mistress and Little Master were family to his new master, and Melly had agreed.

Dobby had started to tell Cranny things would be all right because Young Master was his new master's friend, but that just showed that Dobby was a very young elf. 'Friends' was a word wizards said and then stopped saying. But if Dobby knew his master was family to Little Master Draco, that was as safe as if Dobby belonged to a young Malfoy who had gotten married. Wizards betrayed family all the time, but they almost never betrayed their whole family to death, not the whole of it and its future. Not even when they left and were very angry. Cranny was glad he wouldn't have to kill Dobby to protect Master; Dobby was a good elf who worked hard, if badly.

Cranny bowed, careful not to show relief that might make Master ask questions and then give orders. "Cranny will make sure there is nothing dead in the Manor to make Master sick."

"My son must not expect you to take over all Dobby's duties. If he has lost an elf, that is due to his own ineptitude and he must amend matters himself. Continue as before."

Dobby had taken over very few of Cranny and Melly's duties—or, rather, those he'd taken over had
mostly been taken quickly away from him. Someone would still have to feed the peacocks and do the heavy cleaning, which Dobby had been able to handle without breaking things too often. Melly wasn't going to be pleased about getting pecked by ungrateful birdies who didn't give anything back to the Manor except dirty white feathers and the occasional egg and were too stupid to be taught which guests not to bite.

But maybe when Master said 'before' he meant 'before Mr. Black gave Dobby to Young Master.' Then Cranny could look after the peacocks. He wouldn't mind that, if Melly didn't get greedy and claim all the heavy cleaning. She would probably let him convince her that deep cleaning unused rooms mostly benefited Master's health, and was therefore at mostly Cranny's duty, if he gave in to her very silly argument that extra-polishing the crystal and silver before guests came reflected on Young Mistress as a hostess and so Melly should do all of it.

Yes, that was the best way to understand Master's order. Cranny bowed. "Cranny and Melly will work just as before, Master."

Master nodded curtly. "Bring me a nightcap, with the red potion and the blue potion in the tall bottle. I shall want the red one again tomorrow morning with breakfast, and a whore. I have had a notion."

Cranny waited for details.

"A busy whore," Master elaborated. "A muggle one." He flicked his wand, and a heavy little bag floated into Cranny's hands. "Have this converted to Muggle money to pay it for its time. I don't care where you take it from: if you go where whores are cheap, bring two. Only see to it that your choices are popular ones amongst the Muggles."

"Will Cranny have the whore disappeared?" dutifully asked Cranny, thinking about whether the back lawn or the White Flower Garden by the gates needed fertilizer most. Probably the garden, and not just because processing fertilizer for the White Flower Garden so carefully that nosy Aurors would never find it even if they looked would give selfish Cranny more work to do. The gates called the peacocks when guests came, but they walked around the lawn more the rest of the time. Cranny assumed it was because the flowers kept touching their tails.

"No. It will forget, and be returned to resume its trade." Master smiled, but not as if he thought anything was funny. "There will be no more venturing into the dark places for your master, Cranny; you need fear that no longer. But even I, cursed though I am, can still fight the muggle plague."

Cranny could be brave when it would serve his master. So, even though Master was in a mood, he ventured, "Muggle whores are not clean, master."

"I will clean it as I clean you," Master assured him, and smiled again. "But, for the Muggle, it will not last."

Chapter End Notes

Next: A DIFFERENT DAY! :O
September 1-4: Air and Parchment

Chapter Summary

In which we learn that the relationship is not dead until everyone involved can stop having that last argument. (70% angry old geezers bullshitting each other, 80% sexting at work)

Chapter Notes

Warnings: See summary. Epistolary.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

My dear old friend,

These children you have sent me do not know what war is, and they do not know what to fear. It is ever your way to send innocents against wolves, in faith that theirs is the strength of ten. How long has it been since we sat to think on such things as whether a bruised heart can yet be pure? I do not feel I see some distant mirror when I look on your bold shadow’s rose, but perhaps he does. Perhaps you do. Perhaps the future of my blood is in your hands—it seems to me that it is in yours more than anyone’s.

I wish you well in your new troubles. It is a troubling thing, as you may find, to be opposed by a man of great decision who finds his own heart obscure.

Yours steadfastly,
from the armoured woods

***

Dearest trial,

That which we must now fear rises from the ashes of that war in fear of which you once waged war. You need not trouble yourself to tell me that you told me so, for it was your conclusion and your methods with which I could not agree: you will never hear me say that a wish to protect the world is wrong in itself.

Yet should my admission that horrors of steel and powder may engender horrors of magic and the mind bring you any pleasure I sincerely offer it, knowing you will agree with me in turn that the makers of cold-hearted monsters are horror, hatred, and harm in themselves, rather than any particular tools they may use.

I am glad to have your good wishes. Even from so far away, they will remain a comfort to me as the young viper and his followers claim your legacy.

Though I have sent you nothing but my fondest thoughts and my sincere hopes for your health,
comfort, and security, I can give you news—as I think you asked—of a relation of yours who has recently come of age.

I believe the young man is merely your distant cousin. Yet how can I express how I am moved to see the eyes of a simpler and less passionate young man in a face I remember so well—except to say that his graduation was something of a relief to me. So much of a relief, in fact, that I cannot claim to know him well. Although not a dedicated student of academics, no doubt his family was proud of his performance in our examinations for Ancient Runes and Arithmancy. More, he is discussed as one who shows great promise by those who understand illuminations, and has completed several respected works for families I believe you would call respectable.

I hope hearing of your line’s promise will bring you comfort, though I have not heard it said he is likely to marry soon to carry it on.

Affectionately yours,
from the white hives

***

Dummkopf,

You can convince as many of your Englishmen as you like that the long years have addled your brains, but I am lost in wonderment that you should try it on me.

You have won the future from me. Very well. It is now yours to guard as well as to shape.
Playing the Fool will only avail you when you sit in opposition to one who thinks innocence has value: I hear otherwise of this ‘viper,’ the one a bold shadow calls Basilisk. You may believe me, who well knows it, when I tell you that if you fail the future, the future will not care a speck for the purity or the wisdom of your intentions.

But I am harsh, when we have spoken so seldom of late. Forgive me, my old friend—you know I am impatient and firm of purpose when my convictions are roused. The young enigma who sips at your nation’s heart has chosen silence, but even now my ears are wide. Perhaps, wishing me ‘security,’ you would wish it otherwise. Still, not all the world can be as you desire—no, not even you!

Whatever your wishes, I hear things still: from Bulgaria, from Romania, from Albania. You say one would claim my legacy, but my wish was to save our people.

You will remind me that I could not spare mercy for those who declared themselves my enemy. That is only natural. When the pack is circling, one who opens the door to it is a threat to the flock and can be dealt with in no other way, even should they act from blindness and the true belief that these wolves are tame puppies.

You and I quarrelled because I could see no one but ourselves fit to handle great power, while you think no one can be fit. Whatever your thoughts on my methods, old friend, we have always agreed on these most fundamental of points: that the Greater Good is always, and must always be, the good of our people, not ourselves, and that when we are cruel or ruthless it can only be justified if in service to this goal. Our differences are a matter of degree and of scale.

Let me speak my mind to you. I was an unforgiving sheepdog. I make no apology for it, for I knew my visions of great danger were true ones, as they proved to be. For no other reason would I have surrendered, whether I faced my old friend or the devil himself, whatever strength and cunning came against me. Dark or light, a prince cannot long force anything on his people that
they will not have, even safety. If they refuse to live in the world to which he leads them, he must
listen or, in the end, walk alone. As it is written, the greatest fortress is to not to be hated by the
people — to be right is of little use.

And so you have your victory and I my quietude: because I know this to be true, and for the love of
our people I accept it, though I fear for them still in their folly. You, too, would bow to the will of
your people if they would not be led by your vision. I am merciless, you are unscrupulous, we are
guileful and implacable—we are not tyrants.

One from your islands has walked my dark woods’ white hills who does not think in this way. I
hear of his fair words, never the same from one man to the next, of his cold eyes. I hear of villages
divided, set against themselves. For sport, say the magierpolizei of Albania. For practice, I think.

You and I sought the tools of greatness with stars in our eyes. Even at our most foolish, we never
looked at all the world in malice. Whatever you have thought of me in your darkest moments, my
wish for the world was never to see it withered and bleeding at my feet, merely for the pleasure of
a pain to match my own!

Have I offended you, meine Helligkeit? It is not my aim or desire. Perhaps you know all I could
tell you about this enigma of a basilisk already. No doubt you do not like to be reminded of when
our minds were as one.

Yet I must speak, for though I think I see your heart as clearly as ever I did, from so far away as this
I cannot know your thoughts, or what you know.

One would claim my legacy, or so you say.

Perhaps he would, but you must know any such claim false. That I live proves you know we were
never enemies, you and I. You know better than to show mercy where it will destroy what you
love. We fought like demons because we both wished to save our people, but could not agree on
how or on how many were ours to save. We moved without pity, but never from hatred.

At that time, we were threatened as by a stampede of panicked giants, by those whose trail of
destruction had nothing to do with us but who could not try to spare us, hidden as we were from
their eyes. Their war was our enemy. Despite what others have reported of my words, I have never
said they were.

I say that my people have an enemy now, one who hates them and you as I never did. You cannot
fight him as you did me.

Now I regret so unceremonious an opening, but I must ration my paper and so it must serve.

Thank you for the news of my young cousin. It may interest you to know that he has visited my
homelands of late. They say of him that he has not discovered that his head may be more of a
funnel to his stomach, and that since he goes about with a wide split in his face it is a great pity that
no one has yet seen fit to fill it by throwing in some brains. Shall I blame your so-reluctant
educating?

Yours, in earnest,
from the armoured woods

***

My dear,
You always think we are on the same side, or should be. How I wish it could always be thus! I long to believe it in these trying times but, as you know my heart and not my mind, I know your quicksilver tongue better than I can be certain that I ever knew your heart. It is an insoluble problem for old men such as ourselves to resolve from so far away, and alone.

Alas, such is life.

I am grieved to hear you say such things of your own family. It is true that the boy’s professors did not hold him a genius, but he has talent in his own field, as well as the friendship of some of my cleverer students. If only you knew him—you, who know that on my little isle smiling is no sign of folly, as it is said to be in your storied mountains—you could make up your own mind. Surely the good opinions of one’s peers should not be lightly dismissed.

Affectionately yours,
from the white hives

***

My dear old friend,

If I could better know, or could entertain any red-haired Englisher within these walls, I would choose not the pleasant rose but the mad fox.

Still, it comes to me that we grow older. I would not wake flat in a frame someday, having to come to terms all over again with these past many years, those years passed from my mind along with my living body. You say my young cousin is a painter. On your pragmatic shores they train no magical painters who are not illuminators and portraitists. Who could I trust would do me more justice than family, who can never be parted from my name? Who could you trust to be more judicious with my legacy than my family, who know your eyes will be on them?

Perhaps you will permit me to gift you a poor image of myself as I am now, that you may free yourself from this confusion you feel at seeing my face on a young man’s body, and that I may feel your eyes on me as I write you.

Steadfastly yours,
from the armoured woods

***

My dearest trial,

Do you know, I would like that very much. Since, or so I profoundly hope, such a portrait would not come alive to spread your opinions for many years, I cannot see much harm in it. I will inquire whether your cousin will accept a commission to preserve what lessons you have learned—as you say, it is never my way to force the young to where they will not go, only to illuminate for them the path of greatest love. You will understand, I hope, if I do not send such a very young man alone, unshadowed in these dark times to shores where he is thought of so poorly.

I hope to be able to look forward to hearing your thoughts, if I can come to believe your motives are (first and foremost if never entirely) what you would have me think them.

Yours affectionately,
from the white hives

***
My dear old friend,

If what I have heard of my relative is true, it is indeed for the best that one of these cleverer friends you spoke of should be the shadow and shield at his back, if only to remind him to look up and down when crossing the street and to put up a charm in the rain. I am delighted that you wish me to have intelligent conversation to distract me from the tedium of sitting for a portrait, as I should not like to be remembered looking dull and half-asleep. Still, I confess myself surprised; you have never before scrupled to send even the greenest of wizards alone into more danger than this, far from their families and the familiar.

Meine lästige Helligkeit, my thoughts are ever yours, even when they are not as yours. Certainly you may be assured of their frequent company. As surety now, when you will not dare to believe any words of mine, I will tell you this:

Here in my dark woods, our magical beings have a fellow-feeling and an indignation for your Ministry’s treatment of your nation’s werewolves. It is said they have sabotaged a great gift to these men and women who are already cursed, which could in time have become a cure but now may forever be without worth. It comes to me that this ill-feeling was intended: when I tell you that a cold-blooded enigma splinters my woods against themselves, this is just what I mean. If your eyes have fallen onto this matter, you will see that it is not I who would play you for a fool.

Yours steadfastly,
from the armoured woods.

***

Spike,
You know all the swear words, can you teach me some? Because— actually, I’m going to try your ink-transferring spell. If it destroys both our notebooks… sorry?

Dear Master Rosier,

I hope you enjoyed your recent trip to the Continent, and trust you are settling back into the mists and grinds of our everyday island life.

Yet perhaps you might nevertheless be willing to undertake a commission which would send you back. While the errand might be an inconvenience, I can assure you that the subject would be regarded as something of a ‘catch’ for your firm.

Indeed, my old acquaintance had long resisted being painted since his brief period of fame, and has only been reconciled to the idea due to your distant familial connection—and, naturally, the high repute of your firm’s illuminators. Having been shown some of your landscape studies on the backs of several of your past essays, I think I may be adding a more personal inducement when I tell you that the lemon groves around your subject’s residence are particularly fine.

I shall be happy to send a member of my staff with you, in order to allay any concerns your grandfather might feel about sending his youngest master to illuminate the elder and possibly more cantankerous version of a subject who, as he will recall, is capable of some difficulty. While I can only spare my own most junior member, as classes are already in session, I may assure you and your grandfather that you will find him cautious and capable.
Should you choose to accept this commission, I do beg you will apologise to Chrystanthos on my behalf for not offering it first to him. I shall explain to him that, I fear, a new portrait of my old acquaintance by such a revered illuminator would start an instant bidding war, when I wish the painting of my living friend for my own study. Between the two of us, I may tell you that I would greatly value an image made with fresh eyes which can show me who he is now without the vivid memories of all he as done intruding on the representation.

I remain most cordially…

Don’t wanna go, Spike. However, also do not want to be disinherited for snubbing opportunities Grandpère can publicly brag about.

Incidentally, I had no idea your employer liked to be catty without provocation. I feel I’ve been cheated throughout my entire education and am no longer confused that the two of you are getting along.

P.S.: ‘particularly fine’ -- do you think he knows?!?!

Lance,

Pre-S.: I think he knows you draw incomprehensible pleasure from drawing trees and sympathetically equates it with his own conventional and mathematical enjoyment of the insipid tedium unjustly elevated beyond criticism by the term ‘chamber music.’

Your lack of ambition is both a scandal and a constant mystery. Take comfort, at least, that your years of aggressively vacant-eyed lassitude have paid off and I, offered the flattering role of court jester, need not beg three powers for the privilege of dogging your shadow.

(Is this subject really a desirable one for R&Y? Not exactly a hero on our shores.)

As to being cheated by one’s education, I could not possibly comment.

***

Spike,

Bad day?

(Infamous is still famous. Art doesn't have to be nice.)

***

Lance,

Not especially, except in that this job is intrinsically terrible.

You needn’t think I feel you unequal to the occasion, but I note that our contact’s face doesn’t trouble me as it seems to do you. The coincidence of bones aside, I expect that at that age I’ll resemble him more than you will, as whatever species he belongs to is entirely terrestrial. I do think part of your attention is distracted by what similarities there are; I had switched from sarcasm to mere annoyed discontent with life after the second sentence.

***

Spike,

I’m glad you’ll be with me and that I’m just a front to get you there, too. Incidentally, did you rub
your soap on that last letter?

***

DF,
1. Not in your most indolent dreams, lazy-arse.
2. I may have done. On the other hand, Slughorn was irresponsibly showing off his substandard amortentia in front of a horde of hormonal sixth-years again. It is just possible that sneaking, grabbing, shouting, tears, detention, and, indeed, splashing may have occurred. (I’m not in trouble for shouting this time; I think the Tartan was actually louder when Slughorn told her. A pleasant surprise, but we’ll see if it lasts.) Lick it: we’ll know for certain if, by the time I’ve come home, you’ve fallen in love with the house-elf.

***

Spike-my-Spike,
I don’t have room for him.

***

Lance,
Out of professional curiosity, did any of the aromas overwhelm the rest? I would swear Slughorn’s version is like being hit in the face with a sandalwood broom. When I made it for class in sixth year it had a better balance with the satsuma and old-book smells, although I think the substitution of tea for turpentine I note in this batch is not due to flaws in his brewing.

***

Spike,
You, too, are absurd. And ever-so modest.

It did smell more like petrichor than your soap normally does; that’s why I asked. Not at all because it would have been terribly romantic of you. Thought you might have been playing with the recipe.

***

Lance,
While I think you must have been confounded to think of that abominable adjective in the same breath with my name, I do feel it incumbent upon me to point out that drying my sleeve before writing is an action of which I may, I think, be assumed physically capable.

Until tonight.

***

Lance—
Until tonight, at which point I expect an explanation for why one of the guests at an event we attended two weeks ago is flinching every time she looks at me. What the hell did you write to that child.

***

Spike,
You’re going to have to get expect kids will need to adjust to your being more like a professor than
one of them now. At least this one’s polite and unlikely to wreak nasty chaos on purpose? I doubt that can be said for everyone.

I dripped this oil on the paper completely on purpose because I am not silly enough to feel I need a convoluted excuse to account for my romantic impulses. Although if an olfactory hug might stop you from crankily blaming me for schoolyard nonsense and put you back in the until-tonight mindset, how efficient of me!
Not sorry for anything,
Just yours.

***

Lance,
...I didn’t dislike the sandalwood.

***

Spike,
But do you like this blend? White tea and eucalyptus—I kept the satsuma, though bergamot might go better with the tea, what do you think?

***

Lance,
Pleasant, but cold. Look, I know you talked to her, it was a perfectly reasonable conclusion.

***

DF,
I’m not mad at you, I just wanted to try something. Sandalwood would be too strong with this blend, but I could try amber or almond to put some warmth back in.

***

Lance,
As if you wouldn’t whinge for weeks if I changed my soap.

***

Spike-my-sulky-Spike,
I absolutely would, as yours isn’t boring. We can argue about it tonight over a bottle I found this morning. @’--,

***

Lance,
I would consider not-arguing, depending on the results of your experimentation, if I were presented with the choice of arguing or not-arguing with a face like a proper wizard’s.

***

Spike,
If you want me to grow a beard that badly, you’re going to have to bribe me with something nicer than the absence of an argument in which you will not be able to both explain what you want and
avoid being adorable.

***

To whom it may concern:

Please stop writing my assistant during school hours. I’m sure my class is glad of the words they just learned and your little notebook is quite ingenious, but if it happens again I shall have to explain to Professor Sprout who else is responsible for her fourth-years’ new vocabulary (and, in the most unfortunate case, injuries).

Warmest regards,

Prof. H. Slughorn, MP

***

DEAR PROFESSOR SLUGHORN,

PLEASE ACCEPT THE ENCLOSED HEARTFELT APOLOGY FOR THE DISRUPTIVE FAILURE OF SUBTLETY THIS AFTERNOON. WON’T HAPPEN AGAIN.

SINCERELY YOURS,
ONE WHOM IT DID CONCERN

(attached: a box of five pineapple-flavoured white chocolates from Heartwoods of Hallow Way. There is some evidence that, before being covered in mashed potatoes, smashed by Professor Babbling’s elbows, and repeatedly pecked by an owl, they were shaped like fluffy sheep with sheepish candied-ginger hooves over their eyes.)

***

Dear Unknown Nincompoop,

How thoughtful. However, I do strongly suggest, in future, finding yourself an owl that will stay out of poor professors’ suppers.

-H. Slughorn, M.P., by the hand of S. Snape, M.P., since said hand is fortunate enough not to be covered in potatoes, gravy, and owl bites.

p.s. - you know he knows perfectly well who you are, don’t you? I mean, plausible deniability via block letters is all well and good if you don’t go doing something daft like sending bloody edible CARTOONS as no one else IN THE HISTORY OF HOGWARTS would ever think to do. In future shall apparently only be able to look at note-passing notebook when there aren’t any children even down the hallway, so I’m sure Lily will be as thrilled with you as I am considering she’s started asking me deranged questions at random intervals and has all the patience of a Welsh pixie. DON’T REPLY, I’m in enough trouble as it is. -SS

p.p.s.: also don’t cling on my broom about signing with my title, he insisted. -SS

p.p.p.s.: My assistant assures me this creature doesn’t belong to you, Mystery Correspondent; I am very sorry to see that failing to take Care of Magical Creatures has served you so ill that you can’t select a well-behaved messenger. Be sure to tell the post office that the owl is a demon from the many depths of perdition and they might wish to consider baking it! - HS
p.p.p.s.: The Tartan is snorting pumpkin juice up her sleeve—it’s actually turning orange—and all the firsties are staring and I AM GOING TO MURDER YOU FOR THIS. The damned owl got feathers (as well as shepherd’s pie) everywhere and I have reserved some for the express purpose of MURDERING YOU AS YOU DESERVE. BE READY FOR EXCEPTIONAL DEATH. -SS

***

Narcissa,

Is there some dread ritual you know of that would suggest that if Spike shoutily threatens to murder me with owl feathers I’m in for an unpleasant evening? Just checking in case I have to fix my will in the next two hours after all; obviously Spike still gets everything but it’s possible I should revise it to be slightly less obnoxious to my parents.

Ev

***

Evan, darling,

Present me with that much information on this subject again and I shall either invent one (though I’m sure choking you would be much simpler than some dusty old ritual) or put you in charge of making Draco eat his mushy peas. I’m afraid solids are rather a shock to him, but it sounds as if you deserve more punishment than you’re likely to get. I may relent if you stop being maddening and explain what you’re hinting at when next you come for tea.

Your loving cousin, 
Narcissa

***

Narcissa,

How about an early lunch tomorrow? I want to talk to you anyway; we need to discuss your most recent shower of generosity, and also I need to buy a house by this weekend.

Ev

***

Evan, darling,

Come tomorrow by all means. I do hope you’ve been practising your Protego charm.

Kisses, 
Narcissa

***

Dear Miss Blakeney,

I find myself with an appointment to have tea with Professor Dumbledore at Hogwarts tomorrow afternoon. Shall we discuss the matter of your coming-of-age portrait then, rather than waiting for your next Hogsmeade weekend? Please find enclosed enough floo powder to let me know whether 3:30 or 4:45 better suits your schedule, and I shall meet you then in the old music room unless you would like to ask Professor Slughorn to lend us his office.
In lemon juice, on enclosed sheet decorated with a cute picture of a knarl standing slightly in front of a candle as big as it is and having trouble playing an extra-curly brass instrument:

Cleo—
I was going to try to meet you today, but it’s really better not to have to sneak around in a castle full of portraits, ghosts, and devoted elves if it can be avoided. Use the floo powder to let me know if it really can’t wait till tomorrow and I’ll manage somehow.

Regarding Sluggy’s office—you’ll understand the benefits of being direct with one’s Head of House when a young lady wishes to make a perfectly respectable appointment with a graduated wizard on school grounds, but I ought to warn you Walrus-face is a bit miffed with me at the moment. Completely unfair; it’s hardly my fault Certain People can’t keep a straight face when they’re being complimented, or that the Nottingham Post’s entire owl population is possessed by the vengeful spirits of rabid, bloodthirsty quintapeds. I already apologized, but as that package was delivered by said possessed owl, should you decide to ask him you might want to try, er, anything but pineapple.

Lance

Chapter End Notes

**Rough translation notes:**
'The white hives' and 'the armoured woods' are plays on the writers' names. (...Nah, that's giving it too much credit; it's a fairly direct translation in Gellert's case)
Meine (lästige) Helligkeit - my (annoying) brightness, according to Google Translate.
If you speak German, Austrian, or Bulgarian and know a phrase that more directly implies 'I like to sunbathe but it gives me both migraines and sunburn, I hate you so much,' please let me know ♥
September 4: Potions Classroom

Chapter Summary

Quirinus Quirrell faces a demon. AKA, Severus's first time on the other side of detention does not go completely smoothly. (I know: shocker.)

Chapter Notes

Warnings: Fantastic racism. Extract of Ravenclaw. Do I have to warn for ‘unprofessional behavior by a member of school staff’? Because that’s probably going to apply a lot... Also, the plot advancement is not where you might think. ;)

Notes: I have an exciting new system of organizing my plans for this fic which has really unstuffed my head. It involves large portions of my wall and about 400 pushpins, and I’m grateful to JKR and her teeny-tiny book-in-a-spreadsheet system for inspiring me to make my room look like it belongs to a color-coordinated serial killer. :D

No, seriously, it’s helping a lot. As did all of you who commented to tell me things you’d like to see the story touch on. Some of that will start to show up in the next chapter. Please keep it up, and the letters to Asphodel! (We’ll get one of those next post, too.) I know where the plot is going, but whose eyes we look through on the way is not remotely set in stone and I love knowing who and what you guys care about.

And: The article at the top should probably be in italics for consistency... but I'm not going to do that to you.

Beldames, it’s that time of year again.

Only last week, Diagon defied the sullen, drizzly dregs of August in a swirl of new wands shooting uncontrolled sparks for the first time and awed little faces leaving streaks on the windows of Quality Quidditch Supplies as it displayed the new Silver Arrow Flatbow. Flourish and Blotts rang with parents squabbling over the last few copies of the Standard Book of Spells, while in the rest of the Alley the arguments over Hogwarts-bound pets and mufti were as inescapable as the delectable traces of Madam Fortescue’s magically aromatic chilled tisanes and decoctions.

Now the dear ones are safely off, and Diagon is sparkling in the September sunlight.

Relieved of any caution about provoking jealousy in the wizarding world’s newest members, house elves are flitting openly around the Alley on their errands, competing with each other to show off what they can do with their owners’ cast-off linens. This year the Shafiq family was the undisputed champion, their elf sporting a fresh assemblage of complementary embroidered tea-towels in shades of sky blue and spring-green, sewn into a neatly wrapped robe with breezy kimono sleeves, ornamented by bold, rustic bows at the shoulder and waist. We were also struck
by a rare sighting of the Princes’ elf outside Bishoppers’ Solicitary, in spotless white drapes of exquisite hand-tatted Irish lace, simply wrapped in a charming crimson velvet curtain pull.

Wizards and witches, too, are celebrating autumn’s freedom from the tyranny of ankle-length robes drenched in cooling charms and chizpuffle repelling potion. Lightweight, fluttering robes of linen and organza have been flung open to display autumnal colours in cheerful patterns and glistening moire. Even Narcissa Malfoy, admired socialite and It-witch, has departed from her favoured stylings in summery cream and cornsilk to stun in clean princess lines of warm seashell and pearl that pour down to foam down around her signature heels of doom from a fascinatingly feathered hood.

Not wishing to press the noted philanthropist on a painful subject, we asked her husband Lucius, himself resplendent in a carefully-tailored mulberry moire ensemble with silver buckles that lends a blush to his wife’s pale robes, whether his wife was not afraid to wear a hood after the unfortunate misunderstanding last month between the Ministry and her cousin, Regulus Black. Mr. Malfoy, though full of enthusiasm for the Ministry’s latest pet safeguard against breaches of Secrecy, the new Muggle-Worthy Excuse Committee, spares a moment to assure our readers of his certainty that the Ministry, while understandably alarmed after the strange events at the Portkey Office, understands that hoods are the birthright of every British wizard, as well as creating a most picturesque silhouette when comprehensively crafted against foul weather by Parthalan Tatting.

Mr. Malfoy and his resolute jaw sport a neatly pointed cap by the redoubtable Mr. Tatting, only a few shades darker than his cloak. If Mr. Malfoy is inclined to show off his celebrated platinum mane now that the August drizzle has been chased away by the cool breezes and sunlight that set it off properly, Reader, we cannot blame him.

Some blame may attach to Flourish and Blotts for not quite expecting the size of this year’s incoming class at Hogwarts, but they are determined to make it up to newly-lonely parents in an explosion of seasonal cheer. Begonias and golden leaves brighten the dusty shop, and brewing rumours of a grand Samhain festival hosted by one of Wizarding Britain’s great families are floating around the alleys.

In other brews, sweet autumn olives are having a moment in the street carts, turning cider and mead tartly russet and shining candle-red in lead-cut jars of jams and jellies. Tender & Cruste’s of Kneid Alley is spotlighting a lemon seedy-cake stuffed with their little specks of almondy goodness. Crackling-gauze bags of the dried berries with cashews in billiwig honey and drops of nearly black chocolate are the strolling snack of choice from Spellbinding Nuts’s popular Diagon stall, all the rage with Ministry wizards out to stretch their legs…

Seraphina,

1. Clean up the transition. Remind Lulu that the Malfoys are Slytherins and will throw a wobbler if we put them near words like ‘blame’ and ‘mane.’
2. Cut the snacks. Spellbinding Nuts doesn’t see why they should pay us for the mention. If Lulu can’t find anything good to replace it with, tell him at least to rewrite it so we’re not clearly identifying their product. It would be such a shame if other stalls took the hint and gave them some competition, but there you are. Keep the original page in reserve in case they can be made to realize by Friday.

Urgent: Find me a photographer who can make bundimun infestations sexy. The new column debuts in the next run.

Smooches
Toto
Staring between the Dungeon Demon, the gamekeeper, and a pile of logs wasn’t how Quin had anticipated spending his evening. Flitwick had assured him he wasn’t in bad trouble, but Snape had only been out of school two years. Quin had Heard Things. And Seen Things.

Flitwick was nice. He’d help you find the right books and learn to shake out an outline. But, as everyone knew, he had goblin blood and he’d been known to get even sharper than McGonagall with the persistently stupid. It wouldn’t be any surprise for him to cheerfully feed students who really cheesed him off to a monster who’d already gotten away with turning a popular Gryffindor inside out so all his organs were on the outside.

Gossip said Sirius Black had borne it so very bravely after the first shock that it probably hadn’t hurt very much. That might even have been true, because the Tartan had brought him into Transfigs for an anatomy lesson and the Pomfrey had been perfectly friendly with her at meals after. Only, Quin had missed that class due to being ill. Which was to say he’d gotten half a glance at the older boy at breakfast, when Black’s screaming had been heart-stopping, and promptly tossed his toast.

Slughorn had definitely been at school that day, and all the other school days going back what must have been at least fifty years, so he knew what Snape was like. Clearly, Quin’s impatience to get started in his first-ever NEWT potions class while Slughorn was doing his first-day-back chat had been unforgivable, even though Slughorn had never seemed to mind first-day-back eagerness before. But then, Slytherins assured Quin that Slughorn never did let on when he minded something.

Quin was sick about it. Not just because he was quite reasonably afraid that Snape might slam a hand down his throat and yank out his liver, either. He’d thought he was being an exemplary Ravenclaw—not such an awful one that his Head of House would be happy to see him killed!

Obviously, Quin was a complete idiot who understood nothing. He’d be pathetically grateful they weren’t going so far as to expel him, but they still could!!

That was probably why Hagrid was here. Everyone knew Hagrid had been expelled. He must be here to explain how awful life was with a snapped wand so Quin would try hard and do better.

Or maybe they thought Quin was so uncontrollably terrible that someone bigger than Snape (who was unquestionably demonic, what with the way he’d set all Hogsmeade’s bees on some poor little kid who’d just BREATHED wrong around him, but also only a few inches taller than Quin and skinny as a broom handle) would be there to…

Quin frowned, and hopefully whispered to Hagrid, “Are you there to hit me if I do something awful or stop him if he does?”

“I should hope you wouldn’t be of a mind to do anything ‘awful’ after Wednesday’s debacle,” the Dungeon Demon said dryly. “Incidentally, in case it isn’t obvious, I can hear you.”

Quin blushed. He was afraid he might have cringed, or even trembled. If his body had hoped to mollify the Demon with a show of submission, it failed miserably; Snape only looked more annoyed. “Sorry, sir,” he squeaked, which only made it worse.

Thinking maybe the problem was that he hadn’t apologized for the right thing yet, he blurted, “I mean, of course I’m not! I didn’t mean to yesterday, either! Sir! I mean, it, it just all went wrong and I won’t do it again!”
“Three,” Snape said inexplicably, a muscle under his eye ticcing.

Mind scurrying about in a panic, Quin tried, “Nossir, I’ve never done that to any cauldrons before, I swear! Er, er, unless you mean because I stirred three times widdershins after the blowfish eyes? But I thought—that is, I mean—”

“Five,” the demon snarled.

“There, now,” the blessed gamekeeper interjected himself peaceably. “Don’t be getting ahead of yourself there, er, Quirinus. Our Severus here wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

Quin missed the opportunity to tell Hagrid that, for obvious reasons, nobody called him that. He was too busy staring in blatant and unadulterated disbelief—or, anyway, adulterated only by wondering how worried to be that Snape had up a quizzical eyebrow that was, almost audibly, wondering what Hagrid had been drinking.

Oblivious, Hagrid rolled on, “Cept to put in one of them there potions, of course. Oh, he can get a mite tetchy when he’s riled—”

“You ought to be calling the students ‘Mister,’ now you work here,” Hagrid advised. “Till you get to know ‘em, leastways.”

“You don’t,” Snape pointed out—reasonably enough, on the surface. Quin didn’t trust it.

Hagrid chuckled. “You may not be a professor, our Severus, but you’re teaching, right enough. I heard all about it from some of them first years.”

Snape pressed his lips together thoughtfully. “A point,” he conceded dubiously. “Very well. I was saying, then, that I know why Mr. Quirrell and I are here. How did you manage to annoy Professor Dumbledore, Hagrid?”

“Oh, now, I wouldn’t say as he was annoyed,” Hagrid rumbled—not angrily, but looking shocked at the idea of Dumbledore being so fallible as to get annoyed. “He just thought it might do some good. See, I—”

“Stop,” the Dungeon Demon said, putting up a hand and looking very stressed. “Does this have to do with why, during the budget fracas, Professor Sprout was bellowing about why the new sheds she needed should come from Professor Kettleburn’s budget even after Professor McGonagall offered to transfigure her better ones?”

Looking guilty but not sorry, Hagrid admitted, “Might’ve done.”

Snape squeezed his eyes very tightly closed. “In that case, pas devant les enfants.”

“I can speak French,” Quin volunteered, in case Snape said anything he didn’t want to hear and
then blamed Quin for understanding it.

“I can’t,” Hagrid volunteered back cheerfully.

“Quiet, infant,” Snape said to Quin, without any particular animus. Quin didn’t know what to make of that. “Hagrid, tell me later. All right. We’ll go in blind, Merlin help us.”

He took a small step back, and something happened in his face that made it instantly clear to Quin that detention had officially begun. “The Headmaster has suggested to me that the school might be a safer place should the two of you absorb some notion of safe experimentation. In my view, this should be taught to all students in their second year if not before. As I’m assured that’s not a viable option at this time, I suppose we shall either muddle through or blow ourselves to smithereens.”

“What are we going to do?” Quin asked, daunted, staring with trepidation at the big pile of blocky things under the cloth on the workbench.

“Wrong question.” Snape fired flashing black eyes Quin’s way, making him shrink back. “Try again.”

Quin quailed.

“Hagrid?”

“What do you want me to do?” Hagrid tried, willing but not bothered.

Sighing, Snape explained, “The question put before us is not What but How. Do you know what the scientific method is, Mr. Quirrell? No—I know you wouldn’t have heard about it, Hagrid, unless the school was more sensible under Dippet.”

“I—I think so?” he quavered. It sounded familiar from Muggle Studies, at least. Something about studying things while blinded, which was obviously ridiculous.

“Do you?” the Demon asked coldly. “Do you, in fact, Ravenclaw, ‘think’ you know the way of going about discovery and confirmation that can make your experiments sound and safe, and your conclusions inarguable and right?”

Quin’s vision tunnelled, narrowing tightly into those cool, sneering black eyes, with the one eyebrow tilted up in a way Quin had never managed no matter how he poked his face in front of a mirror.

“WAIT!” he shrieked, and pelted for the door.

“Colloportus.” Snape stared as if Quin weren’t doing the only rational thing. “What the—what do you imagine that you’re doing, Mr. Quirrell? You can’t leave. You are in detention.”

“I’m not leaving!” Quin sputtered, staring at the demon who had apparently gone mad. “I didn’t bring a notebook!”

“You’re in your sixth year!” Snape exclaimed, appalled. “Why are you going anywhere without a notebook?”

Well, that was just completely unfair! ”I thought I’d be preparing ingredients for Professor Slughorn!” he explained indignantly. Hagrid, for some reason, was chuckling. “It might have got yuck all over it!”
“Your Head of House teaches charms!”

“He’s very busy!”

Snape stared at him.

Quin flushed.

Finally, Snape sighed again, rolling his eyes. Without any explanation, he tapped the pile of blocks-or-whatever with his wand, and it went away. “…Fine. Professor Flitwick is terrifying. There is, however, in this very castle, a wondrous thing called a library. I therefore expect you to be five minutes early to your next Potions class in order to demonstrate one charm that will protect your books from ‘yuck’ and one that will clean them without damaging their legibility.”

There was a flash in the black eyes that informed Quin that he was going to have to keep an open book on his desk whether he could protect it or not. He gulped.

“You’d think I ate children raw,” the demon remarked to Hagrid, in an aggrieved tone of voice, as though butchering children and roasting them properly would be an improvement.

“They get used to you,” Hagrid smiled, sympathetic but not helpful. “Or might be I mean you get used to it.”

“I will not be contaminated with the mental fungus you call optimism,” the demon retorted, and scowled at Quin. “Stop it at once.”

“But I wasn’t—” he quailed.

“You most certainly were. Stop it. No one is going to make you eat your own body parts: if you are unfamiliar with the term ‘hyperbole,’ I highly recommend a book called the ‘dictionary.’”

Quin scowled back on pure reflex. And instantly regretted it.

Both confusingly and worryingly, the demon looked approving. “I will even give you a choice. Hagrid, you’re obviously going to be redesigning your protocol—”

“Say again, our Severus?”

Snape squeezed his eyes shut. “Your experiment?”

“Yeah, but what do you mean designing?”

“Merlin save us,” Snape said despairingly. “Right. Mr. Quirrell, I was going to give you the option of designing a subjective peer-assessment with the aim of disproving the hypothesis that Professor Flitwick is, as you believe, terrifying—”

Quin, who didn’t completely understand all that and thought it meant he was going to have to confront his impatient duelling-champion Head of House in some way, blanched.

“—But needs must and I can no longer be so lenient. You two no-hopers are going to discuss what I’m about to write on the blackboard for ten minutes whilst I attempt to asphyxiate myself with the third-year essays on cauldron composition, then you will explain it to me. I will explain to you what you got wrong, and then you will help Hagrid design a method for breeding glowing gypsy moths that won’t set the Forbidden Forest on fire!” He glared at them, eyes a bit wilder than Quin was entirely comfortable with. “Is that clear?”
Puzzled, his moustache curling up at the sides, Hagrid asked, “What were you going to do with the third year—”

“BEAT MYSELF TO DEATH WITH THEM!” Snape snarled.

“That’s not what ‘asphyxiate’ means,” Quin ventured. Even within his own mind, he couldn’t quite tell if he meant it to be smug or helpful.

Even as he spoke a tiny scroll popped out of Snape’s collar button and rolled itself, now about hand-sized, in front of his rather manic black eyes. He blinked as though it was both the last thing he’d expected and, at the same time, completely predictable and tired-making. His face softened while becoming at the same time a perfect representation of the word ‘unimpressed.’ He tapped it with his wand, lightly, deliberately, and smiled as if he was trying not to while it went up in tidy little flames.

Before it fell apart and floated away in flakes of white ash, Quin could read for a moment, in the backwards ink against the scorching parchment, the words ‘NO CONCUSSIONS!’

Snape growled a long line of mostly-inaudible obscenities ending in ‘meddler’ while badly failing not to look pleased. Then, noticing the two of them looking at him, he further growled, “Well? What are you waiting for?”

“You s-said you were going to write something on the b-blackboard?” Quin offered, hating himself for sounding squeaky and terrified he was about to get shredded into wet ribbons for stammering even if anybody would stammer with Snape glaring at them.

Snape didn’t so much as notice. He sat down with deliberate grace, rested his forehead on the desk, and folded his arms over his head with the long fingers splaying delicately down over his eyes.

Then he stood up briskly, transfigured Quin a notebook out of a wad of gum off the bottom of a desk and started, in a completely no-nonsense manner, to fill the blackboard with close-set, spidery instructions.

Quin wondered if it was odd that, despite what an unmitigated disaster this detention was and the unspeakable disgustingness of his notebook, he was starting to feel a lot better.

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* For a teacher’s eye/less hysterical view of both the bee incident and the anatomy lesson, see Act II ch 5

** No, British wizards would not use the metric system, as they were not part of global industrialization and factory culture.

But of course they would have had rooms to retreat to for basic hygiene functions. Just because the furniture didn’t flush until relatively recently—and probably still doesn’t have to, strictly speaking. Flush toilets aren’t necessary for wizards. If you can enchant them to be self-cleaning, garderobes are better, since they don’t waste water or require septic systems. At Hogwarts, hygiene-function areas would certainly involve either toilet paper or some sort of probably-magical bidet equivalent: eleven year olds don’t learn magic so fast that it would be safe to let the firsties clean themselves by wand. JUST SAYING.

Why, no, you can’t tell when this chapter was written based on this footnote, why would you think that?
**Next:** Bill finds out that his training as Fred’n’George’s brother is going to serve him well, and Myron starts to learn that Bill’s different from other people—maybe even a little bit weird.

**Notes:** ‘Mufti’ is a word that seems, at least in its context as ‘what uniformed British schoolkids wear when they don’t have to wear their uniforms,’ to have gone out of use since it was mentioned in every other book I read growing up that had British schoolkids (ie: a lot). This is another instance of Wizarding Britain having been as impacted by Colonialism as the rest of Britain but not changing anything as quickly.

Autumn olives (also called silverberries) are a completely different kind of drupe. You can find pictures of how dramatic their juice looks on Google Image. YasminaMihaylovna commented on ffnet with way more info about them than I got from their Wiki page, so, for you foodies:
"Autumn olives are not particularly sweet (at least, not before a frost or two, and even then only maybe), nor do they look particularly like grapes, but they are very tart. The berries are quite small—maybe about the size of huckleberries? Or a little smaller than peanuts?—and are a light red with a dusting of white upon them. When crushed, the berries turn into an extremely pink mush and produce a very pale juice, which makes quite a decent white wine (we've made two batches, one of which had a very nice nutty finish to it, the other of which has a fairly strong citrus note to it, and both of which have a rather high alcohol content)."
I should note that Mr. Misslethorpe is aware that the trendy fruit of the season is an import. Since Wizarding Britain’s zeitgeist is to mostly ignore other countries, he doesn’t see why anyone should waste ink calling attention to this fact.

Lulu is not ashamed of having pictures of Lucius Malfoy on his bedroom wall. He frankly can’t understand why you don’t.
September 4: Music Room, Hogwarts

Chapter Summary

Bill finds out that his training as Fred'n'George's brother is going to serve him well, and Myron starts to learn that Bill's different from other people—maybe even a little bit weird.

Chapter Notes

**Warnings**: Hogwarts-appropriate levels of teaching sensitivity (ie: Bit Not Good), processing differences, conversational overload, implied reference to professorial underrobes by gossipy minors.

**Notes**: Posting a little early to make up for the long dry spell last time.

I know I suggested last post that there'd be a comment-prompted Dear Asphodel—and I wrote one. And then it was pointed out to me that the first week of school was a bit early for that particular letter, so I'm putting it aside for now (even though Pansy, for example, would 100% have been that obnoxious and passive-aggressive and Hermione might have in her first year or two if she'd thought of it). The plot you're getting instead is not as fun, but it gave me a way to approach a couple of much-appreciated requests some of you have made.

I'll try to do a different D.As. in the next chapter or two. Always open to prompts and will probably hit most of them eventually!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

...muggle healer Sarah Cohen-Goldstein (28) and Daily Prophet copy-editor Devorah Goldstein (25) to what St. Mungo's tentatively identifies as bloodroot poison. Aurors tell the Prophet only that they are pursuing their enquiries, but our investigations suggest they suspect the deaths are connected to the summer disappearances of several wizards and witches with muggle families. The couple leaves an infant son, who will be staying with his wizarding family due to his early exhibitions of accidental magic. The funeral was held yesterday in a private ceremony...

Mum's excuses for other people's lateness started to get silly after the first ten minutes. She usually graduated to 'dead in a tree' around the half-hour mark.

Dad had confided he thought she secretly wanted them to be dead in a tree because that's what they deserved for being late and (even though it generally took their family about half an hour to get out of the house and it always ended up with Mum going frantic and scolding because Charlie needed
his trousers mended again, the twins were hiding, the baby was wet, and Percy's toy-for-the-trip was sticky, dripping, or a book that was too hard for him) nothing less could justify it.

Only now Bill was starting to actually get a bit worried about Professor Flitwick. A lot of things could happen to a really tiny bloke in an old castle this big. Maybe Mum didn't do it to be spiteful after all, because Bill wasn't even annoyed with Professor Flitwick.

(Although if there wasn't a good reason, the professor was certainly being rude.)

He might have been annoyed, except that he wasn't bored. Gwen had got bored about three minutes in, and it turned out that about eight other crazy people also carried bags of gobstones around for no apparent reason. Bill had thought it was a little kids' game, but now he was going to have to owl home for his set and just hope the twins hadn't fed them to the gnomes or something.

Bill and Ron had been prepared to cheer Gwen on, but half the Ravenclaw players kept hissing shhhhh!, and the Slytherins who weren't playing had accused Bill of trying to 'put Alan off his game' and made squinty eyes at Ron like maybe he was a bit of a traitor. They were quite intense about it, considering that they were all three years older than Gwen.

Until Bill felt more certain about whether they were serious or having some fun with the little kid, best to stay out of it, he felt. Sitting down with some homework had seemed like an option at first, but the kids who weren't watching the game seemed to have a lot to complain about for only their third day at school.

The snarl of babble was gargantuan, but only a little louder than when Charlie wanted to tell Bill about something Mr. Lovegood had told him, Percy wanted to tell Bill about a new kind of bug he'd found in the garden and also a new rock he'd read about in his Christmas present, the twins were either babbling harmlessly or plotting something Bill probably needed to keep half an ear on (often involving someone sitting in juice), the baby was fussy but not howling yet, and Bill was supposed to fetch Mum from her lie-down as soon as the tea-kettle started whistling.

He heard:

"...says Australian wizards snog better than British ones, but if you ask me she's just trying to make him..."

"...did my summer homework but I just can't remember a thing about Leaping Toadstools!"

"I know! The Sprout just gave me that look and I could have crawled under the..."

"...can be an ass at the best of times, of course, but she seemed so upset..."

"...never brought a cat before and it's making poor Sneezy awfully nervous."

"...happy listening to Robards talk for just huuuuuuurs..."

"...rather squawky compared to..."

"...do you think tryouts will be?"

"...unbelievable nerve telling us what to wear."

"Right?! I mean, those sleeves—"

"...stand you a round in Hogsmeade if..."
"...heard the last one made kids hex each other in class…"

"—confiscated my bloody hairspray!"

"Well, I don't know why you don't just use—"

"...said last year I could start on incantations, but…"

"—sound just like Saint Mistlethwait—"

"...when he whirled at the blackboard and his robes went up you could almost…"

"...not letting a squib's cat tell me where I can…"

"Don't you start, Sleekeezy was invented by a Gryffindor, I wouldn't be caught dead…!"

"...and the fire went completely out and I swear I didn't mean…"

"...not supposed to keep owls in the dorms anyway…"

"...wasn't giving me sheep eyes, she just wanted help with…"

"...Tartan looks well fit with her tan…"

"...heard she hexes your mouth away if you talk in class…"

"That's nothing, I heard he hexed someone's skin completely off…"

"...the one in the middle ring."

"...Auror so he knows what he's doing, but I'm not sure about the new Divi…"

"...sure there'll at least be a Beater slot open."

"...bleeding lunatic, up at the crack of dawn…"

"...accent is cute, actually…"

"...least you don't get attacked by rogue face-powder every time you go to the loo, I like my freckles!"

"...Sluggy told him no student had ever imploded and he just said YET…"

"...four chapters by Tuesday!"

"You think that's bad, at least you're not taking Arithmancy…"

"...like he thinks using an abacus is cheating!"

"It's like he thinks there's something wrong with cheating!"

"...really hoping we can do some rounds for Halloween…"

"Point to me!"

"What is IN those things?! Mine don't smell like that!"
"...see Cleo after class? I wanted to revise for Herbology but it was like she'd apparated…"

"...told him I'm sure they wouldn't let a teacher actually kill and eat him, but…"

"...honestly, who wears cravats, he must have an Adam's apple the size of…"

"...apparate in Hogwarts."

"I know, but she was just gone, and did you see…"

"...up half the night trying to make a muggle radio work."

"I thought it was a still?"

"...find out how they smell if you ever score a point!"

"...did not remotely understand the bit about niffler nests…"

"Bill?"

"...he needs it to talk like that it can be as big as he…"

"...did think he sounded a bit hysterical, and was it just me or was he glaring at Hagrid's…"

"...think he could give me my hairspray BACK if I promise not to wear it to potions, but noOoo…"

"...com-PLETE-ly full of himself, and Tommy's no help whatever…!"

"...stiff, but I bet if she ever took her hair down…"

"Maybe if you showed him what shampoo is for he wouldn't need—"

"Bill, your eyes are going in different directions, are you okay?"

"—DO YOU WANT ME DEAD?!"

"...almost lost an eye to a valcore, I heard…"

"...wouldn't if you'd just take down your face-powder loo ambush…!"

"...if I begged the elves they'd let me have some coffee?"

"Or firewhisk—"

An opening door and the click of hobnailed soles on stone.

"Hello, everyone, and thank you for your patience! I'm so sorry; Professor Dumbledore needed a word and it couldn't wait. In future, if I'm delayed, I'd like you to start warming up-can I have a sixth or seventh-year volunteer to lead scales? Ah, thank you, Mr. Wenlock. Miss Quartstave, I'll ask you to fill in in case it happens when Mr. Wenlock is ill."

"Sure thing, sir," said the curly-haired Slytherin with the prefect badge who'd kept going on about how she had to study incantations because she'd put out a fire by accident or something. Bill thought she was fretting a lot for not accidentally starting one.

Professor Flitwick climbed up on the piano bench and beamed at them all. "I'm delighted there are
so many of you interested this year! Let's do our warm-ups together to start off with. Since we've lost some time, if you don't know what I mean, just follow along for today and you'll get the hang of it. Then I'd like to hear each of you individually so I can sort out what part you'll be singing this term if you choose to join up past next week. Some of you older students may find I'm moving you around from last year if your voice has changed—Mr. Bellchant?"

"What if our voices are still changing, sir?" asked the tall, chunky Slytherin with the snub nose and another badge who'd gotten sprayed by three separate sets of gobstones. Despite his still smelling faintly of rotten grapefruits and weasel-wee, he got a few grateful looks from some of the middle-sized boys.

"We'll take it on a case-by-case basis, Alan. Now, let's get right into it and see if we can't get through in time to do a song all together at the end. On your feet, everyone, and we'll start with pentascales at middle C!"

Bill joined the rest in scrambling to his feet and also in singing boring five-note up-and-down thingies. He wasn't seeing the amazingness Ron had promised so far, although admittedly it wasn't as dull as it could have been since Ron kept inexplicably glaring and elbowing him in the ribs. After the fourth time, Bill tried mouthing 'la la la la la' instead of singing 'ah ha ha ha ha.' Ron scowled, but left him alone after that.

When Flitwick was satisfied they'd 'stretched' (Bill had no idea how he could tell), he said, "I think we did this reverse-alphabetically last term, so this time we'll start with the A surnames."

"I'm always in the middle," a skinny girl with a blue tie and floaty blonde hair complained to her friend.

"I'll ask you not to talk while it's not your turn," the professor went on, not particularly to the blonde girl, "so we can move this along quickly. Feel free to work quietly on your homework or think of a song you'd like to show me—but don't worry if you can't think of one. And it's quite all right if you'd like to try one another student has used today, even if you don't know it very well. Are there any As? No new Averys or Abbotts or Amjads this year? All right, then, Mr. Bellchant, up you come."

Bill listened politely while Bellchant sang something bouncy about keeping an eye out for hairy-hearted witches. It sounded as if half the lines were meant to rhyme with 'wizards' instead of 'witches.' Then he played a game of noughts and crosses with Gwen while Bellchant and Flitwick had a talk and Flitwick had Bellchant repeat a few pieces of songs.

Then they listened politely while a Ravenclaw with an overly-wide jaw and no cheekbones to speak of sang something treacly and slow that Mum played on the wireless sometimes.

Then a Hufflepuff sang something else treacly and slow that Mum played on the wireless sometimes, only his voice kept cracking.

About halfway through the next person's song, Bill up and took out his homework. Gwen was already half-through her drawing of a moly flower, although it didn't look much like one in Bill's opinion. He caught up with her quickly, although he couldn't remember how to label the bit in the middle of the flower that had the pollen on it. Ron let them copy off his picture, which was kind of him although Bill thought his spelling might be wrong. They got through their Astronomy homework fairly quickly, too.

Bill tried doing his History reading after that, but he couldn't handle words in tiny print that didn't look like how they sounded and weren't even spelt reliably. Well, he could, and did on a regular
basis, but it took a lot more concentration than, say, Percy seemed to need even reading books with tiny print (at least, tiny for a little guy) while Fred and George and Charlie were running around shouting. He thought it'd be better to take a book like this to the library where it was quiet.

Assuming he could find the library. He'd found it once yesterday, but that was by accident because a stairway had shifted landings while he was on it.

This wasn't a good place for his Charms or Defense homework, and he wasn't going to have Transfiguration until tomorrow. So, since he hadn't been clever enough to bring a comic book of his own, Bill took out his mortar and pestle and started dutifully doing the Potions homework he hadn't been able to finish in History.

Flitwick looked over at him with a frown when he switched from oats to chicken bones. Since his teacher, instead of asking him to stop, flicked a spell at him that made no difference as far as Bill could tell except that everyone except Miss Quartstave stopped glaring at him, Bill kept at it. After all, even Miss Quartstave was more sort of looking at him like he was homework instead of exactly glaring.

When it was Ron's turn, he sang (or, really, half-shouted) something extremely strange. Bill assumed he'd heard the words wrong, because the phrase 'toejam football' made exactly zero sense whatsoever. But it was fun and happy and not treacly at all, and Ron sang the places where there was probably a guitar or something with a lot of energy. Bill clapped like he had for Gwen, and Ron looked pleased.

It was a good job Bill had been paying attention, too, since the professor beckoned to him next. Bill realized happily that he and Ron would probably always get called up one after the other for this sort of thing, since they both had W names. Which left Gwen out a bit, except that Mal's last name started with an H and of course she and Gwen shared all the same classes Bill and Ron did. So that was okay.

Professor Flitwick smiled at him, flicked his wand again, and asked, "What do you like to sing, Mr. Weasley?"

"I don't know," Bill admitted. "Uh, sir. My mum mostly puts on sort of soupy songs at home."

He'd been trying to just sound polite, but the little professor grinned at him and suggested, "Skip those, then, and sing something you don't hate. It doesn't matter if it's Row Your Boat or Hop The Fire With Me or anything like that. I just need to hear what your voice sounds like, and it helps if you're enjoying the music."

"Okay," Bill agreed. "Er, Ron," he pointed to Ron, "taught me this on the boats coming in, though I don't really know it."

He'd forgotten most of the words and had to sing 'something something dum dum dum' a lot, but he only faltered when he realized the room had gone dead quiet and everyone was glaring at him again. Lamely, he explained, "I only heard it once, but it was more fun than anything Mum plays on the wireless…"

"Hm." Professor Flitwick frowned, looking concerned. "Mr. Wagtail, will you come up here and sing the song with Mr. Weasley? Mr. Weasley, you can just use 'ta ta' for the lyrics. Nice big notes. Mr. Wagtail, sing a little more quietly so I can hear Mr. Weasley, will you? Now, on three…"

Now that they were off the lake and nobody was talking around them, Bill realized it was about a bar fight and was embarrassed he'd picked it to sing for a teacher. Flitwick's face said that wasn't...
"Thank you, Mr. Wagtail, you can sit down," the professor said, and floated a long, triangular sort of instrument with silvery bars all down the top over from a closet. "Just sing 'ahh,' copying the notes I play, all right?"

Bill obliged—or thought he did, but when the professor was done he looked disappointed in a way Bill hadn't seen him look at anyone in Charms class, even when Wood had swished too hard and smacked Fawley in the eye. "Didn't I do it right?" he asked, afraid his voice might be wobbling a bit. Professor Flitwick seemed really nice, and it was awful to make him look like that.

"I'm afraid not," the professor said gently. "I'm sorry to say it, Mr. Weasley, but it sounds as though you're what we call 'tone deaf.' It's like being colour blind—you'll be able to appreciate music and enjoy singing, of course! But you're not quite hearing what other people hear; you don't identify the notes in the same way, and so you don't land on them properly."

Seeing Bill's face, he explained, 'It's as if we were all trying to say, together, 'a tip-top tinny teapot topples tippily to Tottington,' but you couldn't hear the letters T and O properly and so you thought you were saying that, but everyone else heard 'a dip-rap funny peeper' and so on. Which is just fine on most occasions where people are singing together! After all, music is just about having fun most of the time! But for choir, I need everyone to be singing exactly the right note, and so I'm afraid—"

"Excuse me, Professor," said Miss Quartstave, standing up and coming over to them. "May I try something?"

The professor frowned curiously, and invited, "By all means."

"I was watching him grinding his stuff," she explained, and sat down on the professor's bench, giving Bill a solemn little nod. "He switched it up with every song; I don't think he even noticed. I mean, except during Bellchant's, since Bellchant has all the rhythm of a dying fish."

"I am soulful," Bellchant said with dignity.

"No," said the girl who'd kept complaining about her hairspray, "you bleat like a sad, sad cow."

"Sheep," corrected face-powder girl.

"I do not!"

"Bluwwwww me to the moooooooon…"

Miss Quartstave snapped her fingers at Bill. "Hey, firstie. Do what I do, okay?"

She started to clap, first just like applause only very slow, then like a trotting horse. Bill was baffled, hurt, and mortified from Professor Flitwick's being-nice-to-the-hopeless tone, but she started smiling a little after they were clapping like horses together, and then she started doing all sorts of different things and soon he was smiling, too, in a wobbly sort of way, even though he still felt awfully raw and he knew he wasn't quite copying everything she did exactly right.

"Ok, stop," Miss Quartstave said, still smiling. "Now I'm going to clap something, but it's up to you to make it not-boring. Ready? One, one, one two one!"

She started grinning after a minute. After she made hers more interesting so Bill had to step his up, too, she dared, "You can do better than that." And then, a little later, when Ron and Gwen and a
couple of other students started tapping the floor along with them, "I'm bored, this is SO boring, look, even Bellchant's keeping up with you; do something else!"

"Well done, both of you!" Professor Flitwick said eventually, and he looked just as excited now as he had been disappointed before. "I think that deserves a point to Slytherin, Miss Quartstave, even if we're not in class! Mr. Weasley, this is an a capella choir as a rule, as we haven't a dedicated all-around music teacher or a set budget for instruments, but let's explore our prospects after breakfast on Saturday."

Turning to the group at large, he clapped for attention. Some of the green-scarves looked annoyed with him, for some reason, but he still got it, especially after Miss Quartstave made a little relax, everybody gesture. "Now, for those of you who haven't joined us before, the rest of the practices won't be like this. I'll ask each one of you to come next week at the same time to see what they are like. Remember what part I told you you'll be singing! At the end of that practice, I'll take down the names of everyone who wishes to be in the choir this term.

"I expect choir members to come to every practice unless you have a note from Madam Pomfrey, so be sure to factor it into your homework planning. Please decide carefully, you fifth and seventh years, especially if you're taking more than two electives! I hope you'll all join us again, but your NEWT's and OWLs are the most important thing. And for those of you who'll be playing Quidditch, make sure to share the schedule with your captains when I give it to you. Mr. Wenlock," he added with a long-suffering smile, "you may have to remind Miss Smith to consider choir as immutable as classes."

Some of the yellow-scarves smiled, mostly a bit guiltily, and the professor winked. "Those of you who don't read music yet or need a refresher, be sure to take one of these pamphlets on your way out to study over the week. Now, on your feet, everyone! Let's sing just one song all together as a welcome-back before I let you go. Do you all remember your parts from last year's Leaving Feast? Just do your best to follow along, first-years. Mr. Weasley, come sit here."

He pointed at one of the desk-and-chair sets that had been shoved up against the wall, and then flicked his wand at it. The wooden surface of the desk turned to what looked like padded leather. "That will make a nice, quiet surface that will let you do what you like without throwing off our singers. Focus on the beat they're singing to until you have it, and then play with it, see what you come up with that will be more interesting without throwing the song off, if you see what I mean?"

Bill tried to give him a game face, though he was thinking maybe?

The professor winked again, just at him this time, and assured him, "That's why we're giving you a padded drum this time. Go mad." He turned to the rest of the students, who had shuffled into a semicircle in the middle of the room—some more confidently than others. "Now, remember, even if you hear Mr. Weasley, this is his first time and he's just experimenting for the moment. Don't let him distract you. Watch my wand for the beat, just like always. And one and two and one-two-three…!"

Chapter End Notes

Next: Lily looks forward to fewer diapers, takes a lesson in Hufflepuffery which she does not want to put into practice, and makes a discovery.

(Unless another chapter plots up that should come before that.)
September 4: Owlsview Lodge, Barnes

Chapter Summary

In which Lily visits a friend, faces her questions, and makes a discovery.

Chapter Notes

**Warnings**: cultural/religious ignorance, difficult marital situations, far too many diapers, a sad lack of the proper spirit of experimentation, and the Hufflepuff’s dilemma.

**Notes**: It should possibly be pointed out here that Lily is the child of a housewife* and doesn't have a whole lot of work experience herself. Her expectations for what a reasonable workplace would offer a full-time employee by way of benefits are not well-researched.

*I'm extrapolating this from the fact that Petunia, with her emphasis on normality, appears entirely unconflicted about being a housewife herself. As far as I can tell, while she is proud of her husband's job, she doesn't feel privileged because her household can thrive on a single income, she just thinks housewifery is the job a married woman with children would normally have. I feel like if she felt privileged she'd brag about it instead of treating her role like an unchallenged assumption. Obviously other interpretations are possible (frex: she believes that to be seen as high-class, high-status woman she should behave as though the idea of working has never occurred to her), but that's how she reads to me. So I don't think she grew up with a mother who was employed-with-children. v0v

“I didn’t expect Rosier would stir himself, but I thought Black might come,” Frank said, watching the babies crawl ineffectually around on the rug. “Mrs. Malfoy, I mean. You two got along, didn’t you?”

“She showed up for the funeral, actually,” Ben said, his eyes glued to his nephew in glassy, overwhelmed bafflement. They’d just said goodbye to the other Ravenclaw prefect from their year, and Frank’s old partner from Hufflepuff had apparently come in the morning to help set up before work. Lily had also rather thought Sev might put in an appearance, but he hadn’t been one of them (or, obviously, a Ravenclaw, no matter how much Lily wished he had been, and everyone else here seemed to be from the Prophet) and also tended to assume he wasn’t wanted and would only make things worse. “I’ve no idea how she knew about it. Said she was just passing, as if there was some conceivable reason for her to be in Barnes.”

“I hope she behaved herself,” Lily said darkly.

“I…” Ben hesitated, and finally shrugged. “She made a nasty remark about how Sarah probably accidentally killed them both thinking just because she’s a muggle healer—was a muggle healer—she could handle potions, too. As if anyone could mix up bloodroot potion and aspirin. As if Dev had any reason to keep bloodroot in the house!”
Frank’s whole brow wrinkled up, grieved, and Lily made a vehement but, all things considered, overly polite remark about Narcissa Malfoy’s sense of occasion and overall character. She hadn’t been too horrible the last time Lily had seen her, but making an effort for Sev’s sake didn’t mean she was likely to act like a decent person in any other area.

“That’s what I thought,” Ben said, still frowning down at the babies. “But after she shook my hand there was something in my sleeve, and when I unshrunk it…” He gestured in bewilderment at the box on the table.

Lily went and peeked, carefully. Nothing jumped out and bit her, but she could see why Ben was so confused about it. A soft and not remotely frilly blue bib with a happy yellow-green frog on it was not something she would have expected Narcissa Black to think of. Or whose existence she would have expected Narcissa Black to acknowledge. On the other hand, it was absolutely something Narcissa might receive, smile gracious thanks for, and then give away as soon as possible. “What’s the music ball?” she asked.

“I’m not really sure?” Ben seemed to be hoping she could tell him. “It’s twinkly baby music, only it’s like there’s a heartbeat under there? Or maybe, er, waves or something? I can’t really tell… Mum thought it was a cat purring, and Dad thought it was waves. And, I mean, why would we need that many self-cleaning nappies?”

“You will,” Lily and Frank assured him together. Frank went on, “How’s Becca taking it?”

“She… I don’t know. She had to go back to Seattle. She says they reassigned about twelve journalists really suddenly to something to do with the Emirates this year and dumped her head-first into a hurricane recovery story. They let her come for the funeral, but she barely even got to sit shiva with us.”

Again as one, Lily and Frank glanced towards the hall where the Goldsteins and Cohens were sitting in black, surrounded by food, talking quietly to older relatives and Prophet people, their fragile shoulders and grey, strained faces making them look dwarfed by their guests and the food. “Are the Cohens upset he’s staying with you?”

She got down on the floor to pick up Harry, who was waving his arms at her. He didn’t particularly look as if he wanted to be picked up, she had to admit—and, indeed, he instantly started flailing to be put back down amongst the new people his own size who were more interesting than Mummy—but she had to pick him up. It was like a superstition: if she wasn’t holding him when she talked about babies being sent away, she’d lose him. Sirius and Tuney would both have looked at her like she was mental, and Sev would have laughed at her—though James would have just grabbed desperately for his camera.

“A bit,” Ben admitted. “But they know he’s been sort of attracting bottles from the kitchen—mostly he just screams because they’re empty, but Dev said last month he nearly burned himself. Who knows what it’ll be next? They’re just… they don’t know what to do with a magical baby.”

“Who does,” Lily sighed, pitying her own parents. And maybe Mr. Snape a little, though God knew he didn’t deserve sympathy. It might be a hard test, but you didn’t have to fail it that badly.

“Has Harry started doing accidental magic already?” Frank asked. “I don’t know what we’ll do if Nev starts before he’s out of nappies!”

“I meant Sirius,” she said dryly.

Frank laughed and Ben nearly smiled, so Lily told them about this morning. “Poor Tigger was still
hiding in the linen cupboard when I left,” she finished up, sighing. It was one thing to wash a towel—getting cat hair off it was quite another matter. Even an evanesco didn’t completely work. Probably because the cat had left the hair in a deliberate attempt to tell everyone to whom the towel now belonged. “I’m sure armadillos aren’t meant to look like that—I mean, I’m quite sure they don’t normally have orange racing stripes, for one thing—and now we don’t have a high chair at all.”

“I’m sure Potter will fix it by the time you get back,” Ben said, looking more as if he thought it was expected to say so than likely to be true.

“Ha,” Lily opined. She was sure it would be different by the time she got back, but as to whether or not it would be a high chair again… or even contained enough that she could fix it without too much trouble...

She frowned down at where Harry and Neville were batting at stuffed toys and Anthony was just sort of squinting at the ceiling with a vaguely discontented look. “Ben, can I hold him?”

“Sure.” Ben picked his nephew up with the awkward but no longer exactly ginger air of someone just starting to get over the existential fear of dropping a baby. “Be good for Miss Lily, Annie.”

“Not ‘Tony?’” Frank asked while Lily was cuddling Anthony and chattering to get him comfortable enough with her that she wouldn’t scare him by taking his nappy off.

“He made an ‘an an’ noise a few times and Dev says…” Ben’s mouth went wobbly for a second before tightening. “They decided to go along with it. Help him get used to the idea of noises meaning something.”

“She must have been a really good mum,” Lily said, since Devorah Goldstein had been a Ravenclaw so many years ahead of them that she’d never actually met the woman. She bounced Anthony gently with her free arm while casting one of the domestic spells James’s mum had taught her. The nappy-changing supplies flew out of her bag (she didn’t trust Black an inch, and suspecting Black liked it that way did not make her feel better) and arranged themselves on the coffee table. “Ben, do you know how to do this yet?”

Marlene came in while she was showing him. She said, “Ey-up, Lily, thought I heard your voice, got Goldstein back there? Give us a—”

Lily and Ben looked up from where Frank was showing them his aunt’s way to secure a clean nappy, which he swore was easier to undo in a hurry. Marlene had on some very sharp robes that started as a brownish-black at her collar and greyed out, as far away from her auburn curls as humanly possible, into a pretty lavender. Her nails and eyeshadow were a blush colour dusted with gold, picking up the lighter shades in her hazel eyes. She was making a spectacular face.

“You look nice,” Frank said politely.

“I have a… a meeting,” she explained. “But I saw in the paper and I wanted to stop by and bring your parents something. Er, but I think I won’t hug you till you’ve washed your hands, Goldstein.”

“It could be worse,” Lily said philosophically. “Harry thinks nappy-changing time is target practice.”

“Nev thinks it’s Very Exciting Let’s Pretend We’re A Horsie Galloping Upside Down time,” Frank agreed. “Anthony’s an astoundingly well-behaved young man. Hardly anything went where it shouldn’t at all.”
“Mum gave him a drop of calming potion in his formula,” Ben said, examining the ingredients on Lily’s hand wipes, apparently as a way not to meet anyone’s eyes. “He wouldn’t stop screaming for anyone.”

“Okay,” Marlene said after a moment. “Hands out to the sides, Goldstein.” When he, baffled, obeyed, she carefully moved in for a hug. “No, don’t touch me,” she cautioned, backing away when he awkwardly tried to return it. “I can’t go smelling like—” She glanced down at the babies. “Poo.”

“Date?”

“Er… well, it probably won’t come to anything.”

Ben caught Lily’s eye and mouthed Job interview. Lily assumed it made him feel more in control of things, thinking he knew. But maybe that was just Sev and Ben was just sharing information for the sake of it.

“Well, good luck,” Lily said. “But do you have to rush off? I feel like I haven’t seen you for months.”

“Well, leave the kid with James and come and have a drink sometime,” she proposed, backing away with wary eyes fixed on the tiny drooling people crawling around on the floor. “There’s got to be some benefit to a husband that came with attachments, and if it’s not babysitting what is it? I’m sure Mary misses you, too.”

“Oh, I’m sure,” Lily agreed drolly. “Tell her to go hunt up Sirius, will you? He’s practically sleeping in our sitting room. It’s driving me mad.”

“Noooo,” Marlene said thoughtfully, “I think I will not shove us all down that particular roller-coaster again, thank you kindly. Ben,” she fished something out of her tiny purple purse while Frank whispered what’s a roll accoster and Lily shook her head in a later sort of way. A second later the tiny thing had taken on its proper size and shown itself to be a steaming casserole dish. “This is for you and your parents. Don’t ask them if they’re hungry, just put the food in front of them, all right? I’ll drop by this evening and help you tidy up. Make sure you eat something yourself.”

“I don’t understand how anyone can hate babies,” Frank remarked, shaking his head after her rapid retreat.

“They are quite messy,” Lily admitted, settling a cleaner and less disgruntled-looking Anthony back down on the rug and picking up Neville instead. “Is it the potion making him drool like that?”

“I have no idea,” Ben shrugged, staring down hopelessly.

“How did you know it’s a job interview?” Lily asked, in an effort to distract him from his late sister’s legacy.

“Oh, I’d already heard about it at work,” he said, looking up distractedly. “I didn’t know it was today, but that manicure looks new. I don’t think she’ll get it. They ask you to write about something from History of Magic like it happened yesterday to prove you can write an exciting article, and, er, she’s asked me to correct a couple of her essays. And when she wants to know something she just badgers you about it. Er… no offence, Frank.”

“That sounds like Skeeter,” Lily said drolly. “Last I heard the Prophet was happy with her.”
“She’s… I don’t know, it’s not the same. She is pushy, but… it’s hard to describe? Except that she’s \textit{good} at it. They might offer McKinnon something else, though. There’ll be some shifting-about, what with being down a copy-editor.”

He looked down again.

Lily gave Frank a meaningful do-something look, since her hands were full. Frank visibly panicked, then went to scoop Anthony up and shoved him right in Ben’s face. “You’ll want to make friends with him while he’s calm,” he advised. “Then he’ll, I mean, \textit{babies}, but he’ll sort-of-remember being calm when he’s around you; it might help.”

“Tell him about his mums,” Lily suggested. “Isn’t that what a wake is for?”

“It’s not exactly a wake,” Ben sighed, but he settled Anthony gingerly on his lap and started telling a story about Devorah setting her braids on fire during a game that seemed to involve spinning a top. Lily, remembering some extremely vigorous games with friends in Liverpool, couldn’t imagine why their mum had let them play tops so close to a lit candle while there was a puppy around that hadn’t learned \textit{sit} and \textit{stay} yet, or why she’d encouraged them to play for gold when they were young enough for her oldest to wear her hair in braids.

Then again, Sirius had been making ominous noises about getting Harry a kiddie broom for \textit{Halloween}, not even Christmas, and she wasn’t sure how long she’d be able to stop him. Maybe it wasn’t Mrs. Goldstein’s fault.

The room filled up with relatives once Ben started telling stories. Enough of them wanted to hold Anthony that Ben mostly stopped looking as if he needed to go back and find a time-turner to stop himself becoming a prefect before everyone decided he was a responsible young man who should be expected to look after a baby for the rest of his life with no warning.

“It’ll be all right,” Lily whispered in his ear, hugging him goodbye. “I mean, it’ll get better. And it’s not as if you’re expected to do it all yourself, is it?”

“No,” Ben sighed, “but they’re devastated, how can I ask them—”

“So are you,” she said firmly, “and maybe having Annie to look after will help. You’re going to be \textit{amazed} at how much time you don’t have to think about anything else when there’s a baby. Do you want me to make sure Remus knows? I think he’s been avoiding the news, but I’m sure he’d love to see you. And he’s good with Harry, so…?”

Ben nodded silently, and then his dad called him over to take a giant probably-meat pie from someone who didn’t look related to them. Lily took a moment to be grateful for stasis spells: muggles receiving this much food all at once would have had to buy an extra refrigerator.

“Have you seen Remus lately?” Frank asked as they walked away. Neither of them seemed to quite feel like going home, though if Frank had any idea where they were going, Lily certainly didn’t.

“I think he’s avoiding us,” Lily admitted. “Or rather, I think he’s avoiding Sirius, who seems to be avoiding him by being at my house all the time.”

Frank rolled his eyes. “You’d think Gryffindors would just have a fight if they need to have it.”

“Well, it’s different if it’s someone you care about, isn’t it?” Lily objected, feeling obscurely nettled. Not all that obscurely, actually, even if Frank hadn’t meant it personally.
“That just makes it easier, doesn’t it?” Frank eyed her warily, seeming aware that he’d stepped in it. “When you can trust them to still care about you when you’re done? —Lily?”

Lily realized she’d stopped walking. Vaguely, she asked, “What if he wants a bottle?”

“What? —Oh.” Frank looked over his shoulder at Neville. Where Harry was sleeping curled up against Lily’s shoulder in his sling, Neville was back to back with Frank, hands stuffed stickily over his dummy, which was attached to his wrist with a pretty lace ribbon Lily wouldn’t have condemned to death by infant. “I don’t mind stopping if we have to. It’s not like I could feed him that much more easily if he were in front. Besides, I like giving him something to look at. What’s the matter?”

“I fought with my sister for years and she didn’t invite me to her wedding,” Lily said distantly. The houses on this street were red brick with sandy-yellow details and mostly-white fences, and some of them had lions on pedestals on top. She didn’t want to have this conversation at all, but it felt like the bricks were encouraging her. And Frank was okay. He wouldn’t judge her like someone in her own House would—certainly not in that snide way Rosier did—and he wouldn’t even tell Alice if she asked him not to. “She sent me a picture of her baby, but she didn’t invite me to come, and she didn’t want to meet Harry.”

“Family’s tricky,” Frank allowed, looking warily at her.

“I fought with Sev for years and then…” She lifted a hand weakly, and settled it on Harry’s back.

“I mean,” Frank said carefully, “there is a difference between having a fight personally and actually being on opposite sides.”

“I fought with James for years,” she said fiercely, “and we stopped because he lied to me. For years.”

“I was just talking about Remus and the oik,” Frank addressed a handsome red-brick chimney despairingly, and started walking again.

“Well, how do you and Alice fight?” she demanded.

“Er… mostly I let her shout until she’s done, and then I say, as it might be, ‘so what you’re saying is I should be the one to get up and feed Nev every night because you went back to work,’ and then she shouts some more about how she needs to be alert when she’s at work and I point out that she also wants Nev to know she’s his mum and it’s not as if I get to nap all day; they only agreed to let me stay home if I use the time to study up for a field-cursebreaking speciality, and you can imagine how well that’s going with Mr. Fuss needing something every five minutes.” He reached behind himself and, with a little groping, wiggled Neville’s big toe, earning himself a high-pitched excited BA-EEEEEE! noise.

“I can imagine,” she agreed. “At least James can invent hideous, terrifying toys at home. But that’s a bit, I mean, it’s hardly been a month, Frank! How can they possibly expect either of you to be back at work?”

He shrugged helplessly. “They’re not really prepared for Aurors to have babies to look after when the other partner is an Auror, too, I suppose. Besides, a lot of people wait to have kids until they’ve been working a lot longer, and take a sabbatical, or even wait till they retire. You saw how old Ben’s parents are.”

“I thought they were just sad,” Lily said. “They don’t really look that old, I thought, except for…
you know.” Being utterly crushed by having their daughter murdered, she didn’t want to say.

Frank shook his head. “They’re in their seventies, Lily.”

She gaped.

Frank smiled a nice version of the Muggleborns Don’t Understand Us look Lily had become accustomed to. It usually made her mad, but on Frank you could tell he didn’t think it meant you didn’t belong. “Arent Potter’s parents fairly old, too? Anyway, we didn’t want to wait. I suppose we could have both gone back, really; Mother wouldn’t have minded looking after him. Only I didn’t really… want to do that.”

“Ah,” Lily agreed as they walked in careful, diplomatic silence past a wild area full of greyish, twisty trees. There were more red brick houses on the other side of the street; it was a bit disconcerting.

They park they were approaching had footballers, so Lily turned to the side as if giving Harry some attention and put a notice-me-not on them all. She wouldn’t have worried about being dressed like this in the city proper, but the summer cape over her frock wasn’t muggle-standard, and Frank’s robes were perfectly appropriate for visiting grieving wizards.

“What did you decide?” she asked.

“For now we’re letting Mother take him for a few hours most days so I can have a lie-down,” he admitted. “My Aunt comes sometimes, too, and we’ve left him with Alice’s mum and dad a few times, so we can go out. And Alice is getting up whenever she has the next day off. I think she should do it more, but she does have to be awake at work, after all.”

“That all sounds very reasonable.” She was trying for complimentary, but she knew she just sounded glum.

“We made up a pros-cons list when she was finished shouting,” Frank laughed.

“Pros,” Lily imagined, passing her hand through the air before them as if conjuring. “Doing what Lily wants and leaving Sev for pity’s sake alone would be sane, mature, and would fail to invite him to get revenge, issue an invitation to a duel, or haul me into court, as well as being the right thing to do. Cons: I don’t want to.”

Frank coughed, trying not to laugh. “He’s not still at it, is he?”

“How would I possibly know?” Lily asked, throwing up her hands. Harry, possibly imitating her, wiggled and flailed enthusiastically, so she kissed his head and tried to sound less exasperated. “I thought he stopped after… you know, after our OWLs! And then I hear he’d been playing pranks on him at St. Mungo’s! Around a potions lab! The mediwiches were nice to me, but my goodness did they have a lot to say. Apparently Sev’s lab worked with aconite! Someone could have died if they’d had the wrong kind of accident, Frank! I hear Sev has some sort of job at Hogwarts now, which ought to put an end to it, but if there is one thing about James and Sirius,” she finished darkly, “they are resourceful.”

Frank looked at her helplessly. She reflected that if just hearing that much put that stressed look around his eyes, it was a good job she wasn’t inclined to tell a technically-an-Auror the rest of what Evan Rosier had been so mad about. It was true that she had no way to know for sure about any of it (short of asking James, which she did not feel ready to do), especially since she’d learned that their fellow prefect was secretly much more Slytherin than he’d ever seemed at school. But the
only thing she’d ever seen Rosier get mad about was Sev, and he had been mad, in that sleepy-with-knives-in-way he had. She wanted to think he’d lied, but she couldn’t.

No way was Frank hearing more from her than he could get from chatting to the receptionist at St. Mungo’s. Even the law didn’t ask that of a wife—magical law still didn’t, anyway, at least not for people with last names like Longbottom and Fawley and Potter and Black—and this was her problem, even if she felt a bit overwhelmed and lost with it at the moment. She’d figure out something, eventually, as long as she didn’t surrender it. So there was just no way.

There was a noise, and there was a smell.

They looked at each other, sighed, and turned towards the park in search of a bench. “You’d think,” Frank said, dripping resignation, “someone would have invented a spell to do this with a wand-wave by now.”

“I’d think,” Lily objected, “that if anybody tried anything remotely like a scouring spell near my baby’s bits, I’d take their head off. Or a vanishing spell.”

“An evanesco would be quite gentle,” Frank argued while they both checked their sons. This time, Lily was pleased to see, the smell was not her problem. “It’s sort of bubbly.”

“Yes, but you don’t want that sort of thing turning into vapour,” she pointed out. “Then you’d be breathing it.”

“But it turns into air-vapour,” he argued.

“Are you sure? Because the textbook just said vapour, and yuck.”

“What about enchanting the washcloth?” Frank suggested, grimly setting to it. “I expect people do that.”

“That cooouuuld work,” she allowed, “as long as it was very carefully charmed to have the right pressure. Actually, you’re probably right. Why don’t we know how to do it?”

“Because your mum’s a muggle and so’s Alice’s and my mother hired a nanny?”

She sighed. “I’ll ask James’s mum.”

“Why don’t you ask her about that other thing, too?” he suggested.

She shot him a tragic look. “Hullo, Mrs. Potter, lovely weather, I love your son very much but did you realize that your frankly rather hands-off parenting has resulted in him being so stubborn about being a malicious arse that the last time he had to choose between me and not being a wanker he lied to me for four years, and if he had to choose again I have absolutely no idea what he’d do and also, considering that he got away with lying to me for four years, how do I trust him about anything?”

“...Just speaking personally,” said Frank, very slowly, “I might not put it quite like that.”

“I know,” she agreed, feeling very down even though Neville did indeed, apparently, think nappy-changing time was also Do A Little Dance time and Harry was staring cross-eyed at a squirrel and looking thoroughly stoned. “But the point is, how do I.”

He got Neville situated on his back again, and they kept walking. “You’re not saying you think he’d leave you, are you? He’s completely mad about you, Lily, don’t you know that? It’s been a
pain in everyone’s ar—bum for literally years.”

“I really don’t know what he’d do,” she said stubbornly. They were coming up on a cute, pale-blue sign, rather battered, that said *Thames Water*, and it looked like the road was about to give way to walking trails, or possibly just to marsh-grass. “But I know Sirius would take his side and make him think he was right and I’m hysterical.”

Frank eyed her, as if to say that he would never have used that word but did feel she might be overreacting a bit. “The thing is,” he said slowly, “I understand being upset because you found out he started lying to you when you were courting. Only… people do that, you know? When they’re trying to convince you to put up with them. Show you the part of themselves they think you’ll like the most. It’s sort of… normal, you realize.”

She looked at him while the pavement petered out into sandy-red dirt beneath their feet, not sure what he was getting at. Everything around them was getting very green as they walked, and the air was wetter.

“Why is it *such* a problem now?” he asked, looking helpless. “If Snape’s at Hogwarts, like you said, you don’t really expect James to follow him there just to prank him, do you? It’s not like St. Mungo’s—I mean: Scotland. And even if you can apparate up to the gates, the piggwigs don’t just let graduated wizards in for no reason, and then there’s miles of grounds to get to the castle if you come in from the station, what with the Squid guarding the lake. Hardly worth it, is it?”

“I don’t know,” she explained patiently. “He’s clearly got this… hang-up.”

Very cautiously, Frank asked, “You haven’t been trying to make friends with Snape again, have you?”

Lily tried not to freeze guiltily. She blinked at him, furrowing her brow (not too much, she hoped), and asked, “Why would I?”

“Well, I can’t see why you would, after all that,” he agreed, also frowning—not as if he hated Snape (which made her feel a bit like tearing up, though she couldn’t have said why), but as if Lily was a puzzle and he couldn’t find the edge pieces. “You said he was choosing the dark arts and you couldn’t be part of that. So unless something’s seriously changed…”

She gave him a little how-would-I-know shrug, and felt rather ashamed about it. Lying to Frank felt like kicking a puppy, even if he had gone and joined up as a copper. Which, of course, made it worse. Her dad would absolutely do his nut if he found out she’d lied to a policeman, even one who was a friend.

“Right,” Frank nodded, sagely and sympathetically. “It’s just, you realize, most of the reason he couldn’t leave him alone when we were kids is that he was more important to you than he was.” He paused, and clarified, “Than James was. Snape was more important to you. So unless he started thinking that again—I mean, thinking Snape’s important to you—I can’t see why he’d still care about him now they’re not stuffed into classes together and seeing each other every day.”

“It’s not *about* that!” Lily said and realized she’d shouted when Harry started to fuss. She bounced him, in a panic lest he start to shout too, and lowered her voice, although she still sounded inappropriately vehement even to herself. It hadn’t even been on purpose to distract Frank from asking if she’d seen Sev lately, which was probably just as well. “I mean—it’s not actually about Severus at all, Frank! It’s about *James*. Because it’s *wrong*! It was always *wrong* of him, wasn’t it?” she appealed.
“The whole thing made me glad my lot were sensible enough to stay out of it,” Frank hedged, clearly unwilling to either disagree with her or to say something unkind about a man to his wife.

“And I thought he’d grown up and come to understand it was wrong,” she said furiously, “and all he understood was that I didn’t want to see him do it. So who did I marry, Frank? I never would have started going out with him in the first place if I hadn’t thought he’d stopped being such a spiteful, vicious, stupid twat!”

“A stupid what?” Frank asked, looking lost.

She sighed, deflating, and cuddled Harry, who was trying valiantly to reach a tree branch or something, and not interested in his mummy. “It’s just something they used to say where I’m from,” she muttered, torn between resenting all wizards everywhere or just resenting Alice for having the good sense to fall for people who were actually completely lovely.

Unlike Lily. Lily’s taste was uniformly horrible. Everyone she really liked was, when you got right down to it, just plain mean. She didn’t know whether to blame Petunia for making meanness seem so normal a family would be dull and stiff and dishonest without it, or Sev for making it comforting and invitingly mysterious and friendly.

Why couldn’t she have gone for someone like Remus? Remus wasn’t mean, though he could be a bit pathetic at times, and he was tall and had pretty eyes. She was fairly sure he liked girls, at least a bit. At least when Sirius didn’t have his head all twisted around. “Never mind.”

“Er.” Frank had a funny look, as if he couldn’t quite believe what was about to come out of his mouth. “You weren’t… were you thinking of leaving him?”

“I couldn’t think about that if I wanted to,” she said angrily. “I have a baby. I just want the James I married—or meant to marry. Not that complete knobwalloper from fifth year.”

“...Anthony Goldstein’s going to grow up with his grandparents,” Frank said, looking at Harry with a troubled mouth.

“I thought Ben was mostly taking him. I mean, he was acting a if he’d just got slapped with a life sentence and a wet fish. He said he couldn’t ask his parents to do it.”

“Well, he is Anthony’s godfather, but he’s just in shock, I think. No one expects him to suddenly be a dad.”

“I thought that was what godfathers did. Godfathers provide a home and a family for orphans and godmothers get their revenge for them and make sure they’re safe. That’s what Sirius said. Although I admit it sounded a bit odd to me.”

“No, no, he’s right, but if you’ve still got your grandparents it’s not the same thing, is it? As long as they’re not doddering, anyway.”

“Isn’t it?”

“No. There’s a reason we have Heads of Houses—in families, I mean, I don’t mean like at school. Besides, it’s better for people to have their grandkids to focus on if their kids have died, most of the time.”

“That’s what I told Ben.”

Frank nodded. “Don’t worry about him. You know him; he just assumes things are his job.” Lily
did know this. She’d always thought it was why Ben and Sev got along, although Remus had insisted it was because they both liked arguing about magical theory at volumes that would have shattered less Raven-y eardrums. “My point is, people do it.”

“I suppose I’d have to if it’d be best for Harry,” Lily said dismissively, an ugly, selfish corner of herself snarling at the thought of Tuney’s smugness if her marriage collapsed. She should be thinking about whether her parents, at their unmagical ages, could handle it if she did have to go to them, but it seemed absurd. This was just a fight they were working out how to have—a rough patch. She’d seen what it looked like when a family needed to be broken up for a child’s sake, and while she’d do anything to stop Harry growing up as Sev had, that wasn’t the problem she was faced with. “James adores him. This is between the two of us—or the three of us if you want to count Severus, but it’s probably best not to, considering.”

“I suppose,” Frank said, not so much agreeing as declaring that he wanted no part of this. “It’s funny, really… you both thinking Snape’s more important to the other one than you are.”

They’d come upon a pond—or a lake, really. Lily sighed and cast a bug-repellant charm on all four of them so they could sit down. “Funny,” she agreed glumly, settling Harry down on her lap, and picked up a rock to skip. It didn’t go well, between the baby in her lap muddying her angle and the rock not being particularly flat.

“Well, I suppose not.” Frank bent down and tried to skip a few of his own, but he clearly didn’t know how. No Sev to teach him, Lily supposed, thinking back to a filthy river in a surge of morose nostalgia.

After a quick lesson and a few sad tries, Frank looked around for muggles and, seeing none, hitched Neville onto his front to look at the lake and started making the rocks and leaves do little dances over the water. Lily started smiling after two sticks made a spirited attempt at what might have been an attempt at a waltz, and started pulling up sparkling globes of water, some with indignant fish in, to do their own dances.

Eventually, Harry and Neville both noticed that there were motion and colour-changing sparkly things to stare at. Lily and Frank grinned at each other and started competing to the sound of incoherent, excited crowing.

They might have kept at it all afternoon, if one of Lily’s fish hadn’t turned out to be a not-very-badly decomposing human hand. Which tried to punch its way out of the bubble with no arm to help it.

At any other moment, Lily would have been charmed on Alice’s behalf to find out that Frank’s patronus was a sabre-toothed tiger. Now she was too busy to even really notice he’d cast one, what with lunging up with one hand too tight around Harry, grabbing Frank’s wrist hard enough to bruise, and twist-stepping them all home.

Sirius and James were inclined to complain at her about Frank stumbling and landing on his arse on top of what looked like the shattered orange remains of a spun sugar bird all over the carpet, until they saw her expression. At which point Jamie’s stupid face overflowed so quickly with love and worry that Lily, bloody uselessly, burst into tears louder than poor jarred Neville’s.

“What’s the matter?” James demanded, jumping up to hug her and Harry.

“I love you,” she sobbed furiously, turning her face into his neck, feeling her traitorous back relax at the strength of his arms around her, “and you’re such a bastard!”
“Personally,” said Frank after a long moment of James and Sirius being silently confused, with the addition of amused indignation on Sirius’s part and panic on Jamie’s, “I was more worried about the fresh inferius in the reservoir. But I suppose all we need to solve that one is fire.”
September 4: Rose & Yew

Chapter Summary

We encounter a kaleidoscopically fucked-up version of indulgent grandparenting and the most impulsive snake risks everything.
(He thinks that's what we're encountering. No doubt it is. Then again, he also thinks he planned this out appropriately.)

Chapter Notes

**Warnings:** You may feel sorry for a man you have never met and do not particularly like.

Or that could just be me.

**Notes:** I asked plutoplex to be hyper-alert for continuity errors while beta-ing this chapter, and she remembered a conflicting sentence which I vaguely remembered writing but couldn't place at all. After I failed to find it, she found it in the DVD extras. I, having completely forgotten those even existed, was so impressed with her memory and research that I asked if she wanted to mini-prompt. In the spirit of the extras, she asked who from history Evan would like to invite to dinner (concerns about Spike freaking out about temporal physics based on his very intermittent viewing of Dr. Who, those 5 TOS episodes, and maybe some Asimov aside). Evan's reply is in the endnotes, and I would just like to formally state for future reference that the obscure plotting not explained in this chapter was planned out before this came up.

You guys should always feel free to ask the characters cracky questions! It's about the only kind of prompt they always show up for...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

An unimpressed and very bushy white eyebrow went up. Evan hoped his own wouldn’t look quite so caterpillar-like in a hundred years. Although he supposed that if he lived to be that old he’d have no cause to complain about things like eyebrows. Or if he did, Spike would do something about it. “And what is this my own grandson has just cast on me, chief of the firm that employs him so that he need not be a parasite and a blight on society, in my own office?”

“Sort of a political shield,” Evan explained cheerfully.

“A blank tablet holds nothing,” Grandpère threatened him with a twinkly-eyed smile that must, Evan supposed, have once netted him a lot of unobservant girls, or maybe daring ones. The sort who’d react to a fatal diagnosis by going out to imperius her own son to ensure there was an heir on the way, quite possibly. “A tablet of diamond will never hold anything.”

“You can cut diamonds with other diamonds, you know, and adamant isn’t actually—”
“Is Grandpère your enemy, Euander?”

“I hope that, if you were, I wouldn’t have been stupid enough to cast an unknown spell on you to your face and then ask you for advice,” he replied, careful not to let his cheer drop even a little. It was just like Grandpère to use his ruddy name to accuse him of being an unfilial terrible person.

But maybe he hadn’t been spending enough time around ordinary, boring wizards. He supposed that not everyone saw the taking of outrageous liberties as a show of trust and confidence. Or maybe that was a between-partners-only thing. Maybe if he asked Evans whether it was he’d light a fire under that fight she didn’t seem to be able to start on her own.

“I just thought we might like to decide together what you’re going to remember about this conversation, and Snape has some concerns about Obliviate. It’s a quite clever little spell of his.”

Grandpère’s dangerous twinkles went flat. “You think everything that scallion does is clever, Grandson.”

“It usually is, you know, except for when he’s being deliberately bone-headed out of obstinacy,” Ev pointed out. Later on he’d have to share ‘scallion’ so he could see Spike turn over its every implication, watch his temples flex and his mouth purse and quirk as he decided whether to be offended or smug.

Someone else might just be amused by old-people-speak, but Evan could already see Spike puffing up indignantly over the scullion and vegetable suggestions, smirking over the idea that he was long and green and biting, and fretting himself into knots over whether the implication that he was a rapscallion was insulting or weirdly appealing in a roguish sort of way.

Ev was so glad Severus belonged to his generation instead of Grandpère’s. Being jealous of the Evans creature was mortifying enough. Ev had compared him to the complexities of wine when they were sixteen, but he hadn’t come up with anything as good since, and he’d been so keen to make sure Spike would be excited to see him (i.e.: reassure Spike that being propositioned by muggle museum workers hadn’t changed Evan’s feelings) that he hadn’t saved it for when he could watch the embarrassed and horrified pleasure flush his thin face. And, of course, Spike just looked at him as if he was making a bad joke for no discernible reason when he begged to watch it in the pensieve. If he’d just waited twenty minutes...

“But I mostly didn’t come about him.”

“I suppose ‘mostly’ is the best one may hope for.”

Grandpère liked to pour tea with his own big, flat-fingered hands. Evan thought the teapot’s combination of bone china and gold leaf was overkill for a family visit. Spike would have called it poncy and felt deeply conflicted about coveting it madly for his collection.

Ev himself was never quite sure how he felt about the darkened handle and spout. They made the kettle more handsome and comfortable than fussy, but also made it look as if it had come from an abandoned doxy nest in some dusty old storeroom from Reggie’s house.

Which might have been funny if Grimmauld wasn’t a house Reggie had to live in. It was a handsome old place and well-appointed, and Ev had always been happy as a kid to get out of his own echoing halls and holiday with any of his cousins. But he’d never been completely happy about it.

There was usually Bella whatever you did, and Sirius fighting with her and his mother and taking it out on Reggie, which had been initially bewildering and eternally exhausting, and the looks Evan got when he got fed up with it, and now nobody actually talked to him about whether he’d done the
right thing or not, and Evan had generally been quite relieved to go back home and be alone with Linkin.

On top of that, when he’d stayed with Reggie and Sirius, he felt just a tiny bit irrationally tired and cranky and scared (not worried) from the moment he stepped over the threshold. His cousins didn’t seem to notice, and had laughed at Evan for asking if there was a yew grove in the basement, but Ev knew he was right about this; Severus would only go there when Reggie really needed him to, or when there was a dinner party and Ev had to dare him into it for the sake of his own visibility and status. The first time he’d come to visit he’d put one foot on the stoop, jumped backwards like a scalded manticore (to the confusion of the surrounding muggles, who stared at both his weird stick and, once they’d noticed him, his sleeves), and insisted Sirius was lying in wait for him.

Which just upset everybody since Siri had already cut himself off and gone to live with Potter. But where Narcissa and Reggie had thought Spike was losing his nerve for visiting a grand house at the last minute and been annoyed with him, Ev had been able to say I know what you mean, it’s all right, the house always feels like that. Saying it out loud had gotten him some perfectly lovely tangible appreciation later that evening, too, back at the cottage they’d been renting, which memory now allowed Evan to meet that crawling feeling with a certain smugness.

But it really wasn’t Grimmauld’s fault, Evan supposed. You couldn’t blame a house because its owners had, centuries since, decided to be an outpost keeping an eye on people they feared and hated and inevitably made themselves miserable. Besides, you got at least a touch of that in most of the old houses.

For quite a lot of history, wizards had lived in the certain knowledge that the law was mostly interested in how they dealt with muggles. Keeping public wizarding spaces safe to walk and shop in had also been a more minor concern, but they’d really been too weak to even try to deal with internal wrongs and vengeances and power struggles. This had changed in the 1840s, under Minister Milliphutt, and everyone was still adjusting. Up to that point every family had done more or less exactly what it wanted, to the extent other families let them get away with it.

The Blacks had been extremely good at this game and might have been the angriest about having to answer to anybody again, even nominally. Which probably explained how sulky Evan’s magically brilliant (read: sensitive) friend got about going into the walls that had breathed their pride and anger and curses for so long. It wasn’t just them by a long shot, though. Evan had to take precautions whenever he visited anyone from an old family, related to him or not, Slytherin or not, whether he was there as a social duty or on business.

For example, Grandpère liked to put truth potion in the tea, which was easier to do if you poured it yourself. Never such a blunt instrument as veritaserum, but enough to make cautious politicians babble about their lovers so indiscreetly as to give a painter a fairly good idea about what sly hints to work into the props. Certainly enough to make cautious Rosiers babble indiscriminately about all the ways they’d been stupid that they were stupidly hoping their parents didn’t find out about.

Not that anyone had ever bothered to tell Evan this. He wondered whether it was common knowledge, but of course to ask would be to accuse Grandpère of doing it. Besides, it might not be; the potion had always had a quite mild effect on the occasions Ev hadn’t felt he needed to bother avoiding it. It was possible his relatives just thought they got unnerved by their patriarch’s attitude of fragile stateliness and his intricate facial hair.

No one had needed to tell Ev. If after living with Severus for ten years you couldn’t tell the difference between tea-with-lemon and tea-with-lemon-essence-and-jobberknoll-down, there was
just no hope.

That was why Evan touched his sheathed wand and did a discreet switching spell on their teacups while Grandpère was talking about not being distracted from the fact that Evan had (in Grandpère’s opinion) quite possibly cursed him. There was always the possibility Grandpère might have anticipated this and dosed his own cup, but if so the smell was too subtle for Evan, even in a Ceylon blend, and it really was quite hard to tell if there was unnatural curling when the ceiling’s sky-charm wasn’t running on normal time and the clouds were moving so fast they roiled. There were a number of reasons to admire that effect (rarity and magical expertise being the most obvious, and it was also a lovely, hypnotic way to rest the eyes), but the way it interfered with the reflections in tea had probably not been very low on the list of Grandpère’s reasons.

Evan wasn’t inclined to be forced to say more than he meant to on this occasion, but he also didn’t think he could get the alliance he needed without making a solid effort to show willing. So he explained about the memory charm and got a scolding for ‘distracting me into ruining my tea with cream I did not want.’

Waiting patiently while Grandpère disposed of the dosed cup, he nibbled on some excellent almond biscuits (happily and crisply devoid of soft bits that might contain unbaked potion) instead of the lemon wafers, wondering whether the subtle note of well done buried in the scolding had been his imagination. He hadn’t had his name Etymologycally Emphasized at him again, anyway, which was a good sign—although Grandpère was as likely to do that just because he liked the way it sounded in his mouth as to Make A Point.

Even if he hadn’t really scored any points, though, it was a bit nice to be tested and stymied like this, in a possibly-odd way that Spike wouldn’t really understand but Ev’s cousins would. While netting a conversational partner’s train of thought was always useful, it was also good to see that one’s aged relations hadn’t gone soft or senile. Ev hadn’t seen Uncle Orion in months, but that impression always lingered distressingly and Reggie had implied that not much had changed.

Fortunately, Grandpère, whether pleased with him or genuinely annoyed had too much dignity than to engage in a tug of war—not so soon after his opening sally, at least. So they got to enjoy a nice, delicate blend while negotiating about whether Grandpère or Evan would get to decide which things Grandpère would get to remember.

By the time they had solemnly agreed that Grandpère would take notes on the bits he thought he ought to remember (as if Evan wasn’t going to disappear any that troubled him (as if Grandpère wasn’t going to use the paper that automatically sent a copy into his safe (as if Evan wasn’t going to switch the paper out if necessary (et cetera))) most of the safe biscuits were gone but Evan was reasonably sure the rest of the tea was safe.

“Well,” Ev finally got to reply to the question of what he wanted advice about, shooting his grandfather sad limpid eyes in proportionate revenge for the fifteen minutes of his life he’d lost to negotiations on which they were both planning to cheat. “It’s been so long since we’ve had a chance to talk, Grandpère. Things have been piling up rather.”

“But it has to do with your dreadful friend,” Grandpère posited, trying for stern contempt but mostly managing the slightly horrified gloom so many of Ev’s relatives became inexplicably blighted with when dwelling on the inescapable fact that Evan’s taste in companions was not going to suddenly become as sad and pedestrian as theirs was and he had no intention of ceasing to be selfish despite all their caring, wise advice.

“Actually, I thought I’d start with Dad’s dreadful friend,” Ev said cheerfully, ‘accidentally’ grabbing a lemon biscuit roughly enough to crumble it at the corners and then sniffing ‘sheepishly’
at the filling on his fingers to see if it had been dosed. It hadn’t—which didn’t mean they’d all be safe, and he wouldn’t be able to do this test again without looking clumsy in several ways at once. At least he could have one.

“Young Malfoi’s been circling hermitdom for years,” Grandpère frowned. “I understood his son was handling his affairs.”

“Is that his only dreadful friend?”

Grandpère looked into Evan’s clear, innocent eyes for a long moment, lips pursed. “I shall blame this attack of egregious tactlessness on your appalling half-blood. Whose presence in my life had led me to believe you were unconcerned about that sort of thing.”

“You shall blame it on my appalling cobra,” Evan corrected, instead of pointing out that Grandpère had been awfully quick off the mark to insult Lucius’s (well beyond dreadful) dad while complaining about other people’s tact. Even if Grandpère hadn’t gone to Hogwarts himself and might not understand all the connotations, or, say, why a Slytherin who said they were wearing a neckband instead of a tie or scarf was either making a threat or screaming for help, he certainly had enough Slytherin family and employees to know what cobraosity was. Evan certainly remembered when Tancreda Burke had come back from painting Rufus Scrimgeour and ranted about it to everyone she met for a week and a half. Spike had enjoyed hearing about that.

“Unconcerned about what sort of thing?”

Then they looked at each other for a while until Ev realized Grandpère had meant to confirm his suspicions about Voldemort’s blood status and, thereby, confirm that he was dreadful. The pause had been far too long, but Evan pretended he’d asked as a rhetorical device anyway. “The sort of thing where the younger sons of very old families may be tortured and humiliated in front of their peers just for getting caught at admittedly horrid things half said peers are in favour of, if not actively doing themselves? I have to say, it does concern me a bit. Call me a fusspot if you like, but there you are.”

Grandpère’s attention had clearly been caught by this, but he also didn’t forget to shoot Evan a you’re-too-old-to-use-words-like-horrid look. Ev was sticking with it, though; it would let him get away with pretending he meant ‘in poor taste’ when actually he meant ‘made me want to vomit and I thought Spike might actually cry.’

After a weighted moment, Grandpère said, “How distressing,” which Evan translated without difficulty into How is it possible that no one has already told me about this.

Because he’d already been called out on being less than tactful, meaning less than subtle, and there really was quite a bit he wanted to get through, he answered the thought rather than the statement. “Well, you know, the family doesn’t want to let it be known their remaining marriageable heir shan’t be able to have heirs of their own, so they don’t want to start conversations that might lead to questions. If you look, though, I think you’ll notice that over the last few weeks someone normally quite sociable has been, well, not very.”

Of course, Bast getting himself ‘sterilized,’ to use Spike’s oddly finicky term, had nothing to do with Voldemort. But that would be impossible for the Lestranges to disprove if they hoped to keep the story confined to the realms of rumour. And they certainly didn’t want to prove their son had been mutilated by someone he’d thought was a muggle, as he himself believed.

Evan had zero problems with letting his grandfather think the Rosier line was threatened. After all, if Voldemort continued down the path they were worried he might, it could be him threatening it, instead of Evan’s quite-possibly-congenital disinterest in children and Spike’s intense, knee-jerk
body-horror at the idea of having any.

Anyway, all that would probably sort itself out over the next forty years or so. One way or another, assuming they survived. Grandpère’s own grandmother had been from a lesser Rosier branch, adopted into heirship for her service against Napoleon and her alarmingly three-dimensional miniatures.

But whole families could and did die out when purebloods went to war: killing only one member of a great House tended to create more problems than it solved, so why stop there? So just because Evan was sort of lying to Grandpère didn’t mean he was being dishonest with him.

“An ungenerous impulse,” Grandpère said neutrally, meaning that anyone with a family member that stupid owed it to the rest of the pureblood community to warn people instead of leaving it up to people’s idiot grandsons to be unpredictably indiscreet, “if understandable.”

“Sure,” Evan smiled meaninglessly, and waited.

“On what subject,” Grandpère asked with the patient weariness of centuries, “is my advice being asked?”

“Well, before we get into that,” Evan sat back in his chair, smiling faintly and hard, “I was wondering: are you a wizard or a witch?”

Grandpère stared at him, wearier yet, and then glanced down at his own chest, which was quite reasonably flat for someone so close to triple digits.

Evan waved a hand. “Oh, I know you’re a man, Grandpère, but I was thinking about how Rose & Yew works and it occurred to me you might be a witch. Like Mum and Aunt Dru are.”

“Euander, I have no idea of the distinction you would draw,” Grandpère said, staring longingly at the teapot, “and I wonder whether it troubles you that anyone so rarely does.”

“Not a bit,” he smiled sleepily, floating the teapot up to refill their cups. “If you have to walk around the house to get to the door, you get to see all the windows.”

Grandpère’s moss-at-twilight eyes sharpened, and he hummed neutrality as he sipped.

“I’ll try it this way, though: who do you think is more sensible, Aunt Dru or Dad? Note,” he added, teasing, “I’m not asking who’s your favourite.”

“My daughter cannot even embroider geometric shapes using a ruler and protractor,” Grandpère answered the question of who was his favourite, eternally grieved by it.

“She has a good eye for shade and the broad strokes of a layout, though,” Evan pointed out before Grandpère could go off again on how there was nothing preventing even a muggle with a bit of chalk from coloring the cloth in advance where the needle ought to so there was no excuse for ragged satin-stitch edges on cloth with a high thread count, no excuse at all, or on how baby Aunt Dru had even smeared her finger-paintings with the side of her hand, and not on purpose. “And other priorities. What do you think of those?”

“Druella always does as she ought.” Grandpère was giving him a look that said his personal curtains were drawn, thank you very much.

“Does Dad?”
“Okay,” Ev smiled. “Let’s take another angle. Suppose you’d discovered an amazing new painting technique that would make your work twelve times as vivid and realistic and never fade. It involved using something the Ministry was calling extremely Dark. I mean capital-D legal-judgment Dark. No one had thought of it before, but if you put out a work using this technique, a lot of experts would figure out what you’d done in no time at all, and then everyone but the technique-fanatics would be utterly horrified and tell the newspapers and the firm would be disgraced, maybe even shut down.”

“This has happened many times,” Grandpère pointed out. “The use of thestral blood serum in the primer was, history tells us, extremely controversial when discovered, but how could we anchor spirits to the canvas without it? Utter poppycock,” he sniffled, looking annoyed at some unknown medieval wizard. “It’s not as if the thestrals even need die. In my opinion, they were only upset because we learned the vein-tapping technique from the Khanate.”

“Probably. Has it happened in your lifetime?” Evan asked, curious.

“There was some argument,” he said with towering and rather prim pride, “about whether the use of a lightbox to project the anchoring array onto a canvas of any size was cheating.”

“But suppose our theoretical technique is as shocking as the primer was at first,” Evan pushed. “More, even. Suppose it used--oh, I don’t know. Suppose you had to use a brush whose handle was the leg-bone of a... a freed house elf? Or something even more repellent. But it really made such a difference that pretending you’d never thought of it was just about unthinkable. Suppose it not only made the art better, it made the paintings impervious to damp, floods, mould, time, fire, smoke, and curses. But you knew for sure that people would know what you’d used, and there just wasn’t any possible substitute. So you have a choice between compromising the Art or risking complete ruin for the firm and the family.”

Ev could see Grandpère was a little stuck on the fascination of how on earth you’d get a freed house elf to sit still to have its leg-bones removed, which he himself felt was not really the point of why that idea was a problem. Since that wasn’t the important point either, he clinked his spoon as he stirred his tea to get Grandpère’s attention back and asked, “What do you think you’d do? Not use the idea? Go for it? Try to change the law?”

“One doesn’t rush into such things,” Grandpère reminded him, all disapproval with giant-white-caterpillar eyebrows and Escheresque sideburns. “The law doesn’t matter, Euander. There are still laws in the Ministry’s scrolls not merely permitting but requiring the presence of a Mudblooded infant at every wizarding birth, that healers may test the newborn for magic and exchange the infants in case of squibs.”

Evan felt his expression hiccup.

“The practice is legally permitted in Cornwall and Ireland, and mandated in Northumbria and the West Country, as I recall,” Grandpère explained. “But these laws have not been cited in two hundred years, and not enforced in five hundred. The law is unchanged: public opinion has left it behind. It remains unchanged because it has been forgotten.”

“Okay,” Ev allowed, “but suppose it was your idea, and you didn’t think you were going to be able to change public opinion within your lifetime. Would you choose to prove you were right, and make your work better and your legacy unforgettable, or would you protect the family and the firm?”
And make sure house-elves don’t, oh, I don’t know, START A COMPLETELY JUSTIFIABLE WAR?! he could hear Spike suggest snidely.

“We do not seek to be unforgettable,” Grandpère said sternly, lacing his fingers together in rebuke. “We ensure that those of our kind never become nothing, whether they are forgotten or not. That is why Rose & Yew is a lasting institution, Euander; we have survived periods where our artists were not so good at the painting as you and I would demand.”

Relaxing, Evan smiled again. Not as a tool or nicety this time, and only a little because of the compliment. “Well, that does make sense,” he said, as though he wouldn’t have closed the memory charm and left his grandfather with a purely vapid and social visit if he’d said anything else. “Say, Grandpère, did you know our family’s had people supporting each side of every war since the Angevin Empire?”

“I think you may be exaggerating slightly, Grandson.” But this wasn’t said from a Severan desire for accuracy for accuracy’s sake. Grandpère was clearly starting to see where he was going with this, and while he didn’t seem actually upset about it (phew), he also clearly wished he’d stayed in bed that morning.

“Still,” he insisted, relentlessly cheerful, “it’s a fine old Desrosiers tradition, wouldn’t you say?”

“This is not your idea.” Grandpère sounded very sure of himself. “You do not have such ideas.”

Evan thought it was tactful of him to use the word ‘such.’ “I’m not sure I’d call a sound long-term tactic stretching back nine hundred years ‘an idea,’ Grandpère.”

“You are coming to me,” Grandpère said with hard eyes, “with the notion that you will betray your father, my son and heir, and wishing that I should do so, too.”

“I am coming to you,” Evan said, dropping the smiles and the playfulness and the loose posture and his biscuit (alas), “with this: Dad has thrown in his lot with someone who’s reacted to a failure to become a viable candidate for Minister for Magic by diving into the sort of black magic that leaves its practitioners selfish, unpredictable, and uninterested in anything but power for its own sake and using more black magic. Dad and Mr. Malfoy have been spreading a curse amongst the Muggles that would get us, as a people, absolutely annihilated if their Prime Minister managed to trace it back to us. It’s an act of war and that’s what they’d call it. Their leaders get told about magic, and if one really wanted to break the Veil our Obliviators couldn’t keep up. The Veil only works for them if they can trust us to leave them alone. Individual muggle-baiting instances can be treated as individual crimes, as long as we do treat them as crimes, but Dad and Mr. Malfoy have attacked them as a population. I’m trying to clean up—stop what they’ve left to spread, at least—but they’re risking everything. If it was just Mr. Malfoy I would have had him stopped already, but since it’s Dad I don’t know what to do. Grandpère, it’s so bad I can’t even tell Snape or Narcissa, and Mr. Malfoy has taken his curse into her house. With my godson. She doesn’t care about muggles, but she’d kill him for that and then she’d go after Dad and I don’t know what to do.”

Grandpère had the impenetrable Rosier face on, his hands laced together in the way that wouldn’t let your fingers betray any emotions you might be having. Evan couldn’t tell what he was thinking, or entirely what he was feeling, but he was reasonably sure it involved surprise, and did not involve pleasure in his son’s success.

No advice seemed to be forthcoming, though—and no offers to take the problem out of Evan’s hands, either. That was disappointing, but Ev hadn’t expected any.

Grandpère hadn’t even interfered with the relatively simple problem of Mum and Dad leaving
Evan alone with a house elf for years at a time as a child. He certainly hadn’t stopped his wife from forcing them to have Evan in the first place. Ev had worked out a long time ago that his Black inclination to actually do something on occasion made him extremely a bit strange for a Rosier. His dad’s family thought their job was to witness, record, and preserve.

Which made Dad even stranger than Ev was, although Ev didn’t expect anyone to agree with him about this. Dad was strange for a Rosier, but, after all, a Rosier wasn’t all he was.

It was weirdly uncomfortable to think that Mum might have encouraged Dad like Spike did Evan. He couldn’t understand how badly he wanted to think she’d maybe just encouraged Dad to be active in a general sort of way: that she didn’t know about or condone what he was doing. Maybe she didn’t hate Ev after all, but it wasn’t as if she’d raised him. If he’d grown up sure of her love, relying on her, then of course it would be awful to be afraid she was a monster (although when he thought about it he wasn’t really sure why it of-course-would-be), but he hadn’t.

Either way, there was no use demanding a reaction when you’d just given someone a massive shock: all you’d get was the shock, and not what they really thought. Much better to let it sit for a while, let Grandpère absorb it, find out if Evan was right, and think about things for a while.

So he turned back to Voldemort, which was easier if no more pleasant. “I’ve been reading old papers; as far as I can tell and apart from Dumbledore’s opposition, the main reason whatsisname failed as a politician is that the promises he was making weren’t consistent. I think he’s doing that with people he wants to convince to be guerilla warriors for him. I have information from a client in the ICW that he’s spread mixed stories about his intentions in Europe, whatever he’s saying at home. I think at some point it’s going to come out—either what he really wants or that he doesn’t care about anything but power—and it’s going to fall apart on him. Snape thinks—”

Grandpère sighed.

Evan hardened his jaw. “I know you don’t like that he’s a half-blood, Grandpère, but I think we both know that whosisface is one, too. Snape shares his background, and whosit likes him and has spent a lot of time with him, in a more relaxed sort of way than he seems to with most people. Snape’s had to become a good judge of character because he makes so many enemies. His opinion is relevant.”

“He is also very young,” Grandpère pointed out. “And very sensitive, and very certain of himself.”

“He’s not certain of himself at all,” Evan shook his head, trying not to soften just because Grandpère was thinking about Spike as a person instead of a blood type and even understood he wasn’t (usually) deliberately obnoxious for fun. “He just makes contingency plans for being wrong so he doesn’t have to worry about getting caught off-guard.”

“And what is his relevant opinion?” Grandpère asked, visibly yearning for the peace of the grave.

“That what-d’you-call-him has been treated like a mudblood from the day he entered the wizarding world,” Evan said, coiling back in his chair and holding his grandfather’s eyes. “That his life before Hogwarts was probably pretty dreadful. Humiliating, one might guess, considering the way he insists on the sort of trappings of respect no one ever means and everyone resents. I can tell you for sure that he hasn’t the eye for clothes that even muggle-born kids whose families are reasonably high-status amongst the muggles have. Honestly, even Snape dresses that way because it’s utilitarian, not because he doesn’t know what looks right, and everyone who looks at him knows it, right?”

“It is considerate of him to give such a clear warning of his lack of concern for convention,”
Grandpère conceded cattily.

“Well, exactly,” Evan agreed. “Lack of concern, not ignorance. Whatsiswhoo has style, but you can see he’s trying to send certain signals and getting them wrong. Snape doesn’t do that: his signals are exactly what he means them to be, and when I say his family had no money I mean it. And his voice is studied.”

“True,” Grandpère said, even more cattily, which was good coming from a man who pronounced Lucius’s name with four syllables.

Evan, in the interests of getting what he wanted, did not react to this. “Well, exactly. I believe Snape absolutely that even in the muggle world he was poor with no family. Snape can recognize that when he sees it, as you might expect. He thinks becoming a wizard didn’t magically turn Dad’s friend into an admired man with an easy life like he’d expected, and he wants revenge on the purebloods who destroyed his dreams and despised him. You do despise him, Grandpère, don’t you? Aunt Walburga certainly does. You know who he is, and you’ve always despised him.”

“He was a charming young wizard,” Grandpère said, but not in disagreement. He leaned thoughtfully back in his chair too, and took more tea. “On the occasions I met him, he was humble and agreeable. I thought it unfortunate that Darius should take up with a wizard of no name or family,” and here he paused to shoot his unrepentantly Spike-loving grandson a dirty look full of mostly-resigned crankiness and the more-dignified version of a sulk, “but I didn’t think him a bad influence then. He was a good student, Darius said, and popular with the other students and his teachers. One wishes one’s children to be kind, where kindness will not turn back on them and bite.”

“You’re saying nice things about him,” Evan noted, “but you’re not saying I’m wrong.”

Grandpère sighed again, and put the teacup down. “I will say this,” he allowed, his tone warning Evan not to make more of it than he ought. “When he was charming, he was convincing, without the unconsidered awkwardness of one who need not consider his words. When he was humble, his eyes were the eyes of a Slytherin who is not choosing trust or fealty.”

“Dad might take it as a personal betrayal if I don’t support his friend,” Evan said. “I don’t know. I don’t really know Dad very well; I don’t know if he believes in hedging the family’s bets or he only believes in his friend. But I think he’s leading the family into a giant, messy mistake that could tar us for a long, long time. If that’s true, it’s my job to try and clean up after him, isn’t it?”

“That isn’t your reason,” Grandpère accused after a long pause that felt inexplicably weighty, weary again. He was still, Evan noticed, not claiming Ev was wrong. “You are doing what your own friend wishes.”

“What kind of Slytherin only has one reason?” Evan smiled. “Besides, my friend is absolutely rubbish at revenge.”

“I understood his temper was formidable.”

“Oh, sure, but once he thinks you won’t do it again he stops caring so much about the fact you did it the first time,” Evan waved this off. Of course Spike never forgot a slight, and would happily remind you of something horrible you’d said ten years ago, but he stopped being mad when he stopped being scared. “Snape just wants everybody to be safe and smart and stop being horrible to each other. He gets frustrated, that’s all. I don’t know what Dad’s friend wants, but I really don’t think it’s anything good for us.”
He waited patiently for Grandpère to finish examining everything he’d heard. He was in the middle of plotting out the portrait of Tantella Blishwick he was supposed to start next week, and it rather startled him when Grandpère asked, “What is it you want from me, Evander?”

“For a start,” Evan said promptly, swallowing his surprise at not having his name mangled, “I want to be able to talk to you without worrying it’ll get back to Mum and Dad, and I want you to make sure Linkin won’t tell tales on me to them without my permission. I want him to take any concerns he has to you, not them, and for you to bring any of yours to me directly, and only to me.”

“But I will forget that we have made this arrangement,” Grandpère pointed out, shrewdly forbidding. “You will have me give this order, and perhaps you will charm me to forget what Linkin tells me, and so no one will have any concerns about you at all.”

Evan shook his head. “I can end the spell two ways,” he said. “If I can trust that you’re on my side no less than you’re on Dad’s, you’ll forget nothing. I don’t want to cut you out, Grandpère—I just don’t know if Dad would think he had to choose between me and his friend. And I don’t know what he’d choose if he did.”

Grandpère looked very stern. “That is a terrible thing to say about your father, Euander.”

Evan shrugged. “I wasn’t sure whether you’re a witch, not when I came in. I am sure Dad’s a wizard.”

His grandfather’s face cleared up, just a little, in understanding. “I see: you are using these words as your mother does.”

“And like Narcissa does. I think it’s a Black thing; I haven’t heard anyone else do it.”

“It is still terrible.”

“No,” Evan said calmly, “‘he’s a mass murderer’ is a terrible thing to say about my father.”

Grandpère waved a dismissive hand. “This curse you say he is giving to muggles.”

“Yes. And to Abraxas Malfoy, Grandpère. It’s hard to get an answer out of healers even when they’re being painted, but I’m almost sure that’s why he’s been holed up for the last few years.”

“But you are saying he would give up his own son to a man who hates our people. Euander, how can you speak of your father this way? I know things were difficult when you were young, but—”

“I can say it because I’m not remotely sure he wouldn’t do it,” Ev said, hard-voiced, though he normally wouldn’t break in like that. He didn’t want to get into ‘when he was young,’ especially since he wasn’t sure how to feel about it now and it was this man’s wife who’d… well, he didn’t want to.

Not appreciating the interruption, Grandpère rapped on the teakettle with the sugar tongs, very stern. “You wish me to believe you are protecting yourself and our family. I believe you believe this, but you are also trying to distract me from understanding that you care more about protecting your half-blood.”

“I’ll answer that,” Evan said steadily, “when I have the assurance that you will protect me.”

“Shall I call one of your cousins from their work to serve as a binder?” Grandpère asked with very French disdain. It wasn’t as if the family even was still French really, Evan marvelled, even if Grandpère had gone to Beauxbatons.
Ignoring this sarcasm with the grace of a good winner, Evan held up a little phial he’d made, a perfect, shrunken, thickly-thorned bloom of Vivian du Lac suspended inside it. “I’m sure a blood-oath will be enough. It’s between family, after all.”

First, there was a fight about whether Evan should have taken the hint from Grandpère’s sarcasm that a magically binding contract was supposed to be surplus to requirements since this was, as he’d said, between family. Evan won that one by the shamefully Gryffinpuff method of simply refusing to let the conversation go further until he had his agreement.

Next, they had to fight about whether Grandpère got to keep the phial. Ev was more proud of winning this one, since the concession he Very Unwillingly agreed to—ending the memory charm as soon as the oath was made without removing any memories—was the one was no longer worried about.

Then there was a further fight about the wording, which was even more absurdly civilized than the previous two. Evan honestly wasn’t sure who had the better claim to winning this one, given that he found himself promising to start spending more time on the company and estate books: to step up like Reggie had been doing.

Evan wasn’t unhappy about that, exactly, dismally boring though it sounded. Grandpère thinking he was ready was something to be proud of, but it worried him a bit. About his grandfather’s health, for one thing; occupational training for the eventually inevitable was one thing, but everyone knew Reggie was acting as heir because his father had, er, lost interest in it after Sirius had left. Also, it was going to feel rotten if Grandpère trusted Ev with heirship training and then cut him off from the family.

One risked what one had to, though, and it’d be worth it. Even when Ev went over it in his head half an hour later, and then again at the end of the day with Spike, he was tolerably sure he and Spike were reasonably protected from treachery, forced confessions, accidental slips of the tongue, and Grandpère’s conviction that Darius Rosier was a devoted and caring father and Ev was being paranoid to think that it mattered how much of his son’s business he knew. And they’d kept the oath to ‘I’ and ‘you,’ so it wouldn’t matter if their relations were severed one way or another, or even if Evan had to find a new surname.

When the oath was made, the rose had been burned, and the phial was around Evan’s neck (Grandpère tried to switch it for a hastily transfigured ink-bottle, but he’d expected that and was entirely sure the wards had held), they called for the family house elves. The room got quite crowded, and smelled as if someone had gotten startled and spilt an entire bottle of the rosemary furniture polish all over herself (Evan would have assumed it was Dobby, but he wasn’t a Rosier elf. Folchin was the next clumsiest, though Eustache said she was peerless at getting weeds out with their roots complete and Ev was almost sure he meant it as an honest compliment).

It was a short gathering, made less ceremonial by the way Grandpère couldn’t seem to stop himself being sarcastic every ten seconds about how just because he was humouring his heir-apparent didn’t mean he thought any of this was remotely necessary. But he not only ordered them to never report about Evan and his immediate allies to anyone but him without Evan’s express permission, he declared that the order could only be rescinded by the Head of House and Evan together, not by either of them alone unless and until Evan had to take up the post.

“You needn’t sag in relief as if you thought me a fool, Grandson,” he told Evan irritably when the erklings and elves-assigned-to-cousins had been dismissed (theoretically all the elves should have scattered when dismissively waved at, but that was never going to happen). “In the unlikely event that you aren’t entirely wrong, I have lived long enough to know what the Imperius curse is.”
“So you’ll order that, if you do try to take that back on your own, they should come and tell me?” Evan asked ingenuously, but he just got growled at. He smiled blithely and looked down. “All right, Linkin? I know you’ve been in a bad spot the last day or so—will this help?”

“Young Mistress will still be asking Linkin questions,” Linkin pointed out disapprovingly.

“Mum’s a Black,” Evan reminded him. “She and I came to an understanding. I don’t think she will. I don’t think even Dad wants to. But now your master’s ordered you to protect me, so you’re allowed to lie to her if she won’t be put off.”

Linkin shot him the you’ve been marginally more clever at your lessons than I thought you’d be, but I’m not going to tell you so because marginally isn’t worth inflating your self-confidence over something you’re terrible at look. “The family is divided,” he said dismally.

But the rather cobwebby-faced elf who had terrified Evan as a child on his visits to Grandpère by examining his pictures carefully and never talking spoke up unexpectedly. Her voice was as creaky as Evan would have expected, and it was just as weird and alarming as it would have been to hear the Baron talk. “Linkin is a young elf,” she said firmly. Which was not a thought Evan had ever had. “When Master is finished with his elves, Chustin will tell Linkin about masters from many years ago. Master Evander,” she added, giving Evan exactly the same judgment-unspoken look she’d always given his pastels, “is taking care of the family as the heir should.”

“Young Master is the heir,” Linkin pointed out, looking distressed and torn under his sullen scowl. Evan recognized that look from Spike’s face. He’d seen it there often at school.

“Dad’s also trying to take care of the family as the heir should,” Evan said peaceably, though he rather thought he might be lying. Not that he thought Dad was against the family, but Evan didn’t remotely trust his priorities, never mind his muggle-cursing, Secrecy-risking judgment. “He’s just getting it completely backwards because of bad advice from his friends. Since he’s not going to listen to anyone, we have to keep alert and control the damage.”

“Don’t argue with the elves, Euander,” Grandpère said wearily. “They will obey. That’s enough. You may go, elves. And you too, Grandson, now that you have what you want…”

“I don’t yet,” Evan corrected him, widening his eyes into big blue surprise. “I told you, I want your advice, Grandpère! We had to go through all this so I could talk to you at all.”

Grandpère stared at him in blank, dark-eyed despair (Evan didn’t think for a moment he’d forgotten, and also didn’t blame him for trying to wiggle out of deeper involvement in Ev’s problems), and then called his elf back in when Evan didn’t blink. “Chustin,” he sighed, “tell Delphine that my 4:30 is running over. And fetch a fresh teapot.”

“I fancy a chai blend,” Evan said gaily, picking one that would make the addition of lemony flavours stand out. “Is that all right, Grandpère?”

Grandpère looked as though what he fancied was firewhiskey, or else a nice cup of death to accompany his defeat-biscuits, but he nodded gloomily. Evan was tempted to feel sorry for him, but he was quite sure that was what Grandpère was going for, so it would probably be ill-elapsed as well as unnecessary.

Selecting a slightly apologetic tone nevertheless, he said, “There were a couple of things, actually.”

“How many of them have to do with Snape? I should like to get those out of the way as soon as possible,” Grandpère sighed.
Evan hesitated, considered his options for how to present this, and decided that he could convey his position the most strongly with the intimacy of regression. “Gamper,” he said levelly, “nothing about me is ever going to have nothing to do with Severus. Ever. If he died or left me tomorrow, the rest of my life would be about that.”

“You are,” his grandfather pointed out with long-suffering indulgence, “very young.”

“This isn’t the sort of situation,” Evan replied apologetically, “where he’s my favourite option and I’m his best option and Surely This Will Always Be So Because Omnia Vincit Amor, Grandpère. This is the sort of thing where it’s just as well we actually like each other and make a good team, because when I’m not there he’s a seething danger to himself and others and when he’s not around, including before I met him and after I’d met him but before we were friends, I feel like a ghost with a pogrebin hanging off my hood and don’t really care to paint and when I make myself do it anyway my brushstrokes get blobby.”

“Chustin,” Grandpère said without skipping a beat or raising his voice, “replace the tea water with a spiced rum.”

“That sounds delicious,” Evan smiled, not letting his eyes change from stony decision.

“I suppose this is a notification, and not a request for permission,” Grandpère scowled. “You have cousins, you know. Your talent is promising, but that only means I would not have to feel I was killing you with poverty if I sacked and disinherited you and sent you across the ocean to avoid your becoming competition for our more sensible painters.”

Heartened by the use of ‘would’ instead of ‘will,’ Evan said, “I had thought of that, actually, and while it would make me very sad, it wouldn’t stop me. A reason to get off this island that Snape couldn’t argue with would actually be quite tempting. But I do know my duty, I think, whether either of us likes it or not. Grandpère, there aren’t a lot of purebloods left, and almost none that haven’t married with our family at least once in the last century.”

Grandpère opened his mouth.

“Sorry,” Evan rushed to meet this objection, “I should have said my family; I know you’re not very closely related to the Blacks yourself. But there aren’t a lot of purebloods left that I could have an heir with without running the risk of grandchildren like Aunt Walburga or Lycoris or Marius Black. Snape isn’t muggle-born, he’s a Prince—come to think of it, I don’t think they have married any of us recently—and he wasn’t really muggle-raised. And he’s Slytherin to the heart.”

“You keep telling me that he is,” Grandpère pointed out, “in your words, ‘bad at it.’”

“Subtlety isn’t his strong point,” Evan agreed, “nor persuasiveness, Salazar knows. But he makes up for it with cunning and discernment. He loves Slytherin, and he loves me. He has loyalty, brains, patience, determination, and a creative facility with magic. His ambitions are generous. I know craftsmen are looked down upon in some Sacred Twenty-Eight families, but not in ours, surely.”

“Two in one pairing can give rise to comment,” Grandpère said dryly. “We are known to do our work from love of the art and from duty, not financial necessity.”

“We weren’t planning to make an announcement anytime soon, so there ought not to be any comment at all. Severus thinks it’s best to maintain plausible deniability. Which I’d frankly like to thump him for, but I expect you agree.”
“I certainly do.” Grandpère took a resigned sip of his boozy tea. “I suppose we might be well-served by your appearing permanently eligible.”

“I won’t give anyone hope,” Evan warned. “And I won’t cooperate with any arrangements, even in the early stages. I don’t mind being pleasant to everyone, of course, or taking clients out to lunch and so on, but that’s all. The papers can be as gossipy as they like, but I won’t give him cause to doubt me.”

“Your parents,” Grandpère suggested delicately, and left it at that.

“I’m happy they’re enjoying themselves, but doing things that way won’t work for us.” Evan hadn’t expected that this was the part he’d have to be firm about. “Even Mum said she’d skin me if I risked things with Severus that way.”

Grandpère sat back, caterpillars shooting high on his lined face. “Callisto approves?”

Ev waggled a hand. “I don’t think she likes it much more than you do. She knows I need him, and that he is loyal but needs his loyalty returned, I think is how she put it, more or less.” He added, “I left her and Dad with plausible deniability, too, though I’m quite sure she’s quite sure.”

“Is the thing done?”

“Blood and breath.”

“Show me.”

Evan rolled up his sleeve and came over. Grandpère pored over the brushstrokes of his gemel tree with the low-burning hearth in its hollow, tracing above the tiny runes with his finger. Evan stared at how glossy his grandfather’s nails were and how papery the skin was as a distraction from how much he didn’t like someone else’s hands that close to his tree.

Even without being touched, it still made him want to bristle and yank his hand back. He could see the hairs on his own arm standing straight up with discomfort. Those were his words. Having someone else read them was violating, in a way he hadn’t expected at all. He’d never had any problem rolling up his sleeves in front of clients, or even letting them look at his ink from a respectful distance. It might have been that Grandpère was not observing that distance, but Evan knew better. Spike could claim becoming handfast had been redundant and unnecessary if it made him feel better in some way. Spike was wrong.

“This was not done recently,” Grandpère declared finally, looking up. “The ink has settled. It is your own design, I see your hand in it, but I have not seen you paint with runes before.”

“The technique’s not really suitable for portraiture,” Evan mumbled, trying to tug his arm back without being rude. “I had it done summer after fifth year. We just added some magic to it.”

Grandpère sighed, his shoulders slumping, and let him go. “Who knows?”

Trying not to do up his sleeve with unseemly haste, Ev apologized, “We had to tell Dumbledore; Severus is working at Hogwarts and we needed his cooperation with our living arrangements.”

Grandpère shot him a sour And I suppose you HAD to have living arrangements look, to which Evan replied with an uncompromising you heard what I just said. “Other than him, just the witches who were there to hold the circle—we didn’t have any other witnesses. They accepted a geas of silence. That’s a friend of Severus’s who has no one to talk to about him anyway, the younger Blakeney kid, Severus’s Prince grandmother, Narcissa, and Perenelle Flamel.”
Grandpère didn’t blink. He stopped moving, though, quite abruptly.

“She’s been teaching Severus occlumency; she was kind enough to officiate,” Ev explained once he was sure his grandfather was still breathing. “If you need to disinherit me, I understand, and I moved some money before coming so you needn’t worry about it.”

Grandpère waved an irritable hand, probably at least 60% because they had Madam Flamel’s backing. “It would serve you justly for eloping, but we are not, after all, the Blacks. Put the gold back—keep some for emergencies.”

“I’ll tell the goblins I got the decimal wrong,” Evan smiled. “They’d at least pretend to believe that; their position is that even wizards who don’t look like me are very stupid. Or, well, instead of putting it all back I could use some as I’d hoped to and tell them I overestimated my needs.”

“And those needs are?”

“I was thinking of opening a new branch office,” Evan said. “Snape—”

“Don’t be absurd, Euander.”

Ev grinned, letting just a sliver of his heart into his eyes. “Thanks, Gamper. Spike—”

“Dear Merlin, boy.”

He laughed, and if it was unfortunately bubbly with his relief he really couldn’t blame himself. “Sorry, okay. Severus and I told everyone that we were sharing our Diagon flat because he needed help with the rent to live close to St. Mungos and had offered to cook for me since Linkin’s in different time zones half the time. But we gave the rooms up when he got a job at Hogwarts, and I cannot live in Rosier Hall where Mum and Dad might bounce in at any old time. I mean, I thought they were never home but we were there for less than a week and they came right through my window at a most undignified moment. So what would you think about it if I opened up a new branch office?”

Grandpère had already covered his face with his hands at ‘undignified moment,’ and now he clenched them into his stark-white mane and lightly-braided beard. “Euander Rosier. You are not allowed to make your own appointments. Let me remind you of the debacle with Madam Prewett. And the disaster of Unterminister von Hoenstraut. And—”

“I think you’re being very unfair,” Evan said reproachfully. “I didn’t make Madam Prewett’s appointment. I told her I had a conflict. She just talked over me and pretended to be deaf and showed up when I told her she couldn’t and yelled at Mr. Ogden in the waiting room until he ran away. And Von Hoenstraut walked into Secretary Edgecomb’s appointment without even talking to me first.”

“And Delphine wouldn’t have allowed either of them to get away with it.”

Evan drooped sadly.

“You have cultivated a public face which encourages people to think you easily taken advantage of,” Grandpère said, not exactly scolding but definitely not inviting an argument. “Therefore, if you are not to be easily taken advantage of, you must permit your less docile relations to be in a position to say ‘no’ for you to those who can’t be put off politely.”

“Severus is very good at that,” Evan pointed out.
“Don’t *moon* at me, child,” Grandpère ordered, revolted, and Evan grinned. “Your young man is not good at knowing *when* to do it, and in any case, the affairs of even one artist of our firm cannot be run on a hobbyist basis from hundreds of miles away. *If* I agree to this, you will have a secretary. One who will be close enough to your studio to guard it, and who will confirm your schedule through our main desk.”

“That’s not a problem,” he nodded. “We can set up a candle-floo for memos if a fireplace doesn’t make sense in the space.” And there was, now, Dobby. “I’ve been trying to get Delphine to keep an oil burner in there so I could have some idea what to make her for Christmases, anyway.”

“However.”

Evan had known he was going to pay for getting what he needed from the oath-related arguments.

“I have *not* agreed yet, and certainly won’t unless you tell me the other reasons that, according to your reasoning, a Slytherin would surely have. I also have no wish for your young man to come storming in here to shout at me and attempt to take my memories because he has not agreed to give me his secrets.”

“...Er.” That, Evan reflected, was an excellent point. He really *should* have talked to Spike first. Only he’d been walking around and talking to his solicitor and so on, and he’d realized how paralyzed they were because of Linkin and how useful it would be if, if, if. And they’d just had that humiliating dust-up with Slughorn over Spike’s morning class, and it had seemed like a terrible idea to bother him at work again today, even (especially) while he was on the grounds.

It occurred to him now that he could actually have waited to talk to Grandpère about this until tomorrow. But no—he wouldn’t be able to sleep tonight unless he’d begun to grapple with Cleo’s situation. Besides, when he looked into his own heart on the premise that he should be afraid of Spike’s reaction, he found he was only feeling sheepish, not guilty or even worried. Of course, he might be wrong about how badly Spike would take it, but he was quite sure he had, rather than doing a wrong thing, done a right thing badly.

So he said, “I won’t say that’s impossible—assuming Delphine would let him—but he owes me a judgment call like this. He went and signed us both up as ICW consultants without asking me, after all.”

Evan looked down at his waistcoat. Possibly he should have waited until Grandpère had finished swallowing his tea. “I may have overstated that?”

“How, pray?” Grandpère asked, pointedly not offering to dry him off.

“Well, he put me on his allies-resources-and-contacts list, I should have said, when he signed up. Just as a consultant for the one job, though I do think it may drag on a while. Which he did do without talking to me, though I don’t think it was his idea and it didn’t sound as if he had the chance to consult before deciding. And of course he’ll yell at me a bit, but I don’t think he’ll be too upset once I show him this,” he touched the oath phial, “and Linkin confirms his new orders and I’ve explained those other reasons to him.”

“I see I erred with the tea,” Grandpère said pleasantly. “I should have asked Chustin for brandy.”

“Probably,” Ev agreed heartlessly, careful (not to say fussy) with the drying charm around the delicately wheat-coloured embroidery of his waistcoat. It looked so nice against the dappled russet —glossily earthy, like ore in clay, very natural, and the veins of oak leaves weren’t girly whatever Spike said—but not with peppery black tea and Grandpère spit all over it. His clothes were always
charmed to evaporate paint and rain, but maybe he should talk to Twillfit about a more global impervious. Spike tended to cause unexpectedness just by existing, and would certainly approve.

‘Probably’ was clearly not the answer Grandpère had wanted, but he contented himself with a filthily old-fashioned Look and asking again about those other reasons.

To no one’s surprise, that started an entirely new argument. This one went on twenty minutes and had more to do with whether Evan had gotten high on flower-ash at his handfasting and never come down from it than with whether Grandpère was going to let him do what he wanted. Five of those minutes were mostly Evan repeating bits from the two-hour-long touristy monologue he’d heard from Spike’s wandmaker friend that morning, with assurances that the man was a local and a Slytherin and a pureblood and had Spike’s best interests at heart and didn’t have any known reason to dislike Evan (except on principle for being from old money and, more to the point, farther south than Leicester).

“And really,” he concluded, “it’s not as if I’m suggesting the firm do anything it wasn’t doing already. Anything we haven’t _always_ done. I just don’t see why we should be doing it for the exclusive benefit of His Fingernails.”

Grandpère had, by this point, the glazed-eyed look Evan only usually received when Reggie let him get started on art history. “Of whom?”

“You know,” Evan said, waving his hand airily. “He doesn’t cut them. Like one of those old high-ranking scholars who wanted to prove they were too good to work with their hands. It’s a bit weird. Also, he wears socks with just robes. I mean to say, even Severus never tried to wear socks without trousers. Or torture sons of old families in front of their peers. Embarrass them a bit, okay, but Severus generally seems to feel pointing out how stupid they’ve been is humiliation enough without getting all _dramatic_ about it. Sheer arrogance, if you ask me. I mean, what if a breeze blew your robes up, and all you had under there were socks?”

His grandfather was silent for a long time. “You must take more precautions,” he decided, and proceeded to make several suggestions that Ev not only hadn’t thought of but would never have thought he’d be able to get away with. “I would prefer it not be possible for this to be traced back to the firm,” he concluded, handing Evan a list of instructions for a solicitor. “Can you acquire these papers from your ICW contacts?”

“I’ll ask,” Evan promised, staring down at the list with the disturbed feeling that he’d asked for more work than he really wanted, especially what with the family paperwork that was about to hit him. “But only if they can do it without getting the Ministry involved.”

“And can you _manage_ this?” Grandpère asked with a pointed, weighty gaze.

“...Not by myself,” Evan admitted. “Severus has a new elf that will be under my direction most of the time, so that will help. But I think I might need a Delphine for more than just my official appointments to make this work.”

“That would require more discretion.”

“And a higher salary,” he pointed out pointedly. It wasn’t just that you had to pay someone for discretion where you didn’t already have their loyalty (and tangible marks of appreciation were still a good idea even then). He’d originally thought whoever he hired could either have mornings off or bring other work to the office, and now it looked as if he’d need their full attention.

Grandpère sighed agreement. “Do you have anyone in mind?”
“No, but I have some ideas about who to ask.” Slughorn, obviously—it was a perfect opportunity to make up with him, and also to see if he could win Cleo any of the help she couldn’t ask for. And it might also be a good idea to keep in contact with Weatherby, build on a relationship the Portkey Office affair had warmed. Slughorn would know who was discreet and Weatherby would know who was competent, so anyone they both mentioned would be well worth a visit. The trick would be to get back on Slughorn’s good side in advance so he didn’t waste Ev’s time with anyone who secretly hated Spike or would find Evan infuriating.

Grandpère hummed dubiously. “Come for tea when you’ve made a start. And don’t speak to any prospective candidates without bringing their names to me for assessment. Dare I hope that is all?”

“Afraid not,” Evan apologized. “I think Dumbledore was going to write you to say he’d asked me to take a commission in Bulgaria?”

“Which insult I had supposed not to be your fault,” Grandpère said dryly. “Then you told me you were working for his international gang and all was explained.”

“Quite,” Ev agreed. “Though, if you ask me, ‘working for’ is a bit of a stretch.” He considered trying to convince Grandpère that it wasn’t much of an insult since the point of the trip wasn’t actually the portrait, but least said soonest mended. Besides, it was an insult: to Grandpère, to the subject who was not getting the artist his family, notoriety, and position in history demanded, and, by giving the impression that he’d happily jump on any commission he could get even if he wasn’t good enough to do it justice, to Evan’s own artistic integrity and family loyalty. He wasn’t there to make Dumbledore’s apologies. “I did mean to ask if there was anything you wanted while I’m over there—and I do ask it—but while I was at Hogwarts, one of our prefects wanted a word, and what’s going on up there… Grandpère, I don’t even know where to start.”

In the end, it was well past six by the time he got home. Spike had been so upset to find Ev wasn’t in Rosier Hall that he’d gone back into his Hogwarts closet-room and was shrieking out loud at the pile of homework he was grading instead of just drowning it in ink. As if the odiously-dressed poltergeist ever needed feeding.

On consideration, Evan thought it best to haul him away from his sad little desk through the wardrobe and bend him backwards over the arm of their sofa straight away, instead of trying for anything so ambitious as eating food or saying hullo first. They’d never get anywhere if Spike was too wound-up to digest anything properly.

Even after that—even after their bath—Spike wasn’t relaxed enough to eat, so Evan gave up waiting for a good moment and just filled him in about everything but Cleo.

As he’d predicted, once Spike had stopped bellowing long enough to let Evan lay out his reasoning properly and summon Linkin to confirm his reassurances, he only stopped plotting-and-scribbling long enough to vehemently express that he didn’t owe anybody any great-grandchildren and just because Evan had nagged him into unnecessarily formalizing an existing state of affairs Spike was intrinsically pleased with didn’t mean he was going to budge on that no matter how good Evan’s god-awful relatives were with an Imperius.

Well, he also did keep pausing to lean over to bite Evan’s shoulder with a bit more annoyance and less nuzzling than was usual for this point in the evening, but those weren’t long pauses. Sadly.

It had looked, before the eventual attempt at dinner, as if they’d go to bed satisfied and full of cunning plans, but poor Dobby got thoroughly traumatized: Spike fixed the teacup he’d slammed down on the table by himself, failed to somehow blame Dobby for letting the carpet get wet, and didn’t eat any of the fish the size of his head that Dobby had squeezed possibly an entire lemon
onto, along with a few of its seeds, and faithfully kept so warm it got a bit dry in large patches.

The elf might have been able to handle it if Spike had just admitted that the meal had been ruined instead of insisting he wasn’t hungry. One would have thought Severus, of all people, would understand about needing the hammer to drop straight away. Ev understood that Spike’s pride was somewhat involved here—turning up one’s gorgeously aquiline nose at food just because it wasn’t perfect was wasteful and toffish—but showing faith that Dobby could do better would have been a help.

Evan stopped feeling sorry for them both around minute three of the wailing and told Dobby to go wash the gazebo. If Dobby decided to consider it a punishment, that was fine with Evan: he could tell Spike had been about to give in and try to force down something more food-like than tea despite being too worked up to eat. Ev wasn’t about to let the elf get the idea he could make Spike do what he wanted by being pathetic, because it would be annoying and a bad precedent and very likely to work.

Besides, while Dobby was going to have to learn about Spike’s digestion eventually, Ev really preferred the lesson to take place without anyone vomiting.

Maybe it was because that sort of thing was on Evan’s mind that the last thought in his mind as he dropped off wasn’t the comfort of Spike’s relaxed knuckles softly brushing his cheek, or the slow breath trustingly warming his neck even after an argument, but how grey Grandpère’s face had looked by the end of the evening. Maybe his imagination was playing tricks; it wasn’t something he’d really noticed at the time.

Spike woke him up frantically in the middle of the night to ask whether this was all delayed vengeance for the green lightning, but accepted being chewed on and hand-flopped at in angry-sleepy bewilderment as his answer. Ev would later wonder if he’d had something in the vicinity of a point, but at the time was mostly concerned with wanting to cry about being unexpectedly awake at two in the morning again. This had (almost) never happened at Diagon. Clearly they needed to move again, instantly.

He did, in a not-awake-at-all kind of way, enjoy the apology very much. When he dropped off for the second time he wasn’t considering anything but Severus’s skin against his, and the way he felt like a delicious, weighty pool of liquid mercury spilt all over it.

He badly wanted to paint that. Severus shuddering and open in a bath of enchanted quicksilver, flashing dots rolling down his arms and his high-arched feet, lashes stark against his cheeks with his head lolled back, his hair a chaotic black fan against blue tiles like it was against this pillow, his throat bare and vulnerable to a heavy gold twilight just like it was now with Evan’s closed eyes pressed up against it… he’d never agree to the pose, but surely being in bed meant Evan could dream...

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1: Because Severus would spring little quizzes on you. And, if you missed that your cup had been dosed, would slam his palms on the table so that it sloshed all over your waistcoat before you could drink any. And yell at you about being more careful and using what inadequate and infinitesimal nose God had given you and even if you have a sodding cold what about the way reflections in it got blurry and unnaturally curly?!

Not that watching Spike’s eyes spit enraged sparks because he cared about you wasn’t thoroughly captivating and easy to turn into a delightful evening. Thoroughly captivating. If you properly identified a bad cup, however, you were rewarded with not only dry clothes and occasionally-physical approval but actual tea. Evan had in no way pretended he was game-but-hopeless at making tea for four years in order to procure himself a steady supply of tea brewed by a baffled and outraged Severus full of the need to show off and teach him what tea was supposed to taste like.
2: Metaphorically he didn’t blink. If Narcissa had (also metaphorically) twisted his arm, he might have admitted to putting Wilkes’ lessons in Winsome Eye-Batting to good use.

Chapter End Notes

Next: Chrystanthos Rosier does not feel he has time to waste.
AKA: Evan 100% asked for this.

Evan Rosier Considers His Completely Imaginary Historical Dinner Guest Options!
E: Well, Da Vinci is obvious... Spike and I would both have loads to talk to him about and he's one of maybe five painters in the history of ever that I could trust with Spike's Patiently Sardonic Eyebrows. But if it's just one dinner, how could I possibly pass up the chance to let Spike talk tactics with the Borgias and find out if whozisPrince was writing out of his ear? Or the Medicis! He's even related to them and he needs family! OH or I could invite Auntie Bathilada and have her do a really good interview with Anne Neville or Elizabeth of York and really clear up those Richard III questions--or the Propaganda King and find out how he did it, we could learn a lot from him! Or one of those people like Xenoothingy or Sunzoo

S: AAAAAAAAA NEITHER OF THOSE NAMES ARE EVEN HARD TO PRONOUNCE EVAN WHY DO YOU DO THIS

E: or Marcus Aurelius, I know you used to like him! Of course we could really benefit by someone who made it through the French Revolution and was reasonably plugged into the politics, considering our best-case scenario could actually look quite like that... but then again I know you want to know what Chaucer was on when he wrote Parliament of the Fowls and frankly I'm curious, too, but then on the other hand we can't neglect Hortensia Milliphut; her experience creating usable legislation starting from a complete shambles of a Ministry could be invaluable if we ever get into a good position, but—

S: Evan.

E: Clearly what we need to do is hold a SALON!

S: Ev. Who would you invite if I wasn't going to be there?

E: ...Well, Théo van Rysselberghe, obviously, but why wouldn't you be there?

S: So you could take a four-hour master class in pointillistic realism and show off your light magic without wasting precious time stopping to explain every five minutes. In case you invited fifty people over at once and held a salon.

E: (sheep face)
September 5: Rosier Hall

Chapter Summary

Evan had perhaps not fully realized that machinations set things in motion.

Chrystanthos Rosier feels he has no time to waste.

AKA: Evan 100% asked for this.

Chapter Notes

**Warnings:** Mornings

**Notes:** Sorry, guys, I know I'm late on replying to comments, and there have been some good ones that I've really enjoyed. Please don't be discouraged from commenting; all my energies were going into this one work project and worrying about a family member who's doing something Gryffindorish, and I should be able to catch up soon. I have love for all the comments and questions, even when I'm too cross-eyed to put two words together to answer; please keep them coming!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Evan shouted and rolled out of the way as the enormous sledgehammer came crashing down towards his head in a vengeful thunder of malice.

Actually he shrieked like a wet cat and vaulted himself and half the bedding halfway up to the ceiling in a spirited tangle of bare feet and flailing vines when what honestly was a rather large book dropped next to his head in a thwump-cloud of dust. The point was that he avoided being brained and would absolutely have successfully warned Spike of the incoming threat had that worthy not already gone off to work.

Linkin looked up at him dubiously and pointed out, “Master Evvie has now given away family secrets to his attacker.”

Evander Rosier was not, generally speaking, a wizard given to uncivil language, but he felt justified, under the circumstances, in taking a moment to express his feelings. Eventually, he calmed down enough to realize he was partly annoyed because Dobby would have been in hysterics at this point, whereas Linkin just looked smug. Ev wasn’t sure which was more vexing. He just hoped Dobby would have wrenched up the gumption to interfere if Linkin had gone after Spike like this. He took a deep breath, and then another one, glared at Linkin, and opened his mouth.

And sneezed on the dust.

He took a third breath, through his sleeve, much more slowly, and hissed, “Why.”
“Master was very specific,” Linkin said virtuously, not even bothering to try not to smirk. It was awful when house elves smirked, Evan thought petulantly. Their mouths were so wide to begin with that it looked quite sinister.

“And has Master ordered you to report back any names I might call him once you had fulfilled his very specific instructions?” he seethed.

“Not yet,” Linkin said, viciously happy, “but Linkin expects Master will expect a thorough report.”

“Fine,” Evan snapped. “Then you can tell him if my attacker hadn’t turned out to be family I would have obliviated your unconscious corpus without a second thought.”

Linkin folded his skinny arms and nodded approvingly.

“I say,” Evan noted, brightening a bit himself. “Do you think Spike’s rubbing off on me or I’m just unpleasant in the mornings? Bit of a win-win for me either way, of course.”

“Linkin has no intention of speculating,” the elf said, sticking his large nose primly in the air. “Young Master and Mistress Callisto are expecting Master Evvie for breakfast.”

“Like fun they are,” he retorted, carefully tugging his thorns out of the wall and lowering himself down to the bed. He dug his wand out from where it had got wedged between the bed frame and mattress—and didn’t need Spike to actually be there to point out that he’d just flailed without even trying to reach his weapon. Or to tell him he was going to have to work on that. Under his pillow had seemed like a good idea, and he couldn’t put loops for it across his pyjama shoulders like Spike because his back was more pleasantly occupied while he slept, but… he’d have to think about it. Or talk to Twillfit. “I’ve never had breakfast with my parents at home in my life. Why are you mad at me?”

Linkin looked at him in disbelief and began to hold forth on the subject of naughty boys who kept things from their mothers and elves and disrespected their fathers by working for people who then made them keep secrets from said fathers and made decent, hardworking elves very confused by creating factions within families that had always got along very peacefully just making other wizards happy by painting them no matter what Chustin said on the matter. And on the question of Chustin, had Master Evvie any idea how long that elf could talk on one subject even when there were chores to be done, and, speaking of chores, did Master Evvie wish to discuss the fact that all of a sudden another House’s elf was in Linkin’s House making a pig’s ear out of Linkin’s wizard’s supper?

“Look,” Evan soothed, once his attempts to point out that Narcissa was half Rosier had gotten him nowhere, “just ask Mum to explain plausible deniability. Or ask Spike. It’s hardly my fault Dad decided to get us all involved with a wizard who likes to confuse everybody in an incoherently threatening manner, is it? No, it is not,” he concluded woundedly without giving Linkin a chance to challenge his premise, and turned his sketchpad around. “That’s what you look like when you lose your temper, by the way.”

Linkin accepted the drawing and looked at it. It was just cross-hatched quillwork and Evan was the cross-eyed kind of awake that happened when he’d had a shock instead of his tea, but it wasn’t too bad for a rough, he thought. He was pleased with Linkin’s ear-hair and the dynamic finger-shaking pose—and quite pleased with the perspective on the back-bent finger, which was a pose he’d have to start coaching his clients through so they could scold their great-grandchildren properly—and the ruffles on his dressing gown. “Even Chustin says that Master Evan is getting very nearly good,” Linkin conceded, and tried somewhat reluctantly to hand it back.
Evan smiled. “Keep it.”

“Young Master and Mistress Callisto will still be expecting Master Evvie for breakfast,” Linkin reminded him sternly, clearly as a way of telling him not to think he’d won even while carefully tidying the off-the-cuff sketch away into his sash as if it were precious.

“They really won’t be,” he said, and then caught Linkin’s I-know-something-you-don’t-know look and sighed. “They’ve been told to, haven’t they.”

Linkin gave an extremely satisfied nod. It was really quite dramatic, how high he raised his chin for it. Evan wanted to sketch that, too.

“Well, they’re going to be disappointed,” he said grumpily. “I do my exercise when I get up, and if I do it after breakfast it ruins my digestion.”

“Mistress Callisto is breakfasting at nine,” Linkin assured him.

Evan had to pause to put together that information with Linkin’s reassuring voice. He looked out the window. Dawn’s rosy fingers were just starting to cruelly claw their way over the actual roses—who did probably appreciate them more than Evan did. Very slowly, he asked, “And what time is it now?”

“Just after half six,” Linkin replied with angelic ears.

Evan’s jaw dropped. “You mean,” he very nearly stuttered in his indignation, “you could have woken me up just a little abominably earlier and I could have said good morning to Severus?”

“Master’s instructions were very specific,” Linkin reminded him, continuing to shine with virtue. “Master says, follow my instructions exactly. Master does not say, ‘I order Linkin to get himself hexed.’”

Evan stared at him in outrage, and then said viciously, “You know, Linkin, a ‘dressing gown’ is meant to be cut similarly to a bathrobe, is not commonly worn with high heels or spats, and sky blue is not your colour.”

Magnanimous in victory, the complete rat, Linkin inquired, “Would Master Evvie like fruit or bacon and a fried slice with his eggs and tomatoes at breakfast?”

“Mushrooms and a potato cake,” he sulked, mostly to be contrary.

He resented everything. Including the fact that he hadn’t been contrary enough to declare that he didn’t want eggs and tomatoes (he knew he would want them after his morning bout) when he didn’t want Linkin to have any satisfaction out of this whatsoever. Definitely including the fact that he had no idea how Linkin had managed to get old table-napkins to drape like that, or what he was using for petticoats.

Because there was simply no use resenting the unlikelihood of his being allowed to go back to sleep.

So he got up to change into his shadowboxing outfit, internally grousing about how Spike had liked it so much and could have seen him in it if Linkin had only been half an hour more obnoxious.

With an air of massive benevolence, Linkin snapped his spindly fingers. The bed made itself, the thorn-holes repaired themselves, and the cover floated off the cup of tea Spike had left on the table with a curl of scented steam.
Evan glowered. He felt very hard-done-by, to the point of feeling that cheering up would be quite inappropriate. But how was he supposed to stay mad when Spike had taken the time before going to breakfast in the Great Hall (ugh) to make him the tea that managed to taste like candied ginger while also containing enough caffeine to make a centaur twitch? It was downright inconsiderate how thoughtful and sweet Spike had been!

After Ev had chased his vines around the bedroom for an hour or so, healed his scratches, and done some fanciful glassblowing from inside a long, hot bath, he felt calmer, although still mightily displeased to be awake. The bath he’d treated himself to had been an extra-nice one: he’d put a floral green tea in the water and then washed with Spike’s evening soap. Spike would complain if he didn’t smell like satsumas again later, but Ev fully anticipated the sort of day after which he’d be happy to meet those complaints by inviting Spike into a second bath. Anticipating that happy eventuality didn’t quite last him until he got pruney, but closing his eyes afterwards and pretending Spike was washing his hair was still nicer than admitting he was doing it himself at this hour.

His glassblowing went well, too, even though he only came away with one bottle. He’d only been playing, really—changing its shapes and colours a dozen times before deciding he was happy with a rippily-shaped bottle in a dozen undulating shades of forest green that seemed to have golden bubbles trapped restlessly inside it. It looked, he decided, as if it ought to have mead in, and was, therefore, a Useful Object as well as, in his own modest opinion, a beautiful one. He knew exactly what to do with it.

He still (blast Linkin for knowing him well enough to predict how long he’d need!) had twenty minutes after drying off and dressing and writing a flattering note to Slughorn. Even though he refused to dry off magically in the spirit of protest, and took extra care with his hair and wardrobe since he was dressing for several different audiences at once.

By the time he’d decided his hair was as tidy as it was going to get without being fussy, in a tail down one shoulder instead of a proper queue, and charmed it to stay put (and fight friction and early-autumn humidity enough to also stay shiny), he was calm enough to finally, as unquestionably intended, look at the book with which Linkin (he thought crabbily) had tried to brain him.

It was a volume of the Rose & Yew account books, dated ten years ago, and Grandpère had stuck a piece of parchment in front of the title page that read, “Whom did I sack and why? Ask anyone for the answer who might already know and you’ll be painting Ministry clerks in stuffy little rooms with no backgrounds for a month.”

As a rule, Evan quite liked painting the occasional Ministry clerk. They generally either felt privileged by the experience or were hilarious in ways he could tell Spike and Cissa about later, and often knew more than they thought they did and talked more than they intended to. They rarely felt entitled to services from him which they had not paid for and which would never be for sale. And he could talk about Spike to them, in the role of an anonymous St. Mungo’s lab-crawler’s long-suffering roommate, without having to worry quite so much about Spike getting sneered at for the crime of being common-sensicle and funny and brilliant without possessing two pureblooded parents. He’d even been known to do it pro bono; favours could be better than money and it really wasn’t disagreeable, as a rule.

Sadly, it was also a fact that, unless their families were independently wealthy and they were just doing it for the experience, clerks generally couldn’t afford the sort of grand setups in a portrait for which Rose & Yew was known, with wonderful light and tailoring and props and the full range of motion, which stopped portraitists from getting bleary-eyed and bored painting face after face against empty-ish brown canvas after empty-ish grey canvas. A month of that sort of commission
made for a quite respectable threat when it came from the head of the firm.

Besides, he hadn’t needed such an overt warning to know it was a test as well as an exercise. As Spike liked to say, everything was.

He hadn’t even turned a single page before Linkin tapped him on the elbow. Unaccountably, although he’d been sure he was reading, he was in fact resting on his elbows with his palms ground into his eyes.

“Linkin has been calling Master Evvie for five minutes,” Linkin said reproachfully. “Master Evvie is going in to breakfast.”

“Master Evvie is suddenly understanding why Master Spike is constantly threatening to knock his own skull in with the Compleat Encyclopaedia of Fungi,” Evan muttered dolefully into his wrists, dragging his hands down enough to stare hollowly at Linkin. His lower eyelids dragged with them, but since he already felt someone had poured sand in, it felt good. “Do you know every entry in this record is identified only by initials?!”

“Linkin would never dream of looking at Master’s private books,” Linkin said primly. “Linkin has only come to tell Master Evvie that breakfast is getting cold.”

“You’d never let breakfast get cold,” Evan said reproachfully. “You’re just being dramatic.”

“Master,” said Linkin gleefully, “is giving Linkin—”

“Very specific instructions,” Evan sighed. And, because his face was still within two feet of the open book, sneezed. Freezingly, he said, “I trust this will be thoroughly dusted by the next time I see it,” but Linkin only nodded casually and didn’t look reprimanded at all.

He’d been too busy resenting his wake-up call to imagine how dire breakfast might be, per se. Still, he’d had unconscious, unformed expectations, and they were well and truly met.

He had his fry-up, and though he was more than hungry enough for it by now it was too hot for the weather really. Worse, Dad was eating strawberry soup with what smelled like excellent hot bread with herbed butter, and Mum had a delicately arranged yoghurt parfait. With blackberries. And paper-thin slices of kiwi that had been either sugar-frosted or frozen into shiny little curls. And a glass of something clear and bubbly which was not causing her to act tipsy. It made Ev feel like a child.

Like a provincial child. Who’d never travelled. And was probably getting his table manners wrong.

It made him feel too unimaginative and conventional and stodgy to be worth Spike’s time. Although this, at least, was a feeling that Linkin had not provoked on purpose. Probably. Linkin had probably heard all about Spike’s cooking from Kreacher, though he’d never shown any sign of caring about it before.

The only bright spot was they’d stopped trying to corner him into admitting he’d eloped. However, Dad wanted to talk about death masks, which was not what Evan wanted at breakfast. Even if he’d wisely said no to bacon.

Frankly, Evan didn’t want to talk at breakfast at all. He hadn’t had to since school, and then only rarely. He’d generally been allowed to stare dreamily at the sky-emulating ceiling of the Great Hall and listen to all the gossip floating around him. Mostly his year-mates had known better than to expect him to select or form words at half seven in the morning.
But Dad wanted to talk about death masks. Dad was bright-eyed and bushy-moustached and
talking about how long brains took to stop working after the neck was severed, and formaldehyde
versus salt. All Evan could think about was how he could not remotely understand why Spike
wanted him to wear facial hair when clearly its only use was as an unhygienic soup-strainer.

And Mum wanted a tour of his rooms so she could criticize his taste, which Ev morning-stupidly
thought was probably his best opening to tell her he was absolutely, unquestionably, 100% going to
move to a different primary residence as soon as he could manage it.

Which gave Mum the opportunity to pretend to be deeply wounded, and Dad enjoyed Evan’s
horror far, far too much.

In fact, Evan was not so much horrified as unsettled and suspicious and unsure whether this play-
acting was her secret way of telling him she really did like the idea of having him around more,
even though it was hardly as if they were ever in the country longer than a week at a time. The
very thought made him feel sort of damp and crumbly and weak in the chest and stomach areas,
which didn’t even make sense because shouldn’t it make him happy?

And then Dad made it worse, saying in a very relaxed and not-particularly-invested voice that there
was no reason to move out since he’d mostly have the place to himself. So then there was a (for
them) moderately heated fight about whether people who generally had a place to themselves were
entitled to warnings about whether there would suddenly be company that could barge in on them
without warning in the middle of private moments and rearrange their breakfasts for them.

Mum was no help to either of them for this bit, since she was too busy laughing at him. Evan
stared with very pointed suspicion at her glass of clear bubbly stuff. She shared a sip of it with him,
and, after thus informing him of the existence of something truly delicious which it was just
possible that Spike wouldn’t hate, wouldn’t tell him what it was.

He couldn’t make it out at all. It tasted of thyme and lemongrass and vanilla and something citrusy
and just a hint of something that might have been celery or cucumber or plimpy-root, and yet
somehow the flavours weren’t arguing. Evan stared at it in outrage. It was far too early for drinks
that made his head explode.

Mum remarked to Dad that, in her opinion, they should always talk to Evvie when he wasn’t quite
awake, at which point Evan realized he’d said at least some of that out loud.

Dad mitigated his status as Rat of the Month slightly by saying that really wouldn’t be fair, but
then ruined it by asking how Evan planned to feed himself when they took Linkin out of the
country again.

Evan said, “Cissa’s lending us the elf they got as a wedding gift for a while. Well, I say Cissa; if
you ask Lucius he’d say he’s relying on Severus to train the nerve-basket into not dropping things
and he’d probably also say he had to talk her into it. You know how it goes.”

“I’m sure I haven’t the faintest idea,” Narcissa’s aunt said complacently, and sipped her drink.

“Of course you haven’t,” agreed her husband, smirking under his moustache.

Evan rolled his eyes, though not too ostentatiously. “I might have to talk to Granddad about one of
my own in a while—we’ll see. This should do while I’m getting set up, at any rate, and then we’ll
see where we are.”

“Set up with a new branch office, according to Papa,” Dad noted, tearing off a piece of bread to dip
in his soup. “What brought that on, Evan?”

“Well,” he explained, “I was thinking about where I’d like to live, and there was a lot I did like about Diagon. With markets and take-away and a bookstore and everything. It is nice to look out and see the roses again, but they can’t make that fish thing Spike likes and neither can he, and I’m a bit afraid of what he’ll get like when he runs out of books.”

“He’ll have the Hogwarts library, though,” Dad pointed out.

Evan laughed. “As if he hadn’t already read at least most of it! Besides it’s useful being able to start chatting with a tourist perfectly naturally and just bring them to the studio, and I’m feeling out of touch since I stopped doing my own shopping in the market.”

“Leaving the country for several weeks having nothing to do with being out of touch, I suppose,” murmured Mum, not so much taking a sip of her drink as bringing it up to her face to draw attention to her eyes, which were smirking at Evan.

Ev sighed. “Yes, of course it does, Mum, but Linkin throws a fit when a wizard does the shopping for him and I can only hear ‘unbecoming’ and ‘stealing an honest elf’s work’ so many times in one week before the urge to ask follow-up questions becomes irresistible. Never mind when you go to market yourself you not only hear all the gossip but quite often happen across something delicious you wouldn’t have thought to ask for and an elf wouldn’t have dared to gamble on buying just in case you like it,” he added grumpily.

“We really wouldn’t know,” Dad said with mild bemusement, by which he meant that Spike was a terrible influence on a young gentlewizard of good family who ought never have even thought about from whence his food came, much less gone out to fetch it himself and possibly (horrors) filthied his hands evaluating fresh produce the unwashed masses had potentially also squeezed.

Evan ignored this. To be precise, he Ignored it, complete with veiled dirty look at his honourable parent. “I suppose I could just get another flat in Diagon, but it seems like a waste, doesn’t it, when we don’t have any offices between here and Hogsmeade, and there are plenty of Quidditch towns. Wigtown and Nottingham and Appleby and Yorkshire and so on. I realize it’s useful to be close to the Ministry, but we already are, and there are several untapped markets full of less busy people, some of whom are quite prominent and might well want to make sure of getting a portrait done before they take too many bludgers to the face, and, you know, they might quite like being painted by someone who played at school and can follow along when they talk shop. And then there’s everything that goes along with vacation spots. I don’t see why I can’t live near a studio that’s tourist-accessible and also have a garden, or trees.”

“I don’t either,” Mum said gently, smiling in a way that said she was pleased with him but also expected to have to be quite firm, “but, darling, you know you’ll need a secretary. I don’t wish to rub it in, but we heard about the Muriel Prewett mess in New Zealand.”

Evan stared her dead in the eyes and counted to ten. Out loud.

“I remember when we were first married,” Mum told Dad gaily. “You started doing the wineglass trick at lunches with clients without realizing—and I’d never even told you how it was done!”

Evan picked up his plate, set it to one side, and planted his forehead on the tablecloth where his eggs had been. It was lovely and warm, and had approximately as much give as the back of Spike’s ribcage, but it only smelled of laundry herbs, mushrooms, and eggs. He should have asked for sausage instead of a potato cake.
“Further dramatics,” Dad sighed, stroking his moustache mournfully.

“I INTEND to get a secretary,” Evan informed the nice, warm tablecloth. What a kind tablecloth. It didn’t make fun of him by strongly implying that he was adorably acting like a cobra because he’d been infected by one. “I’ve BEEN THROUGH this with Grandpère. I’ve already written to Sluggy this morning. And Weatherby at the DMLE might give me some leads from his network since I helped him look after his boss at the Portkey office affair.”

“I heard about that,” Dad said mildly, in a tone that mixed genuine approval with a certain amount of irony. “You showed some good spellwork there—or so I heard.”

Evan stared at him. He hadn’t wanted to talk at breakfast at all, and now he was finding out there was a better than coin-toss chance that he had actually crossed wands with his own father. While protecting the head of the DMLE. Who everyone said had a fair chance at being Minister Bagshot’s successor.

Now he was finding out that Voldemort had sent the older and presumably more disciplined Knights of Walpurgis to attack a location he had also ensured that his junior members would be at, without warning said junior members and apparently also without warning the senior ones. Why?

To see how he and Spike would do, obviously—whether they could keep their heads and keep to instructions, and whether they’d be blindly loyal or have the sense to generate goodwill, how much restraint they’d show against opponents they ought to have guessed were allies. But that didn’t seem like enough.

Evan didn’t think Voldemort had meant them to be targeted—he liked Spike and had plans for him. By sending older Death Eaters instead of, say, Rabastan, he’d made it much less likely for anyone to get hurt if he specifically didn’t want them hurt. And it was more likely that agents who’d lived through a war would have enough attention to spare while attacking to catalogue the reactions of their juniors.

But it didn’t seem like reason enough. Not when Crouch was involved. Evan amended his morning plans.

“Evvie?” Mum asked, her voice light and full of amusement. “Were you planning to sleep on the tablecloth all morning?”

“Yes,” Evan replied at once and with decision. Having thus registered his feelings, he sat up. “Dad, Grandpère gave me a puzzle and warned me about asking for the answer, but does that mean I can’t ask for any help with it at all, do you think?”

“Depends what it is, I suppose,” Dad said, so Evan explained. “Ah. If he just said not to ask anyone for the answer, I should think it’d be all right to ask for some sort of help. Probably not for a hint, though.”

“Can you show me what all this code in the firm record books means, then?” he asked plaintively, and went into a pocket for the scrap of parchment he’d brought down with the sample line on it. “It’s all ‘Ag-12-62 LvR cp QsPm 12g9s nv aud af QsPm/3cz2r TmPm Q.m.dap,’ and all I can make out is that the portrait cost twelve and a half galleons in mid-August of 1962.”

“Lavelle Rosier painted Qusay Podmore with all the trimmings,” Dad said promptly, taking the sample, “C-P meaning complete package, and had no divinatory visions—non video, you see. You’ll only see V or N-V in the 1960s book in her entries, Papa’s, and Aunt Chrysanthemum’s, though if you go earlier than 1940 it’s another matter—but gleaned from the sitting-chatter—that’s
aud for *audivit*, or *auditory*, I suppose — that Qusay was having an affair with Tahmid Podmore, his third cousin twice removed, to Qusay’s mother’s disapproval.”

Evan shoved his face back into the tablecloth.

“Linkin, fetch the book you gave Evan,” his father said, his voice making it plain he was smiling behind his moustache. “If we go through a few pages we should hit most of the important terms. You should be able to get the hang of it, as long as you haven’t forgotten your family trees. And don’t worry about having asked; Papa wouldn’t have expected you to work out the shorthand on your own.”

“And I thought Severus’s potions notes were hideous,” Evan mourned as the book appeared next to his head, this time without the thud and dust cloud.

“Then you should be well prepared,” Mum patted him unnervingly between his shoulder-blades, and fortunately got up to leave them to it before Evan could embarrass himself by explaining how he’d been able to bribe Severus to make churning through said notes very nearly pleasant. “You should count yourself honoured, Evvie. Your grandfather didn’t start torturing your father with these until he was.. how old were you, Darius, thirty?”

“Until I was married,” Dad corrected, and they both gave Evan extremely bland looks.

“Wasn’t that the same year you worked out how to infuse the gesso with a translation charm?” Evan retorted innocently.

“...It might have been,” Mum admitted reluctantly, her eyes warning Ev that this was only a temporary setback.

“Jolly useful, that charm,” Ev noted, reaching more cheerfully for his fork to polish off his last tomato. Dad’s expression made him wonder if he’d ever actually given either of them a more than obligatory compliment before. Not that he owed it to either of them. But definitely something to think about, and quite possibly a useful tool to keep in his box and use sparingly.

“Have you invented anything recently, dear?” she asked sweetly.

“Not as such,” he admitted, devoting his attention to assembling a well-balanced forkful of egg and delightfully garlicky mushroom, “but I did point out to him that we’ve been completely neglecting a boatload of Quidditch-related business opportunities, and I think I really captured the feeling of this amateur game they had at the Dartmoor potions conference. The technique needs polish, naturally, but the only other wizarding sports paintings I’ve seen have been posed.” He hadn’t actually told Grandpère about it; it needed a lot of polish. But he had shown it to Delphine, and she’d winced a little but also looked considering. “Even if game captures don’t work out, we haven’t been offering family game-day portraits or victory portraits or anything .”

He would, he predicted, feel smug about the considering look they gave each other for weeks.

Dad was, for the first time in Evan’s life, extremely helpful, but then he made Evan pay for it by demanding to see all of his mask stuff. His excitement over the design-drafts Evan had so far was flattering, but not in a way Evan really liked.

As it turned out, despite all his fine words to Spike about this not being the heart of his work and how they should be happy he’d gotten a job that barely involved Bella at all, Ev was not particularly comfortable with having his work praised on the basis that it would inspire pants-wetting fear from his colleagues’ enemies when it emerged out of the mist on them on a dark
night.

He didn’t want to admit that Spike had been right. Spike would start worrying about him again, and Spike was stressed enough without that sort of nonsense. But if he kept it to himself, Spike would feel betrayed and useless. So there was no choice.

It made him think back to the pure, heady, eye-spinning rush of painting that quidditch game in Dartmoor, brushes whipping all around him and heart pounding out of his chest as he switched canvas after canvas and scrambled to get dozens of people contained into one enthusiastic moment.

Except that hadn’t been exactly pure either, had it? People had already been disappearing.

And then Dad wanted to make suggestions. Ev didn’t get out of the house before eleven. Which, actually, was around when he’d expected to, before Linkin had interfered with his morning. He might have resented that less if he’d had more sleep.

Chapter End Notes

**Next:** Remus is in no way pissed off beyond belief at all his friends, what on earth would make you think that?

**Notes:** The part of the notetaking that has to do with divination is credited to Judith Merkle Riley’s *The Oracle Glass*. 
September 5: The Valley, Godric's Hollow

Chapter Summary

In which Remus takes the minutes and is super-professional and not mad at absolutely everybody even a little bit, why do you ask?
(Their code is unbreakable, what are you talking about, they're very good at this.)

Chapter Notes

Warnings: The capitalization in the titles has some internal logic, and even though both betas were confused by it, Remus stands firm.

Notes: Lily's Maruader-ish name isn't quite there yet. I wasn't going to even further delay posting just for that, but I reserve the right to change my mind about it.

She tugged at his collar, getting it just right to be daringly off-kilter instead of sloppy. She kissed him on the cheek, enjoying how nice it was to have someone she didn’t have to go on tiptoes for, and how pleased it still made him, every time. She gave the front of his robes one final tug and said in a warm, approving tone, slipping a hand behind his neck to make it support instead of an order, “Have a good time, sweetie. Don’t let those oik friends of yours make you tell them anything you don’t want to!”

She saw in his day-of-rain eyes how he wanted to protest against his friends being insulted. Saw him remember, with a sigh, how they were likely to react if they heard her name, knew her colours. Saw him nod glumly—in resignation to the necessity, not any resentment of her, or of having to keep secrets, or of being bossed around.

She sent him off with a smile and a kiss, knowing how much he’d have to complain of when he came back to her.

He was so glad she’d be there to talk to when he got back, and thought no more of it than that.

“Minutes” for Triannual Back to School Week Meeting

Friday the Fifth of September, 1980

Location: The Valley in Godric’s Hollow, sitting room
Sound quality: Preternaturally quiet, apart from some birds which are definitely not secret animagi spies because Mr Padfoot checked nasally

Barometer: slightly cool (about time) but bloody humid

Emotional barometer: commensurately humid, if you ask me, but no one did
Present:

Mr Prongs (CEO, chief of transfiguration, senior charasmith, ideas-man, President, Entire Graphics Department, junior guinea pig, and God-king)

Mr Padfoot (Vice-chair, chief of production, chief of technomancy, ideas-man, chief of negotiations, copy-writer, Head of Morale Because We Were Extremely Drunk When Assigning Titles, production slave, senior guinea pig)

Mr Wormtail: (Ministry liaison, senior potioneer, junior transmuter, ideas-man, guinea pig emeritus)

Mr Moony: (Budget-Wrangler, chief of administration, senior charasmith, senior transmuter, Layout Man, chief of production, copy-writer, ideas man, etc etc aka the one who actually does some work around here even when it isn’t deliriously entertaining)

Mr Giddy: (White Bearded-Counselor, All-Around Ginger Terror, senior nephew-corrupter, potions consultant, ideas-man)

Mr Fishbreath: (co-mascot, Muse, Chief of sitting on Padfoot’s head, senior sarnie-stealer)

Absent:

Madam Tigereye (CFO, chief charasmith, chief potioneer, copy editor, Ethics Monitor, chief aesthetician, and Queen, consulting guinea pig at Her Majesty’s pleasure)

Mr Fabulous (White Bearded-Counselor, All-Around Ginger Terror, technomancy consultant, consulting guinea pig, senior nephew-tester, and ideas-man)

Mr Prongslet (co-mascot, chief of dirty nappy production)

Minutes

- Meeting opened with the traditional argument over whether minutes should include timekeeping and whether it is completely necessary to continually undermine Mr Padfoot’s vital contributions as Head of Morale and towards the production of established products.
- Mr Moony read out the week’s production numbers and Mr Padfoot sulked and made excuses. Mr Moony called into question the validity of Mr Padfoot’s excuses on the basis that Mr Padfoot doesn’t have a real job either.
- Messrs Moony and Prongs debated whether (ir)regularly babysitting the best child in history without fiscal compensation should be considered a real job. No consensus reached: parties agreed to disagree.
- Mr Wormtail inquired as to the whereabouts of Madam Tigereye and Mr Prongslet. Mr Prongs informed the meeting that they are visiting her mother. (Mr Padfoot looks as if he knows something about Madam Tigereye’s absence and is uncharacteristically unhappy about it. This being only tangentially relevant to company business, Mr Moony will get it out of him later.)

Production Notes
Mr Prongs noted that last quarter’s production numbers had already been read.
Mr Moony cautioned Mr Prongs that the production numbers as read might have been summarized for effect (at which point Mr Padfoot said ‘HA’ very loudly and also incorrectly, causing Mr Fishbreath to hide under the cupboard), and read said numbers in more detail.
Mr Padfoot fetched a round of butterbeer for the company to cover his shame.
Mr Padfoot’s failure to promise to take on something approximating his share of the boring stuff and avoid a repeat of this sad incident at the next meeting was noted by Mr Prongs and was deeply unsurprising to Mr Moony.

Back To School Week Sales

- Arse-Kicking Boots: sold well amongst Hogwarts-bound students, but were all returned to Zonko’s by Mr Filch and many parents pressed for reimbursement. Zonko’s has dropped the line, enclosing in their communication an unpleasant reminder of having agreed to stock company products in spite of concerns about company members’ school-age reputations. Mr Wormtail volunteered to ask Barty Crouch Jr to make enquiries as to whether the DMLE might have a use for such a mobile offensive distraction. Mr Giddy asked what use a trainee Auror might be in this area, and Mr Wormtail explained that Mr Crouch is kindly disposed towards him at the moment, thanks to a matter of Mr Wormtail’s limiting Mr Crouch’s time in a difficult meeting, and that Mr Crouch would know who to ask and where to start in making introductions. Mr Prongs approved the plan. Mr Moony cautioned that the Ministry might find the boots a touch chaotic for their tastes. Mr Giddy agreed that the Ministry is a bunch of fuddy-duddies. Mr Padfoot pointed out that the boots can in fact be set to a specific target when the desired target is known. Mr Moony agreed that it’s certainly worth trying but also expressed the opinion that the company should not get its collective hopes up as sympathetic magic is required to set a target.

- Duck-Egg Delights: similar situation (same for the Marauder’s Torches), with fewer requests for reimbursement (possibly due to the much lower price points). Mr Padfoot reported that an owl approached him on Monday with a howler from Mr Filch on Hogwarts stationary in which one of the few coherent words did indeed sound quite like ‘ducks.’ Mr Padfoot expressed gratification at Mr Filch’s most unexpected rhyming ability. Mr Wormtail expressed justifiable dudgeon at the failure of an innovative product. Mr Prongs wondered what sort of giant bristle-brush had crawled up Mr Filch’s arse. Mr Giddy (despite being only familiar with the late Mr McGillicutty and not Mrs Norris) expressed the opinion that it was his foul cat’s tail, assured Mr Wormtail that it was an extremely innovative product and noted that Mr Filch had not in former years made a practice of shaking down incoming students with mischief detectors. The company affirmed that it didn’t appear to have been Filch’s practice last year, based on sales figures. The company indulged in a round of self-congratulation. Mr Prongs clarified that his earlier question had not been rhetorical, and Mr Padfoot explained that Mr Filch had expressed hygienic concerns. The company agreed that this was a failure of advertising, although Mr Moony noted that Mr Wormtail looked a bit shiftly while agreeing. Mr Moony will revise the adverts and packaging, after confirming with Mr Wormtail privately that Mr Filch’s concerns are unfounded. (And possibly making some inquiry into why Mr Wormtail is so unusually (one might even say vengefully) preoccupied with this one.)

- Other comestibles performed as expected. Mr Padfoot will deliver the Zonko’s and Sugarplum numbers to G&J and Honeydukes and attempt to secure shelf space in time for the first Hogsmeade weekend. Mr Giddy advised Mr Padfoot to buy lunch for Mr Flume before entering into serious discussion, which advice was well taken in light of last year’s
abject failure and Mr Padfoot’s subsequent exit from the sweets shop pursued by an angry mob.

- Madam Tigereye’s line of hair-rinses was an absolute smash, although the aura-enhancer performed considerably less well at market than the sparkling, bubbly, and jasmine-sprouting ones. The company agreed that we should wait and see if word-of-mouth has any effect on sales next quarter before cutting the aura-enhancer. Mr Padfoot expressed a fond desire to see the bubbly version used on a gentleman of our acquaintance. Mr Giddy’s request to be further informed on this point was initially met eagerly by Messrs Padfoot and Wormtail, but to Mr Moony’s astonishment, Mr Prongs put a close to this discussion—looking weirdly uncomfortable, in the writer’s opinion.

- Night Lights: similarly successful, with the exception of the Marauder’s Torches as aforementioned* and the cute one for nurseries (still some sales on that one, just not from the student crowd. Mr Wormtail expressed some bewilderment that first-years were as liable to go for dragons over unicorns as the older years, and was asked in some astonishment by the company at large whether he actually remembered our first year. No cohesive reply to this query.)

* Some concerns expressed that the Marauders Torches are too similar to Hands of Glory for distribution to the general public. Half the company acknowledges this as a reasonable concern and the remainder is hung up on the fact that our torches accomplish their effect entirely without the use of dark magic or dismembered dead blokes’ body parts. Messrs Moony and Padfoot agreed to discuss whether the effect can be adjusted to be less attractive to criminals and terrorists, always assuming Mr Padfoot is ever at home to have anything discussed with him, and in the meantime distribution will be limited to Community Engagement purposes.

- Zonko’s COMPLETELY SOLD OUT on Eager-Pleaser Catnip Treats. Mr Moony remarked that the company ought to prepare for complaints: while these are likely to make normal cats and kneazles more susceptible to requests to get off the kitchen table/birdfeeder/baby’s face and stop trying to disembowel the other pets, it is likely to have little to no effect on Mrs Norris, who is widely acknowledged to be the avatar of some Lovecraftian demon-god. Some discussion ensued on the exact composition of the evil that lurks in her spiteful little heart, and by ‘some’ I mean about fifteen minutes. The company concluded that she must have been summoned by some ancient dark rite Mr Filch found in the restricted section which could be accomplished by Muggles but uses the tears of virgins, baby unicorns, or first-year Huffies.

**Vendor Requests**

Attachment 1: recurring orders
Attachment 2: non-recurring orders
(IMPORTANT: this year let’s remember Ollivander doesn’t want trick wands, he wants the fizzy sparkly obviously-a-toy ones the titchier sprogs can use to practice their forms without the risk of sudden Real-Smelling Rubber Giant Squid Hats)
Attachment 3: Honeydukes (tentative: To Be Adjusted Following *firm but POLITE AND HUMBLE* Negotiation, Padfoot)
Attachment 4: Sugarplums
Attachment 5: Zonko’s (also TBAFN)
Attachment 6: Gambol & Japes
Attachment 7: Auror Corps/DMLE
Attachment 8: Community Engagement
Forward Planning

Note: Production for several products was multiplied for the back to school rush. Relative numbers in this section are as compared with production estimates from last quarter.

- Production to resume on body armour, footprint enhancement, demiguise-hair cloaks, Stunning Shrikes. Continue at full capacity on Marauder’s Torches as noted above.
- Production to be delayed on Cold Nose Warm Heart drops until a) the weather calls for it and b) we can refine the recipe so it stops making Mr Padfoot steam uncomfortably at the ears. Further development and testing approved over Mr Padfoot’s objections.
- Production to stop on the stupid bloody attack boots until Mr Wormtail has had a chance to talk to Mr Crouch and take feedback for any changes the DMLE might wish to see before (we hope) placing a bulk order.
- Mr Padfoot suggested that, however enamoured Mr Prongs is with the boots as boots, they might sell better as detachable under-soles to be activated when kicked off. Mr Prongs reluctantly agreed that Mr Wormtail had better keep this idea in reserve to offer Barty if necessary. Messrs Prongs and Padfoot will begin work on the necessary adjustments.
- Production to resume as normal on most hair rinses, night lights, and all the sweets except the duck eggs (reconsider after sanitation-certified). Including the catnip treats, at least until we can gauge the Hogwarts reaction.
- Production on the aura rinse and the unicorn night light to be reduced to 20%. Mr Prongs will re-label as Limited Editions with new artwork. Mr Moony will add a Probationary Product Performance Appraisal item to the agenda for the next quarterly meeting. Mr Padfoot suggested the labelling for aura rinse should target courting couples and their mothers. Mr Padfoot had no immediate suggestions for how to do this without slapping a honking great ‘MUMS! CONCERNED YOUR PRECIOUS PRINCESS IS TAKING UP WITH A PRINCE OF SLIME AND DARKNESS??’ on the label, but hinted with suspiciously belligerent mysteriousness that he might have a consultant in mind. Mr Moony reminded Mr Padfoot that packaging designs must go through layout to prevent spatial distortion and magical interference, and Mr Padfoot agreed but declared he would act as a middleman rather than arranging a meeting. This is not dodgy at all.
- Further development of hair rinses to produce different sorts of flowers and less salubrious results (for Zonkos and G&J only) was approved. Mr Prongs cautioned that rinses in the latter category will have to be run by the Ethics Monitor before final approval.
- Development of a range of friends-and-family tracking charms to be proposed to Ethics Monitor for review. Mr Padfoot is allowed to play around with the idea but is cautioned that serious experimentation is to be delayed until Madam Tigereye has had a chance to poke holes all over it. Mr Giddy volunteered himself as a potential consultant on this project and Mr Fabulous as a potential guinea pig, and stated more seriously that he wouldn’t mind having something along those lines for his own family.
- Development of the Phoenix Bomber is to continue and we are still not telling Madam Tigereye about it, to Mr Moony’s considerable disapproval. Production has been delayed by Madam Tigereye and ‘a galumphing Hufflepuff apparating home in a whomping rush and landing directly on’ the prototype, but at least Mr Prongs was keeping rudimentary notes this time.

Community Involvement

- Mr Prongs told an EXTREMELY DISTURBING ghost story about an abandoned Underground station and implied that the Aurors will think the occasionally hirsute responsible. Mr Prongs was unable to identify any actions taken to dissuade the Aurors from
this impression. Mr Prongs presented his belief that the Aurors’ alternate theory will be that muggles were responsible as an excuse for not taking such action. Some discussion of which category of persons is best able to defend themselves, which got unfortunately political and got bloody nowhere.

- More evidence apparently needs to be gathered to convince the company at large of its complete wrongheadedness on the subject of who is most vulnerable to sodding politics. No action items on this front from the company at large.

- Mr Prongs reports Mr Spangles is pleased with the results of Mr Padfoot’s ventures into Muggle London. Said ventures have also resulted in an enormous pile of rubbish which Mr Padfoot claims has given him ideas, although Mr Wormtail warns the company that new laws limiting adaptation of Muggle items are being crafted and care will have to be taken in developing any muggle-derived products.

- Mr Wormtail is enjoying his new day job and feels he is doing good work, but reports that some of the incidents his office has been called to explain away have been decidedly malicious. Mr Padfoot enquired whether a certain gentleman might be presumed involved, but admitted when Mr Wormtail elaborated that he wouldn’t expect said gentleman to repeat himself twice in two weeks and that nastier versions of common Zonko’s products like nose-biting teacups lacked the expected spitefully personalized imagination. Mr Wormtail suggested that the gentleman might be developing a monomaniacal resentment of more standard-sized noses, or planning to utilize his noted unpleasant facility with switching spells.

- Mr Prongs expressed the desire that the company should work very hard to prove to Mr Spangles its collective maturity, steadfastness, and ability to keep mum about sensitive topics. Mr Padfoot remarked that this sounded remarkably like being asked to turn Hufflepuff. Mr Prongs reported that Mr Spangles has expressed an unwillingness to let the company contribute more than production to Community Involvement until convinced that the company as a whole can’t be pressured, startled, or provoked into accidentally doing the wrong thing. Mr Wormtail noted that we are very good at production, someone has to do it, and it’s not as if anyone else is having pitched battles either. Mr Padfoot argued that they could be and no one is telling us or the Prophet, and Mr Prongs agreed with Mr Padfoot.

**Old Business**

- Mr Wormtail remains of the opinion that members of the general populace are looking at him funny, although he concedes that this is less of an issue now he’s switched offices. Mr Prongs suggested that the office itself might have been at issue, or indeed Mr Wormtail’s former desk since his former co-workers were not similarly afflicted. Mr Prongs agreed to pursue the matter in a month or two if Mr Wormtail did not notice continued improvement. Mr Giddy suggested it might be our civic duty to inform the Ministry if one of its offices, or even desks, is cursed. Mr Padfoot gave a stirringly unpatriotic speech about The Man, the conclusion of which being that anyone working for the government deserves what they get. Neither Mr Wormtail nor Mr Giddy appeared impressed, which suggests to Mr Moony that either Mr Giddy likes his brother-in-law better than he likes to admit or that there’s a reason Messrs Giddy and Fabulous never seem to discuss their day jobs even to complain about coworkers.

- Mr Wormtail continues to refuse to tell us his girlfriend’s name, even in the face of Mr Padfoot’s insistence that her name is Shaglesswanka Maiditupson.

- Mr Padfoot expressed dismay at not having the baby around and some confusion about what to do with himself. Mr Moony suggested he invent a loom for the demiguise cloaks if occasionally pointing a wand at a pair of knitting needles is so beneath him. Mr Moony also
suggested he might occasionally consider doing his own bloody dishes. Mr Padfoot accepted the challenge of the loom, cheerfully disregarding Mr Giddy’s information that such looms (naturally) already exist.

New Business

- Mr Wormtail suggested selling some products exclusively to the DMLE, since ‘exclusive government contract’ looks good for promotional purposes and some of Mr Padfoot’s former relations and their associates might use them harmfully. Mr Padfoot agreed heartily with this assessment but disagreed with the proposal, saying that the people we should be concerned about would use their own charmsmiths rather than patronizing Gryffindors, and it would be rotten of us to deny Moon-madness to mischief-minded munchkins. Mr Prongs declared the motion tabled until Madam Tigereye and Mr Fabulous are present to discuss it and vote.
- Mr Prongs proposed a line of toys for babies and was roundly shouted down by most of the sane members of the company. Mr Giddy questioned the wisdom of summarily dismissing a potentially lucrative product idea which could encourage the right sort of mindset in mayhem-oriented children from a young age (Mr Giddy did not deny accusations that he was planning to torment his own sister using his own giant pack of nephews), but retracted his objection when Messrs Moony and Wormtail explained about the Spaghetti Incident, the Aardvark Incident, the Thing With The Crib, and that the Fuzzy Bear disaster hadn’t even initially been Mr Padfoot’s idea.
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

Evan exercises his genius for efficiency, his lawyer regrets charging only time-and-a-half, and Walburga Black's umbrella stand was probably already cursed so no harm done, really.

Chapter Notes

Warnings: Parenting by sheltered Gryffindor who has not practiced making split-second decisions in hectic circumstances.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, SEVERUS!

Not only is this on time this year, it's a chapter in which I am not torturing you! Yes, thanks to my generosity you may dread your next bout of being afflicted by stupid people for another few weeks and instead live in the more immediate fear of what I'm about to do to Evan, who is keeping secrets from you which will directly affect you and matter to you very much! Don't bother thanking me, bubbeleh, I understand your feelings perfectly. ♥.^,^

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Retching miserably into the horrible troll-leg umbrella stand of nightmares, Evan had just enough attention to spare for Reggie’s Horrified But Still Trying To Be Polite voice saying, with an additional note of flattering indignation, “Er. Your client appears to be ill.”

“Apparating twelve times in one afternoon was entirely the gentleman’s own choice, Mr. Regulus,” replied the solicitor, unruffled.

“I’ll have,” Reggie started, paused while he obviously remembered Kreacher was supposed to be dead, and gulped in grief that might have been a little too overdone for a servant. [1] The almost-smoothness of his recovery was much better, though, when he finished, “—Some mint and ginger in a minute, Evan, hang on.”

“Tea, if you don’t mind,” Ev managed before he had to pause for another heave. “I can’t eat ginger straight, it burns.” He left just enough space for Reggie to, presumably, nod anxiously, and begged, “And a toothflossing stringmint if you have one, please.”

“Oh, sorry,” Reg said, with a voice that sounded quite wide-eyed. “We keep them in the umbrella stand.”

Ev turned just enough to grin at him and get a pleased-with-his-own-cheekiness grin back before Evan had to turn back to the receptacle. Which, in his opinion, hadn’t been notably disimproved by his additions to it. He could have dumped the flowers out of the vase (Aunt Walburga’s curse against careless, filthy boy-hands probably didn’t apply to him anymore and besides, it wasn’t a permanent transformation), but he would have felt badly about putting something nasty in such a
beautifully enamelled volute krater and Circe really didn’t deserve to be disrespected like that. [2]

Spike would have argued that Evan was being extremely shallow and the troll’s leg didn’t deserve it either. At least the second half of that was probably true, but since it was a present from Rodolphus, who had killed it himself and who Aunt Walburga rather liked, the only way Evan’s aunt and uncle were going to get rid of the wretched thing was if it was, quite innocently, made unusable. Vomit probably wasn’t going to be enough, but maybe if it was the target of enough outrages over time?

He was feeling better by the time Reggie hustled back with the small paper box and large mug. ‘Good’ would have been an exaggeration—his stomach felt punched and his balance was off, with the sort of suggestion-of-nausea that comes with stuffed-up sinuses. But he was better enough that it didn’t seem pointless to do some intense cleaning spells on the umbrella stand. He was almost sure he’d made them powerful enough to take off at least a layer of skin, although one of Spike’s upholstery-bleaching scouring spells would have been stronger.

“I could get rid of this,” he told Reg thoughtfully, hoping for an ally though not for actual agreement, “and tell your mum it evaporated under the evanesco.”

Runcorn shot him a speaking look. What it spoke was: Please do not plot out loud in front of your solicitor who has to see That Woman at holiday parties.

“Evvie, it’s made of troll,” Reggie said patiently, holding out the little paper box of mints.

Evan stuffed a string into his mouth and waited for it to wriggle clingingly through his teeth, relax into a tingly, scrubby foam, and dissipate without fuss. He was in complete sympathy with Spike’s violent hatred of the mints and preference for the controllable muggle tedium of toothbrushes, but he personally thought they were fun. Bracing in the morning and quite cheering after one had been sick, or when a client was drones on self-importantly at such length that one was legitimately afraid of falling asleep over one’s canvas, and far less likely to provoke a gag reflex. “Yes,” he agreed finally, when his mouth was clean and felt sparkly, “but she already thinks I’m crazy.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” his cousin temporized, walking them to the parlour and putting the tray down. “Why did you bring your solicitor?”

“I need to be very efficient,” Evan said mournfully as they sat, and sipped his tea. It was a bit weak, but he was used to Spike’s hell-brews, he supposed, and probably Reggie had wanted to get it to him as soon as possible. “It’s horrible.” [3]

“Oh, sorry, does it need sugar? Or—”

“Oh, sorry, does it need sugar? Or—”

“The tea’s fine, Reg.”

“...Oh. Er, good. Oh!” Reg remembered his manners. “Would you like some tea?”

“Thank you, Mr. Regulus.” Runcorn inclined his head civilly. “I took a potion in anticipation before we left—”

“So did I!” Ev objected. It wasn’t his fault if he was used to Spike’s, which actually worked. He’d had to pick up a commercial one, because Spike would have Noticed and Asked Worried Questions if the level in their bottle had gone down. He wasn’t used to apparating this many times in one day at all, and for most of them he’d been riding along with the estate agent. Side-along was always worse, and since the commercial potion was only helping with the nausea rather than eliminating it as Spike’s would have, it had gone cumulative on him.
Several times.

“Indeed, Master Rosier,” Runcorn probably-agreed, and looked back at Reggie. “I don’t require any ginger tea, but the ordinary sort would be welcome.”

Reggie hesitated, then summoned the necessaries from the kitchen. Evan could faintly hear the ‘dead’ Kreacher being insulted and indignant from down there, and devoutly hoped he was just imagining it.

In case he wasn’t, he started talking, as Spike would have said, complete drivel. “I know you don’t feel right about replacing your elf straightaway as such, Reg, but couldn’t Aunt Wally at least borrow one from Granddad? I bet he’s got one or two that could use some polish on their training before they’re placed, and this place has to be hard to keep up without one, what with all the…” he looked around at all the vicious decorations that would gleefully and sometimes lethally bite anything with human blood, “whatnots.”

Reg made a politely noncommittal noise that Spike would have pronounced as ‘sod off,’ so Evan shrugged peaceably. “I thought you weren’t coming to start on my portrait till Monday,” Reg said, his face pointedly and silently adding and you still haven’t come close to explaining the solicitor.

“Actually, I came to tell you I have to delay it,” Evan apologized. “And it’s even ruder than that, because I might not be able to start for a week or two, and I can’t say exactly when.”

“Is he okay?” Reggie immediately asked (discreetly if not subtly), eyes widening in worry.

Evan looked at him fondly, smile tugging wider. He turned to the solicitor, said, “Excuse us a moment, if you don’t mind,” and cast Spike’s sound-muffling charm. Back to Reggie, he said, “He’s not hurt or anything, but he doesn’t have a place of his own and it’s become very clear to me over the course of the week that he absolutely cannot stay at that school all weekend and my parents’ house will not do. I need my own place, I need it fast, I need it right, and—”

“There is no way on earth you can get a new house and have it ready for Spike by tomorrow,” Reggie interrupted, looking at him as if he were crazy. “There is no combination of magic and gold that will make that happen.”

“That’s what he said,” Evan grouchily agreed, tilting his chin vaguely in Runcorn’s direction. “And Narcissa.”

“Because there is no way on earth,” Reggie repeated, looking as if he were trying to be patient but was slightly worried because someone as crazy as Evan might do something dangerous.

“Right, well, I’m suddenly busy this weekend anyway. I think I can get it done by next weekend,” Evan sighed, “but I’m busy because I have a new paying commission that Grandpère wants me to clear immediately, so I’ll be out of the country again for the next couple of days. Sorry, Reg, I do expect to be back in England by Monday, but I’m really going to have to put the whole of next week towards this house thing. It’s rotten of me to do that and ask you to help me with part of it, but I’ve got to make Spike somewhere safe and quiet to escape to before his head explodes and he kicks somebody out the window again and gets sacked. I promise you’ll be top of my schedule as soon as it’s settled.”

“What do you mean, ask me to help you with part of it,” Reg demanded warily, and Evan beamed proudly at him for not letting the hook be buried. “I’m not helping you pick out furniture, Evvie. And I’m definitely not helping you paint, no matter how simple you say it is. Anyway, if it were that simple you’d let Linkin do it—”
“Look, you know how Spike is about doing things ourselves—”

“And nobody but you and Narcissa can tell the difference between misty-agate green and smoked-gunpowder-matcha tea or whatever you said, and the way you get about ‘even coverage’ and the tiniest drips—”

Evan laughed, and let the privacy spell fade. “No fear, Reggie, Narcissa would kill me if I asked anyone else for help decorating. No, the thing is, as long as I’m getting a place, Grandpère thinks—and he’s quite right, of course—that I might as well take the opportunity to expand the business a bit. So I’ll need a receptionist—someone who’s absolutely reliable and not gossipy at all.”

“I maintain,” Runcorn said long-sufferingly, “that my firm is not a hiring service.”

“But you do help out with our hiring contracts,” Evan pointed out reasonably.

“Certainly, Master Rosier, but not with your hiring selections, as a matter of course.”

“True,” he agreed, “but I value the character assessment of anyone who survived Slytherin while Lucius Malfoy and my cousin Bella were butting heads, and since I needed you along to find problems in the estate contracts anyway…”

“Also something of an expansion on our usual services,” Runcorn murmured, now not so much long-suffering as appreciate-my-goodness. He only meant that it was unusual for his firm’s solicitors to actually come along on a client’s house-hunt; for Evan to have made his own decision and then sent the contract along for him to facilitate would have been perfectly normal.

Sadly for him, his dress sense was much like Spike’s except more conventional and with fewer pockets, and the skin around his eyes was expressive even when the rest of his face was a perfect deadpan. Evan had every expectation that between his own understanding of Spike’s preferences and Runcorn’s natural taste, he wouldn’t have to wonder whether Spike would think a house was too silly to be borne.

Sadly for Evan, the estate agent hadn’t shown them anything remotely silly yet, but Evan considered dragging Runcorn all over England would be worth it even if she never got less boring. The solicitor didn’t seem to agree, but then he valued thoroughness over efficiency.

Ev slid Runcorn an amiable And I’m Paying You Commensurately smile, and explained to Reggie, “My difficulty is that Narcissa and I tend to gravitate towards the gossipy types, and we can’t have anyone spreading company business talking about our clients out of turn. It’ll have to be someone who can say no to people more rampaging erumpent-ish than you can imagine and make it stick, and do the books very competently and keep track of everything, and be willing to accept a silence geas without taking it personally and getting insulted. I thought you or Lucius might know someone, and frankly, I’m not sure Lucius would suggest anyone I can tolerate for more than five minutes put together.”

“Selwyn,” Reggie said at once.

Evan blinked.

“She can say no to Bast,” Reg added, both fervent and a bit defensive. “And she’s been helping Bulstrode out at the trainery, with the books as well as the crups, so she’s had a bit of accounting experience. She wouldn’t make a very smiling receptionist, but she’s never been gossipy and I always thought you got on all right…”?

“Reggie, you’re a genius,” declared Evan, smiling at him. “Do you think she’d want to?”
“I don’t know,” he admitted, his I’m-being-useful! glow faltering. “Would you need her full-time? She’s been talking about wanting to give up the security-troll training since the baby came or I wouldn’t have mentioned her, but I think she still likes helping Bulstrode with the crups and thestrals. She wouldn’t want to stop helping with the books, either, unless you’ll be paying her enough that Bulstrode can hire some other help with it. And there is Millicent to consider.”

“Well, I’ll see if we can work it out,” Ev decided. “Let me know if you think of anyone else, will you, in case she won’t?”

“Sure, Evvie. Tell Spike hullo from me, will you? And I’m sorry his job’s being so…” Reg waved an aimless hand.

“He just needs to get used to it, I think,” Evan lied. What Spike needed was to be able to relax and feel safe every single evening. He was about to start losing his appetite, if Evan was any judge of his stress levels. But settling in would certainly help. And a weekend away from the school might, too, even if it was a busman’s holiday.

Runcorn put his teacup back on the silver tray and stood up. “Thank you for your hospitality, Mr. Regulus. Are you ready to resume the hunt, Master Rosier?”

“I don’t think so,” Evan decided. “Folley gets cranky when her tea’s interrupted, and she looked like she really needed it.”

“Quite,” Runcorn agreed, with eyes that silently accused Evan of being unreasonable and a terrible client for wanting to see every house that fit his specifications in the space of one afternoon, as if he wasn’t paying them both their full time-and-a-half for several hours at short notice.

“Anyway,” Evan ignored this reproach, “it looks as if I need to find out whether I’ll need the waiting area to have room for a crib and a playmat and possibly a dog bed.”

Runcorn let his eyes close, expressively. “Babies require a great deal of attention and must be changed and bathed.”

Evan considered that giving Dobby more work than he currently had could only be a good thing, but just said firmly, “Well, I’ll discuss it with Selwyn.”

“They occasionally become quite loud, and, indeed, odiferous,” Runcorn pressed on in a despairing voice, “neither of which is a trait commonly considered an ornament to a place of business.”

“Quite, quite. Thanks for the tip, Reggie!” Evan said loudly. “I’ll let you know when we can reschedule as soon as I know.”

“D’you want to come over for supper sometime this week?” Reggie asked.

He was clearly hoping for a reprieve from his own parents, but Evan thought it would probably be a solid month before Spike had calmed down about Hogwarts enough that he could be either left alone of an evening or subjected to family-formal meals. Anyway, Aunt Walburga was conflicted about Spike, and he reminded Uncle Orion of Sirius being disreputable and a disgrace, and then there was gloominess and extra drinking. Taken altogether it made things strained.

So Evan said, “I don’t think I can commit to any particular day just at the moment with all this to get done, but I’ll tell you what—I’ll have you over as soon as the new place is fit for company. And then you can explain some of this heir-apparent nonsense Grandpère suddenly wants me to pay attention to and tell me all about why you’ve been haunting the tea-shop so often the Prophet’s
calling you its patron,” he added on his way out the door, shooting his sunniest grin over his shoulder and watching Reggie turn all pink and white and completely fail to refuse to help him figure out how to do the books.

Even though Ev had specifically gone to see Selwyn while he was already paying for Runcorn’s time, he was disappointed in his wild hope of getting this step taken care of at once. While cautiously in favour of the idea once promised that at the very least she wouldn’t be taking a pay reduction if she worked anything resembling normal business hours and Ev wouldn’t mind if she did her wife’s books at his desk, she naturally wanted to talk it over with Bulstrode and have a think about how much time she wanted to keep free.

She wasn’t keen on Evan’s idea of taking the baby to work to give the place a friendly, casual, mum-friendly air, either. Ev rather thought she was trying to make him feel like a monster for even suggesting it, possibly in aid of salary inflation.

This did not work for her at all. He’d thought it would be convenient for her with a possible business side-benefit, but it wasn’t as if he particularly wanted to have an infant around all the time. He wasn’t even terribly fond of Narcissa’s, although he had to admit that Millicent was, based on the two or three times he’d visited when she was awake, less fussy and fretful than Draco by far.

When Selwyn suggested, all on her own, that she might occasionally bring one of the crups in instead if he thought having something big-eyed about would be such a bloody draw, he felt quite pleased with himself. Everyone liked dogs, and though he personally preferred larger ones, crups were cute and unintimidating, as long as Selwyn could train hers to be polite to Nottingham muggles. That would be a bit of a challenge, considering how offended crups tended to be by the smell of humans who lacked magic, but Selwyn and Bulstrode both secretly enjoyed challenges. They claimed not to, but Evan had known Spike and Narcissa for a long time and he could tell when someone was only pretending to be grumpy or annoyed so as not to be taken advantage of.

So even if he didn’t have a signed contract in hand by the time they were ready to leave and Runcorn was making agitated little wasting-my-literally-valuable-time faces, Evan felt considerable progress had been made.

And it hadn’t been a waste of Runcorn’s time, in Evan’s opinion. This sort of thing was exactly why he’d asked him to come, along with thinking to raise issues like:

* Do remind me which concern would be used to transport the building, because the one I surely-incorrectly recall you mentioning is currently under investigation for fraud.

* If my client is to consider purchasing this house, it will be after the carnivorous ivy and doxy colonies have both been removed, along with the curse on the oven, which, as I’m sure you’ll recognize, is a fire hazard.

* What do you mean the wards are incompatible with the spells to expand rooms?

* Will your client refuse sales if mine wishes to completely replace all the bathroom fixtures that her grandfather lovingly installed, taking into consideration that they appear to have been built for extremely short people of no evident taste? [6]

* Er, is it actually possible that the cottage will irretrievably fall apart stone from stone if removed from its native ley lines, or could it be, and I do hesitate to suggest it, that your client is simply loath to sell the building without also selling the associated land which happens to be blighted by proximity to a nogtail colony?
Et cetera. Ev wouldn’t have thought of most of the little details Runcorn apparently had on a pre-written checklist, and he didn’t think even Spike would have thought of all of them.

He certainly hadn’t known what salaries Rose & Yew typically paid anybody,[7] and he’d completely tuned out for a good five minutes while Runcorn and Selwyn talked about how early in the morning an office should open even if the artist it was serving wasn’t awake yet and why the confidentiality geas was standard and what it actually involved.

It had given him time to start thinking about what different backgrounds he wanted to put in into the Grindelwald portrait, since he and Dumbledore had agreed the fellow ought to be confined to a single frame. The lemon grove was obvious, even if Dumbledore hadn’t hinted he’d like it, and Ev would have to do the cell since he couldn’t take the man out of it to pose. Probably Grindelwald would like a library, even if he’d have to let Dumbledore choose all his books. Other than that, the only thing Ev knew for sure was that he was not going to flit all over Europe to paint war ruins.

He was going to treat this more or less like a normal portrait, not a Provocative Work of Great Historical Meaning. This commission wasn’t being painted for strangers to gawk at and learn from—if one of those was to be done, Grandpère could do it. This was helping an old man unburn a bridge with someone very important to him. This was that old man making sure that his important person didn’t entirely disappear from the world, and would be comfortable in his anchor and not feel it a prison or a penance. If there were politics behind it, that might be Evan’s concern as Severus’s partner, but it wasn’t his business as an illuminator.

He was, as an illuminator, deeply curious about how soon Dumbledore would break and ask for a second locked portrait with them both in it, but probably even studying Divination with Narcissa wouldn’t have helped him with that one.

“—Or two more, if we go now,” Runcorn was saying pointedly. “I daresay she’ll be expecting us by this point.”

“Jolly good,” Evan said vaguely, deciding against putting in any of the places he’d shared with Spike during their Bulgaria visit, no matter how gorgeous and how much fun they’d be to paint. Those were theirs. [8]

Selwyn sighed heavily, came over, levered him out of his chair by the arm, and shoved him out the door. She wasn’t rough about it, so he just waved absently to her as Runcorn took a grip on his arm.

Before Runcorn could take that one magical step, Evan said, “Just one more thing.”

Runcorn let him go and, if Evan was any judge, cathartically considered three or four methods of untraceable homicide. Evan, interpreting this as the melodramatic internal sobbing of someone who liked schedules more than any real threat, smiled placidly and drew him over to a nice piece of field a little distance Selwyn and Bulstrode’s house, on the other side of a little copse with enough battered tree-branches to show they used it for flying practice. [9]

“While I have you,” he said, as though it were something he’d only just thought of as they left, “why don’t we discuss the Prince matter.”

“So you did get my letter,” Runcorn said in what Evan considered to be an unnecessarily accusatory tone.

“Why did you think I made sure I’d have a large window of time with you where so much of it could be accounted for that any moments in between would disappear?” Evan blinked. “Only this
one won’t if we don’t use it well, so let’s be quick. You said you’d made progress?”

Runcorn looked as if he would have liked to have an emotional reaction to an outrageous remark but a) was too professional and b) acknowledged that Evan had a point about using the time well. He said, “I hesitate to take credit for it, but nevertheless progress has been made. Which is to say that on Monday I received an owl with a missive addressed to the solicitor overseeing your affairs, which it took me until Wednesday to authenticate. At which point,” he underlined pointedly, “I owled you.”

“And I arranged to meet with you as soon as possible, so there’s no need to feel ignored. Was it, by any chance, from one Mrs. Augusta Longbottom?” Evan asked.

“It was,” Runcorn admitted, surprised. Evan smiled. That letter Spike had mocked had looked to Evan like a clear declaration of her willingness to act as an intermediary, and he was, reservedly, glad to have pegged her right. “I didn’t anticipate discussing this matter today, considering how much other business—”

“I’m lazy,” Evan said placidly, hurrying him along with an encouraging gesture.

Runcorn eyed him, but allowed himself to be hurried. “And so I didn’t bring the documents, but I take it you’d like a summary?”

“Please.”

“There were two, and the first was what you asked me to acquire.”

“Julilla Abbot’s marriage contract,” he breathed. He’d thought it would take months. “Wait, don’t tell me— not Severus Prince’s contract, his wife’s father’s.” He didn’t say I’m an idiot out loud, but he thought it. Of course something Mrs. Longbottom could lay claim to, as a descendant, would be easier to get than anything Mr. Prince didn’t want to let go of.

“A copy of it,” Runcorn corrected, “which is why it took me two days to authenticate: the magic which would have made the matter instantly clear is all attached to the originals, of course. But I believe it to be a genuine copy.”

“And it’s as binding as was represented to us?” he asked, trying not to sound too much as though it mattered.

“Oh yes,” Runcorn said with a dry little legal smile. “You may view the document at your leisure, of course, but in brief, Mr. Prince is bound to support his wife’s safety, and to deny her no comfort within his means (some codicils there, I might add) and support her advancement in such endeavours which a gentlewitch may undertake without embarrassing her family.”

“...Which means?” Evan asked warily.

“I gather that Mr. Prince is permitted to block Mrs. Prince from supporting businesses and charities he would prefer his money not aid, taking public office while promoting positions he opposes, and from engaging in work which would either be physically dangerous to her or which he finds, and here I quote, ‘morally reprehensible.’”

“Considering all indications are that the man’s a tyrannical twit,” Evan said drolly, “that sounds promising.”

“I could not possibly comment,” Runcorn said solemnly.
Even though they were on a bit of a schedule, Ev couldn’t resist asking, “Why? He’s not one of your firm’s clients; I checked before putting this job on your desk.”

“He isn’t,” Runcorn agreed, the twinkle in his eye suggesting strongly that he had his own opinions about who else was either a tyrant or a twit. Evan looked sad at him. “But I must say that all the clauses of the contract are quite standard for that period—one might even say bog-standard. Including the provision for mutual bodily fidelity, and the binding on her to obey his decisions in regards to heirship and other inheritances, disinheritances and other forms of social, er, severance, adoptions, and the general finances of their House, once he declares such decisions final and providing they don’t violate clauses which are in her favour.”

“So he can’t oppose her in picking out the furniture to suit her comfort over his,” Evan summarized, “but he in fact can make it impossible for her to speak to her daughter or send any money and there actually is nothing she can do about it.”

“Just so.”

“Well, that is a charming and equitable balance of power,” Evan said, distracted from how glad he was for Spike by the thought of how Spike would have reacted if Mum and Dad had tried to make him sign anything that, if Dad had his way, probably would have been quite similar to that.

He really was glad, though. Not just that he didn’t have to think Julie Prince was the complicit monster Spike had braced against, but that Severus Prince was apparently an idiot. He must have said never to contact Mrs. Snape, but only said not to write Spike or seek him out. There were ways around that, although in Evan’s opinion Mrs. Prince hadn’t looked hard enough.

Runcorn shrugged philosophically. “The Abbotts may be a more significant House than the Princes, in Britain, but the Princes have a strong Continental presence, which was even stronger before their losses in Grindelwald’s war. And, of course, Mr. Prince was at the time the heir to the British branch of his House, as he is now its head, while Mrs. Prince is from a significant branch of her own birth-family but not high on its line of succession.”

Evan said, “Well, I wouldn’t sign it in either role, that’s all I can say. What was the second?”

Runcorn explained.

Evan said, “Huh,” and crossed his arms to give it due consideration. Now that he was reminded, Mrs. Prince (he was going to have to find a less cold way to think about her, if she was actually family) had mentioned something along those lines at the handfasting. At the time, he’d thought it was, if not a false promise, something between wishful thinking and wild brainstorming. Apparently she’d been serious. Worth bringing to Spike’s attention, even if it didn’t ultimately turn out to be practicable for them.

Uncrossing his arms, he smiled. “Okay. I’ll take a closer look at it later. Let’s go give Folley her chance to bite my head off.”

He was absolutely never apparating this many times in one day ever again, but his stomach had had enough time to recover since showing up at Selwyn’s door that he didn’t decorate the teashop. He did, however, get queasy enough that Folley only looked exasperated and informed him he was paying for her tea as punishment for being late instead of scolding him at length.

She was annoyed enough to get sharp with him, at least, four more houses in. This was less than an hour later; Evan had turned away from all of them on sight. Hanging on to professionalism by
her teeth (he did feel sorry for her really) in front of what he had to admit objectively was a very handsome Tudor building, she suggested, “Why don’t we go over your requirements again, Master Rosier? Maybe there’s something in them I didn’t understand.”

“Not a bad idea,” he agreed, using a tone that suggested an apology for being difficult without actually making any. “We may as well go in and see if the owner’s left any furniture to sit on.”

The owner had, so they settled in the sitting room. Folley appeared to hope that the very nice appointments inside would sway Evan. They did not, and he let it show. With a sigh, she pulled out her scroll and started reading off it. “Master and guest bedroom. Room large enough for a combined office-library.”

“One with two desks and at least six shelves,” he reminded her. “Or expandable to that size.”

She made a note and nodded. “Sunny studio area with ceiling capable of taking a sky charm. Personal sitting room with a fireplace mandatory, with a secondary parlour if possible. Room or outbuilding outfitted or suitable for potionering, with good ventilation, either fortified or fortifiable against internal accidents.”

“It has to be able to take additional fortifications regardless,” Evan corrected, because Spike was going to want to add on no matter what was already in place. “It’s good if there’s a foundation to build on, though.”

“No locked wards, all right.” Pulling out her scroll with the addresses, she made a couple of strikethroughs a few inches past everything Evan had already rejected, and then four more at the bottom. “And you wanted a cloakroom near the work areas in addition to the master bathroom, and a guest bathroom.”

“Well,” Evan temporized. “There don’t have to be two bathrooms and a cloakroom, really, do there? As long as there is a second bath, and some sort of toilet and sink near the work areas. Which I suppose we can add, but a place to put them, at any rate.”

She gave him a look that suggested she might have been able to add another address or two if she’d known that earlier, but didn’t comment. “You also wanted a kitchen and pantry operable by elves and wizards, a size-malleable dining area, an elf lair, a dedicated room for storage and ‘lots of closets’. That’s all I have for interior requirements.”

“That sounds right,” he agreed, after scanning the list she handed him and closing his eyes to see if he’d forgotten anything.

“Have you realized anything as we’ve been looking at places today?” she asked. “Ceiling height requirements? You want everything on one floor, or you definitely want two floors or three? You don’t like certain architectural styles?”

“I… hmm.” He considered this. “Actually, yes—well, and obviously the ceilings should be tall enough for me, but I don’t need anything, er…”

“Malfoyesque?” Runcorn suggested under his breath, speaking (Evan assumed) as someone who’d shared a school dorm with Lucius rather than as Evan’s solicitor.

“Grand,” he substituted diplomatically as Folley coughed into her hand in an I’m Not Laughing sort of way. “I want the master bed and bath, the study, and the personal sitting room on the top floor, and the guest and working rooms below. Or a three-story place with the study and dining area as a buffer.”
“Ah.” She made several more strikeouts. “No sprawling single-story layouts. And have you liked
the looks of anything I’ve shown you, whether it fit your other requirements or not?”

“No,” he burst out plaintively. “They’ve all been indefensible and soulless! And stuffy!”

“Some of them have had lots of windows,” Folley pointed out, looking confused.

“But they’re all so… boxy,” Evan tried to explain, frustrated. “And… and sterile, and show-offy
for strollers down the high street.”

Runcorn made his I Shall Not Display My Opinion That My Client Is A Lunatic face, but couldn’t
resist saying, “Surely you would wish a new home to be sterile before moving into it?”

“Only in terms of actual cleanliness,” he said plaintively. “A home shouldn’t look that way.”

He hadn’t thought about it before Spike had reacted with that quiet fury to his childhood bedroom.
It had never bothered Evan before, and their own place hadn’t exactly been cluttered. But when
Spike had, he’d felt as though something in him that he hadn’t known was broken started
cautiously thinking about knitting together. Clearly, even if Spike was overreacting, there was
something to it—something more than Evan being bored by boring architecture, which was also a
(less important) consideration.

“Homeowners generally want their houses to have curb value,” Folley said mildly. “To be
attractive to onlookers, and in case of future re-sales.”

“Yes, but it’s not going to be on a curb,” he said. “There shouldn’t be onlookers. I don’t know,
they could be teashops, Folley. Muggles could live there. They’re so… so fashionable.”

She looked at his clothes.

“Yes, but when I get dressed it’s to be in public,” he pointed out. Actually, he considered his
comfortable at-home clothes to also be as fashionable as such things ever got, but that wasn’t really
the issue at all. “A house with an elf should be… I don’t know, I suppose a house can’t really be
natural, but it should be able to become part of its land. These have all been parts of their cities.
It’s not the same thing at all.”

He half expected her to snap at him that what did he expect? Houses were houses; they were made
in a certain way because it worked.

Instead, she hummed contemplatively. “How much do you actually care about having guests
over?” she asked.

“Well, I don’t want any,” he admitted. “One or two friends over for dinner occasionally, but I
suppose one might as well use the family house for any big dos. That’s probably better anyway,
really. Still one ought to be prepared.”

“So you wouldn’t mind if a house had two bedrooms and two bathrooms, but no size-malleable
dining area?” she checked.

“Well, I suppose not.”

She rolled up her scroll. “So I understand properly: what you really want is a cosy little fortress
with some character. Possibly even one that’s a bit… old-fashioned, shall we say.”

He felt his shoulders go down in relief. “Yes. Yes, exactly. I mean, if it’s the right sort of
character. I don’t want any ghosts tagging along, or fireplaces that were used for dark rituals or whatnot.”

“Cosy,” she repeated comfortingly, and stood up. “I’ll just use the floo--one or two places come to mind, I’ll have to check to see if we can visit today. You probably won’t like them, but you can tell me if I have the right idea, and then I can see what else I can find.”

Having gotten the go-ahead from her office, she handed Evan yet another ginger chew and side-alonged them to yet another secluded area in yet another bustling probably-a-city. This one smelled, not as pleasantly as it might have, of seawater.

“It’s quite close,” she said, gesturing to the street. Runcorn made the exact sour face he’d made everywhere that wasn’t either Diagon Alley or a nice spread of secluded countryside, but he didn’t say anything. He had the first time, in Mayfair, but once Evan had reminded him that he already had the paperwork started on the land they’d be moving the house to, he’d contented himself with pressing his mouth flat and breathing in long-sufferingly through a pinched-looking nose.

Happily, the Mayfair exchange had alerted Folley to Evan’s complete lack of use for any townhouse his cousin was not currently living in, which had probably saved them all a lot of time.

As they got closer to the intersection, Evan started to hear the crowds, and as far as he was concerned they were not speaking English. “Where are we?”

“We’re coming onto James Street in Liverpool,” she said, and they turned a corner. “Here we are.”

She gestured up at a building that looked rather like a red stripy jumper over white trousers, or, alternately, a castle on top of a warehouse. Evan started to laugh. “What is that?”

“That’s Albion House,” she said, smiling. “It’s a hotel.”

“You weren’t going to sell me a hotel!”

“No, no,” she assured him, still smiling. “I’m just trying to work out what your limits on acceptable character are, and how much of a fortress you want.”

“Defensible,” he laughed. “Not an actual castle!”

“What do you think about the looks of it?”

“It’s very stripy,” he said, trying for a grave tone. Only it was very stripy.

“There’s another building I couldn’t sell you five minutes’ walk from here,” she suggested. “It’d give your stomach time to settle before the next jump, anyway.”

Evan checked the time, pleased he’d remembered to wear a pocket-watch so he wouldn’t have to cast the tempus spell in the middle of Muggle Liverpool. Addressing Runcorn, he said, “I don’t mind a walk if you don’t.”

“A moment first,” Runcorn said, and took them back into the alley before casting nihilmalio on them all. “I believe the ones from this morning were starting to wear off,” he explained. “I’m sure I saw a muggle woman looking surprised at your outfit, Master Rosier.”

“She probably just thought he was a model,” Folley said dismissively, making Evan go a bit blank as he tried to discreetly check he was wearing more clothes than you saw during life-drawing practice, “but an extra dose of nothing’s-off-here can’t hurt.”
In Evan’s opinion, being in this place at all was hurting his soul a bit. Some of the architecture was interesting, but it was all so greyish. The buildings stretched from one end of the block to the next, without a leaf of any sort in sight, and once it stopped smelling like a dirty beach it was full of horrible mugglish smells.

He felt badly about being so put off by them, but they were honestly horrible. They were strong and not-alive and he couldn’t even work out what a lot of them were, though some of them got worse when a car passed through.

Objectively speaking, he would probably have had to acknowledge that the pit of polluted despair Spike had fought his way out of smelled worse, but at least that reek made sense. The river was dirty and the streets smelled like old alcohol and older urine and garbage and the people smelled like sweat and harsh soap and giving up.

It wasn’t nice, but you knew what you were smelling and you’d gone in expecting it. People here looked as if they were not just going about their day but actually living their lives, and finding that people could walk around happily with their shopping in the middle of this tarry and synthetic stench… Evan was having a hard time fitting that into his head.

Even muggle perfumes smelled unnatural, and when one woman with aggressively curled hair passed by, he had a moment’s shaking flashback to being on the Devon moor with blood on his hands and Rabastan humming placidly off to one side and Spike trying with a white face to fashion a finger-bone out of a rock.

He was just reminding himself that he was not a Gryffindor and there was no shame in exiting an upsetting situation that promised minimal benefits when two things happened.

First, he spotted a flash of cool green and white that, when he looked at it, resolved into a statue-sprinkled gazebo in a stone resting area, across from some trees. They were lonely and didn’t look especially healthy, but at least they were something growing. He felt better at once. Not a lot better, but less like running away.

Which was just as well, because as soon as he’d noticed the trees, his peripheral vision started shrieking alarms at him, and other alarms started blaring, too. He shoved Folley and Runcorn up a short stone stairway into a somewhat-sheltered doorway, ignored her reflexive shove back with the ease of someone who’d been on a sports team and grown up with Narcissa’s shin-assaults, and peered out.

The cars, though large and worryingly solid, had previously to this been proceeding in an orderly fashion, stopping politely at the intersections and going in sets. They were no longer doing this, and Evan thought it might have something to do with the way the three lights on the boxes on the stout poles on the corners were going mad.

That was just a muggle problem, though. As Evan saw it, the real issue was that the statues on the gazebo were hopping down from it.

“I realize this isn’t your area of law,” Evan said to Runcorn conversationally, “but how much trouble would I get into for doing magic in this situation?”

“We’d best call the Ministry first,” Runcorn said, looking pale as he fumbled with a cloak-pin that, as a family solicitor, he’d probably never thought would have to serve as more than a mark of his profession. “But I should say the Statute is not currently a factor.” [10]

“Call them now, then,” Evan said in his That’s Enough, Avery voice, starting down the stairs. Of
course Runcorn was already trying, but it was important to make good intentions crystal clear at times like this. “And tag as many muggles for the obliviators as you can.”

“I’ll set up an expanding zone to tag us all,” Folley agreed, sitting down to spread one of her scrolls out on the top step to start the array. “A square quarter-mile should catch everyone who can’t apparate, with the traffic going mad.” Which did sound more effective than trying to zap the muggles they could see, though they’d probably already lost some of the faster runners. It seemed a bit fishy to him that an estate agent would have that sort of spell at her fingertips, but he didn’t have time to wonder about it.

His protego charm got a serious workout before he even made it to the square, especially when two of the cars tried to smash into each other trying to avoid the statue swinging its scales like nunchucks.

(As opposed to the ones lobbing royal orbs and drop spindles and gyroscopes at people, or bashing at them with shepherd’s staffs and crutches and books and whatnot.)

Evan couldn’t drop his protego when the car that hit it flipped up into the air: the car he’d been shielding was careening into a group of fleeing, screaming Muggles. That was why he was so surprised when it stopped in midair, spun gently wheels-side-down, and was settled carefully in a temporarily-empty spot.

Wheeling around, he was prepared to shout at Runcorn and Folley (though he wasn’t quite sure what for; he could certainly use all the help he could get even if his initial impulse had been a Spikelike one to get people whose Defense skills he was unsure of out of the way), but instead he was confronted with auburn hair, flashing green eyes, and a wand pointed at his face.

“What,” Lily Evans (er, Potter) hissed, “are you doing here?”

“House-hunting,” he said, too astonished to consider whether it was wise. “What are you doing here?”

“My parents live here,” she said, lowering her arm a little but still looking suspicious. “We were taking the baby for a walk.”

“There’s a baby here?” he demanded, appalled. “Where is it?”

“HE is safe in a cafe with my parents,” she snapped, “and how do I know—”

“What exactly do you think is safe with them chucking their bits and bobs about?” he demanded, gesturing wildly at the target-practicing statues. Cafes had windows, after all.

...He was turning into Severus.

No, Severus would have spontaneously figured out how to make a copy of himself so he could both shoot shields at people here and run after the baby. Still, Evan felt quite proud.

“It’s safer,” she snapped, white around the eyes in a way that told him she’d already thought of that and was trying not to. “I charmed the glass. And what am I supposed to do, let these people —”

“Never mind, just stop that car so I can put the shield down, will you?”

Still looking unfairly truculent, in Evan’s opinion, she somehow froze the careening automobile before it hit anything else. Evan thought he saw someone’s forehead hit the big window up front,
but he didn’t have time to worry about that because an old man was about to lose his kneecaps (and quite possibly the rest of his legs as well) to what looked like an enormous bronze toy boat.

Her voice still sounded a bit as if she were extending him the benefit of the doubt as a deliberate choice somewhat against her better judgment when she asked, “Are you better at protego or finite?”

“Don’t use finite!” he said, alarmed. “Are you mad? They’ll stick in place.”

“We don’t have time to worry about some dead Victorian’s artistic integrity, Rosier!”

”Maybe not, but we don’t have a choice. We’d never get them back quite right. All the old pictures will be wrong and it’ll be a permanent crack in the Statute.”

“Well, what do you suggest?” she snapped, throwing the statue with a shepherd’s crook away from the middle-aged woman it had been pounding towards and through another car’s window. The woman was probably only about Folley’s age—maybe even younger, since muggles seemed to age faster—but her aggressively blond hair made her look older to Evan. He wasn’t sure if it was the wrong shade for her or just made her look as if she were trying a bit hard.

Not that he was really thinking about it, but a corner of his mind he wasn’t currently paying attention to was deciding whether to emphasize the faint lines in her face when he painted her.

Not that he’d decided to paint this disaster, per se. It was just unthinkable that he wouldn’t.

“Petrificus. Or—Arresto momentum!” he stopped talking to demonstrate, since the angel was swooping down on a man with a briefcase who looked unnervingly like Madam Marchbank’s boggart-vampire. It fell to earth—well, paving-stone—with not only an almighty crash but also a crater. Evan breathed, and checked on the man. He was in one piece, although he was starting to look a bit damp around the trousery regions and Evan couldn’t tell whether he was having a heart attack or clutching at one of those cross necklaces that went in and out of muggle-mandatory fashion through the centuries.

Then it started climbing out.

“Nope, definitely Petrificus totalus,” he concluded with regret, waving his wand sharply at another impending disaster. He was aware that he decidedly had not been in the top ten of their year as far as spellcasting force and endurance were concerned, while she both had and was better at charms generally than he was. Still, no use risking that the difference would only buy them a few extra seconds. An arresto didn’t last long enough that you had to worry about dehydration even on mice, but Evan had never seen a petrificus wear off on its own.

“Right,” she said, sounding as if she’d set her jaw resolutely, and dashed off for the square.

Evan rather wanted to sigh, Gryffindors. Since he was being at least as bad (‘at least’ since he didn’t have the excuse of actually being one), he just set off after her in protego-peppered silence.

After only a few meters (and about six swift shields) he stopped, cursed himself for an idiot, and shouted, “Linkin! Dobby! To me!”

1: Overdone, at least, in front of someone who didn’t know about Reggie and Kreacher. Evan made a note to talk to him about that, though it was probably okay if Reggie was doing it on purpose for consistency.

2: Sixteen years later, the feud between Molly and Sirius did not actually start over disagreements about how much to include Harry, but because Sirius didn’t remember that the vase Molly was about to put some flowers in likes to turn
people into pigs.

3: Not that Severus’s tea wasn’t delicious. He managed to avoid whatever mere non-potioneering mortals might do to make it bitter or sour, every time. It was invariably, however, freakishly strong. If there was a hint of flavour or a molecule of caffeine left in the leaves by the time the cup made it to one’s lips, that cup had not been brewed by Spike.

4: Not that any Rose & Yew commission were pro bono, of course, even deathbed rush-jobs by junior painters that might end up as a very modest line-item in the funeral expenses. But coin aside, some of them paid off more than others.

5: By which he meant ‘shamelessly encourage them into talking three times as much as they ordinarily would and leave feeling they’d been quite discreet.’

6: Runcorn hadn’t put it exactly like that. But that was what Evan had been thinking and, furthermore, what had been all over his face.

7: His own income came from his share of the family interest and his commissions, and the rent for a fashionably-located flat in Diagon hadn’t taken as much of a bite out of it as Spike seemed to think. They were really going to have to talk about that at some point. Even if Spike never wanted to use any of the money that was now his-too, it was a fact and he was going to have to face up to it, poor thing.

8: Or, well, obviously not. Not remotely, in fact; Evan would never have heard about them if they hadn’t been famous national attractions. No one over there had liked him enough to let him know about the places only the locals knew about. But he wasn’t painting them for anyone else.

9: Although there were few wizard-only communities, this wasn’t because there were a lot of mixed ones. For wizards, the threat presented by neighbours had been far greater than those of living far from markets and hospitals since King James. After all, as long as you weren’t too sorry a wizard to apparate and too paranoid to be on the Floo network, commuting wasn’t a problem even if you worked in the city, and it wasn’t as if there were any wizarding supermarkets. Every Hogwarts graduate had enough Herbology to support a kitchen garden. In theory. In practice, there were weekly market days near any town with even a minor-league Quidditch team to its name, and if a muggle looked up at night to see a broom against the moon it was most likely to be some dairy farmer’s idiot nephew forgetting the invisibility charm on their milk delivery route.

10: In this Evan was mistaken. As a solicitor to families like the Rosiers, Runcorn had thought himself fully prepared to have to take what his firm called Preventative Measures. He just hadn’t quite expected giant bronze queens vaulting off their pedestals to bounce their orbs off people.

Chapter End Notes

Next: Severus Snape and the Bureaucracy of Dumb
AKA: If Severus doesn't kill Albus two decades too early by the end of this chapter, then fandom surely will.

Notes: I literally found out this monument even existed by using street view on Google Maps to trace the walking route between Albion House and the town hall. The muggle-attack originally planned was going to be a lot less of an obvious assault on the Statute of Secrecy, but then the Victoria Monument was right there.

Both my perspicacious betas noticed a discrepancy against chapter 12, and if you noticed it too then
a) the character in question would like to know why anyone thinks this detail is
anyone's business and hopes everyone will understand that this was a rhetorical question meant to serve as a warning against continuing the discussion and thereby inviting a punch in the face by someone who trains security trolls for a living
b) while I, by contrast, am impressed!

End Notes

**Content requests**: reviews, always, they keep me moving. And please let's talk about betaing, anyone who's interested. I am all about multiple points of view! Also, do please write in with letters to Asphodel: if this goes well, I will include with chapters. With her replies, of course. Caveat: If you send Lily your own problems and take her probably horrible advice, I will not be held responsible!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!