**Of a Linear Circle - Part IV**

**by** flamethrower

**Summary**

It's 2nd January, 1996, and things are about to get interesting in regards to the Order of the...
Phoenix, the Underground, and Hogwarts.

Notes

I almost forgot to start posting this because I've been busy clearing out clutter so I can work in this room again. (This is a much longer project than I realized it would be.)

Beta reading performed by @sanerontheinside and @mrsstanley, both of Tumblr fame and not-fame! Cheerleading done by @norcumi and @jabberwockeypie. Voracious over-the-server reading ahead on the fic like a word-vacuuming addict performed by the mate, @drougnor.

Thank you all for the awesome, kind words and comments on all of Of a Linear Circle to date. It means a lot to me. <3
Severus awakens far too early on the morning of the second. He’d much prefer to go right back to sleep—being well-rested is getting to be a habit—when he realizes he’s alone in the bed. As that also has been rare of late, he gets up, pulls on a dressing gown, and wanders through the flat in a vain quest to find Nizar. Kanza is in front of the fireplace, curled up in a dozing sulk that aptly portrays her opinion of the current weather. Except for seeking out the occasional mouse, she’s spent their entire time at the flat in front of the fire.

Outside, then. Severus slides open the door for the balcony and steps out onto the railing in his bare feet, hissing in a breath at the contact with icy metal. “You brought that thing to London?”

Nizar lowers the long blade from what looks like legitimate sparring exercises when facing an opponent armed similarly. He’s only wearing shirt, trousers, and boots, and is still sweat-soaked despite the freezing morning temperature. “This put a hole in Voldemort’s face. Of course I brought it. What if I had the opportunity to put a matching hole on the opposite side and was daft enough to leave the seax at home?”

“An excellent point. Why are you…sparring in this garden at six of a morning?” Severus asks.

“I like how you say sparring as if it’s a dirty word.” Nizar retrieves the dagger’s sheath from the bench. “I’m sparring at six of a morning because I have no idea what London’s opinion is on people running on the walkways before the sun comes up.”

“Unless you’re stealing, they don’t care, and even if you are committing theft, I think you’d have to find a very motivated copper who would be willing to chase you at this hour.” Severus raises an eyebrow. “Is this a thing you do often?”

“If I’m not sleeping, then yes. This, or going for a run. My running at midnight confused the hell out of the centaurs in the Forbidden Forest until they decided I was just insane.”

“You are insane,” Severus reminds him in a dry voice. “Self-proclaimed, even. You probably climb the bloody castle walls.”

Nizar pauses with his foot on the first step for the circular stairwell. “Is now a good time to mention that you’re very good at guessing, or should I reassure you that I only do so when everyone else is asleep, so no students take it into their heads to climb the outside of Hogwarts?”

Severus bites back a smile. “Nizar: why?”

“If you get locked out of a magical castle, you have to get back in somehow,” Nizar replies, leaning against the balcony railing when he gets to the top of the steps. His clothes are steaming in the chill air.

“Why are you awake? I’ve actually gotten used to your horrible attitude towards being forced to face a day before seven,” Severus says.

“I’m not sure. I just woke up restless.”

Severus glances at him. “Related to yesterday’s dream, perhaps?”

Nizar shakes his head. “No. I told you—that was more like Pensife memory-viewing than reliving an actual memory. Not exactly alike, but it wasn’t…no. Not that. Why are you awake?”
Severus thinks on it. “Restless” is too vague; this isn’t a vague sensation. “The feeling that I needed to be. I’m often correct.”

“In that case, I’m getting in a shower before whatever is going to happen presents itself.”

Severus goes back into the flat after Nizar, heading straight back to their bedroom. The cards are still in the bag; he brings the entire deck back with him to the kitchen and leaves them on the counter while brewing tea.

He never took Divination in Hogwarts, not given their instructor at the time. No student in Hogwarts would believe it if the current teaching staff informed them that Professor Thorn, Trelawney’s predecessor, makes Trelawney look like a fucking Greek oracle in truth.

Bugger it all. After he has tea, he draws three cards from the deck and places them on the table.

Club Moss. Often associated with power, since its spores literally explode when introduced to heat or flame, but is also used in protective potions—or used by itself, hung from the doorway like garlic’s pathetic attempts at warding off vampires.

Guinea Pepper. Delicious on food, but brewed in potions for curses. It’s also in Veritaserum, meant for divining truth from lies, innocence from guilt.

Devil’s Snare, Severus thinks, needs no explanation at all.

“Muggle clothing?” Severus asks Nizar when he comes into the kitchen. The long-sleeve black shirt and deep indigo denims are distinctive after months of silk, preceded by years of green silk-blended wool.

Nizar shrugs. “We’re in London. I might as well attempt to get used to this. Except for the fact that it wasn’t bloody fitted properly until I fixed it, it’s not bad. What’s that?”

In answer, Severus slides the three cards across the table. “I believe I know why we woke early.”

Nizar frowns down at the three cards. “A failure of protection—wait, is this literal?”

“I was hoping it wasn’t until you said that,” Severus retorts, annoyed. “Yes, I think someone used Devil’s Snare to murder someone. Recently. All that remains is waiting to find out why, where, and who. If it’s a failure of protection for an ally, then I’m very much looking forward to finding out why.”

As if summoned, a weasel Patronus slinks in through the kitchen wall and opens his mouth. Arthur’s harried voice emerges: “Severus, a situation has…happened. Meeting in the usual place in one hour.” The Patronus vanishes.

It’s followed almost immediately afterwards by Minerva’s tabby cat Patronus. “Nizar, if you recall where we met in London on tenth December, you need to be there in an hour.” The cat licks its paw and disappears.

“A situation like someone being strangled to death by a plant, I imagine.” Nizar stacks the three cards before handing them back to Severus.

“I think Albus might use the opportunity to question everyone about the Underground. Given a few hints he dropped during conversations before the winter break, I think he’s finally heard of their existence.”
“We should expect a full house, then?” Nizar asks.

Severus nods. “Everyone including Mundungus, who is bloody useless.”

“And here is where my flashes of precognition come in.” Nizar holds up two fingers. “In that first bedroom’s wardrobe is a woolen raincoat that is most decidedly not in Salazar’s size, but I think it will fit you. Grab the umbrella next to it, too.”

“Instead of Apparating in, you mean to walk right by the Death Eaters who will no doubt be waiting in front of the townhouse,” Severus says. “Any particular reason for the umbrella?”

Nizar grins. “Aside from the benefit of being considered non-magical and thus ignored until it’s too late for them to duck?” He holds up his left arm. “Sometimes all the magical healing in the world won’t convince your body to forgive what was done to it. My left arm always lights up like a bastard when it’s going to rain.”

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Severus shuts the door behind them before he closes the umbrella and introduces it to the dubious pleasures of being stored in a taxidermied troll’s leg. Walburga’s curtains are open, but instead of shouting, she merely scowls at them in complete disapproval. Nizar grants her a smile that isn’t pleasant at all. The portrait reaches out with her magic and shuts the curtains again.

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard anyone scream like that outside of the Cruciatus Curse. What did you do to Dominick Bole?” Severus asks.

“¡Quitar lóbulos y tubos testiculares, reemplazar con avispas enojado!” Nizar repeats the spell. “I do hope that man never wanted to father another child.”

Severus frowns as he re-runs the words through his head at a slower speed. “Testiculares. Dear God, do I even want to know what you did to that man?”

“Oh, Merlin, you—” There are several loud thumps as Tonks falls down the last few stairs. When she reaches the floor, she’s laughing so hard her hair won’t stop changing colors.

“Oh, look! Someone else who speaks Castellano!” Nizar holds out his hand to pull Tonks up from the floor.

“Tell me there is a Latin version!” Tonks gasps out. “I want to cast it next!”

Nizar’s eyes widen. “It’s permanent. Save it for the bloody Death Eaters, woman!”

“Even better!” Tonks slings her arm around Nizar’s shoulders and effectively kidnaps him.

“Wotcher, Professor!”

“Hello, Nymphadora.” Severus resigns himself to following Tonks and Nizar. “Please do not trip on the cellar stairs while hauling around another professor of Hogwarts.”

“Look at this one!” Tonks announces in the kitchen basement. “He looks right and proper Muggle. Half of our bloody Aurors can’t manage that, can they, Kingsley?”

Nizar rolls his eyes. “Maybe if they bothered to ask. Like I did. Politely.” The coat Nizar is wearing
was Bernice’s inspired choice. Severus approves of it for being sensible enough to have pockets, a hood to repel the rain, and for being loose and long enough to mimic a knee-length black robe.

“No, but then, half of our bloody Aurors can’t catch a cold,” Kingsley replies. “Pleasure to see you again, Professor Slytherin. And you, Severus.”

“Kingsley.” Severus takes a quick look around; everyone Ministry-employed looks grim. It can’t be Cornelius Fudge who is dead, then. Pity.

Charlie Weasley comes downstairs with a baffled expression. “I just got in. Did you lot know that there is a Death Eater bloke running around in the public garden across the road, screaming and clutching at his bollocks?”

“We do now.” Ted’s brow furrows when Tonks dissolve into hiccupping laughter again. “Sweetheart, what did you do?”

“Wasn’t me, Da!” Tonks nudges Nizar with her elbow, who smiles at Tonks’s father. “It was this one and a little bit o’ *Quitar lóbulos y tubos testiculares, reemplazar con avispas enojado*.”

Charlie blanches stark white except for his freckles. “Dear God, who the hell came up with that horror?”

“Helga,” Nizar says innocently. “I keep telling everyone that she was the most terrifying of all of us, but no one ever seems to believe me.”

“My House Founder is a bloody violent genius,” Tonks says in pure glee.

“Your House Founder was a *Vikgr* and a *Vǫlva*. Bloody, violent genius is part of the package,” Nizar tells her.

Mundungus Fletcher is cackling. “Which one o’ them was it done to?”

“Bole,” Severus says, eying Mundungus. Given the reactions from those who understand Spanish, he no longer wants to know what that spell does.

Mundungus presses his hand to his breast. “ Couldn’a happened to a more deservin’ twat.”

Nizar glances at Severus. “What Severus isn’t mentioning is that there were *two* Death Eaters out front, and Benedict Mulciber is now missing all of his toes.”

“It’s not like he’ll miss them,” Severus replies blandly.

Lupin looks surprised. “You’re not usually so, uh, active when it comes to assaulting another Death Eater, Severus.”

“Perhaps, but Mulciber is irritating,” Severus replies, which Lupin seems to think is a sensible, acceptable answer. Interesting. He wonders when Lupin and Mulciber last exchanged words.

“I’m afraid I must dampen your spirits along with your clothes,” Albus announces as he comes down the cellar stairs with Minerva and Black. “Good morning to you all, but I have grim news.”

“Well, we’re certainly at the right address to receive such,” Bill mutters under his breath, and is promptly elbowed by Molly.

“For those of you who weren’t here at certain meetings over the course of the fall, I will tell you that our first indication that Voldemort was after the prophecy in the Department of Mysteries came in
October. An Unspeakable named Broderick Bole, a friend of Arthur’s—“Arthur nods at Albus, looking unhappy—“was placed under the Imperius Curse by an unknown agent of Voldemort. He fought the spell, touching a random globe of prophecy instead of the one Voldemort sought. The effects were the same, regardless. As it wasn’t meant for him, he was cursed, and has been recuperating in Saint Mungo’s ever since,” Albus explains. “The Ministry considered it nothing more than an unfortunate workplace accident.”

“Of course they did,” Black says sourly.

Albus gives Black a look that is equal parts sympathetic and quelling. “At first, Kingsley was able to convince Madam Bones to place a guard over Broderick in the hospital ward for his safety. When no attack came, the guard was removed.”

“They then poor Sturgis got hit with the Imperius next, and was sent in to get it. He got caught.” Alastor spits on the floor; Black rolls his eyes while Molly glares at Alastor. “Fudge there is so paranoid about looking wrong-footed that he had the poor sod dumped in Azkaban before Madam Bones could see to him having a proper trial. Cited Ministry guidelines about those who belong in the Department of Mysteries and all that codswallop.”

“But that is what got certain of you permission to patrol the area of the Ministry around the Department, isn’t it?” Nizar is resting his chin on one hand. “Madam Bones?”

“She’s smarter than bloody Fudge,” Hestia mutters.

“Madam Bones took two attempts at breaking into the Department of Mysteries seriously, even if she isn’t convinced of Voldemort’s return,” Albus confirms. “Unfortunately, Voldemort was merely biding his time in regards to our Unspeakable ally. Over the Christmas holiday, a cutting of disguised Devil’s Snare was delivered to the recovery ward for one Mister Broderick Bode. His caretakers, seeing his improvement, encouraged him to care for the disguised plant. Yesterday, Broderick physically touched the Devil’s Snare.”

“And it throttled the life out of him. No one found his body until morning rounds.” Arthur lets out a glum sigh. “Madam Bones has declared that after a direct Death Eater assault on the Department of Mystery’s doorstep, along with Broderick’s suspected assassination, she’ll be assisting us more actively in preventing further incursions, injuries, or deaths within the Ministry. She’s pushing for Sturgis to be pulled from Azkaban for a proper trial, even if Fudge bleats about it.”

“Is Madam Bones’s assistance going to prove useful, or will it be a hindrance?” Andromeda asks.

“Madam Bones is fond of the law being carried out proper,” Alastor says. “Could be either.”

“In the meantime, I do have more than Broderick’s unfortunate passing to discuss.” Albus waits until he has everyone’s attention, which doesn’t take long. Severus often despises the man’s sense of dramatics, but even he will admit they’re effective. “It has recently come to my attention that there is another resistance group in the wizarding world working against the Death Eaters.”

Lupin perks up from his usual slump. “A real one this time, not just a rumor coming back to us about ourselves?”

“This does appear to be the real thing,” Albus replies. “They are apparently composed of members who not only fought in the last war, but would be in very real danger if they were to publicly reveal their identities by siding with the Order.”

Minerva seems intrigued. “I imagine it’s because most of us are public faces already.”
“Everyone from the last war is accounted for. Aren’t they?” Molly asks, frowning.

“Apparently not,” Dumbledore muses. “There have been times since Voldemort’s resurrection that I’ve received unexpected intelligence without any hint as to who sent it, and it has always proven valuable.”

“Just to clarify—recently come to your attention, or recently you confirmed the group’s existence beyond rumor?” Mundungus asks. Severus feels his eyes sliding over to the man, who, for once, has asked an intelligent question.

Albus looks surprised, as well. “Does it matter?”

“Oh, it matters,” Mundungus says, and Severus finds himself itching to draw a wand. That isn’t Mundungus’s accent now emerging from the man’s mouth. The only thing that keeps Severus from drawing a wand is Nizar’s hand coming down to rest on his thigh, fingernails digging in through his trousers in brief warning.

“If you’d acted on all of that self-claimed ‘valuable’ intelligence, perhaps Broderick Bole’s family wouldn’t be planning a funeral. Or did you ignore the one that came in on Christmas Day merely because it was a holiday?” Mundungus smiles when eight different witches and wizards are suddenly pointing wands at him. “I do love properly applied paranoia, even if you lot are a mite slow about it.”

Nizar rolls his eyes. “Really? This is how you’re doing this? You dramatic shit.”

“Mundungus” smirks at Nizar. “But it’s ever so much fun.”

“You couldn’t have impersonated someone who smelled better?” Nizar asks.

“Little brother, trust me—we know from years of experience that the smell is entirely that man, and no amount of bathing has ever made it dissipate.” The man pulls out a pocket watch. “About a minute left. My timing is excellent.”

“Polyjuice,” Alastor growls.

“Mundungus” glances at Alastor. “Irony, that. I’d no idea how much use I’d be putting it to when I invented the potion. And its correct name is Multa Facies Sucus, by the way. This island and its terrible fucking Latin can drive a man to drink.”

Severus watches Nizar’s eyes flicker over to Alastor, Ted, Lupin, Black, Emmaline, Kingsley, Tonks, and Bill Weasley. “Stop pointing your wands at him, or those of you with bollocks will receive an education in what Helga’s spell really does.”

Their guest is studying his pocket watch again. “It’s not as if they can kill me.”

“Just because you’re an idiot and the Killing Curse doesn’t work doesn’t mean I want to watch you be hit by it!” Nizar snaps back.

“Put your wands away gentlemen, ladies.” Albus’s voice has the distinct tone of command. Then the damned twinkling makes a resurgence. “I don’t think we’ve anything to fear from our guest. Do we?” he asks as the others grudgingly step back, though no one puts their wands away.

“Fear is probably not the best choice of words.” The uncomfortable contortions that accompany Polyjuice Potion wearing off are noticeably less when the person beneath is of similar size to the one being impersonated.
Salazar puts the watch away into the pocket of a waistcoat that suddenly has quite a bit of slack in the middle. “From what I’ve heard, half of you are still terrified of my brother. Gods know what you’ll be making of me.”

“Salazar Slytherin.” Minerva gives the man a brief visual inspection. “Your last portrait does you no credit at all.”

“And from what I’ve heard, it hasn’t for a long time, Lioness,” Salazar replies.

“Salazar Slytherin.” Black is staring at Salazar in a way that Severus is going to treasure. “Not dead.” Salazar smiles at Black. “Not at all.”

“Because he’s an idiot,” Nizar says flatly.

Salazar gives Nizar an offended look. “You willingly climbed into a magical portrait, hermanito.”

“That’s because I’m stupid, too!”

There is a heavy silence for a moment before Minerva speaks again. “You know, I’d like to be surprised, but I can’t quite manage it.”

Nizar eyes her. “I fell out of a painting on Hallowe’en. This does seem rather normal in comparison, doesn’t it?”

“I’m truly concerned about what our standards for normal have become,” Lupin says.

To Severus’s surprise, Andromeda laughs aloud. “The Pure-bloods who still deign to talk to me had such interesting things to say about the Malfoy Christmas Party this year. I just didn’t believe half of it.”

“Beautiful Andromeda, you probably disbelieved the wrong half,” Salazar replies.

“Well.” Albus smiles. “Salazar Slytherin, I presume.”

Salazar rolls his eyes. “Salazar Fernan, Casa de Deslizarse, please. You don’t speak Cumbric to have such a convenient excuse for not saying it properly!”

Nizar makes an amused sound. “It didn’t help then, Sal, and it doesn’t help now.”

Minerva gives Nizar a look of complete disapproval. “I take it you’ve known for a while now that Salazar Slytherin isn’t dead.”

“Oh, that wasn’t nice. You used my name that way on purpose,” Salazar says to Minerva, grinning.

“I’ve known for two weeks now,” Nizar’s words are met by general disapproval and a few mutters of not trusting Slytherins.

“Why not tell us?” Alastor asks, spitting again.

“Because as Salazar pointed out, most of you are still terrified of me,” Nizar replies. “What, you think I was in a hurry to compound the difficulty?”

“Bugger it,” Tonks finally says. “What did we do to earn the honor, uh…sir? Do you have a real title?”
“I do, but my name is quite fine,” Salazar replies. “As to the honor…” He looks at Albus. “This isn’t the first time you’ve ignored intelligence delivered to you from my Underground and someone’s died of it. I’ve lost my patience for such. From now on, you’ll all simply have to cope with hearing it directly from me.”

“Or what?” Alastor asks, scowling.

“Or more people will die of preventable deaths?” Salazar tilts his head at Alastor. “Unless that’s to your preference, Auror Moody.”

Alastor stares at Salazar for another minute before grunting. “No, s’not. I’ve had time to get used to your brother, sir, and so far I’m not disappointed. As Madam Tonks over there reminded me recently, Severus isn’t the only Slytherin in this room. Having four of you about might make this war be a mite more efficient.”

Salazar blinks a few times before he looks at Nizar. “Bloody hell, brother, what have you been telling people?”

“I’ve not been telling people anything.” Nizar looks smug. “I’ve been teaching their children not to be sheep. Funny how students who can effectively cast spells and defend themselves make up for quite a bit.”

“Not to mention chipping away at certain House rivalries,” Minerva adds, a corner of her mouth curling up. “It is hard to hold onto certain prejudices when one learns that a certain pair of brothers are Half-bloods.”

“They are?” Dedalus asks, wide-eyed.

Salazar glances at Dedalus. “My mother was of a magical lineage but non-magical for three generations. My father was what the Moors at the time called a ‘Pagan wizard.’ They were quite properly terrified of that side of the family.”

Andromeda crosses her arms. “There was another intriguing part to those rumors—well, aside from Ratier having an interesting evening. Something about, oh…Britanni Bellum dux Magum.”

“Fucking what!” Black blurts in surprise. “I heard that correctly, didn’t I, cousin?”

Andromeda smiles. “Yes, you did.”

Nizar winces; Salazar grins. “Not I, Madam Tonks.”


Severus looks over to see a flabbergasted expression on Albus’s face—something he’s never before experienced in his life. “A titled war mage?” Albus whispers.

Nizar groans and slumps over with his face resting on the tabletop. “Magicians are the worst gossips.”

Black grins. “Voldemort is so fucked.”

“We knew that already!” Severus reminds them in irritation.

“Yes, but—a titled war mage, Snivellus!” Black’s grin widens. “A titled fucking war mage can call up the bedrock of the whole of Britain to flatten Voldemort into so much paste!”
“Only if Voldemort declares war against the whole kingdom, you idiot!” Nizar retorts. “And please do not give him those ideas! Do you know how messy it is when that happens? Do you know how much it fucks up the lay of the land, much less the land’s magic? Do you know that since the Ministry made necromancy illegal, there is no one on this fucking island trained to clean up the mess afterwards? For fuck’s sake, I hate the twentieth century!”

Salazar grimaces. “Let’s not raise up the bedrock, shall we?”

Nizar glares at Black. “Also, I’ve still not forgiven you for fucking 1975. Use that name for Severus again, and your ears and your bollocks are going to discover what it’s like to be in opposing locations!”

Black stares at Nizar in shock. “How would you know about that?”

“Do not act like you’re an idiot. It’s beyond irritating.” Nizar grinds out between clenched teeth. “I know people in this century have manners and common sense, but they don’t seem to know how to demonstrate it.”

Salazar rests his chin on his hand and grins at his brother. “Such complaints about the twentieth century, but you’re finally dressed like you live in it!”

Nizar glares at him before flipping Salazar off with two raised fingers. “Go. Get. Fucked.”

“So much for manners,” Salazar replies, and then flinches. “Ow, shit! What kind of shoes are you wearing?”

“Steel-toed boots. They’re useful,” Nizar answers with a bright smile. Severus is glad he’s practiced at hiding his expressions. Salazar and Nizar are both very good at breaking each other out of foul tempers, even if he did sort of wish to see Sirius Black utterly put his foot in it.

Severus catches Lupin staring at Nizar. “What now, Lupin?”

Lupin snaps his attention away from Nizar to look at Severus. “Steel-toed boots do sound rather useful,” he says in a mild voice. Severus frowns; the werewolf isn’t lying, but that isn’t why he was staring at Nizar, either. He gives Lupin one last, warning glare before deciding to simply ignore him.

“You know, all of this interesting information aside,” Molly ventures, “I do confess I did feel a bit of terror upon your reveal, Salazar. However, that—I can’t. You and your brother bicker like Bill and Charlie. It’s very difficult to be terrified in the face of that.”

“We do not bicker like that!” Bill claims at once.

Charlie glances at Molly. “Uh, do we?”

Arthur smiles at his eldest sons. “Yes, you do. Frequently, to our amusement.”

Emmaline sighs, but Severus notes she’s finally put her wand away. “I’d just like to say that I’m so very confused right now.”

Kingsley is studying Salazar. “I don’t buy it. No, I buy your presence just fine,” he continues when Salazar raises an eyebrow. “But Broderick’s death isn’t the only reason you’ve ousted your existence to the Order—and judging by Andromeda’s smile, a great deal of Pure-blooded idiots who sided with Voldemort. I’m supposing that was done in order to terrify them.”

“It was, though my brother did a much better job of that than I,” Salazar replies. “You’re right,
though, Kingsley Shacklebolt. There is another reason, one that’s forced my hand at least a month before I was ready.”

Severus gives Nizar a narrow-eyed glare. Not a word, he thinks. Nizar lifts both eyebrows in response, but doesn’t comment. If Severus is to do this, it’s going to be on his terms. Even Salazar recognizes that.

“He means that the Order no longer has a spy of its own in Voldemort’s court.” Severus sheds his coat and rolls up his left sleeve, scowling. He never did figure out what to say to Albus, but better in front of witnesses—and Salazar—than trying to speak to Albus alone.

He isn’t even beholden to Albus in quite the same way, which allows Severus to discard some of the resentment he’s often felt since 1980 in regards to Albus Dumbledore. Severus is no longer certain if Albus will consider him useful to the Order, or if he will still be employed at the end of the term, but he’s well aware that other options exist.

Severus isn’t used to the sight of his own unMarked skin. “Please do recall that no illusion in existence will hide the Dark Mark.”

Lupin stares at Severus’s arm, then at Severus, in disbelief. “It’s gone?” is his intelligent observation.

“Obviously.” Severus gives Lupin a bland look. “You no longer have a spy in your ranks. Just someone you despise.”

Lupin rolls his eyes. “I don’t despise you, you stupid wanker.”

“Flatterer,” Severus replies.

Alastor is scowling. “You’ve given up one of our only tactical advantages?”

“I ‘gave up’ nothing. I’m simply against dying for no reason or gain,” Severus replies.

Albus seems appalled. “You quit your task, Severus?” he asks in a way that makes Severus’s blood feel too warm in his veins.

Salazar interrupts whatever icy words Severus might have uttered. “No, he was betrayed. One of mine in the Underground was in the Riddle Manor that night, and it wasn’t pleasant. Do you mind, Severus?”

Severus waves his hand at Salazar in permission. “Please. I don’t actually recall most of what happened after my arrival.”

“Margot Dolohov went to Voldemort with tales from the Malfoy Manor that, she convincingly argued, revealed Severus as a traitor to Voldemort’s inner circle,” Salazar explains in a tone devoid of amusement. “Voldemort has been reading up on his own magics since my brother carved a permanent hole in the side of his face. He reached through the Mark itself to read Severus’s thoughts to confirm that Margot spoke truthfully.”

“Dear Merlin,” Minerva whispers.

“Thankfully, that is the only thing he searched for, else we’d have more problems than my lack of volunteering for multiple bouts of the Cruciatus Curse merely for existing in Voldemort’s immediate vicinity,” Severus tells them in a dust-dry voice.

“Voldemort then intended to kill Severus using the Mark, but only when he was in my brother’s
presence,” Salazar says.


“None taken. It’s an intelligent question,” Severus replies, “even if it has an obvious answer.”

“To make me really fucking angry,” Nizar tells Charlie. “Granted, what Voldemort did caused that result anyway. I removed the Dark Mark so Severus wouldn’t die.”

“How?” Tonks asks, leaning forward curiously. “I thought only that walking corpse dying would get rid of the Dark Mark on a Death Eater.”

“The idiot is family, and the blood magic Voldemort used is too simple. I can undo it by convincing the Mark that I’m its creator, not Tom Riddle.” Nizar sighs when there is grumbling from more than one member of the Order. “Blood. Magic. Is. A. Healing. Tool,” he grates out in response. “I will say that until you lot finally bloody well listen to me!”

“Then the Dark Mark can be removed.” Albus’s expression is undecipherable, which often means he’s in the depths of great plotting. Severus learned that lesson the hard way. “Anyone who wishes it gone—this changes everything. There have to be others among Voldemort’s ranks who remain out of fear.”

Salazar gives Albus an odd look that Severus also finds uninterpretable. “There might be a few, but it will take more than a few trite words to convince them of your intentions.”

“I’ve…heard from my sister,” Andromeda says, gaining their attention.

“Good news, or is it dramatics?” Molly sounds sympathetic.

Andromeda takes a breath. “She wants out.”

Severus isn’t the only one who stares at Andromeda. “Are you certain?” Hestia asks.

Andromeda presses her lips together. “Only as certain as the very cautious and careful way in which she sent word to me. It could be a trick, but if so, it’s one poorly thought out.”

“The Dark Mark is blood magic that could only be placed on those who consented to receive it,” Nizar says to Andromeda. “To remove it requires the same—consent. They have to want it gone. If Narcissa Malfoy is lying, I won’t be able to do anything to the Dark Mark. If she is being truthful, I’ll be able to remove the Mark, and it will prove her intentions sincere. If it’s the latter, then Draco Malfoy will have one parent who isn’t rotting in Azkaban, and to my pleasure, it will be the intelligent one.”

Severus looks at Nizar from the corner of his eye. He sometimes forgets how subtle the man can be with his words. He just used a granted opportunity to speak of Severus’s character and intentions without naming Severus at all. He wonders which members of the Order will be observant enough to notice.

Andromeda nods in acceptance of Nizar’s words. “This removal. Is it painful, Severus?”

“Interesting to watch. Not painful at all.” It helps that Severus trusts Nizar, which might ease the process. That is not information he will be sharing with Narcissa Malfoy unless it becomes clear that her intentions are genuine.

Lupin looks at Salazar. “This Underground of yours. Were these people in the Order during the first
Salazar’s expression, Severus thinks, is very similar to Nizar’s when they’re contemplating how to answer a question without giving away too much. “There are individuals involved who fought on both sides during the last war, but they’re united in their goal of seeing Voldemort ended.”

Dedalus glares at Salazar. “I still don’t trust that you’re not an enemy on par with Voldemort. Not either of you. We all know what Salazar Slytherin is supposed to be like.”

Severus can almost feel the air around Nizar gain a sudden chill. “Dedalus Diggle: please retract that statement.”

“Why should I? It’s our job to be that paranoid!” Dedalus claims.


“You read the paper, don’t you?” Nizar asks without looking at Dedalus. “I came of age before the beginning of this millennium.”

“Which means what, exactly?” Dedalus asks.

“I actually don’t mind being insulted.” Nizar finally eyes Dedalus in a way that makes all four of the man’s Weasleys seatmates move back from the table. “But you just insulted someone I love, one who risked much just to be here today. You’ve insulted someone who has also gone to a great deal of trouble on the Order’s behalf. In short, by insulting my brother? Those are dueling words, you complete idiot.”

“Please, brother, be reasonable. He might actually be useful for something.” Salazar’s voice is polite, but his smile is venomous.

“Convince me otherwise,” Nizar growls.

Charlie plasters on an innocent smile. “We probably need him?”

Nizar gives Charlie an irritated look. “That’s not convincing.”

Severus glances at Dedalus, who is staring at Nizar as if he’s already drawing a wand. He doesn’t want to be the voice of reason; he doesn’t actually like Diggle that much. “Meat shield?” he offers.

Nizar smiles. “Those are useful. Okay.”

Dedalus wilts in place, but Alastor seems pleased by that declaration. “Those are the kinds of thoughts that win wars.”

Nizar eyes Alastor as if he’d prefer to strangle the man. “I’m aware.”

“Well, bollocks,” Emmaline says. “Without a spy, what are we to do? And no offence to your, er, Underground,” she says to Salazar.

Salazar nods at her. “None taken.”

“We already know that Voldemort wants the prophecy stored in the Department of Mysteries,” Dumbledore says in a sharp voice. “He hid his intentions under the cover of using foul magic to Summon his distant relative to the Ministry, but it’s the prophecy he wants.”

“That is one thing my group does not know. Why does Voldemort want this prophecy so badly?”
Salazar asks. Severus glances at him; somehow, he knows that Salazar is lying through his teeth.

Dumbledore frowns. “Voldemort believes that the prophecy might tell him how to find and vanquish those that threaten him most.”

“And you haven’t announced the prophecy as a whole because you want to use the Department of Mysteries, with its anti-Apparition wards, as a trap.” Nizar waits for Dumbledore to nod. “Voldemort could send anyone in to retrieve that prophecy. Why does he keep using those who aren’t allied to him?”

“Because of the same curse that felled Broderick in October,” Arthur says. “Each prophecy globe can only be touched by those the prophecy speaks of. It’s a form of protective magic the Unspeakables employ.”

Nizar stares at Arthur. “Let me get this straight. There are a bunch of prophecy globes in the Ministry that can only be touched by the people they apply to, but they’re hidden away from the people they apply to, and once those people are dead, there are a bunch of useless globes sitting around, taking up space.”

Arthur’s smile is wry acknowledgement. “Welcome to Ministry bureaucracy.”

“That is so stupid,” Nizar mutters. “How do you alert the others if someone on patrol finds a Death Eater or a walking corpse where they do not belong?”

Tonks holds up a scarred knut. “Patronuses and Protean charms.”

Salazar rests his chin against his clasped fingertips for a moment before addressing Kingsley. “I know there are Anti-Apparition wards outside the Department of Mysteries thanks to the events of the tenth December.”

“How would you know?” Hestia asks, frowning.

“Because that fucking idiot’s Blood Summoning spell Summoned everyone Voldemort shared blood with,” Salazar answers, scowling. “That was such an annoying way of waking in the morning.”

“Everyone, because Voldemort thought himself and Nizar to be the only ones,” Tonks realizes. “The Heir of Slytherin and all that.”

“And the idiot didn’t have my blood for a more direct means of Summoning,” Nizar says. “He’s not getting it, either.”

“Voldemort really is a Slytherin, though?” Andromeda asks. “Of the blood, not of the House. The latter is obvious.”

“Legally, he is not my Heir. His many-times great-grandmother married a Gaunt, not myself…but unfortunately, yes, the twit is a direct descendent of mine. We’re getting sidetracked. Can those wards surrounding the Department of Mysteries be removed?” Salazar asks Kingsley.

“Yes, in case of emergencies, though it has to be done by magic workers in that particular department,” Kingsley replies. “Arthur?”

“As far as I know, that’s true,” Arthur confirms.

Salazar smiles. “Can those who control the wards shift an Anti-Apparition ward to One-Way Apparition wards?”
Severus glances across the table when he sees Lupin beginning to smile. “One-way warding. Apparition allowed in, but not back out again.”

“Which means the moment someone alerts the rest of the Order, we can all Apparate in, but they can’t escape.” Black looks gleeful. “A real trap.”

“A trap that would need bait, not to mention one of ’em gaining awareness that the Apparition wards on the Department are down.” Alastor glares at Severus, who merely stares back. Alastor Moody isn’t the one who had to deal with Voldemort on a personal basis.

“No, your bait already exists—the prophecy.” Nizar shakes his head. “What you need is a means of passing on the information that the prophecy is somehow vulnerable.”

“Or just wait until the idiot makes another attempt. He’ll try for it in grand fashion, like he did last month,” Salazar says.

“Convincing the Department to change the outer wards won’t be easy,” Tonks says.

Salazar gives her a fond look. “Which is not my problem. If I wanted that sort of headache, Auror Tonks, I’d have tried working for your Ministry when it first formed.”

“‘Your’ Ministry, you say?” Ted queries.

“Under my real name, I’m a citizen of Spain,” Salazar says. “I was once also a citizen of Moray, but alas, it doesn’t exist any longer. Thus, it’s your Ministry, not mine.”

“One question you’ve not answered for us,” Minerva says, interrupting a sudden conversation between Tonks, Kingsley, Arthur, Emmaline, Alastor, and Hestia regarding the Ministry and its wards. “How are you not dead, Salazar Deslizarse?”

Salazar smiles at Minerva, but there is an unpleasant edge to it that Severus doesn’t think is aimed at Minerva at all. “I made a deal with an Aspect of the universe not to die until Voldemort is defeated. I didn’t word it the way I should have, either. It takes quite a while to recover from wounds that would otherwise be fatal.”

“Er—which…which Aspect?” Molly asks, looking uncomfortable.


Salazar spreads his arms. “You’ve already said that once today. You’ve gone over your allotment, little brother.”

“Death is a real entity?” Bill asks in disbelief.

“There are quite a number of Aspects to creation that are real entities.” Salazar looks amused by their reactions. “The real trick is to wonder this: which came first? The entity, or the idea of the entity?”

Kingsley smiles. “That’s quite a Ravenclaw statement.”

Salazar nods. “Rowena was an amazing person. They all were, and I miss them more with every day that passes.”

That seems to break the dam of discomfort for most of the Order. They start asking Salazar questions: his stance on blood purity, Pure-bloods, his family, even his bloody love life. Salazar answers them all with a sharp-witted, blunt honesty that Severus already knows is going to earn
Salazar the respect of the Order, even if it’s grudging, unhappy respect.

Nizar listens until his expression tightens into old grief when Salazar is asked about his nieces and nephews. “I’m going upstairs,” he murmurs to Severus. “I just—I think there is only so much reminiscing one can take before it becomes pain.”

“Just go back to the flat,” Severus responds in a low voice. “If anything else occurs of interest, I’ll tell you.”

Nizar nods and smiles. “Thank you.”

“And where are you off to?” Alastor asks Nizar before he reaches the stairs.

“I’m one thousand twenty years old, and I want a fucking nap,” Nizar retorts in annoyance. “Seriously: grown adult, can do as I like, when I like, et cetera.”

“Which would make you…?” Lupin asks Salazar.

“One thousand twenty-six as of the twenty-eight of last month,” Salazar answers.

“Fuck!” Nizar bursts out. “I forgot!”

“You can’t even remember your own birthdate. I didn’t think you’d remember mine,” Salazar says.

Nizar looks back long enough to glare at Salazar. “We’re discussing that later.”

By the time everyone runs out of prying questions, for which Salazar demonstrates a remarkable level of patience, it’s gone past six o’clock. Minerva gives Albus a pointed look until he declares the meeting over, citing a need for everyone to have a proper dinner after missing lunch.

Once he’s escaped the townhouse, Severus waits out on the walkway across the street with the umbrella open to avoid the drizzle. For some reason, they do not have any lingering Death Eater spies. He suspects it might have something to do with Nizar’s spell. Severus’s is repairable; Nizar’s, apparently, is not.

He still doesn’t want to know what it does.

Salazar emerges from the door, notices Severus, and crosses the street to meet him. “I bloody well thought I’d never get out of there. Do you think my unexpected presence was taken well?”

“No one tried to curse you, hex you, or imprison you. Your first meeting with the Order went better than mine,” Severus points out. He is not still bitter about that. He’s still furious about it.

“No, they didn’t,” Salazar admits. “I notice they didn’t ask me to join, though.”

Severus gives in to the smirk he’s been wanting to indulge in all afternoon. “I do not believe you gave them much choice.”

“Considering that myself or one of mine has been present at every single meeting they’ve had since, oh, 1978?” Salazar nods, pleased. “No, not much choice at all.”

“Was it you, one of yours, or Caradoc Dearborn who stepped between myself and Alastor Moody in a foul mood that day?” Severus asks.

“That would have been Caradoc, though I might have mentioned to him that perhaps we should keep tempers from flaring. You were literally risking your life. You deserved better than Alastor Moody’s
version of a proper greeting. And don’t ask me questions when there is a chance you might not like
the answer,” Salazar continues before Severus can decide to open his mouth. “Let’s go back to my
flat, order terrible takeaway, and break open a bottle. I discussed a lot of things today I’d deliberately
not thought of in a very long time.”

“You didn’t have to do that.”

“For Nizar, for this war’s success, and for Voldemort’s defeat?” Salazar gives him a somber look.
“Yes, Severus. I did have to do so.”
White Rabbit

Chapter Summary

“Is that your concern, Headmaster? Do you worry that Salazar Slytherin will return here and unseat you from your very comfortable, ornate, and gaudy throne?”

Chapter Notes

I almost forgot to post the chapter. Whoops.

Severus isn’t surprised to see a phoenix Patronus waiting on the coffee table of the flat—one that is having a staring contest with Nizar. He’s just irritated that Albus waited until a conversation in private couldn’t be avoided.

As soon as the door shuts, the Patronus opens its beak: “Severus, I need to see you in my office at your earliest convenience,” it says, and vanishes. Severus rolls his eyes.

“Earliest convenience, my arse,” Nizar mutters.

“It’s not as if I wasn’t expecting it,” Severus says. “I’ll go. It shouldn’t take long.”

“Chinese for takeaway. Do you have any preferences?” Salazar asks, taking Severus at his word.

“As long as it does not have pork or shellfish, I don’t care. Its presence on the table is also acceptable. Just don’t force me eat it.” Severus takes the time to exchange the borrowed raincoat for his own cloak before he steps out of the flat just long enough to Apparate straight into Hogwarts. If Albus is going to call him away from dinner, then he’ll just have to be irritated by someone Apparating within the anti-Apparition wards on the school.

“Are you certain there was no other way?” Albus asks him after observing the barest basic pleasantries. Now Severus knows the man is upset; Albus didn’t try to torture Severus with those damned lemon sherbets.

Severus raises both eyebrows. “Did you know that he can control people using the Dark Mark? I didn’t, not until that night. I have no recollection of the trip to see Nizar. I wasn’t the one deciding on it, Albus.”

Albus finally sits back, genuine shock in his gaze. “Dear Merlin. He didn’t just use the Mark for mind-reading.”

“No.”

“You didn’t mention that in London,” Albus chides him.

“If you find it shocking, the others would have panicked,” Severus replies, scowling. “Given that most of the Order has spent this entire time not trusting me, a deliberate façade we’ve both
maintained for my spying efforts, I could easily foresee at least one of them responding in a way that would directly risk my life—or more accurately, their life. I believe Nizar might have turned them inside out for making the attempt.”

“He is rather fond of you,” Albus admits.

“He’s known me since 1971. Of course he is,” Severus says. “Albus. Voldemort has told me nothing of his plans since his return, and less than nothing since his rebirth last June. I’ve been called, questioned, or tortured, and I’m sent away again, but never am I told anything. It was already becoming clear that I was not useful to you as a spy, but there was another reason to continue the ruse.”

Albus nods, brow furrowing. “Harry. Severus, you promised—”

“To help you safeguard the child of Lily and James Potter, yes,” Severus interrupts him. “And I will be keeping to that vow, even if I can’t do it from both sides of the fence. My work as a spy in the first war yielded tangible results. This time it’s yielded nothing except quite a bit of discomfort for myself. The only way I might regain part of Voldemort’s trust is to publicly murder you, and I am not doing that.”

Albus smiles. “I appreciate that you do not wish to publicly murder me.”

“I wouldn’t do it in private, either. Being annoying is not usually a murderous offence.”

“All right. We still have a missing child to search for, but…Severus, you earned your freedom a very long time ago,” Albus says quietly. “I’m glad you’ve gained it in a way that didn’t require Voldemort’s death first, as we once believed. Am I keeping you from anything?”

“Dinner,” Severus says, irritated by the maudlin tone in the man’s voice. “You may starve yourself if you wish, but I prefer not to do so.”

Albus inclines his head. “Some of us have younger constitutions than others. Go ahead, Severus. I will see you…”

“On the sixth. Minerva and I plan to waylay you regarding a genuine concern for others’ safety instead of petty bickering.”

Severus gets to the bottom of the stairs and then merely stands in the passageway. “Somethin’ wrong, Professor Snape?” Galfridus the Gargoyle asks. Severus has noticed that the gargoyle has been far more talkative since Nizar reintroduced ear-scratching as a means of entry, but Galfridus only talks to those who employ that particular method.

“No,” Severus lies. There is something wrong, but he isn’t going to confess it to a statue, especially one in a public space. “Enjoy the rest of your holiday, Galfridus.” He finds the nearest empty, unused classroom for Apparition and wonders, not for the first time, that Hogwarts has so many unused classrooms and spaces. If this castle was designed by the Founders to be used, exactly how much is lacking?

Severus Apparates back to the hallway outside of the flat, within bounds of the Disillusionment Charm Nizar found built into the hall around the flat’s door. If it’s meant to hide Apparition from the neighbors, it might be a wasted effort—they haven’t met any of the other tenants above the pub.

Severus enters with the key, hangs up his cloak near the door, and walks into the kitchen. “Did a Chinese restaurant explode in here?” he asks in surprise.
Nizar glances at the dozens of white takeaway boxes, which are spread out all across the kitchen table. “Sort of, yes.”

Severus isn’t certain he wants to know, but curiosity wins out. “Why?”

Salazar comes into the kitchen with the barely-touched bottle of Death in a Bottle. “Nizar didn’t know what any of it was, I couldn’t make up my mind, and my brother is walking proof that good Preservation Charms exist.”

“Please tell me you’re drinking something aside from that,” Severus says.

“Well, yes. I’d actually like to remember the evening, and after more than four shots, that would be in doubt.” Salazar directs Nizar to a cabinet that has a stack of crystal shot glasses. “How was your visit with Dumbledore?”

“Odd.” Severus does his best to articulate the feeling plaguing him as he came out of the headmaster’s office.

“I’m not surprised by that.” Nizar is glaring into a box he’s just opened. “There is no meat in these noodles.”

“Brother, I told you, they don’t write the menu for those who can speak the language, they write the menu for English speakers and idiots,” Salazar tells Nizar. “Severus, you must really not have been paying attention, or were deliberately refusing to notice that Dumbledore’s Order is comprised of very specific types of individuals.”

Severus grimaces. “The latter, most likely.”

“I don’t think I need to spell it out for you, then.” Salazar pries open another box. “Oh, hello. You should try a Crab Rangoon, Nizar.”

“Stop butchering the fucking language!” Nizar takes one of the stuffed shells and gives it a curious look. “I think Aberforth’s absence from those meetings says a lot, don’t you?”

“You mean Albus has nothing to hold over his head, whereas in the last war, Aberforth might still have given a damn about certain goat-fucking rumors.” Severus opens a box out of idle curiosity and discovers beef with mixed vegetables. “Did you literally buy the entire menu?”

“Yes,” Salazar confirms. “And those rumors of goat-fucking were astonishingly absent until after the war’s end.”

“What the fuck is in this?” Nizar asks of the Crab Rangoon.

“Shredded crab meat and creamed cheese in a wheat pastry shell.”

Nizar frowns. “That makes no sense. That should not be delicious.”

Salazar pours out three shots of Death in a Bottle and smiles. “I think that particular blend working so well is caused by the magic of deep-frying, little brother.”

“Albus does still have something to hold over my head. He can sack me.” Severus accepts a full shot glass. He will not be slinging it back, not after what half that amount did to his senses.

Nizar snorts into his drink and has to go find a towel to dry his face and shirt. “I’d like to see him try.”
Severus rolls his eyes. “Nizar, it isn’t your castle, much as the castle seems to think so.”

“No, I mean—he can’t. I tied you into the castle’s magic over the Western Seat. Albus can’t sack you without the castle, uh, protesting.” Nizar grins at Severus when his jaw falls open. “What, I didn’t mention that part?”

“No! No, you did not!” Severus points at Salazar. “And how can I be holding that position if he still is, too?”

“Because there is a difference between the Founding corners and the magical corners, even though they’re both magical—you know, I’m really not certain I can explain that properly. Myrddin didn’t do a very good job of it.”

“What Salazar just said, badly, is that the castle will always be tied to the Founders because they literally sealed the magical node to the castle’s foundation stone—its literal founding stone,” Nizar says. “Salazar, as a Founder, is a keeper of the castle’s magic. If you hold the seats for the West, the South, the North, and the East, you hold one of the four rotating titles for those who were always meant to come after Rowena, Salazar, Helga, and Godric.”

Severus frowns. “But until you tied me into the magic, no one was holding those seats!”

Salazar slams his empty glass down onto the kitchen tabletop. “WHAT?”

Nizar winces and rubs at his ear. “Have you gone deaf and decided the rest of us need to join you?”

“Excuse me. I could have sworn that you’ve just told me that Hogwarts’ magic is being left to founder!” Salazar retorts. “Do you not remember why no one being tied to those seats is a problem?”

Nizar glares at Salazar. “I do remember that it’s a problem, if not why, but it’s one I’m trying to fix!”

Salazar looks to be grinding his teeth. “Mis dioses. How long do you think it’s been?”

“I was in a portrait, Salazar,” Nizar says in a flat voice.

“Why did you not ask the castle?”

Nizar makes a face. “I did try. She can understand me, but she can’t communicate in response.”

“It’s been a long time, then. Shit.” Salazar rests his head in his hands. “SHIT!”

“Is whatever is wrong repairable?” Severus asks.

“Yes,” Salazar grumbles through his hands.

“A fix that will be even easier to accomplish once Minerva agrees to be tied in to the Southern Seat. I think today might have pushed her over into accepting the necessity. I expect to have a visitor on the sixth, if she doesn’t ask to see me sooner,” Nizar says.

Salazar drops his hands. He looks tired in a way that is usually hidden by his wide smile and laughing eyes. “It’s a start, and she’s a sensible one. What of the other two?”

“Filius will give in before the end of the term, if only out of prurient intellectual curiosity,” Nizar answers. “But until he does? Pomona isn’t going to budge. Honestly, the two Houses with the fiercest historical rivalry are getting along better than Pomona Sprout is coping with my entire existence.”
Salazar smiles. “So she’ll cope with my existence very well, then!”

“She’ll either get over it, or she’ll snap. I’d be unoffended by the latter,” Nizar says, frowning. “She doesn’t actually seem to be teaching them anything.”

“The only thing you knew was care of dangerous magical plants.” Salazar glances at Severus. “Have you any idea how much herbal lore I had to cram into my brother’s head?”

Severus changes his mind and drinks the entire shot of Death in a Bottle at once. “She wasn’t teaching when I was a student. Pomona didn’t join the staff until 1985. God, that explains so fucking much about why my students suddenly became rubbish at Potions. I thought I was just getting more cynical.”

“No, there’s not a thing wrong with your teaching at all,” Salazar says.

Severus narrows his eyes. “Unless you’re Polyjuicing yourself to be a student in my class, you wouldn’t know.”

“Ah, but I’ve experienced the unfinished results first-hand,” Salazar counters, pointing at Nizar.

Nizar looks up from poking at a container of deep-fried and sauced chicken. “What?”

“What about it?” Nizar asks, shoving a chopstick straight through a piece of chicken instead of picking it up. “What the fuck is this?”


“No.” Nizar takes a bite of the chicken and then leans over to spit it out into the rubbish bin. “I did not need to eat chicken marinating in pure sugar. I truly did not. My gods, how does anyone eat the food in this century without dying of blood-sugar poisoning?”

“Apparently, one gets used to it.” Salazar laughs as Nizar shoves the offending box aside. “Also, I’d dearly love to strangle whoever thought it such a brilliant thing to move your portrait.”

“Just explain Sana Visio, Sal. Severus won’t leave me alone about lemon balm as it is,” Nizar mutters.

Salazar glares at Nizar. “Thank you so very much for reminding me that I overlooked the obvious for six years.”

“You’re welcome!” Nizar returns cheerfully.

“Sana Visio,” Severus reminds them, amused. “At least you only overlooked it for six years.”

Salazar salutes him with his glass. “And Myrddin overlooked it for ever so much longer than either of us. When Nizar was fifteen, I challenged him to brew something from memory so I could ascertain his skill level. I could tell he was not pleased by the idea, but he’d memorized a potion at age twelve meant to correct the eyesight. One that ultimately didn’t work for him.”

Severus frowns. “Oculus is a N.E.W.T.-level potion.”

“Something neither of us knew at the time,” Salazar says while Nizar stares at him. “He says a friend found it for him, and he learned it. Of course, there was a significant ingredient lacking in 990.”

“I’m not a bloody brewer!” Nizar shoots back.

“You invented a fucking potion at age fifteen that Potions Masters in this decade barely comprehend!” Severus shouts.

Salazar just watches them while taking another shot. “If you convince him, it’ll be an actual miracle, Severus. He never listened to me, either.”

Nizar growls under his breath. “That’s because I am good at angering people or killing them, and not necessarily in that order!”

“How fortunate, then, that with the right potions, you can do both,” Severus replies, “and I’m not done being smug about you being fifteen. A fourth-year-educated student. Where was this skill in 1994, I wonder?”

Nizar gives him an odd look. “Given what you’ve told me, I imagine we spent far too much time being enraged about having to exist in the same room as the other at the same time of day.”

Salazar starts laughing. “Dear gods, that would have led to an interesting relationship in our day.”

Severus scowls. “I’m going to be thirty-six in four days, Salazar. He would have been fifteen. That is highly inappropriate.”

“In our day, if a magician was of age to take on a magical apprenticeship, they were considered to be of age, period,” Salazar says. “It would only have been considered inappropriate if he’d apprenticed to you.”

“Because of the power imbalance and potentials for abuse.”

Salazar nods. “Which is the exact same problem we face today, but instead of young men and women needing to worry about one or a handful of teachers, it’s every educator, and most adults on this planet. There are things I really do miss from my time, even if I don’t miss the plagues.”

“Veering away from this unwelcome topic…” Severus glances at Nizar. “Is there anything aside from Sana Visio?”

“I didn’t even recall inventing Sana Visio, Severus,” Nizar replies dryly.

Salazar answers for him. “Our version of Wolfsbane, though we didn’t call it that.”

Nizar looks at his brother in frustration. “Then why can’t I find it?”

“That, I can’t help you with.” Salazar tilts his head. “Unless you left the book in the wrong place.”

Nizar groans and puts his head down on the table. “Like the fucking library. Since I thought people might actually need it.”

“With no updating duplication spell.” Salazar nods. “That would do it.”

“That would explain the self-torture of you trying to teach yourself a dead language, then.” Severus privately thinks it might well be a lost cause. If anyone who found that potion feared werewolves even more than Severus does, they may have destroyed it.

“There are books in the Restricted Section written in Cumbric,” Nizar says into the table. “I’m
surprised you’re not yelling at me again about brewing skills.”

Severus smiles. “I’ll reserve that for when you find this other mysterious potion.”

“And on that note…” Salazar pours out three fresh shots. “Last round, or no one will be able to
walk, myself included. A toast to the day.”

“Compitalia,” Nizar says. “Godric loved Compitalia, but then, he loved any holiday that was a
loosely disguised excuse for drinking.”

Salazar rolls his eyes. “That wasn’t the only reason. Despite being Christian, that man was still so
very Roman, even though the British Isles hadn’t hosted Rome since the fifth century. Compitalia is
the day of the crossroads, when two or more ways meet. I think today’s Order meeting covers all of
that, don’t you?”

Severus lets the crystal shot glass chime against the others. “One might almost consider it overkill.”

Nizar doesn’t let Salazar leave the flat without extricating a promise that he’ll meet them at the Leaky
Cauldron on Friday evening after dinner. “He can’t make it out to the castle until the twenty-sixth, so
I’m damned well going to pry another visit out of him before then,” Nizar says in explanation after
shutting the door. “You still have such a look on your face, Severus. Is it regarding what Salazar
implied about a relationship between a student and a teacher?”

“Yes.” Severus crosses his arms and glares at the closed door. “He might have grown up in a time
where people felt otherwise, but some of us did not.”

“Relax; it wouldn’t have happened. You and that child would have killed each other first. Your rants
were not so long ago, and those, I remember.”

“I’m not sure if that makes me feel any better,” Severus mutters.

“Well, of the two of us, we’ve more than confirmed that I would be the one considered to be taking
advantage.” Nizar smiles before the expression fades. “Though I did read through your copy of
Advanced Potion Making.”

“It’s not exactly the most well-written text book in existence, Nizar.”

“Oh, it wasn’t that. I was reading your notes,” Nizar says. “Comments and experimentation, and then
comments on the experimentation. You were right there in the castle, and it made me miss you.”

Severus frowns. “Why?”

“Because all of it was written before Voldemort.” Nizar takes one of Severus’s hands. “I don’t mean
anything about you once choosing to be a Death Eater. I mean…he destroyed part of you. Once
parts of ourselves are destroyed, there is no getting them back. We can build new parts, and those
new parts can have the same function as those old ones, or do entirely different things altogether, but
they’re not those old parts and never will be.”

Nizar takes his other hand while Severus struggles with another bout of severe discomfiture. “And
then you weren’t free to build those new parts the way you would have wanted to. You had to build
them to suit two very different people, with nothing left over for yourself. I might actually hate both
Voldemort and Dumbledore for that.”

Severus clenches his jaw. “It was necessary at the time.”
“Was it?” Nizar looks up at him. “When my perspective was limited to what I could see and hear from a canvas frame, I agreed with you. Now that I’ve seen and heard otherwise? I don’t think it was necessary in the manner that Dumbledore ordered, even if he made certain to sound like it was only implications and suggestions. However,” he continues, while Severus is still staring at him in disbelief, “I really do look forward to what you build now that you no longer have to give a fuck what either of them think.”

* * * *

They wrap up the rest of the week in the flat doing normal, mundane things that Severus can’t find mundane at all—usually because there is a man who came of age and earned his titles in the eleventh century exclaiming happily over new things or yelling about stupidity. There does not seem to be a lot of leeway between those responses, either.

Severus once thought he would despise spending this much time with that sort of person, but even he has to admit that while he views life as myriad shades of gray, his emotional responses tend only towards love, loathing, or complete indifference. Severus is just less enthusiastic about sharing his opinions unless it involves both loathing and the chance to make someone else share in the feeling.

“Oculus,” Nizar says at one point, looking up from one of the last essays he’s grading. Severus has been quietly impressed by the stack of essays that Nizar crossed through as complete failures. It’s not because so many students did so poorly, but because Nizar is the wonderful bastard who is going to make the cretins rewrite them. “Why would a second-year student want to learn to make Oculus?”

“When said second-year student was as blind as a garden mole,” Severus replies.

“Really?”

Severus lowers his book, realizing he won’t have peace until he explains. “At the beginning of the child’s second year, I caught Miss Granger whispering what I thought to be methods of cheating into that child’s ear and took points accordingly. She then had the daring to come to me after class, without her friends, to tell me it was because you couldn’t see the chalkboard. I’d deliberately sized my handwriting so that it was visible to anyone with decent vision, even if it required correction by spectacle. Given that the child still couldn’t read it…yes. Blind as a garden mole.”

He really hates resorting to that dissociative label, but Nizar is right. If Nizar wants to keep his former identity quiet, that is his decision. At the very least, neither of them currently want Voldemort to know. Not until it’s far too late for Voldemort to be capable of doing anything about it.

Nizar looks thoughtful. “Auditory memory. That’s why. Not visual. Why concentrate on the visual memory if you can’t fucking see?”

“Does that help you identify the song you insist on playing at least once every few hours?” Thank goodness Severus doesn’t mind the band. He might even be developing a preference, which he hasn’t bothered to do with music from either side in sixteen years.

“No. I only recall that the association is unhappy, which doesn’t exactly narrow things down.” Nizar shakes his head and bends back to his work.

Severus stares at Nizar for a moment longer. The memory of Granger coming to see him is a strong one because of how exceptionally out-of-character it was for any student not of Slytherin House to
approach Severus after class—for any reason.

He’d also sneered at her claims of terrible eyesight. *That is a pitiful attempt at avoiding blame, Miss Granger. If Mister Potter were truly so deficient of eyesight, he would not be capable of catching a Snitch, would he?*

Granger only stood her ground, narrowing her eyes. *That’s about movement, sir. Harry doesn’t need to see every detail on a Snitch to be able to see movement at a distance. The blackboard—that’s fine detail at a distance, sir.*

Severus had frowned, glared at her, and dismissed her in a tone that had sent Granger scrambling for the exit. However, he’d enlarged the size of his handwriting, if not its appearance, and waited for Potter’s reaction.

It was truly amusing to watch the child gape at the blackboard, take off his glasses, and squint down at them in confusion. *Hermione, did you do something to my glasses?* he’d whispered.

Granger had rolled her eyes. *Honestly, Harry. Just get to work before you don’t have time to finish the potion!*

It was far less amusing to realize that Potter had been continually staring at both the blackboard and Snape that day because Potter expected the enlarged writing to be a trap. Of what sort, Severus had no idea, but after learning that the child lived with Petunia Dursley, the implications soured his stomach for the rest of the afternoon.

Granger had not approached him again, but at the end of his class Severus discovered a slip of paper left folded on his desk. In Granger’s handwriting had been two words: *Thank you.*

Severus had stared down at those two simple words and thought, *That is one who was Sorted correctly.* Granger reminded him once again of Lily Evans, but the old fury didn’t accompany the comparison.

* * * * *

When trying to sort through the contents of his own head, Severus began not with himself, but with other members of the Order, and the hold Albus Dumbledore might have on each of them.

Albus is Minerva’s employer, but she was also Albus’s prized student in Transfiguration. Filius and those other staff who are reserve members of the Order of the Phoenix have the same potential difficulty based on employment.

Rubeus Hagrid will always be sappy and watery in his gratitude to Albus for “saving” him. To be fair, Albus did exactly that, but in a way that suited his own purposes and kept a potentially useful ally close. Severus tries to decide if he’s being too cynical in that assessment, but can’t make himself believe otherwise.

Mundungus is easy enough to fathom. Albus probably kept the idiot out of Azkaban. More than once.

Lupin and Black are also easily explainable. Albus protected Lupin from being revealed as a werewolf and made certain Lupin received an education, something Severus still has mixed feelings
about. That secret being kept nearly got Severus killed by an idiot, but worse—by continuing to hide the educated werewolf, Albus’s “kind” gesture ultimately did nothing for werewolf rights at all. Severus wonders how hard Albus fought Lupin’s decision to leave at the end of the 1993-1994 term…or if he fought it at all.

Black should have been presented for a hearing at the Wizengamot for nearly getting another student butchered by a werewolf and was not. Now he is being “hidden” from the Ministry by Albus. Until Fudge’s paranoia reared its ugly head, Albus was Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot. He could have called for Sirius to receive a real trial after Peter Pettigrew’s reveal—and he didn’t. Severus hates Sirius Black, and still he wants to grab Black by the shoulders, shake him, and tell him that he’s literally being kept on a deliberately short leash, a restriction that serves no purpose at all.

Arthur isn’t stupid, and neither is Molly, though she can sometimes be willfully blind. Severus suspects that they’re in similar positions to Nymphadora, Ted, Kingsley, and Alastor—they genuinely want Voldemort dead and his Death Eaters stopped, and understand that Albus is currently the best way to achieve that goal. Severus thinks they might change their minds if Nizar and Albus went their separate ways, given one is now only Headmaster of Hogwarts and the other is a literal war mage, but Nizar claims that sort of political divisiveness won’t help. Nizar tempered that declaration by saying he’s willing to change his mind if Albus, or the Order, make it necessary, and Severus believes him.

Andromeda Black Tonks would be given a pass of trust for being willing to discard her Pure-blood family to marry a Muggle-born Hufflepuff. She also has direct social ties with the Pure-bloods that Albus does not have. Albus plays up his own reputation as harmless and buffoon-like too much; Kingsley’s Pure-blood family is stuck with the label of Blood-traitor, like the Weasleys and Prewetts. Andromeda somehow avoided that label among everyone except Marked Death Eaters, possibly because she is both a Black and an expertly demure politician.

Then there is Nizar, who was formally asked to join the Order by Albus, though Severus had to suggest it first. “When the sibling of a Founder falls out of a painting and then proves that he can literally call upon the magic of Hogwarts just to get rid of someone, you tend to want to stay on their good side. Oh, and unlike what Lucius Malfoy intimated, Dumbledore actually blackmailed me,” Nizar tells him.

Severus turns his head so he can stare at Nizar. “Albus did what?”

“Do you remember that joke I made, about wanting back pay for nine hundred seventy-eight years of hanging on a wall? He paid it. Cheaply, at a Galleon per year, but he paid it. Where and when I’m from, that is called blackmail.”

“And yet when I asked for hazard pay, it was considered unreasonable,” Severus says in anger.

“You were in a life-or-death position where you literally had no choice,” Nizar points out. “Thus, Dumbledore could say no and even have reasonable-sounding excuses.”

Severus growls profanity under his breath. They had been reasonable-sounding excuses.

“With me…well, let’s just say I will allow Dumbledore to continue along under the notion that I have nowhere to go aside from Hogwarts, and no choice but to do what I do.”

Severus gives him a curious look. “You’re a titled defender of the castle.”

“Yes, but it’s a title I can pass on. They all are,” Nizar replies.
Severus tries to contemplate the idea of Nizar giving up his teaching post. “It’s your job and your home,” he settles for saying.

“Hogwarts has been my home for a very long time, but Severus? I can teach anywhere. If you decided at the end of this term that you were utterly sick of Hogwarts and teaching—your happiness matters more to me than either of those things.” Nizar pauses. “If you’re still tolerating me at that point, anyway.”

“That aside…Nizar—”

“I had the chance to live my life the way I wanted to. You should have that same chance.” Nizar then proceeds to ignore the subject entirely while scowling at some poor unfortunate student’s essay. Severus has a feeling that student might have an undeserved surplus of red ink on their scroll when it’s returned to them.

“What did Salazar say about your birthday?” Severus remembers to ask on Friday morning.

“Oh—first day of March.” Nizar removes the Preservation Charm on a carton of noodles for breakfast. “Apparently, that was my first day then, so it made more sense to move my birthday. I don’t really have an attachment to either date.”

“And that’s too far away,” Severus mutters under his breath.

“What?”

“Nothing. I’m going out for a bit. I need to look for something.” Severus grabs a Muggle coat before leaving the flat.

It takes him hours of wandering around in the cold drizzle to find someone selling a turntable second-hand that still works, doesn’t need a replacement needle, and has all three speeds available. When asked about the speakers, Severus lies and says he has them. When pushed, Severus says he’ll pay full price if the merchant wants, but the speakers will immediately go into the nearest rubbish bin. That saves him twenty pounds, both in money and literal carrying weight.

“You went to ridiculous lengths on Hanukkah. Consider this an extra gift for the past Solstice, New Year’s, Compitalia, or various holidays no one has heard of in a thousand years,” Severus says when presenting Nizar with the turntable. “I can teach you the charms so it will work without electricity.” He’s almost figured out how Salazar causes sound to be emitted from and amplified by the walls, so that also should not be difficult. “Now you can play that damned song continuously until the needle wears out.”

“A Preservation Charm wouldn’t keep that from happening?” Nizar asks, exploring the second-hand turntable with curious eyes and gentle hands.

Severus blinks a few times. “I’m an idiot. Yes, it would.”

“You’re not an idiot. I doubt you’ve owned one of these in ages,” Nizar says without looking up.

“I think it might be in the attic in Spinner’s End, actually. I can’t recall getting rid of it.” Now Severus is curious. Dammit, he does not want to go back to that pit until the pit has thawed somewhat, but it’s been nice hearing music again instead of listening to the constant, resounding silence of his quarters.

“Do duplication spells work on vinyl?” Nizar’s question leads to the realization that Severus was wasting money during his summer holidays. He could have been duplicating whatever Lily
purchased. She might also have tried to rip him a new one for duplicating an album instead of just asking for a copy, but trying to explain his views of money when she came from a household that didn’t need to hoard sixpence and shillings just to buy food for the week…he knew of easier ways to give himself a migraine, most of which involved simply going home. It wasn’t that Lily didn’t want to understand, or didn’t try. Lily simply didn’t have the context to recognize just how different their lives really were.

By mutual agreement, Severus and Nizar pack up early with the intention of returning to Hogwarts that night. Severus is looking forward to dinner at the Leaky Cauldron, as he is completely done with leftover Chinese food. He’ll eat any number of things to keep from starving, but even he has limits.

Salazar might be lurking in a corner of the pub somewhere, disguised by Polyjuice, but if so, he doesn’t announce himself as Severus asks Tom for a private room upstairs, dinner for two but drinks for three included. Nizar speaks up and requests mead along with water, which makes Tom grin and ask if “old Saul” is going to be joining them.

“He’d better, or I’m hunting him down,” Nizar replies while smiling, and Tom laughs.

Shepherd’s pie is welcome normalcy after too many cartons of wok-fried food. It also leads to a baffling realization. “It just occurred to me. I was thinking about Lily earlier, and it wasn’t…I’m used to such remembrances having much more dire emotions attached.” Instead, it had been normal. The grief had been present, yes, but not with its terrible sting.

“Severus.” Nizar’s expression isn’t something Severus can easily translate. Love he recognizes easily enough, but grief, frustration, and old anger; he doesn’t understand why those would also be present. “I removed a binding curse from your arm. Blood magic used to enslave, remember? That sort of evil is going to ensure that you focus on the drab, the dreary, the unhappiness, the depression, the grief, the guilt, the rage—every unpleasant emotion before that magic would ever allow you to feel something positive. You are strong-willed enough that you mentally went around, coped with, or ignored it, but it was still doing that to you.”

Severus looks at him in dismay. “What does that mean for me, then?”

“The core of who we are doesn’t change that much,” Nizar reminds him gently.

Salazar arrives before Severus has time to contemplate that. He yanks Nizar into a hug, but restrains himself to a handclasp when it comes to Severus. He’s glad for the other’s restraint. He suspects he might actually like Salazar, but Severus still has moments when he finds it difficult to be touched by Nizar, and he’s sleeping with the man.

Salazar gives the mead an accusatory look. “Brother!”

“I am not going to be subjected to sweetened and brewed _butter,_” Nizar emphasizes. “You can drink carbonated cow fat on your own time.”

“And the hops swill would also be right out. I can still work with this,” Salazar replies. “However, it will be just the one bottle for me. I’m off in a rush; something unexpected came up. Fortunately for my evening, it’s not the need to dispose of a body.”

Nizar gives both of them a tolerant smile. “Between the two of you, I’m sure the necessitated hidden body count is legendary.”

“Whereas a certain _hermanito_ would just obliterate them.”

Nizar tips a bottle at Salazar. “Do not mock my efficiency in the matters of waste disposal.”
Severus asks Salazar about the charm for the wall-speaker conversion, which is an intelligent bit of spellwork that Filius would salivate over. “You bought him a turntable? Why not just duplicate the one in the flat?” Salazar asks.

“Too many small and electronic moving parts. Not my specialty,” Severus replies. “Vinyl, on the other hand…”

“My vinyl collection has been pillaged. I’m sure it will never recover,” Salazar says dryly. “Please tell me you copied the good ones.”

“Most of what was in there is good, and Jefferson Airplane was a necessity.”

Salazar seems surprised by that. “Not that I’m disagreeing, but why?”

“Fucking ‘White Rabbit,’” Nizar answers, laughing. “I thought I was going to damage myself while listening to that.”

Salazar lifts an eyebrow. “Do I even wish to know?”

“I read Alice in Wonderland to him when he was still in the portrait,” Severus says. “That was an entertaining mistake.”

“No, the mistake was in reading the sequel, Through the Looking Glass, a few days after falling out of a painting,” Nizar replies. “Regret, thy name is Lewis fucking Carroll.”

Salazar is giving them a speculative look that Severus finds just as unfathomable as Nizar’s expression before explaining the nature of the Dark Mark’s emotive devastation. “You read to my brother while he resided in the portrait?”

“I asked him to,” Nizar says.

“And I agreed to it. On trade, remember?” Severus reminds him.

If anything, that thoughtful look is growing more intense. “Severus Snape, do you love my brother?”

“Sal!” Nizar blurts out in shock. “Could you be any more blunt?”

Salazar smiles. “Yes, but I do try to observe some sense of decorum.”

“Yes.” Severus tries not to wince when Nizar and Salazar both look at him. “He asked. Yes.”

Nizar is staring at Severus, joy mingled with what Severus suspects is pure terror shining in his eyes. Odd; he’d never once suspected that Nizar might have as much trouble hearing such a declaration as Severus did. “You do?” Nizar rasps out.

Severus rolls his eyes. “I did just say that.”

Nizar settles for glowering at his brother. “Salazar, you prick. You didn’t need to push.”

“Some things should be certain,” Salazar murmurs. “Some things should be said before it’s far too late to say them at all.”

“Technically, I only answered a question,” Severus says.

Salazar nods. “You did. You answered a question he can’t ask about words that you, for some reason, cannot yet say. Some might consider it cheating, but I consider it efficient communication.”
Severus looks at Nizar, who seems to be at a complete loss. “Contemplating a run for the hills?”

Nizar gives him a wry look. “Understatement. The brain sets some very stupid habits.”

“I’m off,” Salazar announces. “The two of you can be adorably awkward on your own time.”

“Fuck you, Sal,” Nizar retorts, smiling.

“Not a nice thing to say to the man who’s going to pay the tab at the bar.” Salazar grins at them and opens the door to go downstairs.

“I’ll believe that when I see it,” Nizar mutters under his breath. “Time to leave, I suppose.”

Severus shakes his head, stands, and takes Nizar’s waiting hand. “Yes.”

At the bottom of the stairs, Nizar says, “I hope you didn’t say that only out of concern that Salazar might choose to retaliate.”

“Retaliate.” Severus turns around, grasps Nizar’s head, and then kisses him in public, in full view of the entire blasted pub. Nizar makes a startled gleaping sound before his hand tangles itself in Severus’s hair.

“I am not so intimidated by my House Founder that I am going to lie about my feelings for you,” Severus says to Nizar, whose pupils are entertainingly blown out. “Do try to keep that in mind.”

“Sorry, the only things left in my mind are all completely inappropriate for public consumption.”

When they’re outside, Nizar glances up at him. “You kissed me. In full view of everyone.”

Severus lifts his hand and rests his fingers along Nizar’s cheek. “Is that a problem?” he asks, feeling the corner of his mouth turn up in amusement as Nizar is promptly distracted by touch.

Nizar blinks a few times to gather his thoughts. “Voldemort is probably not happy that he has no leash on you any longer. That could endanger you.”

“I am exceptionally dangerous, myself,” Severus counters, “and I am no longer trapped in a position where I cannot allow my true feelings to be known. I repeat: is that a problem?”

Nizar smiles. “No.”

“Good.” Severus is either in a daring mood, or he’s been utterly sick of the restrictions placed on his life and his choices for longer than he realized. He uses his fingertips to tilt up Nizar’s chin so that he can kiss the man in the middle of Diagon Alley.

Someone walking past them trips and falls when she notices the spectacle. “My word!” the witch bleats in shock.

Severus smiles against Nizar’s lips. “Would you like to go home?”

Nizar grasps hold of Severus’s arm. “Yes.”

“Outside the anti-Apparition wards?” Severus asks when they arrive outside the castle gates.

“I wasn’t sure if you’d prefer to go upstairs or down,” Nizar replies. He waves at a few students who stayed on for the holiday and are outside, braving the colder weather.
“Down, most likely,” Severus says in a low voice, entertained when Nizar almost trips over a cobblestone. “You are far too easy to distract.”

“Only for very specific instances of distraction, thank you!” Nizar’s smile quickly becomes a scowl when a phoenix Patronus swoops down to meet them. “I might kill him merely for having bad timing.”

“Do not kill your current employer,” Severus says, wondering at how they both understand who that Patronus is meant for. Severus, Albus could call for at any time, but with Nizar, he’s playing a political game.

“Nizar, now that you’ve returned to Hogwarts, I was wondering if I might speak with you regarding last Tuesday,” Albus’s voice says. “At your earliest convenience, of course.” The phoenix Patronus trills to conclude the message and vanishes.

Nizar rolls his eyes. “I’ll go off and get this over with. I’ll see you downstairs when I find out what his concerns are regarding Salazar.”

* * *

“Ah; good evening, Nizar,” Dumbledore greets him when he knocks and then enters the headmaster’s office. “That was quite a prompt response.”

“Good evening, Albus,” Nizar replies. “I’d nothing else immediately pressing. I’m merely surprised you waited this long to give in to your curiosity regarding Tuesday’s meeting.”

“What makes you think that is what I wish to discuss?” Dumbledore asks, his eyes full of a merry twinkle that puts Nizar in mind of when he’s fallen down dizzy with a night sky overhead. It’s not a prying attempt at modern Occlumency, but it is a very good manner of keeping the suspicions of others at bay.

“Because I’m not stupid, and neither are you.” Nizar sits down when Dumbledore gestures at a chair. The Headmaster offers him candy, which Nizar refuses; then it is tea, which Nizar finds entirely acceptable. To his amusement, it’s delivered by Dobby.

“Oh, yes, our employed house-elf.” Dumbledore smiles at the elf in what appears to be genuine fondness. “Dobby, I am presuming you’ve met Professor Slytherin by now.”

“Yes, Dobby has been meeting the Professor Slytherin several times when Filky and Tinny be busy.” Dobby beams at Nizar. “The Professor Slytherin is being very kind to Dobby, and doesn’t mock him at all for wearing clothes and having pay!”

“Never at all,” Nizar reassures him. Dobby bobs his head at Nizar and Dumbledore before Disapparating.

Dumbledore settles down behind his desk with a cup and a selection of biscuits. “I confess, I worried at first that when Salazar Slytherin appeared, alive…I worried that he’d employed the magic of a Horcrux to remain so.”

“Salazar has a multitude of reasons to find such a method of survival abhorrent, Albus.” Nizar chews on the corner of a biscuit and hides a smile. The house-elves have been paying attention, and the
sugar content is much reduced. It’s now palatable and capable of demonstrating other flavors rather
than sweet. “Not least of which is the cause of death for my eldest son.”

“I see.” Dumbledore sips his tea. “I heard an intriguing bit of gossip about your son’s death after
Christmas Day, but there was not much substance to it beyond the means employed to terrify
Voldemort’s followers.”

“Brice chose to live in Eidyn Burh—Edinburgh—as an adult. He’d performed his apprenticeship for
his mastery nearby and fell in love with that region of Alba. One day, rumor came to him that one of
the villages local to the king’s fortress had been visited by an evil magician. This man killed half of
the villagers and then turned the remaining seventy-four young men, women, and children into living
Horcruxes.”


“Voldemort has greater ambition, which often has consequences that reach further, and reap deadlier
rewards,” Nizar says. “Unlike Voldemort, this magician was learned in the creation of Horcruxes,
and could whittle his soul away in tiny bits instead of giving up vast parts of himself with every
severing. By creating all of his Horcruxes from living beings, this magician also gave himself a literal
slave army. He could draw from their lives to power his magic.

“My son used his mastery of Blood Magic to cut off the magician from being able to draw strength
from those living Horcruxes. Brice then fought the bastard to the point where the magician was all
but drained of magic, but Brice was injured badly during that battle. The magician was still alive, but
against another healthy magician, he would be defenceless. Brice knew he didn’t have the means left
to him to finish the job, so with the last of his own magic, he called for me—for us.”

Nizar puts his teacup down. “Myself, Salazar, Helga, and Godric were available. I’ve never been
able to decide if I regret that Galiena and Elfric, Brice’s siblings, were not. They might have had a
chance to say goodbye, but…Brice gave up much of himself to cause that magician’s defeat. It was
not a—not a kind death. After dealing with the magician, we had to bring seventy-four living
Horcruxes back to Hogwarts in an attempt to fix the damage done to each and every one of them.”

“You all bore terrible witness to how vile such magic can be,” Dumbledore murmurs. “Is there any
truth to the claim that you cursed this Dark wizard to living death while being trapped in his own
grave?”

Instead of answering, Nizar says, “We’d all seen soul jars placed in living things before, but
individual by individual. Never that many, and not all from the same village. Each of those
Horcruxes were created as the victim witnessed the murder of someone they loved.

“Half of the villagers died with the Horcrux’s removal.” Nizar watches Dumbledore’s expression
sink further into pensive distress. “As I told you before: you cannot replace what has been burnt
away, Albus.”

“And the others?” Dumbledore asks quietly.

“Half of the survivors died because of what could not be put back for them.” Nizar reclames his tea
and warms his fingers with the cup. “The nineteen who remained became one of our exceptions to
the castle’s rule about not hosting non-magical beings. They had nowhere to go, no one left who
would understand the terrible thing that had happened to them unless they remained in a magical
community. After a year or two, as they mentally and physically improved, they moved to
Castleview and took up residence there for the rest of their lives. You call that village Hogsmeade
now.
“Such an interesting thing about magic, though,” Nizar adds. “Every single non-magical survivor
gave birth to magical offspring, each of which gave rise to magical lineages. From what I know of
those who came to Hogwarts, many of their descendants still live in Hogsmeade today.”

“I had wondered why you excused yourself when the others showed such curiosity in Salazar
Slytherin’s extended family. I am sorry, Nizar,” Dumbledore says. Nizar shakes his head at the
sentiment. His grief is old and often tiring. “What of your other descendants?”

“You witnessed those results, Albus. The Potter child is related to the Slytherin line, so your device
would have pointed at everyone I or Salazar are related to. It’s only him, Voldemort, and perhaps the
child’s aunt and cousin. That’s all.”

“Then you do have my sympathies yet again. I have to admit, in my concern for young Harry, that
lack never crossed my mind at all,” Dumbledore admits.

“It’s fine. I didn’t think on it at first, either.”

“I understand what it’s like to be the end of your own line,” Dumbledore says. “Myself and my
brother will be the last Dumbledores of this world. I never fathered children, though my preferences
were not for the feminine, and my brother…I believe his preference is to have no partner at all.”

Nizar decides that he’s going to ask Aberforth about that at the first granted opportunity. He’d really
like to know if that is the truth, or if it’s Albus Dumbledore’s truth.

“Now, then…Britanni Bellum dux Magum.”

Nizar selects another biscuit. “Blame Myrddin for that. I certainly do.”

“Merlin is listed as being one of your brother’s students in the registries,” Dumbledore says with a
curious look.

Nizar rolls his eyes. “And neither Salazar nor I know how that happened, considering the old goat
was born at the end of the fourth century and died in 1010. Salazar was not born until 969 and
served his magical apprenticeship under Myrddin. It’s like all that rot about Salazar and blood purity,
or the Hat singing about Salazar being ‘from fen’ when he’s from bloody Castile. This school’s
history has been tampered with to suit the ends of others, Albus Dumbledore, and it was done so
effectively that the damage may take decades to undo.”

“Then that is the plan,” Dumbledore says. “Attempting to undo years of lies being touted as fact?”

“Most likely. I’ve certainly been at it since I fell out of a canvas frame,” Nizar replies. “Is that your
concern, Headmaster? Do you worry that Salazar Slytherin will return here and unseat you from
your very comfortable, ornate, and gaudy throne?”

“A concern?” Dumbledore purses his lips. “Perhaps. I’ve grown used to my comfortable, ornate, and
gaudy throne, Nizar, and there are many who would fear a Slytherin in this seat.”

“Salazar is the Keeper of this castle’s Western Seat. Its western magic,” Nizar says, amused by
Dumbledore’s response. Dumbledore isn’t perfect by any stretch of the imagination, but he’s better at
being Hogwarts’ Headmaster than his two predecessors. “Godric was more often than not acting in
the post of what would eventually become the Headmaster’s role. He was the most personable of the
four, the man who could make anyone like him. Even if Salazar turns up in Hogwarts tomorrow,
Albus, your job is secure.”

“Do you think he’ll be coming here to Hogwarts? Your brother?”
“I’d be very surprised if he didn’t, but I don’t expect him for a few weeks yet. When that day does come, though…” Nizar smiles. “There are people in this school who will be receiving an education that they don’t want. People have obstinate streaks about changing stubbornly held beliefs, and your staff is not immune.”

“No, they’re not, but if I thought them entirely inflexible, they wouldn’t have survived life under my perpetual oddities.” Dumbledore smiles at him in return. “I must confess several things, Nizar.”

Nizar waves his hand in permission. “Please; be my guest.”

“I’m looking forward to the challenge a Hogwarts Founder will bring to this school.” Dumbledore’s expression turns serious. “I am grateful that there are spies out there whose identities Voldemort doesn’t know, and that your brother is willing to share the information they gain with the Order. That may become the only means we have of being prepared for what Voldemort intends next. I am quietly thrilled that Voldemort is going to be concerned with not one ancestor, but also the one Tom Marvolo Riddle considers most important of all.”

“The only problem with that last bit is that Voldemort isn’t going to believe it’s him.” Nizar holds up one finger when Dumbledore opens his mouth to argue. “Yes, I know. Voldemort accepted the truth of me after we met. But I remember that child’s mindset, Albus. A single miracle is exactly that. A second miracle is trickery meant to ensnare, as such things are not possible. He’ll firmly believe we’re trying to use his uncertainty regarding me. Voldemort will believe we’ve dug up a man to act as Salazar Slytherin in hopes of sowing fear.”

Dumbledore frowns. “Well-argued, and most likely correct, Nizar. Still…Britanni Bellum dux Magum?”

Nizar sighs in frustration. “Pay more attention to the fact that I am the titled Protector of Hogwarts, Albus. Ultimately, that is far more important to me than making the bedrock beneath our feet tremble.”

“Of course not. I only hope for such information to make Voldemort tremble,” Dumbledore says. “Fearful men make mistakes.”

“Considering Tom Marvolo Riddle’s fears caused him to create Horcruxes? Yes, they certainly do.”

*   *   *   *

Nizar decides to go upstairs first, the better to unpack what shrunken objects he’s crammed into his pockets. He waves at the few students he sees from every House but Slytherin, whose students all went home for the winter break. Most of those remaining seem excited, looking forward to the other students’ return Sunday afternoon.

When Nizar makes it to the sixth floor, he stops in place, head cocked as he listens. He can sense something, but the impression is faint. It’s like searching for those who bear the Dark Mark from far away, but not quite. Odd.

He takes the stairs up to the seventh floor and makes it halfway down the corridor before he has to slump against the wall, breathing hard. He feels like he’s suddenly come down ill, chilled even as he breaks out in a sweat.
“Professor?”

Nizar manages to turn his head. “Miss Granger. I didn’t realize you’d stayed over the holiday.”

“I didn’t want Ginny and Ron to be lonely. It was just us in Gryffindor staying over this year. George and Fred were supposed to be here with us, but whatever they did in London took longer than they thought, so they didn’t return until yesterday.” Granger frowns at him. “Are you all right, sir?”

“No, but I’m not certain why. It only started when I got to the sixth floor.”

“Can I help you?” Granger asks. “Or maybe fetch Madam Pomfrey?”

Nizar shakes his head and forces himself to continue on. “No, not Madam Pomfrey. I’d appreciate it if you just make certain I don’t fall face-first onto the floor.” Granger nods and quickens her steps until she’s keeping pace with him.

When Nizar arrives at the tapestry, he finds himself staring at a door he doesn’t recognize. Its wood is almost black, making it hard to discern the iron wrapping it.

Whatever is behind that door is the source of what’s plaguing him. “Miss Granger, will you do me a favor and open that?”

Granger gives him a doubtful look, but does so. The moment the latch clicks for the door to open, the feeling intensifies. There is screaming in his head, anger and viciousness—

Nizar drops down onto the floor when Granger hurriedly shuts the door. He leans back against the tapestry, trying not to gasp for breath. “What the—” He corrects himself at the last moment. “What is that?”

“That’s…” Granger flinches. “It isn’t just your classroom that’s here. The twins showed us in September. They said it’s called the Room of Requirement.”

“Someone figured out how to use the room’s aspects,” Nizar guesses. “Right, then.”

“What’s the matter, Professor?” Granger asks with her hands clasped together. “You look positively ghastly.”

Nizar can hear it still, that screaming. His own Mind Magic keeps the vileness at bay, but whatever is in that particular room awoke something within him that should not be there at all. “Miss Granger, I trust your discretion.”

Granger’s chin comes up as her eyes widen. “Of course, sir!”

“During that confrontation with Voldemort, I stole part of his magic when he tried to steal all of mine. Retribution. Foul temper. Call it whatever you like; I still did it,” Nizar explains, retrieving his wand from his sleeve. “Do you know what normally happens if one magician carries the magic of another for more than a few days?”

Granger’s brow furrows. “I know magicians can temporarily grant magical strength to another, but you’re supposed to give it back. If you don’t…the larger magic will consume the smaller magic until they’re the same. Right?”

“I love your studious habits. Never let anyone tell you that you’re wrong to be so educated.” Nizar wheezes his way through another breath. “That didn’t happen, that consumption. It didn’t happen
because I’m an idiot. Voldemort gave himself a corporeal form with a spell that gives him life unchanging. That includes his magic. It’s still within my core, and it’s still *his.*”

“Oh.” Granger bites her lip. “That doesn’t sound good.”

“It really, really isn’t.” Nizar tilts his head towards the door. “Something in there set it off and alerted me to its continued existence. That unchanged bit of Voldemort’s magic is recognizing a Horcrux within one of my classroom’s aspects—a Horcrux that belongs to Voldemort.”

“Why didn’t you notice before? What’s a Horcrux? And why are you telling *me* all of this?” Granger asks.

“I was used to it. I’d been here the entire time. I wouldn’t have known any differently. Now I’ve been away for nearly two weeks, and I can…it’s obvious. As for why I’m telling you?” Nizar can’t lift his wand; the best he can do is hold it in his hand. “When that door opens again and whoever is inside comes out, I don’t know what shape I’ll be in. You may need to explain things to others. *Espero a un guardián.*”

Granger’s mouth is still twisted in concern, but her eyes light up when Nizar’s basilisk Patronus appears. “You can cast the Patronus Charm in Spanish. I should have realized—that’s amazing—”

“Granger,” Nizar says to interrupt her excitement. Then he addresses the basilisk in Parseltongue. The Patronus nods and slithers off through the wall. Next, Nizar retrieves Kanza from his neck. “Please watch over her for me.”

Granger gingerly accepts the basilisk. She is not a fan of snakes, but she absolutely refuses to fear Kanza. Nizar considers that quite an accomplishment from Granger, considering she was one of Jalaf’s Petrification victims. “Now what do I do, sir?” Granger asks.

“Send a Patronus to Professor Snape. Tell him that he needs to come here.” Nizar swallows. “Tell him that *he* hid a soul jar in Hogwarts.”

Granger is biting her lip again. “Sir—”

“Miss Granger.” Nizar manages to smile at her. “You can do it.”

The last thing he sees is Granger’s Kneazle Patronus forming on the ground, tail tucked properly around its feet as it waits for instructions.
“What did you call my classroom?”

“The Professor Slytherin not be knowing the other name for his classroom?”

Chapter Notes

I've forgotten to mention this before, so I profusely apologize.

I'm probably not going to be able to respond to comments on this section of the story, as I'm eyeballs-deep in editing a book that will be 2 books (printed as 6 books plus the ebook formats) while working on its sequel, so I'm...busy as hell, basically.

Please feel free to keep commenting. The love and the shrieking means a hell of a lot to me. <3

“That’s everything, then?” Salazar asks.

“Almost. Until the new moon on the twentieth, we’re done in regards to London,” Gwen replies without lowering her hood. “Well. Short of removing two sections of London and dropping them into a Vanishing Cabinet for the duration.”

“I don’t think any of us need to visit Narnia that fucking badly,” Salazar replies, “and I’ve dealt with enough royal children in my life, besides. I trust your word. If you think we’ve done all we can, then we have.”

“You’re certain about going back? At this point, I don’t know if you’ll drive a panic or a revolution.”

Salazar lifts his shoulders in a shrug. He has theories, but he won’t be able to confirm them until it’s done. “I don’t see as I’ve much choice, but panic often goes hand-in-hand with revolutions. Just in time,” he adds as Fawkes appears, landing on the tree limb nearest him. “How are you this fine evening, Fawkes?”

The phoenix lets out a long, lingering trill. Salazar tilts his head. “About usual, then.” He places a sealed envelope in the phoenix’s beak when Fawkes opens his mouth. “This time next week.” Fawkes nods and vanishes in a burst of flame.

Gwen sighs. “And Dumbledore?”

“His willingness to listen averaged fifty-fifty before Compitalia. Perhaps now Albus Dumbledore will be more reasonable.”

Gwen makes a displeased noise. “That is far better than the days when it was ten times out of one hundred. I’m off. Have a pleasant weekend, Saul.”
“And you as well, Gwen.” Salazar waits until she Disapparates before sighing. She chose this—all of them did—but that does not make it fair, or just.

Salazar glances to his left when a Patronus forms in the darkness of the public garden. A basilisk. “Oh, did it take you naught but two hours to find trouble, little brother?”

The basilisk opens its mouth and nothing but slurry Parseltongue emerges: “Sal. Seventh floor. Corridor. Fucker hid a soul jar in this castle. Right…right here.”

Salazar feels himself go completely still, battle-readiness settling over his nerves as he prepares for what may need to be done. He Apparates on the spot, appearing in the seventh floor corridor in front of one of the most gods-awful tapestries it’s ever been his misfortune to witness. He also surprises the hell out of a young female student dressed in non-magical clothing, one who holds Kanza in her cupped hands. Other than Nizar, they’re alone in the corridor.

“You—but the Anti-Apparition wards—how did you do that?” the girl asks, wide-eyed.

“You ask how I Apparated within the castle before you ask my name, and yet I’d wager quite a bit that you’re not a Ravenclaw.” Salazar kneels down next to his brother. “Nizar?”

Nizar has his hands clasped to his head. His eyes are closed; an unhappy grey tinge mars his skin. He’s also hissing in Parseltongue, loud and sibilant in a way that has Kanza rearing in alarm.

“He’s not really—responding,” the girl tells him. “Because there’s something he called a Horcrux in an aspect of that room.”

Salazar checks to make certain Nizar hasn’t broken into fever anew before turning. “What door is that?” he asks of the black wood set in the wall. “I’ve not seen it before.”

“It’s—” the girl squeaks when Severus Apparates into the corridor. “Professor!”

“What happened?” Severus asks, ignoring the girl’s sudden paleness.

“Quiet.” Salazar lowers his head, listening. “You—student—your name?”

“Hermione Granger, sir.” Her brown skin is still lacking color, but her eyes have narrowed with a shrewdness Salazar always prized in his students. That’s one who has realized who she’s speaking to, but isn’t wasting time. “Professor Snape, I think he’s trying to interpret, so please let me tell you what Professor Slytherin told me?”

Salazar can sense Severus’s great hesitation. “Very well,” he grates out. “What did he say, Miss Granger?”

Salazar listens long enough to have his suspicions confirmed. “Like recognizing like,” he says. “Being away from it would certainly make it easier to discern.”

He doesn’t glance up when he hears that mysterious door open, but Miss Granger’s, “What are you two doing in there?” is almost louder than Severus’s, “What did you two idiots break now?”

“Oh—a professor?” one lad says in surprise.

“Great Merlin, what’s the matter with him?” another one says, sounding remarkably like the first. Twins, perhaps.

“Don’t. Shut. The. Door,” Nizar says in clear, biting English, even if he doesn’t open his eyes.
“Why?” Salazar asks him, ignoring the others. “I can tell it’s paining you,” he adds in Parseltongue.

Nizar opens his eyes, which are shifting colors, as they often do when he is gripped by fever or the fiercest of tempers. “Because. The. Fucking. Thing. Will. Hide! We won’t find it!”

“It’s an inanimate object, Nizar.” Salazar bites back a curse. He hopes it’s inanimate, at least.

“Yes, but—uh…oddly not-dead Sir Slytherin?” one of the lads says. “That room we were just in is designed for hiding things.”

“All of the things, really,” the other young man adds.

Salazar looks over his shoulder to find a pair of adult ginger twins staring at him. Then he looks beyond them and sees a dark room with no apparent boundaries aside from the rubbish that seems to fill it. “Gods, what a complete bollocksing mess that is.” He gets out his wand, which makes Miss Granger draw in a swift breath before she seems to bite her tongue with a vengeance.

The light he conjures is a deep, cool violet, like the most tricky of *ignis fatuus*. “Severus, this light is going to find whatever Nizar can sense. Follow the light until it finds our problem. Don’t touch it, no matter what it appears to be. Find another means to carry it and bring it here.”

Severus gives him a curt nod and then steps out of the way so the violet light can pass through the doorway. “Come with me, you ginger ingrates,” he orders the twins. “You helped cause this mess, so you will help fix it.”

“Just don’t bloody touch it!” Salazar yells after them, scowling.

“Here, sir.” Miss Granger holds out her hands. “You should have her, I think.”

Salazar reaches out and allows Kanza to encircle his wrist. It isn’t the first time they’ve met again, but he suspects her presence will always cause him a certain pang. “Yes, thank you. *Hello, tiny beauty.*”

“*Hello, flatterer.*” Kanza replies, tucking her tail in so she resembles nothing more than a glittering, green-and-gold cuff on his arm.

“Dobby!” the girl exclaims as a green-eyed house-elf wearing six different pairs of socks and a green tea towel Apparates into the corridor. “What is it?”

“Dobby is wondering what is being wrong,” the elf replies, staring at both Salazar and Nizar in wide-eyed wonder mixed with concern. “There is being bad magic in the castle tonight!”

“Yes, but it’s been here for a while. It’s coming from in there.” Miss Granger points through the open doorway.

Dobby the elf frowns. “It being in the Come and Go Room?”

Nizar cracks his eyes open again. “What did you call my classroom?”

The elf looks surprised. “The Professor Slytherin not be knowing the other name for his classroom?”

“No.” Nizar swallows when his voice cracks. “Why did you call that room the Come and Go Room? Miss Granger says the students call that aspect the Room of Requirement.”

“It is not just being one aspect, Professor Slytherin.” Dobby frowns. “That being the name the other Hogwarts elves are calling all the rooms. Please be waiting a moment.” He Disapparates and returns
a moment later with another elf, a female with brown eyes.

“Yes? What is the Professors—” She pauses, bewildered by the sight of Salazar. “What is the Professors and the Master Slytherin be needing?”

“Why is my brother’s classroom saddled with two different ridiculous names?” Salazar asks her so Nizar doesn’t have to.

The elf is appalled. “No one be telling the Professor Slytherin this?”

“No!” Nizar drops his head back against the ugly tapestry. “Does this have anything to do with why my classroom door likes to hide, Filky?”

Filky the elf nods so vigorously that her ears slap the air. “Master Salazar, Professor Slytherin, the Professor Slytherin’s room be—they be abusing it! They do it so much, we elves hide the door.”

“That was probably a very wise idea,” Salazar says, “especially given what I can sense of Hogwarts’ magic.”

Dobby prances from one foot to the other in a display of upset. “The students be turning it into a room that gives them anything they want. They just be needing to walk past the door place three times, thinking about what they be needing, and a new door appears to give it to them!”

“So many students doing inappropriate things,” Filky mutters under her breath. “Abusing the Professor Slytherin’s room.”

“That being the room where everything is hidden,” Dobby adds, pointing into the rubbish room. “Dobby is hearing certain Hogwarts students speak of it.”

Nizar lets out a dry chuckle. “Dobby, were you spying?”

Dobby looks affronted. “Dobby is a good elf, and would never spy on anyone intentionally. Dobby could not be showing anyone anything about the Come and Go Room. Hogwarts’ magic won’t let me.”

“That, I can fix,” Salazar tells the elf, ignoring the way Filky starts to fret. “You’re too loyal not to have full access to this castle.”

“Thank you, Master Salazar,” Dobby replies with a wide smile. “The Master Salazar is being very kind.”

“No, I’m a complete prick, but I save it for the appropriate occasions,” Salazar replies. Both Hogwarts elves snicker behind their hands like young children, while poor Miss Granger blushes up to her very eyebrows.

Severus stalks out of the room with the twins following at a rather meek pace behind him. “If I heard that right, then ‘the room where everything is hidden’ translates directly to ‘too lazy to take out the rubbish.’”

“To be fair—” one twin begins.

“—some of it is useful rubbish,” the other finishes.

“Everything in there is perfectly preserved. The Preservation Charms on your rooms seem to have extended to all the rooms.” Severus holds up a robe that still hangs on a device that is more hook and
rod than proper clothes hanger. “Date it.”

“1625,” Salazar says after a moment’s thought. “That would be when the style changed with King James’s death. It appears to be brand new.”

“Indeed.” Severus tosses the robe back into the room with no concern as to where it lands. “Shut the door, Weasleys.”

The twins glance at each other, shrug, and close it together. The odd black door promptly vanishes. “We did find a thing,” one says.

“Well, the glowing light found a thing. A very old thing. A thing that I’m thinking is a ‘We should be taking Miss Granger and leaving over this’ kind of thing.”

“Why, Fred?” Miss Granger asks, but the twins have her by the elbows and are already dragging her down the hall. “Oh, for goodness sake!”

“Goodness doesn’t have spit to do with it,” the twin named Fred says, and then they’re off down a different passage.

“What did you find?” Salazar asks, noticing the pinched look to Severus’s features.

“Not out here.” The man stalks back and forth in front of the wall where the odd black door had been until Nizar’s original oak classroom door returns. “I’m so very glad that works.”

Salazar gets Nizar’s arm over his shoulders and hauls his brother to his feet. “Come on. Inside, before the entire castle’s scant holiday population decide to join us.” He’s intrigued by the fact that Severus knows which direction to flip the cast-iron S in order to achieve the differences between an ancient office and Nizar’s living space.

“What that is quite a bit of trust,” Salazar murmurs.

Nizar glares at him. “Sal. This is really…not the best time.”

“It’s always the best time.”

Salazar ignores Nizar cursing him as he sits Nizar down on his own sofa. “Now: what did you find?” Salazar asks again.

Severus holds out a square wooden box, of the right width, length, and depth to hold quite a bit—or given that Salazar recognizes the style, to hold one large, crown-like object in safety. “A very specific piece of jewelry thought to be lost,” Severus replies. That confirms the suspicion of jewelry, but Salazar’s gut churns with the other possibility that arises.

“Nizar, he’s going to be opening it,” Salazar warns Nizar, who nods. “Severus?”

“If it’s what I believe it to be, you will not be pleased.” Severus lifts the lid on the box.

Salazar flinches when that loud sibilant hissing resumes, half of it the nonsense of pain, half of it raving. He looks into the box only long enough to see ancient, tarnished silver, the glimmer of a perfect, dusk-sky sapphire, and the words engraved upon the diadem: Wit beyond measure is man’s greatest treasure.

Of course she would apply her own creation of an updating translation spell to such, Salazar thinks in grief, just before that grief is swamped by anger. “Close it. That bastard turned Rowena’s diadem
“How did it get back here?” Nizar whispers in English. “Helena left it…oh. He keeps giving me new reasons to want him dead.”

Salazar nods in restrained fury. “I’m inclined to argue with you now about which of us is killing that prick.”

* * * * *

“Can either of you undo this?” Severus asks, trying to ignore a vague sense of excitement. The aspect of an ancient treasure of Hogwarts is meaningless to him when compared to the opportunity to kill Voldemort.

“Not my specialty, no,” Salazar says just as Nizar begins hissing in Parseltongue again. “Salazar, what is he—”

“Quiet.” Salazar is frowning, head cocked to one side. “If Nizar is trying to repeat that bastard’s words, then at the very least we can listen to find out if there is anything useful within the nonsense.”

Severus feels his blood turn cold. “That’s not Nizar—that is Voldemort speaking?”

“Yes and no.” Salazar’s eyes half-close as he listens. “This is a direct connection between two parts of Voldemort’s magic, yes, but Voldemort is not speaking through Nizar. My brother is only repeating what Voldemort is thinking or saying. When that bastard is less stable, he speaks to himself in Parseltongue.”

“Voldemort just lost a Horcrux and several followers. Stability was never one of his defining traits,” Severus says flatly.

“Exactly.” Salazar leans closer to Nizar and hisses in Parseltongue. Nizar blinks a few times, though his eyes don’t focus. “Sal?” he whispers. “Sal, I can—I can see what he’s looking at.”

Salazar’s expression hardens. “Does he know? Does Voldemort know, Nizar?”

Nizar shakes his head. “He doesn’t know. He’s distracted. Oh, that’s a wreck of a place.”


“Hello, Pettigrew,” Nizar mutters. “It has to be you. You still look like you haven’t figured out how to stop being a rat.”

“Never spend twelve years in your Animagus form,” Salazar says in grim amusement. “I couldn’t make out anything useful in the Parseltongue. Can you see what he’s thinking without getting caught?”

Nizar smiles faintly. “If he tries looking in my direction, he’ll regret it. Hold on.”

Severus grimaces and grabs Nizar’s shoulders when his back arches up, a strangled noise leaving his lips. “That’s enough!”

“Yes, it is!” Salazar agrees in a disturbed shout. “Nizar!”
Nizar’s jaw clenches before he speaks again. “He knows something’s wrong.”

“We gathered that,” Salazar retorts. “Let it go, Nizar!”

“I can’t. I took part of his magic, Sal. I took part of his magical core, and he’s reaching for it. Like recognizing like. I can’t. You’re going to have to—”

“Gods all.” Salazar’s eyes burn in a way that suggests he’d like to destroy half the contents of Britain. “Fuck. I didn’t want this to be a concern so soon. It’s still too bloody close to the damned blood poisoning!”

“Will that make a difference?” Severus asks. “That was nearly a full month ago now.”

“I have no idea. Nizar, which is easier: cutting that connection, or removing that bit of magic?”

Nizar ponders the question while hissing under his breath. “Easier, or less dead?” he finally asks.

“Fuck.” Salazar swipes his hands through his short hair before he pulls out his wand. “Severus, I need your help.”

Severus nods his immediate agreement. “How?”

“I need you to hold him.” Salazar presses his lips together before sighing. “That bit of magic recognizes something that was once its home, Severus. It’s going to want to escape my efforts to destroy it. It’s going to fight back. Nizar?”

“Sal,” Nizar responds at once, just as aware of them as he is of Voldemort. “Oh, he looked directly at the basilisk,” he whispers, and lets out an absolutely chilling giggle. “I hope he likes being temporarily Petrified.”

Salazar’s grin is all teeth. “I’m sure it will be an educational experience. Nizar, what I’m about to do isn’t going to be pleasant. Do you remember?”

Nizar shakes his head. “No. No, I don’t.”

“Well…” Salazar reaches out long enough to tap Nizar’s nose. “Unlike before, you’re about to cause Voldemort a great deal of pain.”

Nizar’s lips quirk in a quick grin as his vision temporarily focuses on Salazar’s finger. “Pleasant bonus.”

Salazar gives Severus a hard look, an instruction buried in his gaze. Severus nods again and sits down on the sofa. Nizar is frighteningly pliant as Severus gathers him up, locking his arms around Nizar’s chest.

Nizar flinches away from something they can’t see. “Salazar, se ha recuperado de la Petrificación. Con rápido, el es molesto.”

Salazar rolls his eyes. “Then stop eating the magic of annoying bastards.” He points his wand at Nizar’s heart. “I want you to think on something, little brother.”

“What?”

“An apple tree.” Salazar’s voice has dropped all hint of irritation or humor. He sounds calm and deadly quiet; Severus finds himself holding his breath. “An apple tree in the spring, little brother. Its leaves against the sky, its blossoms perfuming the wind.”
Nizar flinches. “I—I don’t remember!”

“You do, and you will,” Salazar insists. The feel of magic is suddenly strong in the air, though there is no audible incantation. This is pure magic, wielded by a man who’d been in full control of his talents at a time when most children of Hogwarts are still trying to remember the difference between a doxie and a pixie.

Nizar goes rigid in Severus’s arms as he hisses in a pained breath through clenched teeth. He sounds like he’s choking down the urge to scream as his left hand grasps at the sofa cushion; his right hand clamps down on Severus’s forearm with such strength that Severus’s fingertips start to tingle from lack of blood flow.

Severus can’t resist the opportunity. “In trouble twice in less than a month? Bloody Gryffindor.”

“You’re insulting me right now?” Nizar sounds amused. “Slytherin—” he gasps just before the scream breaks through Nizar’s control, piercing Severus’s ears as Nizar’s fingers embed deep bruises in Severus’s arm.

Salazar hasn’t moved, but the green, silver-edged shine of his magic is glowing in his eyes. “Tell me when,” he orders.

“991!” Nizar shouts. “That was when! Spring of 991! It’d been the full year!”

Salazar bares his teeth. “What are we doing, Nizar?”

“UNTANGLING THE DAMNED KNOTS!” Nizar shrieks. Severus hisses in pain as Nizar’s hand tears through his jacket and shirt, his nails gouging into Severus’s skin.

“What are you looking at?” Salazar asks. “I know you can see it now, little brother. Tell me!”

“A—a tree! The apple tree in the spring, that fucking stupid tree!”

Salazar glances at Severus, but he has no idea what the expression on Salazar’s face is meant to tell him. “What did you say, little brother?”

Nizar starts fighting Severus’s grip. “STOP! You have to!”


Salazar clenches his jaw and flicks his wand like he’s trying to stab a fly. Nizar shrieks again, his fingers digging into Severus’s arm. Severus can feel blood starting to well up from the wounds, and hopes Voldemort’s suffering is tenfold. Failing, what could Nizar mean—

“Diggory,” Severus realizes.

Salazar tilts his head and shrugs. Severus is partially correct, then. “Almost there,” he mutters. “And what did Helga tell you, little brother?”

Nizar draws in a rasping breath. “She said—she said I didn’t have to. She said…she said I was free.”

Salazar smiles in triumph as his wand slashes viciously through the air in front of him. Severus thinks he hears something cry out in mortal agony before a deep silence descends in the room. He glances
down to realize that Nizar is boneless in his arms, unconscious.

“Done. Not as bad as I feared it would be.” Salazar uses his sleeve to wipe beads of sweat from his face. “My little brother and his damned temper. Family trait, that.”

Severus inspects his sleeve and finds jagged tears through the black silk, revealing raw and bleeding flesh beneath. “That wasn’t normal, was it?”

“No.” Salazar leans back against the sofa and lifts Nizar’s legs into his lap. “Normally, a magician can draw another magician’s magic into their core, where it will then be consumed and made part of the dominant core if it’s not returned. There are good reasons for magicians to trade parts of their magic, or to offer part of it on a temporary basis to another.

“My brother was turned into a Horcrux as an infant, Severus. He isn’t normal, and never will be. Always there will be a part of himself that no one will ever be able to reach. Not because Nizar doesn’t wish to share, but because what is meant to be there was destroyed.”

“I don’t understand,” Severus says, but then he remembers the Pensieved memory. Nizar told Albus that Horcruxes destroy things in the living being they’re placed in.

“You can’t put part of someone else’s soul into another living thing without making room for it. The soul shard will destroy whatever is in its way to create that space for itself.” Salazar has a wary look on his face when he glances at Severus. “Make no mistake: my brother is one of the most talented magicians with a wand who will ever exist. He is intelligent, fearless, cunning, and a fierce damned protector—he earned his name, Severus, and did so in a way that would turn the stomach of every teacher in this school aside from yourself. He cares for more beings on this earth than he possibly should, and when he chooses to love? That’s a bur you’re never getting rid of.”

Severus thinks on the gifts Nizar had bestowed simply because he wanted to demonstrate the depth of what he felt. He thinks his gifts in return were not nearly so fine in comparison, but Nizar had gazed on them as if they were as precious as a pile of gold. “I think I’ve borne witness to the bur aspect, but I’m not sure what point you’re trying to make.”

“Helga put it best, a long time ago,” Salazar says. “Nizar lacks the ability to think of himself as someone who has as much right to exist as anyone else.”

“The Dursleys,” Severus growls, but Salazar is already shaking his head.

“That rotten bunch only made it worse. I’m talking about a sense of self-preservation, Severus. He bloody well doesn’t have one. What you might once have perceived as recklessness in the child was never intentional behavior, simply a lack that he had no way to rectify—or even understand.”

“Ah.” Severus instinctively tightens his grip on Nizar, who makes a faint noise of protest. “That does explain a lot, both then and with certain recent…misunderstandings.”

“I imagine it would.” Salazar rests his head against the back of the sofa cushion. “Did Nizar ever mention that living Horcruxes—soul jars—were more common in our time?”

“Once or twice, in conjunction with telling us that he knew how to defend others against becoming one,” Severus answers. “Whereas except for Voldemort’s success, we’d lost the knowledge it was possible at all.”

Salazar nods, releasing a long sigh. “I’ve seen people lose their sense of self-determination—their will. One woman who could love nothing ever again, but that’s a lack you can feel. It eventually drove her to leaping from a tower. A boy who no longer had any emotions left to him; another child
who felt them all, all the time, and it drove him mad. We always did what we could, but you can’t put back something that’s been burnt away.

“You can’t manipulate your way around any of those losses, but a lack of self-preservation? That we could do. Rowena thought it was one of the greatest challenges she’d yet faced.” Salazar smiles. “We encouraged that vicious protectiveness in Nizar because it made him want to be better. The greater his skills, the less chance some random bastard could come along and hurt someone my brother was trying to keep alive. The less chance my brother would die of it.”

Severus nods in approval. “Manipulative.”

“Just another tool.” Salazar looks at him again. “That same lack means my brother would go after Voldemort and die of it if he thought that was the only way to make sure the bastard’s death would stick. Unless, of course, he has a solid reminder of why he shouldn’t.”

“Perhaps he does,” Severus allows. Salazar provides such, even if Severus does not. “What was the apple tree?”

“Just a tree,” Salazar replies. “Nizar needed a focus for Mind Magic, and that’s what he chose. By the time we removed the Horcrux, he hated that tree, but it did the job.” Salazar’s expression becomes distant, terrified recollection. “Months of instruction in Mind Magic. Months of work on removing the shard, a bit at a time, and still it almost killed him.”

Severus flinches. “Because it was Voldemort.”

“Yes. I’ve never forgotten that time, even if other moments have lost their clarity with the centuries. I remember thinking: if a mere fragment of this man’s soul is so potent, so terrible, what must the man himself be like?”

“What did you do?” Severus asks.

“Without telling Nizar of it—not until later, at least—I scryed upon it while we were still in the midst of removing the shard.” Salazar shakes his head. “I was on the cusp of my twenty-first birthday, Severus, and I hadn’t yet learned when to stop asking. I’m not sure I’ve ever learned such. In that time, I kept scrying, kept looking forward, even as what Tom Marvolo Riddle did became worse and worse. I made it to Little Hangleton before I had to stop.”

“God,” Severus mutters. “Do you have any idea how grateful I am that I was not there?”

Overhearing the child’s halting recitation of that night had been awful enough. If Severus had been present, he would have destroyed his position as a spy, unable to stand by while an undertrained wizard, far too young, was made to face Voldemort.

“And of the pair of us, that makes you the more intelligent. I’ve spies in Voldemort’s ranks, Severus.”

Severus stares at him as realizes the implication in Salazar’s words. “You went. When one of those spies told you that Voldemort was sending that first Summons on twenty-fourth June, you went to Little Hangleton.”

Salazar nods, brow furrowed with remembered anguish. “I put on a cloak and a mask, and I did exactly that. I could do nothing, but I couldn’t—I knew what the results would be. I knew he would be well. I just couldn’t be that close and not be there for my brother, even if he never knew.”

The tightness in Severus’s chest is far worse than the pain from the fresh scratches in his arm. “How was it?”
Salazar hesitates. “Cruciatu,” he says, and Severus flinches. Helga’s portrait told him of that recently, but he still doesn’t like to dwell on it.

Then a smile cracks Salazar’s face. “My brother is a fucking lunatic. Voldemort attempted to cast Tempero—your incorrectly dubbed Imperius Curse—against Nizar. He threw off the spell and told Voldemort to fuck off in Parseltongue. I don’t know of many fourteen-year-olds who would’ve had the stones for that.”

“Kind, vicious, lunatics,” Severus quotes with a distant sort of amusement.

“Some of us a bit more lunatic than others.” Salazar pats Nizar’s leg. “Idiota. My brother spoke of you, by the way.”

Severus feels his shoulders tense up. “Did he?”

“I wished to know of who I knew would be my eventual successors, holding this castle’s western magic, and Nizar only knew of one—that being you,” Salazar says. “Nizar said you couldn’t stand him, but that you were brilliant.”

Severus blinks a few times. “I’m sorry. This conversation just stopped making sense.”

“You can want to throttle the life out of someone and still recognize that they’re intelligent. He said you’d criticize someone up, down, sideways, and back up again, but you were always right. Scathing essay comments, but always right.”

Salazar tilts his head, his eyes focused on Severus’s left arm. “A man brave enough to bare the Dark Mark on his arm and thrust it under that idiot Minister’s nose, daring him to deny evidence of Voldemort’s resurrection, even though it would mean that there would be those who wouldn’t trust you because of it.”

“Was this before or after the Horcrux was removed?” Severus asks when he can’t think of anything else. Nizar is...Severus knows Nizar, but he can’t wrap his head around the idea that Harry James Potter would have had anything positive to say of Severus at all.

Salazar lets out a brief laugh. “Before. He couldn’t reliably converse in the local tongues yet. Much of what we discussed was in Parseltongue.”

“Ah.” Severus glances down at Nizar, who is starting to frown in his sleep as he draws close to waking.

“Still with us, I see.” Salazar pats Nizar’s leg again.

“Still here.” Nizar loosens his grip on Severus’s arm and then blinks up at the red staining the tips of his fingers. “Oh, fuck. I’m sorry.”

“It will heal,” Severus assures him. “That is probably one of the least of all the wounds I’ve ever taken in the course of this war.”

Nizar does not look impressed with his logic. “The worst wounds are the ones we don’t mean to cause.”

Severus tries not to draw back in surprise when he feels the flow of magic from Nizar’s hand, repairing torn flesh and rent cloth. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“That’s your opinion, and it is a stupid opinion.” Nizar focus on Severus’s face and smiles. “I know
you were talking about me.”

“Aside from the obviousness of what was just done? Why do you think that?” Severus asks, bemused.

“He’s twitching,” Nizar says of Salazar. “It’s such an easy tell.”

“I’m not!” Salazar protests.

Nizar lifts his foot and puts his boot heel against Salazar’s jaw. “Liar.”

“Prick!” Salazar retorts, shoving Nizar’s foot away from his face. “Why do I like you, again?”

“I quote: Gods wept and thank them all, someone else who can finally understand what the hell I’m saying all the time!” Nizar grins at Salazar. “The feeling was mutual, but still you said it first.”

Salazar pretends to think about it. “All right. Fair point, then.”

Nizar allows Severus and Salazar to pull him into a sitting position. “Most of what I repeated was useless, wasn’t it?”

“Unfortunately,” Salazar agrees. “The only thing of potential use was about those fucking Dementors, but there were no details.”

“Dementors.” Nizar’s eyes narrow. “Azkaban. Voldemort thinks he can retrieve his followers from Azkaban without anyone ever knowing.”

Salazar growls something under his breath. “Given that we still don’t know how he got the Lestrange cousins out of there, that’s more work for us, then.”

“We’re killing that damned thing, right?” Severus asks of the diadem.

“That would be the plan. Nizar has a dagger that should do the job nicely.”

“Blunting my bloody seax,” Nizar mutters. “That is no way to treat a knife.” He reaches out, Summoning the closed wooden box without using his wand. “I really do not want to destroy this. Rowena would be so disappointed.”

“You couldn’t even be near it a few minutes ago,” Severus says in displeasure, though Nizar is showing no sign of distress beyond lingering fatigue from the removal and destruction of that stolen bit of Voldemort’s magic.

Nizar flips open the box, staring down at the diadem. “This is an inanimate object, so we don’t need to stab it, or be concerned with it dying. Severing the blood magic tethering it to Voldemort should fix that difficulty.”

Severus frowns. “I know I cannot possibly be as knowledgeable on the matter of Horcruxes as the pair of you, but I thought the entire point of a Horcrux was for it to be a separate part from the wizard who created it. Otherwise, it would still be a danger, yes?”

“The point of a Horcrux, a soul jar, is that no one is supposed to know you’ve created it. Without that knowledge, it cannot present as a mortal danger.” Salazar’s eyes are narrowed in anger.

Nizar glances at Severus. “To answer your question in full: Voldemort isn’t that smart. Someone told the walking corpse the basics of making a Horcrux, but nothing more. Blood magic is always going to call to the blood that created it. Did you hear that bastard scream when Nagini died?”
“Because he could feel it,” Severus realizes. “Then he will feel this, too.”

“I should certainly hope so.” Nizar snaps the box shut, to Severus’s relief. He passes the box to Salazar and then uses the sofa to haul himself to his feet.

Nizar stumbles once before waving off their assistance. “No, I’ve got it. I want one hell of a nap after this, but I’m not going to fall on my face.” He pulls back the sleeve of the robe he wore out of London, grasps something Severus can’t see, and then pulls the black-handled dagger from its hiding place.

Salazar kneels down on the rug, opening the box. Severus can’t hear anything, but it feels like the temperature in the room dips every time the diadem is revealed. Salazar taps the box’s side until it dumps its silver contents out onto the rug. The box goes onto the rug; Salazar lifts the diadem with his coat sleeve and places it atop the box.

“One question first.” Severus suspects he knows the answer, but would prefer to hear another confirm the theory. “Why are we not telling Albus Dumbledore that we’re about to destroy one of Voldemort’s Horcruxes?”

“Because he didn’t want anyone to know that Voldemort’s Horcruxes existed.” Nizar is frowning at the diadem while his raised left hand seems to be plucking at the air, as if searching for something. “He didn’t say anything at the time, but he was upset when I informed the rest of the Order.”

“Yes, he was,” Salazar confirms. “Mundungus again,” he says to Severus, who grimaces in distaste that someone would willingly Polyjuice themselves as that man more than once.

“I’m very fond of secrets, but you don’t keep vital war information from your allies unless it’s useful to do so,” Nizar says. “Everyone would have known not to discuss Horcruxes. Until I know why Dumbledore made that decision, I’m erring on the side of caution. I’m willing to inform him after the fact, but not before.” Nizar lifts the dagger. “Found it!”

The dagger slices through the air, but the results are horrendous to witness. A terrible howling rends the air, making them stagger back from the diadem as it shrieks in both Voldemort’s voice and another’s—most likely the murder victim used to create the Horcrux. The silver oozes foul, bubbling black blood that eats through the box and strikes the rug beneath, beginning to destroy the wool.

“VANISH IT!” Salazar yells. “All of it, right now! Don’t let that shit touch the castle!”

Severus Vanishes at least part of the dissolving mess. Salazar and Nizar get rid of the remainder, which includes the rug.

Nizar lowers both wand and blade, his hands shaking. “At this point, it would be so much easier to carry around a scroll for the growing list of reasons of why I want to kill that bastard.” He shoves his wand back into his sleeve after regarding the bare stone for a minute. “That was a thousand years old, and bloody irreplaceable.”

“It was also ugly,” Salazar says.

Nizar glares at his brother. “I do not insult your decorating choices in your own quarters, and I’ll thank you not to do it in mine, especially as that stupid bleeding soul jar just destroyed a rug that—”

“Elfric. Elfric brought that one back.” Salazar closes his eyes. “I’m sorry. I’d forgotten.”

Nizar glances away, his hand tightening around the dagger’s hilt. “It’s—it’s fine. I’m going to let Rowena know of what happened.” He strides off in the direction of the storage room.
Salazar looks at Severus the moment Nizar is out of sight. “Do you remember enough of that rug’s
detail to replicate it?” he asks in a low voice.


“My brother’s birthday. I have contacts who still weave in the old ways. It won’t be the same rug
that Elfric gifted him, but I’ll replace it if I can.” Salazar looks at the portraits of Brice, Galiena, and
Elfric, who have crowded into Elfric’s frame and are petting their brother while biting their lips in
dismay. “I won’t let that go. It’s all I can do. In all my years on this earth, I never discovered what
became of my nephew.”

Less than a minute after Nizar enters the storage room, there is a feminine bellow of outrage from
Rowena. “HE DID WHAT?”

Salazar winces. “She’s taking it a bit better than I thought.”

“Come on,” Nizar says as he returns to the sitting room. Severus can hear Rowena Ravenclaw
yelling a non-stop litany of foul language in German. “We should go tell the wearer of eye-blinding
robes in the headmaster’s office that someone might be plotting to break a bunch of idiots out of
Azkaban.”

Albus raises an eyebrow when they enter his office. “This is much sooner than you predicted,” he
says to Nizar. Severus can only assume the man is referring to Salazar, who is still wearing Muggle
dress as he gazes up at the portraits with undisguised curiosity.

“Something came up,” Nizar says in a flat, unhappy voice. “And no, I do not just mean my brother’s
presence. That is a side effect.”

“Is that really you, Salazar?”

Salazar turns around and smiles. “Hello, Phyllida. Fancy seeing you hanging on this wall.”

“Well, one gets oddly famous if one writes a book. I do recall a certain Spaniard gentleman telling
me so.” Headmaster Spore smirks at him. “You’ve not aged a day, you lout.”

“Alas for that,” Salazar replies. “Whereas you will remain beautiful for as long as that canvas lasts.”

Phyllida smiles. “Flatterer.”

“It seems as if the portraits, at least, will be pleased to welcome you.” Albus gestures for them to sit.
“Please. I believe you’re here on a matter of some urgency, or one of you would not be standing here
at all.”

Albus develops a frown that deepens as the explanation proceeds. “I actually did not believe Tom
could accomplish something more vile than the curse of interference Nizar removed from the
Defence tower classroom. But a Horcrux inside this very castle—I’m beyond grateful it was hidden
well, though I do regret the means of its detection. Unchanging life, indeed.”

Nizar is propping his elbow on the chair so he can rest his chin on his hand. Severus takes a brief
look at him, but he seems to be in no danger of succumbing to exhaustion in Albus’s office.
“Rowena’s lost Diadem is no longer lost. It is also, unfortunately, destroyed.”

Salazar grimaces as the portraits murmur their dismay. “Your pardon, Headmaster. That is word that
will spread quickly. I need to go tell Helena, your ghost of Ravenclaw Tower. I believe she’ll take it
better, hearing the news from me.”
Dumbledore nods. “Of course.” He waits until Salazar leaves. “Did you need to destroy it?”

“I tried not to, actually.” Nizar sighs. “I cut the blood magic tying it to Voldemort, and the Horcrux died like it had been stabbed. Ruined my rug in the process. That’s aside from how upset Rowena’s portrait is at the moment.”

“Then the blood magic tether allowed you to discern the prison break.” Dumbledore’s eyes narrow. “It is similarly constructed to the Dark Mark?”

“Voldemort does like his themes. Yes, it could be backtracked,” Nizar says, which is the truth while not being true at all. Severus might adore this trait more than he should, and he’s a blasted Slytherin. “If Voldemort is still planning for another Ministry break-in, then he’s contemplating gathering more assistants.”

Albus rises from his desk and goes to his fireplace. “I’ll be contacting other members of the Order from Grimmauld Place. Even if Voldemort does not plan to do this now, we should all be aware of the possibility. Would either of you would care to accompany me?”

Severus shakes his head. “No. Cleaning up after a dying Horcrux was adventure enough for the day.”

“I haven’t even unpacked from London yet,” Nizar says in refusal.

Moments after Albus is whisked away by the Floo, Severus and Nizar flinch at the same time. The feel of a terrible pang of grief strikes Severus, a strong echo provided by the castle’s magic. “Helena,” Nizar whispers. “This is just going to make things worse for her.”

“How?” Severus asks.

“When Helena grew up and completed her masteries, she was quite the accomplished magician, but she always felt overshadowed by her mother. I suggested she leave Hogwarts and practice her magic elsewhere, but she was courting a magical baron of York. After she and Edvard had one of their many infamous spats, Helena stole Rowena’s Diadem of Wisdom and fled Hogwarts. She is responsible for its loss twice over.”

“Twice?”

“How else would Voldemort have found the Diadem in order to corrupt it? Helena once confided to me that she crammed the diadem into a tree to the north of Greece after the new millennium began.” Nizar stands up. “Come home with me?”

Severus hesitates for a moment. Home. He supposes he can tolerate the use of the word today. He reaches out to take Nizar’s hand. “Of course.”

Dobby and Filky are waiting for them in the corridor outside Nizar’s classroom door, looking anxious. “We is being sorry!” Dobby blurts at once. “We didn’t know that the Professor Slytherin is not knowing!”

“You have done nothing to apologize for—I mean it,” Nizar adds, giving both elves a somber stare. “I didn’t know before, but I do now. With a certain item removed, it’s now very useful to know this room exists.”

“It is?” Filky asks.

“Certainly.” Nizar smiles. “I have another room I can dump my students into for practical dueling
lessons. That’s excellent.”

“If the Professor Slytherin is being certain,” Dobby murmurs, rubbing his hands.

Filky pats Dobby’s shoulder, the most kindness Severus has ever seen her grant the freed house-elf. “Would the Professors of Slytherin be liking evening tea?”

“That would be a kindness, thank you.” Both house-elves vanish; Nizar pushes open his classroom door. “Even if I only plan to drink the tea so that I can get through a bath without falling asleep in the water.”

“Agreed,” Severus says as he realizes his own exhaustion. “Please make no more life-altering discoveries today.”

“If I make such one minute after midnight, you’re not allowed to complain about it.”
Epiphany

Chapter Summary

“I refuse to attend tea of any sort today just because you had to reference that damned book.”

Chapter Notes

All hail the betas, who despite having busy uni schedules, are keeping up with chapter review and are thus totally awesome. (@mrsstanley, @sanerontheinside)

Also I almost forgot it was Friday.

Saturday morning’s breakfast is interrupted by Nygell bringing Nizar a letter. The owl’s method of delivery involves flying directly into the window with a muted *thud* of feathers and down striking reinforced, leaded glass. Nizar shakes his head, retrieves the bound scroll, gives the owl a piece of bacon, and threatens to have the idiot bird’s eyesight checked if he hits the window again—any window. Nygell glares at him and flaps away in a tiff.

“When you said you bought an owl, I take it you meant that you bought a feathered bastard,” Severus says, unimpressed.

“Most of them really are exactly that. They’re owls, not rabbits.” Nizar unrolls the scroll to find legible and oddly cramped handwriting, given the message’s sender. “Oh. Right. Tea with Rubeus. After the Ministry nonsense, I’d forgotten all about that.”

“Tea with Rubeus Hagrid,” Severus repeats, sounding even less impressed than before.

“He invited me on the nineteenth, then Voldemort decided to be an irritant, and we’ve been gone for the holiday.” Nizar lowers the scroll. “What is your current difficulty?”

“Thank you for phrasing it in recognition of the fact that I have many,” Severus responds dryly. “My current ‘difficulty’ is that I do not prefer to socialize with Hagrid.”

“You don’t socialize with *anyone* except myself,” Nizar points out, amused when Severus scowls. “What makes Rubeus unacceptable?”

“His inability to keep secrets,” Severus says flatly.

“That would be mildly irritating, yes, but is easy to avoid—don’t tell him something that’s supposed to be a secret.” Nizar rolls the scroll up and puts it in his pocket to respond to after breakfast. “Besides, there is a distinct advantage in socializing with Rubeus over Dumbledore.”

“Imbecilic decisions regarding dangerous creatures?”

“No, I think that’s a matter of perspective, not stupidity,” Nizar says. “Rubeus understands people,
Severus. Dumbledore does not. I learned more about that child in two sentences spoken by Rubeus than I did from everyone else in this school aside from yourself.”

Severus’s glower is replaced by intrigue. “All right; I confess I’m curious as to how that’s possible.”

“Rubeus was upset about the child still being missing, and said that he used to visit Rubeus in his hut. I asked Rubeus if they were friends—yes, while strongly disassociating with what I’d just learned that day,” Nizar adds when Severus’s eyebrow rises in polite disbelief. “Rubeus said that he was that child’s first friend, even if the child wouldn’t admit it to anyone. That says a hell of a lot with almost nothing needed to be said at all.”

“Yes, it really does,” Severus admits grudgingly.

“Rubeus isn’t stupid. Undereducated, definitely. He lives at a school and yet his education did not continue, despite the fact that he still has a well-hidden, functioning wand in the form of one pink umbrella.”

Severus’s expression slides back to displeasure, but Nizar doesn’t think it’s for the same reason.

“Albus. How does someone know to be disloyal if they’re never given enough of an education to ever remove themselves from the fold, or to realize that they might be capable of doing so?”

“Exactly.” Nizar watches him drain a teacup. “Want to come to late morning tea, then?”

Severus frowns. “I might consider it, but some of my Slytherins are returning early instead of arriving on the train for the return feast. I don’t know why, and I’ll need to find out. That is aside from my plot with Minerva to get that damned broom banned from school Quidditch. I’m also…I’m realizing that I’m not certain if my reaction to Hagrid is based on childhood prejudices and foolishness, or the mask of a spy. I’ve never had the opportunity to get to know that man in any other capacity.”

“Then if I can keep from somehow accidentally insulting Rubeus, perhaps there will be another opportunity for tea.” Nizar pauses. “It all sounds so very Alice in Wonderland at the moment.”

Severus gives him a flat stare. “I refuse to attend tea of any sort today just because you had to reference that damned book.”

Nizar’s second message for the day arrives as a piece of paper that pops into the air and drifts down towards him. He catches it and unfolds the single sheet of paper. “Salazar,” he says in explanation to Severus. “He stayed the night in the castle in his own quarters—and there is much complaining here about uppity elves modernizing his quarters without his say-so, even as he admits that they saved him a lot of work. Sal, you wrote this before you had tea,” Nizar murmurs, smiling. “Oh—he also gave Fortunata’s portrait new instructions. She’ll let both of us in.”

Severus stares at him. “Both of us?”

“Salazar likes you, and I was not kidding when I said we Deslizarses are a clingy lot,” Nizar says, folding the letter. “Do you want to see them?”

“Now?”

“Unless you feel like lingering over empty breakfast plates…why not now?” Nizar asks.

Before he can leave his quarters, a third message pops into the air. “It’s far too early of a morning to be this popular,” he mutters, but unrolls the newest scroll. “Minerva.”

“What does she want? Minerva despises this time of day as much as you do, if not more,” Severus
Nizar lowers the scroll, grinning. “She wants me to tie her into the castle’s Southern Seat.”

“Congratulations on accurately judging the situation.” Severus pulls the door open after Nizar tucks the message away into his pocket to join the first two. “Would you like me to be there as reassurance that the process isn’t fatal?”

Nizar snorts. “No. I think your continued survival has convinced her of that by now. Pomona, on the other hand…I think all three of you will have to be there for her to be convinced.”

“Filius hasn’t agreed yet, Nizar.”

“No, but he will.”

Fortunata smiles at them when they approach her portrait on the fourth floor. “You have to speak the password and then set a new one for yourselves. A shorter one would be preferable.”

“Considering what the current one is like...yes.” Nizar draws in a breath. “Pantzeska, Sibylla, Salazar, Estefania, Nizar, Orellana, Fortunata, Andoni, Marfa, Zuri, Galiena, Brice, Elfric, Marion, Ouen, Imeyna, Betisa, Ximeno, Sens Salazar, Ines Orellana, Uriel, Paynel, Drystan, Vanora, Muriel.”

Fortunata lifts one painted hand to wipe at her eyes. “Yes, please. Something shorter, Uncle, and with far less heartache attached.”


Fortunata smiles before her painting swings inward. “Come in.”


Nizar waits until the ironbound door that Fortunata’s portrait is mounted on swings shut. “That plant saved Fortunata’s life once.”

“Then you should have it!” Severus retorts.

“I wasn’t joking about having black thumbs, Severus.” Nizar glances around the sitting room and has to swallow against a flood of memory. He expected it, though, so he was prepared for that swamping wave.

The sitting room is the same as he remembers, its three windows on the round curve of the wall flooding the room with light. The furniture is still set to hold a family, not a single individual, so there are two sofas across from each other, a low table between them, and two armchairs, all in dark green velvet. The cushions the elves added are silver brocade accented in green, something they didn’t do in Nizar’s quarters—but then, his tastes always ran to practical. Compared to Salazar’s rich upbringing, this is practical for his brother. The rug on the floor is a blue with gray and green tones that attempts to merge with the stone floor; a slanted monk’s desk is still resting between two of the windows.

Just as they are in Nizar’s quarters, the walls and floor are a uniform gray with scarcely any other color. Unlike the stone in the rest of Hogwarts, this was meant to be easy on sensitive eyes. The remains of a fire burns low in the hearth of the fireplace, and the mantelpiece above still holds Salazar’s ancient sun dial and three racks of blue, green, and violet hand-blown glassware—not for potions, but for hosting guests.
“The violet glassware—those were mine. I gave them to Salazar,” Nizar says as the memory surfaces. “I wasn’t going to have a need, but he still did.”

Severus is staring at the portraits that face the windows, spelled to protect the paint and their hardwood frames from being damaged by sunlight. Two of the paintings have sleeping portraits; the rest are awake and looking at them. “Who are they?” Severus asks.

“The one who looks so very much like Salazar if he’d been born a girl is Estefania, our sister,” Nizar says, and Estefania smirks at him. “Hello, sister.”

“Hello, you delightful pain in my backside,” Estefania replies. Her accent is still pure Castellano, even if she’s learned modern English. “I’ve missed you.”

“And I you.” Nizar nods at the portrait next to her, whose occupants are sleeping. “Those two are her children. María Andonica inherited the title of Marquésa of León and Castile rather than Salazar’s children due to the politics at the time. Her brother is Ekaitz Suero, Lord of Araba and heir to his father’s line. Yes, Ekaitz’s hair is pure white, an odd quirk to spring up from those bloodlines. His father Andoni went white at twenty, but Ekaitz was born with it. It’s part of the reason they chose his name: *army of the storm.*”

Nizar walks closer to the portrait of a pale, black-haired woman with brown eyes that reflect shades of red and gold. “Sometimes I forget how young you were,” he whispers. “This is Orellana Constanza of the House of Sunlight. Salazar’s first wife.”

“Hello,” Orellana says to them both in her gentle voice. “It is as good to see Nizar as it is good to meet the Head of my husband’s House of Slytherin in this school. Yes, I do travel about in the castle quite a bit more than the others. No one knows who I am.”

“I’ve never seen her before,” Severus says. “Not anywhere.”

Orellana smiles and vanishes from her frame without leaving it. “I’m quite good at remaining undetected, Severus Snape.”

Severus inclines his head, amused and impressed. “A portrait that knows the Invisibility Charm. That’s ingenious.”

“This is Fortunata’s brother, Zuri Zumar,” Nizar says of the black-haired young man in the painting next to his mother. “He was born prematurely at a time when that was exceptionally dangerous.” Nizar flashes on his hands covered in blood and flinches away from the memory. “But he survived and did well. Didn’t you, Zuri?”

Zuri nods. “I did get into cousin Brice’s bad habit of oft finding a battle to fight in. Fortunately, I was well-trained for it by our War Master.”

“War Master?” Severus repeats, curious.

“Godric. He didn’t like the title, for all that it was true, but if there was a method of waging war, Godric knew it,” Nizar says. “Any weapon, magical or non-magical, he understood. If he’d been so inclined, he could have taken over the whole of Britain and ruled, but fortunately for everyone, he had no interest in conquest. He preferred the idea of knowing how to wage combat, understanding when it was necessary, but more importantly, knowing when it was *not.*”

“Hello Marion,” Nizar greets the next painting in line. “Salazar’s second wife, Marion of Inverness. She was the delight of Rowena’s House, and she drove Salazar completely mental for several years.”
“And it was well-worth it.” Green-eyed Marion has deep garnet-colored hair and a wide smile on her face; her accent is still laced with the thick burr of the island’s original Gaelic. “How else is one to tell if a man is fickle or true? Torture them with a drawn-out courtship.”

Severus nods at her. “Lady Marion, I truly do not believe I could ever be that patient.”

“Lucky me, then,” Nizar says. “These two sleeping here are Marion and Salazar’s first children. This is Ouen Arturus and his sister, Imeyna Genevote, painted when they came of age at fourteen. They’re not supposed to be in the same portrait, but I don’t see the other frame for Imeyna.”

“Yours and Salazar’s bronze complexion with red hair. It’s an intriguing blend,” Severus says. “And then there is this one,” he says of the final portrait on the wall.

“That is Betisa Haizea, Marion and Salazar’s youngest, born much later than the others. Like Muriel, I didn’t get to see her grow up.” Nizar looks up at the portrait of bronze-skinned, black-haired, green-eyed Betisa. “You’re beautiful, dearest.”

Betisa blushes. “Thank you, Uncle. I do like being known for my magic, but it is still a kind compliment to receive.”

“What did you master in?” Nizar asks her, Severus hovering at his side. Their hands keep brushing together, Severus offering the option of comfort without insisting upon it.

“Necromancy,” Betisa says, ducking her head. “For Elfric. Father and Mother always said he was so good at it, and there were not many of us with that knowledge. I repaired many of the damaged magical nodes in the north, Uncle.”

“For Elfric.” Nizar swallows. “That was very kind, and I’m glad the magic suited you so well.”

“What of the rooms down the hall?” Severus asks. “Or is that prying?”

“I can’t,” Nizar whispers, his eyes watering. “When I was younger, I lived in one of those rooms, Severus. I didn’t need to be—I wanted to be near people, not away from them. When I finally created the space upstairs, that room became Zuri’s. I just…I don’t know what’s become of those rooms and I’m not ready to find out.” This time he grasps Severus’s hand when it’s offered. “Maybe when Salazar is here, but not by myself.”

“That’s a wise decision, I think,” Marion says. The others who are awake nod their agreement.

“Be easy on yourself, Nizar. You were always hardest on yourself when it was undeserved,” Orellana says. “We’ll still be here tomorrow, and the next day, and the day after that.”

Zuri grins. “If we’ve hung here for nearly ten centuries, chances are we’ll hang for a bit longer yet.”

* * * * *

Nizar goes downstairs alone at ten minutes before eleven. He fetches biscuits from the kitchen; honestly, the painting with the pear is ludicrous. He almost has to fend off house-elves to escape with only enough biscuits for tea when they’d rather send enough food to fill Rubeus’s entire hut.

When Nizar makes it to the Entrance Hall, Miss Granger is also striding through the hall, bundled up
against the winter chill outside. “Going somewhere?” he asks her.

Granger jumps as if someone goosed her. “Uh—Professor Slytherin!” She smiles. “You look less—er—”


“I was concerned,” Granger says, lowering her eyes. “But between Professor Snape and your—your—”

“You can say it. Salazar Slytherin. My brother. Yes, he succeeded on his mad quest, and yes, he’ll probably be back.”

Granger looks up again, wide-eyed. “I have so many questions.”

“I think he’s girding himself for that,” Nizar says in amusement. “I’m going to see Rubeus Hagrid. Where are you off to?”

“The same, actually. He invited me for tea.” Granger gives him a baffled look. “He invited you?”

“He did, yes. Why, is that odd?” Nizar asks.

“Well…normally the staff…they don’t…socialize with Hagrid,” Granger finally says.

“That’s very impolite of them.” Nizar holds up his tin of provided biscuits. “Shall we go, Miss Granger?”

It’s cold outside with a fluffy layer of white powder on the ground, but not intolerable. Nizar became accustomed to weather in the north with greater ease than Salazar ever did. “There used to be an apple tree where Rubeus’s hut is standing,” Nizar says to Granger, the memory coming to him at last. “It was a great, massive tree, and it tossed apples every year like it felt the need to supply the entire isle.”

“That sounds lovely. I don’t think we’ve a single apple tree left on the school grounds,” Granger says.

“I bloody hated that tree.” Nizar smiles when she gives him a surprised look. “It was my focus for Mind Magic—your modern Occlumency. By the time I mastered Mind Magic, I loathed that poor, innocent tree.”

“So if I were to practice Occlumency, my focus object shouldn’t be something I still want to regard fondly afterwards.” Granger nods. “That’s good to know, sir.”

Nizar glances at her. He has suspicions regarding Miss Granger and her research habits, not to mention her awareness of what the N.E.W.T. classes for Defence are getting up to, but they’ve arrived and he doesn’t wish to voice them in front of the man who keeps no secrets. “Good morning, Rubeus.”

“Nah, it’s just Hagrid, really,” Hagrid says, waving them inside. “Y’want tea? I’ve got it brewing up right now.”

“That sounds lovely, Hagrid,” Granger says, removing her scarf and cloak. “Professor Slytherin brought biscuits.”
“As promised. You’re hosting, so you receive biscuits.” Nizar didn’t do the same for Narcissa Malfoy, but he doesn’t plan to until she makes up her mind as to where she stands in this stupid magical war. When she gets rid of the Dark Mark and begins to act as a proper parent to Draco, then Nizar will consider hosting gifts if he’s ever invited back to the Manor.

Nizar sips tea that is so strong the Sanskrit-speakers would find it acceptable, especially once he adds cream. He gets permission to raid Hagrid’s kitchen, showing Miss Granger and Hagrid how to spice the tea to Far Eastern standards.

“Chai!” Granger exclaims, smiling and holding the tea mug close to her breast. “I had no idea how to make it and couldn’t find a recipe that agreed on how much of what should be used, but that tastes just like what I can get in London!”

Nizar gives her a blank stare. “Chai is another word for tea. It has nothing to do with the flavor profile. It’s just the name of the leaf.”

“My Da tol’ me that once,” Hagrid rumbles, frowning. “I told others, an’ they didn’t believe me. Spent a long time thinking mayhap he was wrong.”

“He wasn’t,” Nizar says. “You were right, and the idiots who corrected you were wrong. Honestly, language has done some very odd things in the last thousand years.”

Somehow that becomes a discussion on etymology, and while Miss Granger dominates the conversation, Nizar watches Hagrid and notes that while he might not have much to say on the matter, the man is listening and learning. It makes Nizar angry anew at Dippet and Dumbledore, both of whom tossed this man’s education aside for the sake of political expediency. He resolves that he’s going to come see this man for tea more often, and he’s going to encourage other members of the staff to do the same—even if he has to fucking drag them out to this hut.

“Did you still wish to learn to levitate?” Nizar asks Hagrid when he’s gone through two mugs of incredibly strong tea.

Hagrid looks delighted. “Course I do!”

“Can I?” Granger asks, grinning. “Or do I have to wait?”

“Considering that it’s not a Defence aspect, but no one else seems to teach the spell?” Nizar nods. “Miss Granger, you’re entirely welcome to try.”

“What do I need t’do?” Hagrid asks. Granger, on the verge of asking the same, clamps her mouth shut.

“You’ll need your wand—I’m sorry, your umbrella,” Nizar corrects himself, smiling when Hagrid blushes above his beard again. “Don’t worry, I’m not saying a word, and I doubt Miss Granger will, either.”

“I’ve known it’s his wand since first year,” Granger says, rolling her eyes. “I just didn’t know why it was a secret until second year.”

“Yeah, well.” Hagrid retrieves the pink umbrella and does something that actually removes the umbrella aspect from the length of wood. It’s oak, and looks to be about eighteen inches long, but it suits Hagrid’s hand. “At least now that basilisk culprit bit was cleared up, I’m allowed to do magic. Just can’t be letting on that I never lost m’wand in the first place.”

“The Ministry is a daft pile of owl excrement,” Nizar mutters, and then straightens. “The first two
lessons are simple. You have to know the Levitation Charm, which for some reason that escapes me has been given actual nonsense as the incantation. It used to be *adlevo*. Raise.”

“I have been telling people that for years,” Granger seethes. “I looked it up in second-year, and I was so angry!”

“Not sure I should change it, m’self,” Hagrid says thoughtfully. “I might have to learn it all over again.”

“If it works for you, don’t worry about it,” Nizar agrees. “It’s intent that matters. The second thing you have to be able to do before moving on—you must be able to cast the charm non-verbally. It has to be something you simply do.”

Hagrid still looks thoughtful, but Granger’s expression falls into dismay. “I can’t really do non-verbal spells yet. I’ve been trying in Practicals and before bed at night, but I’m still having trouble.”

“Are you focusing on one spell at a time, or attempting all of them at once?” Nizar asks, suspecting he already knows the answer.

“All at once. I kept hoping one of them would be…you know. A breakthrough, sir,” Granger answers.

“That’s your problem. Concentrate on one single spell. This spell, if you’re truly intent on learning to levitate.” Nizar nods at them both. “It helps to think on what you’re asking your magic to do, and how it does it. Understanding the charm’s function, not just the words—that’s one step closer to understanding how to apply it to yourself.”

Granger stares at him. “The—you use *Wingardium Leviosa*—*adlevo*—to levitate. That’s it.”

“That’s it,” Nizar confirms. “They don’t even teach that in N.E.W.T. Charms, but I don’t believe that’s Professor Flitwick’s fault.”

“Governin’ board,” Hagrid rumbles. “I remember now. They were still teachin’ it in my day to the older students, back before ol’ Filius took on the post.”

Nizar resists the urge to sigh. “Of course. Why am I not surprised?”

* * * *

“I want to show you something,” Severus tells Nizar after Nizar returns from tea and goes straight to lunch. No one on their side of the table is present, though Sasha, Quintinus, and Barnaby are seated on the other side of the Headmaster’s chair.

Nizar looks over at him, curious. “Right now?”

“After the meal,” Severus replies, but won’t mention anything further on what this mysterious *something* is.

“It still amuses me that you were born on the Epiphany,” Nizar says.

Severus rolls his eyes. “I’m not Christian, Nizar.”
“Oh, I wasn’t thinking in terms of religion. I was thinking more on the meaning of the word itself. I like proper realizations, or Latin manifestations.”

“Is that your very roundabout way of saying ‘Happy Birthday?’” Severus asks, favoring Nizar with an amused glance.

“Well, I’d planned to say it in a much more direct fashion later, but if you want, I can be far less roundabout: Happy Birthday. You’re thirty-six, and you’re not dead yet.”

Severus glares at him. “That was positively inspiring.”

“I could sing.” Nizar gives him an innocent look. “Right here at this table.”

“I will kill you.”

Nizar smiles. “I know the relationship is progressing when we’ve reached the point of death threats.” He tilts his head at the empty Slytherin table. “Any news?”

Severus nods. “Miss Greenwood is returning to study, which shouldn’t surprise either of us. The Greengrass sisters are returning a day early to make up for their early departure. Draco Malfoy will also be returning this evening instead of on the train tomorrow, as are multiple students whom I know for certain have Marked Death Eaters for parents.”

Nizar suddenly wants something stronger in his tea than mere sweetener. “An attack on the train?”

“Potentially. I’ve already passed on word to Albus. A great deal of the Order have found convenient excuses to take the train to Hogsmeade tomorrow.” Severus lips thin in displeasure. “I find I keep trying to regret no longer being in a useful position as a spy, and have to remind myself that it wasn’t actually useful. Even if this holiday’s events had never happened, I doubt I would have been informed. I discerned just as much from knowing who was returning early.”

“And that is just as important, if not more so. You’ll be here for those who are going to know why they were returned early, and a number of them won’t be happy about it.”

“I will be, yes—good afternoon, Minerva,” Severus greets her as she approaches, looking harried.

“Good afternoon Severus, Nizar.” Minerva eyes Nizar’s presence in her seat, glances up at the ceiling, and then seats herself in Nizar’s usual spot “No, I’ve no news at all beyond those who will be on the train tomorrow.”

“I suppose you also have students returning early,” Severus says.

Minerva frowns. “Everyone does, Severus. I expect we’ll be keeping an eye on those who are seventeen years of age.”

“I’m just glad that the age of seventeen has such dominant acceptance,” Nizar says thoughtfully. “It means he can’t Mark anyone below that age. They can’t accept that sort of binding agreement.”

“Not even with the permission of a legal guardian?” Minerva asks, curious.

“For some things, that’s acceptable. Not for the sort of binding blood magic that leashes you to someone else.” Nizar puts his teacup down and faces her. “Severus has my attention after lunch, but if you’re not busy at…”

“Two,” Severus supplies, ignoring Minerva’s suspicious look.
“Then if you’re still serious about being tied into the castle’s magic properly, we can do it then,” Nizar finishes.

Minerva considers it. “I’d been thinking more tomorrow than today, but will it help to keep an eye on those who might be requiring it?”

“It’s a gradual awareness, as Nizar might have mentioned…but I did find that certain advanced types of trouble were noticeable right away,” Severus says.

Minerva nods decisively. “Then two o’clock it is. I’ll be in my office, Nizar, unless you’d prefer we be elsewhere?”

“The location doesn’t matter as long as we’re still on school grounds. Your office is fine.”

Severus leads him out of the Great Hall not long afterwards. Nizar follows Severus down to the dungeon corridor and into Severus’s office. Severus keeps walking until he’s entering the office’s cramped storeroom, facing the only wall that isn’t lined in shelves or cupboards. He gets out his wand; Nizar watches as he taps seven differing stones in rapid succession, causing a door to appear.

“Prime numbers and a Diagon Alley cheat,” Nizar says.

Severus puts his wand back in his sleeve and glances at Nizar. “Relying on only one or the other seemed foolish.” He pushes open the door and beckons for Nizar to follow.

Nizar is slapped in the face by hot, humid air just before the change from dim lighting to sunlit brightness strikes his eyes. “You found one of the castle’s original greenhouses!”

“Is that what it is? I wasn’t certain.”

Nizar turns in a full circle, smiling at the raised rows of plants and the wide, leaded windows letting in full sunlight. “Glass was much more rare and expensive in those days—those greenhouses outside would have been considered an insane expenditure even by royalty. But this we could do. Charms for warmth, water for humidity—” He tilts his head at the stream of water running through the center of the room, skirting the raised beds. “—and earth of varying types. What condition was it in when you found it?”

“All but ready to be used, aside from needing to remove dead plants. It was also less about finding it and more my grumbling over the need to have a place to grow potions ingredients so that they wouldn’t immediately be stolen by students or the Herbology instructor at the time,” Severus replies. “The door appeared and revealed this room. What of the charm for the windows? We are still in a dungeon, after all.”

“No, we’re not. We’re on the fourth floor, in a room that magically rotates to follow both sunlight and moonlight,” Nizar says. “The door merely appeared in a place most convenient for you.”

“Then the door is similar to the way your office door functions.”

“Yes and no. My office door isn’t mobile. This one can be moved if you wanted to put it somewhere else,” Nizar explains, running his hand along a row of plants that aren’t hazardous to the touch, and won’t be harmed by being touched. “How close are you to a mastery in Herbology?”

Severus gives him an odd look. “I don’t have a certification for Herbology, Nizar. Only Potions.”

Nizar glances over at him. “Severus, Salazar and I don’t hold certifications, and yet those masteries were announced by Narcissa Malfoy’s house-elf. It’s magical recognition. Certification is only useful
from a Ministry standpoint.”

“Ah.” Severus seems discomfited by that. “I don’t actually know, then. How does one discern such?”

“Ask a house-elf. Granted, they can’t tell you where you are in the learning progression—they can only tell you if you are a master of a magical form, or if you are not.” Nizar pauses. “I wouldn’t ask Pomona. I trust she earned her certifications, but given how limited the Herbology curriculum is, she might not be able to tell you anything useful. Ask Salazar when he returns. In our day, Herbology and Potions were considered to be part of the same magical art.”

“I’d prefer to ask Salazar, really. Pomona is almost as bad as Hagrid for not keeping secrets,” Severus mutters. “If you had to learn plants and other potions materials, why do you not hold a mastery in Herbology, Nizar?”

“I’m not joking about being bad with plants. I can identify them and harvest them, but part of a mastery in Herbology is knowing how to grow them and keep them alive for the duration,” Nizar says. “You can only watch a plant die so many times before it’s simply depressing, and I don’t like killing the undeserving.”

Severus bends his head over a plant in that particular way of his when he wishes to voice something that he’d rather avoid. “Lily was quite good at Potions.”

Nizar plucks a lemon balm leaf and crushes it with his hand to perfume the air under his nose, as if he’s hardly paying attention to Severus at all. “I think that might be one of the few things you’ve never mentioned before.”

“Lily is the one who realized that Gopalott’s Third Law is complete rubbish. She wondered aloud during that particular assignment why we were wasting so much time with an antidote for blended poisons when bezoars existed.”

‘Just shove a bezoar down their throats,’” Nizar quotes, amused. “I did think that notation in your book had quite a bit of anger driven into those letters.”

“I felt so bloody stupid for overlooking the obvious. Slughorn, of course, insisted that ‘cheating’ was not the point of the exercise. I countered that Lily had just presented him with his mythical singular ingredient, and could we move on to something more useful.” When Nizar turns around, Severus has a grim smile on his face. “It didn’t do much to endear me to that fool. Not to either of them, really, but at least it ended Lily’s outright hostility.”

“I’m sorry—that I was wrong about that,” Nizar blurts out, wincing at how sudden and awkward that sounds. “About her and grudges. Granted, I am very, very good at holding a grudge, myself.”

“I cannot for the life of me imagine where that trait came from,” Severus says dryly. “You weren’t wrong, Nizar. As you said: children grow up. The difficulty is that by the time we’d both done so, it was too late.”

Nizar shakes his head. “I don’t think it’s ever too late. It’s just that a great deal of time can pass between one meeting and the next.”

“You truly believe that, don’t you?” Severus asks.

Nizar looks down at the rolled leaf in his hands, still giving off the strong scent of a healthy lemon balm plant. “One day, you’re going to call magic to the point where it shines in your eyes and dances about your fingertips. When you do, you’re going to feel this sense of something different, something
Other, watching as you cast magic of that strength. Yes, I really do believe that, Severus.”

Severus reaches out and takes Nizar’s hand, guiding him over to a raised planter that is meant for a single plant, usually those who do not get on well with others. In the center are the dark green, yellow-threaded, spiky shoots of a very specific plant.

Nizar has to resist the urge to reach out and touch it. “It sprouted. Dragon’s Breath of Life.”

“The twenty-second of December was both the Winter Solstice and a new moon.” Severus pulls him close until Nizar is pressed against Severus’s side. “I took the time before dinner that evening to plant it. I’ll be honest and say I wasn’t certain that it would grow, but you were. You were right. You’ve been correct about a great many things I might never have even given thought to, but I do know how to listen.”

“They’re beautiful, when they mature,” Nizar says, holding onto Severus’s words and understanding the thank you that lies beneath them. “Roses are pretty, graceful, and colorful, but Dragon’s Breath of Life is wild magic. That makes it one of the most beautiful plants that I’ve ever seen.”

Severus tilts Nizar’s chin up with two fingers and kisses him over the shoots of a resurrected plant. “I find that I much prefer the sight of you.”

* * * * *

Minerva studies her arm, lips pursed. “That’s it, then?”

“That’s it. It really is that simple.” Nizar leans back in his chair, stretching out his legs so that his boots are closer to the fire burning in her office hearth. He’s chilled, a sign he might be pushing too hard, but as that’s the last bit of magic he plans to perform that day outside of the most mundane of spells, he isn’t concerned.

“I confess I don’t feel any different.”

“The differences will come, though by the time it does, that will feel normal, too,” Nizar says. “You now officially hold the Southern Seat of this school’s magic, as Godric once did, and it’s a title of address you’ll receive in formal circumstances by those using magic to detect such things.”

“And what is your title, then?” Minerva asks. “Godric’s portrait hinted about referring to you as a defender.”

“He meant it literally. Et protector e Hogewáp.” Nizar takes a moment to rub at his eyes with one hand. “The Protector of Hogwarts. If the school falls under attack, certain magic comes into play. The awareness you’ll have of all things Gryffindor? I’ll then have that awareness of everything that is considered to fall within Hogwarts’ bounds until the attack is done.”

Minerva blinks a few times and then utterly refuses to be astonished. “That sounds overwhelming.”

“While it’s happening, it’s not. Afterwards? It’s exhausting,” Nizar emphasizes. “The moment the castle is safe, I usually fall down whenever I happen to be standing, whether it’s soft or stone.”

Minerva frowns. “Do you think that will happen here? Do you think You-Know—” She catches the slip, looks irritated, and corrects herself. “Do you think Voldemort will attack the school?”
“If he takes the reports of his Death Eaters seriously—if they report the full list of titles that Narcissa Malfoy’s house-elf recited—then he might,” Nizar answers. “I hope he doesn’t.”

“Aside from the obvious: why not?”

Nizar grimaces, feeling a headache brewing behind his eyes. “Because we’re not prepared. Not in the slightest.”

* * *

Draco straightens his shirt and coat for the eighth time in as many minutes as he takes the final steps up to the seventh floor. He’s looking forward to this as much as he’s completely dreading it—feelings that haven’t changed since Christmas Day.

The classroom door likes to hide, but after hostilities became...less, the Weasleys began showing everyone trustworthy how to get the door to the Professor’s classroom to appear. Draco makes the necessary three passes and is pleased when the oak door promptly reveals itself. He knocks and waits. The stone in the wall is still an option, but this isn’t an emergency. If the professor doesn’t answer, he’ll come back again tomorrow.

The classroom door opens, even though no one is standing there. Draco winces before stepping inside. “Hello?”

“Hello, Draco.” Professor Slytherin is in his office, seated at that odd tilted desk while frowning down at a set of books. His hair is tied back in a loose tail, which Draco stares at in surprise. He’s so used to Nizar Slytherin never changing because of the portrait. The idea that the professor’s hair is now getting longer, that it’s growing, is startling.

“You’re not wearing silk?” Draco asks, and then bites his lip while shutting the classroom door. That was a stupid question with an obvious answer. The professor’s shirt is black, like the linen shirts that he wears with those long vests or his robes, but it’s finely woven modern fabric with a modern collar that he’s left open.

“Not today.” Professor Slytherin glances up at him. “What can I do for you, Draco?”

“I—had questions.”

“After Christmas, I’d be very surprised if you didn’t.” Professor Slytherin turns around on the backless stool to face him. “Feel free to ask them, but the usual standards apply.”

“I might not like the answers, or you might give me confounding answers.” Draco nods. “Yes, sir. I—did you really curse that other wizard that way? It wasn’t just for...for scoring points over Mister Ratier?”

“My brother says the magician in question is still screaming. If you go exploring the hills outside Edinburgh, you might be able to hear him. Scoring points over that idiot was merely a bonus.”

“But you didn’t kill him. Your brother—he said you were being nice to Ratier. Is that what—are you being nice to us, too?” Draco tries not to sigh. “That was badly worded.”

“You’re worried I might not be nice to you one day.” Professor Slytherin gives Draco a searching
look. “Draco, if I were to be ‘not nice,’ the safeties on this classroom would not exist. Of course I’m going to be kind to you all. You’re my students, and you’re learning. You’re not my enemy. I save my ‘not nice’ moments for them, and them alone. Also, everyone I’m related to is dead but for Salazar and Voldemort, the latter of whom I could do without, so I’m a bit out of family members for you to murder.”

Draco can’t help but smile at the professor’s flippant tone. “I don’t think I’ve any plans on murdering members of your family, sir. Oh, uh—” Trading. This should be fair. “The others who were there that night. Most of them don’t believe that was really Salazar Slytherin.”

Professor Slytherin lets out an amused snort. “And what do you think, Mister Malfoy?”

“I’m not sure,” Draco hedges.

Professor Slytherin raises an eyebrow, as if aware of the fact that Draco isn’t being entirely honest. “House-elves cannot lie. They can dissemble, they can obfuscate, they can avoid answering, and they can refuse to answer a question, but they cannot lie. Those who are choosing to forget that are willfully blinding themselves, and it makes them fools.”

“All right. I really do believe it was him. So does Mother,” Draco admits. “We discussed it afterwards. And then there were several days when we—we didn’t know if—”

“You didn’t know if Professor Snape was alive,” Nizar says softly. “Our apologies for that, but the silence was not meant to hurt you.”

“No, but—I’m glad he’s not. I mean, I wouldn’t mind if it you were suddenly our Head of House, but I don’t want it to happen because Professor Snape is dead,” Draco says.

“It actually couldn’t happen, regardless. I’m a titled defender of this school, Draco, which means I cannot be aligned to any House beyond my relation to Salazar.”

“Titled neutral defender?” Draco perks up, curious. “Why neutral?”

“If the threat were to come from within this school—say, someone who was Head of a House—I would need to be able to act to stop them from harming anyone or anything in this school. If I were of that person’s House, it just makes things so very awkward,” Professor Slytherin says with a wry smile.

“That does make sense.” Draco frowns. “Mother says that Professor Snape has cut ties with the Dark Lord.”

“That is something you’ll have to discuss with your Head of House, Draco,” the professor tells him. “But when you do go ask him of this, go there with this in mind—Professor Snape was allied against Voldemort in 1980.”

Draco feels his eyes widen. “Then—spying! Oh! That—”

That changes everything.

“I’m glad you’re pleased.” Nizar is gazing at him with a somber expression on his face. “When this becomes known, and that will be very soon, there are going to be those within our House who are not going to be happy about it, Draco.”

Draco rolls his eyes. “Like the Carrow twins.” He doesn’t miss that the professor still called Slytherin House our House. That means a lot, too.
“The Carrow twins are just horridly obvious about it. There are others, Draco. There are Death Eaters of age in this school, in every House. Everyone who sides against Voldemort puts themselves in potential danger.”

“I don’t want to lie about—” Draco breaks off. “Sir. There are kids in our House who should see some of us acting like proper Slytherins.”

“That is wise of you, and shows a certain fortitude I’m proud to see you develop,” Professor Slytherin says, to Draco’s surprise and pleasure. “Those of you who choose to take sides against Voldemort should be cautious. Never go anywhere alone, not even the bloody bathroom. All right?”

“You really want us to be safe, don’t you?”

Professor Slytherin nods. “Draco, not only is it my job, I chose that task. Besides, the last two months in my class hadn’t already convinced you of that?”

Draco smiles. “Well, yes, there is that, sir.”

“Be a good Slytherin, Mister Malfoy,” Professor Slytherin says in a more formal tone. Then he smirks. “Your bullying ways are not so far behind you.”

Draco ducks his head, embarrassed. “No, they’re not, but I did quit picking on people directly after Granger…uh, well. She hits really hard.”

“Given that I got to see the bruise that evening? Yes, I’d say she does,” Professor Slytherin agrees.

“And then in fourth year…” Draco hunches his shoulders. “It just seemed like a lark, mocking Potter with those stupid buttons. Even Potter started wearing one, like he was proud of it, and that was funny, too. Then Cedric died, and it all—it stopped being funny, sir. I don’t know how you can still smile, considering what you’ve told us about everything you’ve lost.”

“Because you have to,” Professor Slytherin says gently. “You have to be able to walk through tragedy and smile at the light that comes after it, or you lose yourself.” He seems to hesitate. “When Salazar’s first wife died, her son drew his first breath. Losing my friend hurt so much, but her son was a reason to keep going, to live, to smile as that little one grew. The year Elfric died, Salazar’s daughter Betisa was born, and again, she was a reason to laugh and smile, even when the idea of rising for the day was agony. Then Kanza chose me as hers, and it hurt just a bit less to look at the portraits of my sons.”

Draco feels his eyes burn and blinks until the burn stops. “My father was never going to look at me and acknowledge me, was he?”

Professor Slytherin’s expression isn’t pity, which Draco appreciates, but it’s not dripping sympathy, either. “Do you truly want me to answer that question, Draco?”

“No, sir.” Draco lifts his chin. “I already know that answer. Thank you for your time, sir.”

“You’re welcome, Draco.”

“Oh, and…” Draco’s mouth twists up. “You’re going to hear that my mother and I are disagreeing over my loyalties.”

Professor Slytherin nods. “Understood.”

When Draco leaves the classroom, he ducks into the nearest bathroom, washes his face, and then
stares into the mirror. No, he doesn’t need someone to answer that question about his father. He knows the answer; it makes him very glad he favors his mother in appearance, despite having his father’s white-blond hair.

“Not for a hypocrite,” Draco whispers, and goes to stir up Astoria, Daphne, and Pansy—those he knows for certain feels as he does. None of them are going to die for a hypocrite.

“Why here?” Pansy asks, staring up at the portrait that blocks the entrance to Gryffindor Tower.

“Because I know who’s in residence for the holiday, and I think we should get this started before everyone comes back tomorrow,” Draco replies. “Excuse me, Madam?”

The large woman in the portrait wakes up and peers down at them. “Oh, my! Four of you, and most certainly not in scarlet and gold.”

“I have it on good authority that you were a Slytherin student, ma’am,” Daphne says.

The portrait blushes. “I was Godric’s apprentice first, loves, and then I learned another mastery under Professor Slytherin, but I suppose that’s close enough. What can I do for you? I cannot let you in—not without the password, dears, no matter whose House you belong to.”

“We know. But can you tell the Weasleys and Granger that we’d like to speak with them?” Draco asks. “It’s important.”

The woman frowns. “Hm. Yes. Back in a moment, then. No mischief from you four while I’m gone!”

The four of them step back when the portrait door swings inward. Fred and George emerge first, wands raised, and then relax when they see who’s waiting. “Sorry, but Fellona just said ‘Four Slytherins,’ not who, and some of you aren’t going to be much fun to play with.”

“It’s okay,” Astoria pipes up as Ron, Ginny, and Granger emerge from the Gryffindor Common Room. “That’s kind of why we’re here.”

“Huh. Well.” The twins glance at each other, then their fellow Gryffindors. “I can’t say we expected that,” Fred says.

“But it’s not entirely unexpected, either,” George adds, and then addresses the portrait. “Open back up, Fellona. We’re going to have guests.”

Madam Fellona gives the Slytherins a cautious look. “If you’re certain, dears.”

“We are,” Granger says, eying Draco. “Besides, I can always hit him again.”

“Please don’t,” Draco requests, grimacing. “I had to get my teeth reset properly after that, Granger!”

Once they’re inside, Draco realizes they’ve all crowded together in the center of the Gryffindor Common Room. “It’s very…Gryffindor,” he observes, trying to be polite.

“Very gold,” Pansy says.

“Very scarlet.” Astoria giggles. “But ours is very, very green, so fair is fair. I wonder what the Ravenclaws and the Hufflepuffs have to put up with?”

“The Ravenclaws? So much blue. So, so much,” George tells her, rolling his eyes.
“What about the Puffs?” Daphne asks.

“Bugger those barrels,” Fred mutters. “If you think that eagle knocker on the Ravenclaw’s door is annoying, those barrels are bloody evil. We could never get in to find out.”

“I wonder if it’s exceptionally Goth,” Granger muses.

“Goth?” Ron asks.

“Oh, it’s a current Muggle fashion trend. Black and black lace and black—well, black everything is very in right now,” Granger explains.

“So, what brings you serpents to our door?” Fred asks.

“Professor Slytherin says that there are Marked Death Eaters in every House in the school.” Draco’s words drop a sober cloud over the entire group. “Some of us are…well…”

“Some of us are going to be blatantly declaring against Voldemort,” Pansy puts in, annoyed when Draco takes too long to explain. “My parents are probably going to divorce over it.”

Daphne frowns. “They won’t be the only ones. Theo’s parents already have. Astoria and I are glad that our parents—well, it’s a good thing my father never took the Mark, or the Dark Lord would have killed him for not returning to the fold last summer. Mother has always been against it, though.”

“Even if they both want to marry my sister off before she has a chance to finish school,” Astoria puts in, scowling. “Daphne should be able to do whatever she likes.”

“We all should,” Draco says. “We all know by now who our enemies really are.”

George looks thoughtful. “You’re proposing we all watch each other’s backs, then. No matter the House. Everyone who’s vocally against You-Know-Which-Twat—”

“George!” Granger snaps. “Honestly!”

Fred grins. “Picked that one up from old Aberforth, we did.”

“Yes, but not in front of the ladies,” Draco hisses, trying to at least attempt to act as the Prefect he’s been named. “Mind your manners!”

“I think I know why they only date Quidditch players,” Pansy says dryly. “George Weasley, if you carry through on that rumor I heard about you possibly asking Parangyo for a date in Hogsmeade, you’d best learn to watch your mouth. Ona is from a titled Muggle House in Nairobi.”

“But yes,” Daphne interjects, rolling her eyes. “No matter the House. No matter if we like each other or not. We safeguard each other against those who might want to retaliate, and outside of Professor Slytherin’s classroom, they can retaliate in ways that might be fatal.”

“Or just shove us down the staircases. That would do it,” Granger murmurs. “Yes, I think of these things,” she says when Draco stares at her. “I’m a Muggle-born. We’ve been targeted by those who are fond of You-Know-Which-Idiot since our first day of school.”

“Right. Uh.” Draco winces. “Sorry. About that. Really. The…name-calling. And the incident with the, er, teeth.”

Granger stares at him with her jaw hanging open. “I—thank you. Apology accepted. I’m not entirely convinced this isn’t a hallucination.”
“Not our doing if it is,” Fred insists.

“If you’re hallucinating, we all are,” Ron says. “I mean, I suppose I should get used to Slytherins in our Common Room after Professor Slytherin just—Fellona just let him in! Because he asked nicely!”

Daphne snorts. “Imagine that. Good manners getting you somewhere.”

Astoria frowns. “We have to be fair. They invited us in.”

“She’s right. We owe you a trip into our Common Room, but that will have to wait until certain idiots are not in there,” Draco says. Even the twins look intrigued, so they must not have figured out a way into the Slytherin Common Room before. “In the meantime, Professor Slytherin suggested that we go nowhere alone…” Draco outlines the ideas that have been tumbling around in his head since Christmas Day’s revelations.

“That’s the start of a sound plan,” George says. Draco thinks he might even look impressed. “We can inform the other Gryffindors we know aren’t numbskulls when everyone gets back tomorrow afternoon.”

“We’ll be doing the same in our House,” Pansy replies. “I’m just not certain how to pass the word on to the others, though. Us Slytherins are sort of automatically suspect.”

Ginny, who’d been silent and listening up until that point, speaks up. “Luna’s in the school for the holiday. I can ask her. The idiots in her House might not listen to her, but aside from Cho, she’ll know who’s safe to talk to and who isn’t.”

“Cho has an in with the Puffs because of Cedric,” Granger says quietly. “She’ll know who to start with, and the Puffs can handle things in-House from there.”

“If it’s too hard on Cho to go Puff-scouting, I think Tamsin Applebee is a certainty. She of the newfound Viking fondness,” Fred says.

“All right. One more thing.” Draco draws in a deep breath. “Until anyone knows otherwise, my mother and I are having a disagreement over the matter of the Dark Lord. She disapproves of my choices. Is that clear?”

Ginny swallows. “You mean she’s Marked,” she whispers, and Draco nods.

“You’ve got my word,” Ron says, to Draco’s surprise. “Just because I still think you’re a complete ferret doesn’t mean I want you or your Mum dead—especially if you’re going against him.”

“Agreed. We’re sympathetic to your plight,” Granger says formally. “One parent in Azkaban and one trying to make you join You-Know-Who. It’s simply awful.”

Pansy is studying Granger. “Are you certain you were Sorted correctly?”

“Hat never hesitated,” Granger replies primly, but she grins. “It’s probably for the best.”

“She stuffed an insect Animagus in a bloody jar last year,” Ron mock-whispers. “Beware Hermione—ow!” he yelps when Granger punches him in the arm.

“Can I be Ginny’s friend now?” Astoria asks her sister once they’re back out in the hall and the portrait-hole is shut.

“Yes, Astoria, you can be her friend,” Daphne allows. “But before you decide to socialize with the
entire school, do run who they are past us, so we can be certain of their loyalties.”

Astoria huffs a sigh. “Fine. Oh, and I told you so!”

“Yes. In your first year. I know.” Daphne grinds her teeth so hard Draco can hear it, which is impressive.

“Come on,” Draco says. “Our next stop is our Head of House’s office.”

* * * *

“I just had a very interesting visit,” Severus says without looking up as Nizar Apparates into his office. He just needs to finish writing out this ingredients list for stores that need replenishing, and he’s done preparing for the latter half of the school term but for the train’s arrival tomorrow evening.


“Mister Malfoy, Miss Parkinson, and the Greengrass sisters,” Severus replies. “They had some very interesting questions, intriguing plans, and the ability to make me feel pride in how far they’ve come.”

“Come on,” Nizar says after a thoughtful pause. “It’s my turn to show you something.”

Curious, Severus follows Nizar out of his office and down the passage, upstairs, and to the statue of Galfridus the Gargoyle. Galfridus closes his eyes in stone-carved bliss from the ear-scratching before opening the door for them. “Why are we going up here?”

Nizar pushes open one of the double doors leading into the headmaster’s office. “We’re up here because I know, thanks to a certain map, that Dumbledore is currently engaged elsewhere. Hello, everyone.”

“Hello, trouble-maker,” several of them reply, which makes Nizar glare upwards towards the ceiling where Godric’s portrait lurks.

“Someone’s trouble-making, all right,” Nizar mutters. “Ladies, Gentlemen, and otherwise-gendered beings—we were never here.”

“Of course not,” Phineas Black’s portrait says with a smirk. “I’ve been wanting something to hold over Dumbledore’s head.”

Severus watches as Nizar goes over to the Sorting Hat, giving it a firm nudge with one finger. “Do I even want to know?”

“It’s your birthday. I’ve already thrown at least seven books at you in the last two months—”

“Some of those were literal tossings,” Severus interjects dryly.

“—so, I thought I’d give you a different sort of gift.” Nizar pokes the Hat again. “Wake up, you sodden excuse for a felt hat.”

The Sorting Hat gives vent to a great yawn and mutters sleepily: “September has not happened yet; I will sleep more, I’ll bet!”
“Rhyming? That’s what we’re Sorting to now?” Nizar picks up the Hat and stares at it. “You can go back to your nap after you do me a favor.”

“What favor will I do—” Severus watches in amusement as the Hat’s gaping mouth falls open. “NOT YOU!”

“Still me.” Nizar grins at the Hat. “Want to give it another go?”

“No!” the Hat says at once. “I will not be doing so! I gave it another go but a few years ago, and still you argued with me so!”

“Yes, but that was technically a Sorting that happened out of order. Come on. Give it another chance, and I’ll teach you how to sing in Welsh,” Nizar offers.

The Hat manages to look quite suspicious, for a hat. “Proper dirty words and all?”

“Would I leave those out?”

“If you thought it would offend and appall? My guess is yes,” the Hat groused. “Another go you shall have, but this is the last one, you utter scab!”

“I have actually never heard this Hat utter so many complaints in my entire life,” Severus says.

“That’s nothing.” Nizar puts the Hat on his head and crosses his arms.

The Hat cringes and starts to look unhappy. “Unfair, this is. Like long ago and days gone by, not short five years traveling across the sky!”

Severus waits, keeping an eye on his pocket watch. At six minutes and thirty-three seconds, the Hat begins to sob in despair. “I CAN’T!” it shouts. “GET ME OFF OF YOUR HEAD. I SHAN’T!”

Nizar neatly plucks the Hat off his head and puts it back on its shelf. “I’ll teach you later, after you’re done soaking yourself, all right?”

“GO AWAY!” the Hat orders, letting out a loud sniff. “COME BACK ANY OTHER DAY!”

Severus waits until Nizar has shut the Headmaster’s door behind them before he starts laughing. “I admit it! I didn’t believe you.”

“And now?” Nizar asks, arms crossed as he smirks up at Severus.

“That was one of the funniest damned things I have ever witnessed in my entire life!” Severus gasps out. He leans against the wall and tries to gain some control over laughter that is trying to veer towards inane giggling.

Nizar stands up on his toes and kisses Severus in the stairwell. “Happy birthday, then. Now I get to do terribly inappropriate things to you in private by kidnapping myself a Potions Master.”

“By all means, please lead the way.”

Nizar grins and grabs his arm. “But what if I don’t wish to advertise?” he asks, and Apparates them directly to Severus’s quarters. “And you did say down yesterday. I heard that correctly, yes?”

“You did.” Severus walks forward, causing Nizar to retreat until he’s pressed against the closed, locked, and ward-sealed door. Severus takes Nizar’s right wrist and holds it in place over Nizar’s head, then does the same with Nizar’s left hand. “I also recall a certain idea that crossed someone’s
mind a month ago.”

Nizar swallows. “But it’s your birthday.”

Severus smiles and nuzzles against Nizar’s cheek. “And how do you know that isn’t exactly what I want?” When he draws back, Nizar’s pupils are blown, his lips parted in shock. “Is there anything I should know not to do in your presence, Nizar?”

Nizar blinks a few times in an attempt to string words together. “Uh—no blindfolding, no literal tying, and no magic. I won’t—I won’t panic, exactly, but I escape those situations by inflicting the most possible damage possible until I’m capable of making conscious decisions again.”

“Then none of that will happen,” Severus whispers, and captures Nizar’s lips in a kiss that makes Nizar whimper. He deepens the kiss while pressing Nizar’s hands against the door with greater strength, and Nizar’s hips buck up against him. “Why do you find that so enjoyable?” he asks, curious.

Nizar’s tongue darts out long enough to wet his lips. “Because it’s you,” he whispers. “Because I trust you.”

“God knows why.” Severus glances down at the buttons on Nizar’s black shirt. “What is that spell you used to open that row of buttons on your vest?”


“At the moment, that is quite the appropriate term. Apelefthérosi.” Severus is pleased when Nizar’s shirt falls open in a quiet whisper of silk. He’s still fascinated by Nizar’s physique; the man carries quite a bit of muscle on a lean frame, but not to the point of needless bulk.

Severus runs his hands from the top of Nizar’s trousers through the thick line of hair along his stomach, smirking when Nizar’s belly twitches in response before Nizar draws in a sharp breath. Severus keeps following that trail until he splays his fingers across Nizar’s chest, through the thinner spread of light brown hair. Nizar is watching him, wide-eyed.

Waiting.

“What shall I do with you, I wonder?” Severus muses, noticing that the Greek Release Charm had also undone a button and zipper that would otherwise be in his way.

Nizar grins. “Oh, you’re asking me, now? I thought you had ideas of your own.”

“I did, but you’re nervous. You’re never nervous,” Severus replies. They’ve yet to explore any aspect of penetration, but given the very detailed nature of thoughts that he’d sometimes found lurking in Nizar’s eyes… “You’ve never done this before,” he realizes.

Nizar shakes his head. “No. Not for lack of wanting to—”

“Oh,就不想做吗？I thought you had ideas of your own.”

“Indeed,” Severus interjects dryly.

“—but the people I was with either didn’t like penetrato at all, or were far more into receiving it than granting it.”

Severus inhales sharply. Nizar’s voice has always been fascinating to listen to. It’s precise and English-cultured to reflect how many Pure-bloods wandered through the Common Room over the last few centuries, but is also melodic from years of French, with a lurking burr that veers between
Gaelic and Spanish. Hearing that Latin word roll off Nizar’s tongue has a surprising and quite distracting effect on him. “Did you do that on purpose?” Severus asks.

“The Latin?” Nizar glances upwards, as if thinking. “No, I just suddenly couldn’t remember the modern term for the life of me, even though I’m almost certain that penetration’s connotations haven’t changed in four hundred years. Why?”

“Intriguing results.” Severus releases Nizar’s hands. “Change of plan. No first time should entail what I was pondering.”

“Now you’re teasing,” Nizar complains, but whatever else he intends to say ends in a choked-off groan as Severus palms the man’s cock through the thin layer of his pants.

“No,” Severus replies, removing his hand. “That was teasing.”

“Right. Teasing. Yes.” Nizar blinks a few times to gather his thoughts and then strips off his wristwatch before tossing it onto the sofa. Severus takes that as a hint and slides Nizar’s shirt off of his shoulders, letting the silk whisper along Nizar’s skin before it strikes the floor. The white scar over Nizar’s shoulder draws his eye, as it always does. “I still wonder what sort of spell caused that.”

Nizar shrugs. “It might not have been a spell at all. Other weapons existed.” He helps Severus out of his jacket; a non-verbal Release Charm undoes the line of buttons on Severus’s shirtfront and cuffs. Then Nizar removes Severus’s white shirt, smiling. “Gods, but I love your body.”

Severus makes a face. “Then you have an odd preference for scrawny individuals.”

Nizar’s brow furrows. “Scrawny? You really are not. Exceptionally slender and scrawny are two vastly different things.”

Severus decides to let that argument go. It’s one they’ve had before, and Severus is not convinced. Distractions are in order; he is going to get what he wants tonight, if in an entirely different form. He leans down and licks a long, wet trail up the side of Nizar’s neck, making Nizar shiver. “I want you,” he murmurs in Nizar’s ear.

He can feel the effort it takes for Nizar to pull himself back together. “Yes.”

Severus takes Nizar’s hand and guides him into the bedroom so he can close the door behind them. That is a clear signal to any elves or bloody nosy Headmasters that Severus is not available. Nizar seems to agree, as he is divulging Severus of belt and trousers as quickly as possible. “Do you have any concept of patience at all?” Severus asks.

“Nope.” Nizar smiles and slides his hand into Severus’s pants, his fingers curling around Severus’s erection and squeezing. “Not right now, at least.”

Severus noses against Nizar’s chin and cheek. “Take off your trousers, you idiot. Some things are worth being patient for.”

It takes a while to make it into bed, given that Nizar won’t stop nipping at Severus’s skin. He often thinks he never should have let on that he enjoyed it so much, but he can retaliate. Nizar still becomes a nonverbal mess when Severus uses his tongue, or even mere hints of heat and breath, on any part of Nizar’s body.

“Lie down,” Severus says, chuckling against Nizar’s lips when they make it to the edge of the bed but no further. “You’re making this so very difficult.”
Nizar flops backwards onto the bed, notices he’s still wearing one sock, and yanks it off. “Now is it less difficult?”

Severus stares down at the man sprawled naked across his bed. Nizar’s familiar, defined features: snub end to his long, elegant nose; long, curling hair partially bleached by southern sun, generous mouth, brown lashes and brows highlighting hazel eyes. Nizar’s eyes never truly have the shine of true happiness unless he’s in private with Severus. Then they all but gleam, not like emeralds, but green labradorite. Severus’s gaze follows the bronze-skinned column of his neck to Nizar’s chest, down that trail of dark brown hair to the cock rising in semblance of Nizar’s impatience. It’s only there that Nizar’s bronze skin turns dusky, brightening only at the blood-fueled red at the tip.

Nizar raises an eyebrow. “You’re staring at me.”

“Perhaps I’m still trying to figure out what I’ve ever done to deserve you.”

Nizar ignores the mild contempt Severus is feeling and smiles at him instead. “You were kind, generous, intelligent, funny, thoughtful, fierce, defiant, brilliant, determined—you are amazing. What else is there to do?”

Make you happy, Severus thinks, but he isn’t ready to say that aloud, any more than he’s ready to say three more, very important words. Instead, he opens the drawer at his bedside and retrieves a jar, removing the corked lid. “Once upon a time, I was a teenager with little to do but experiment on improving Wizarding Britain’s rather inadequate lubrications for anything sexual. I invented something better, and they can all go hang before they’re getting the recipe, because I’m not sharing.”

Nizar grins. “Oh, that must be special then. You’re not often that secretive when it comes to improving potions.”

“You could say that.” Severus crawls into bed and sits up against the wooden headboard, coaxing and teasing until he’s convinced Nizar to sit on his lap. With their differences in height, it means they’re face to face. “You’re still certain?” Severus asks.

“I definitely wouldn’t be here if I wasn’t.” Nizar touches Severus’s face, traces his lower lip with his thumb, and then runs his hands down Severus’s chest before grasping Severus again.

Severus feels his eyes roll back. “Don’t distract me, or this might actually take all night!”

“Is that a complaint?” Nizar laughs. “Truly?”

“No. Shut up,” Severus mutters, dipping his fingers into the jar until they’re coated with a generous bit of clear gel that’s closer to being an ointment.

“Willow bark,” Nizar identifies one of the gel’s scents. “And…that one new thing from Australia. Melaleuca. Oh—ginseng?”

“Panax ginseng,” Severus clarifies, glaring at Nizar. “How do you continue to claim you’re not knowledgeable in Potions?”

“Well, I don’t actually know what this will do.”

Severus smiles before he traces the curve of Nizar’s backside and presses the first gel-coated finger against his skin before sliding inside. Nizar’s eyes open wide as he lets out a shocked gasp. “Do not come.”
Nizar grasps the base of his cock and squeezes while gritting his teeth. “Holy gods, what the fuck did you do?”

“A slight numbing agent for discomfort, an antibacterial in case of accidents, a base component that encourages pliant skin…and one more ingredient that amplifies sensory pleasure.” Severus smiles when Nizar stares at him. “You asked.”

“You could give someone an orgasm just by using this by itself!” Nizar gasps out, grinding down against his hand. “Gods, do that again.”

“I’ll do my best to make it memorable,” Severus says dryly, obliging him.

“Please,” Nizar tries to scoff, but the word becomes a long, drawn-out moan. “You make everything memorable.”

“Do I?” Severus asks, twisting his fingers. Nizar’s lips part as his head falls back, throat moving as he swallows. Severus withdraws his fingers, making Nizar gasp at the loss. Then he captures all of Nizar’s attention by using the gel on his own cock. It’s slick and cool, a pleasurable counter to throbbing heat.

“You’re using that—that’s probably us not lasting that long,” Nizar says, his eyes still glued to Severus’s hands.

Severus lets out a low hint of laughter. “Nizar: I’m used to this.”

“Then you could—” Nizar looks back up and whimpers. “Oh, fuck.”

Severus places his hand on the back of Nizar’s head and draws him in for a kiss. “That’s the idea,” he whispers. “Lift up.” Nizar licks at Severus’s lips and lifts his hips. Severus uses his free hand to guide Nizar back down onto his cock. He lets Nizar control how fast it happens, not wanting to rush any bit of this. Watching Nizar’s face, eyes fluttering closed as his mouth opens, is worth every second.

God, but it’s been so long since he’s done this. Severus has missed this rare feeling of connecting with another human being. It’s taking more self-control than he expected to keep still, to keep from moving.

Nizar sinks down on him in one long, soundless sigh of pleasure. When he opens his eyes, Severus is startled by the joy he can see reflected there. He’s used to seeing the haze of pleasure in another’s eyes, even if it’s been a very long time. Nizar’s eyes are indeed hazy, despite the labradorite gleam, but joy—that is a complete surprise.

He has no idea what to do about that, so he does what is all but expected, instead. He rocks forward gently, settling back down as Nizar gasps and grasps hold of Severus’s shoulders with both hands. “Oh, fuck. Yes, do that again!”

Severus nips at his lips and obliges him, setting a slow pace that sets Nizar to panting, his grip on Severus’s shoulders tightening to the point of pain. “Severus, I—” Nizar’s words are lost to a soundless cry as Severus grasps the head of Nizar’s cock and squeezes as the man’s orgasm strikes.

Nizar leans forward to rest his head on Severus’s shoulders, gasping for breath. “You are still a magnificent cheat,” he rasps after a moment.

“A magnificent cheat who is going to wring two orgasms from you before this night is over,” Severus replies smugly, licking a smear of white from his thumb. Nizar lifts his head just in time to
see the gesture and groans aloud. Then he grasps Severus’s hand and takes Severus’s entire thumb into his mouth, sucking hard.

Severus grits his teeth as the sensation goes right to his cock, making his hips buck. “Nizar!”

“You are not the only cheater in this room, Severus.” Nizar tilts his hips in a way that impales himself further before rocking forward again. “And I want to return the favor.”

Severus meets the angle of Nizar’s hips, drawing another long, shuddering breath from Nizar as Nizar’s cock begins to harden again. “Still cheating,” Severus warns him, before dipping his fingers back into the jar and spreading the gel over Nizar’s cock.

“OH, FUCK!” Nizar takes Severus’s lips in a fierce kiss, drawing blood that he licks away before tangling his hands in Severus’s hair. Severus thrusts his tongue into Nizar’s mouth, feeling an amazing sense of abandon steal over him. He thinks it a trite thought, but he’s never felt this way before. Not ever—not this rush of blood through his limbs, his heart pounding, feeling tingling waves spread over his skin as Nizar rides him.

Severus meant for this to last, but overestimated himself. It’s been too long since he’s been with anyone, and Nizar feels so damned good that he just wants to bury his nose against Nizar’s skin and drown in sensation. “Nizar—”

“Yessss,” Nizar growls. His teeth graze Severus’s ear before clamping down on the side of his neck in a vicious bite that still feels amazing. Severus lasts for another few seconds before letting go, burying his cry against Nizar’s shoulder as he shudders out a shockingly intense orgasm.

“Severus,” Nizar murmurs. Severus lifts his head and then watches, bleary-eyed, as Nizar uses his hand to bring himself off a second time. He’s utterly silent, but the expression on his face is like captured bliss.

Severus moves them so that they flump down onto the bed, curling up on their sides. They’re facing each other, legs tangled together. “Oh, God,” Severus gasps out, still stunned.

Nizar surprises him by reaching out and cupping Severus’s face. “There you are,” he murmurs. “I’ve missed you.”

Severus can’t make sense of Nizar’s words until he realizes—he’s let his guard down. He’s let all of the masks and defences fall away for the first time in…in…he can’t remember how long. “Nizar—”

Nizar shakes his head. His thumb rests over Severus’s lips. “Don’t. I shouldn’t have said—”

Severus reaches out and places his trembling hand over Nizar’s mouth. “Shut up. I only meant…I only know how to be this person when I’m with you.”

When he lowers his hand, Nizar is smiling. “Then I’m honored beyond words.”

They clean up when Severus thinks he can cast a wandless cleansing charm without causing an incident. Nizar pries the quilt and sheet free so they can crawl under it, sharing a pillow while cradling each other in the darkness.

Severus strokes Nizar’s hair until he feels the particular boneless sprawl of limbs that is Nizar falling into a true sleep, not restlessness. “Nishmati,” he whispers, trying out the sound of the word on his tongue. It feels…awkward.

Now he’s fooling himself. He gave Nizar his soul years ago.
"Nizar, it is far too early for me to want to kill so many people. Just...one justified killing at a time, please."

Nizar wakes up far, far too early on Sunday and can't get back to sleep. He creeps out of bed and gets dressed in the dark in order not to wake Severus, goes out, and shuts the door.

Then he turns around and nearly hexes an aging house-elf to death when he finds the elf standing composedly in Severus's sitting room. "Shit, don't do that." Nizar shoves his wand back into his sleeve. "You couldn't wait until it was properly morning?"

Bificiss shakes his head. "The Madam Malfoy is telling me to find the war mage and to wait for the war mage to awaken to pass on her message, so that is what Bificiss is doing, Professor Slytherin."

Nizar stares at the elf in dismay before calling for Dobby. The green-eyed elf pops into the room, still rubbing at his large eyes. "What is the Professor Slytherin be needing—Bificiss!" Dobby exclaims happily, reaching out to hug the old elf.

Bificiss steps back, scowling. "The traitor elf is not to be touching Bificiss!"

"Dobby, fetch me tea, will you please?" Nizar waits until Dobby Disapparates before glaring at the other elf. "Why were you just so exceptionally rude to someone I consider a friend?"

Bificiss swallows hard but stands his ground. "Dobby is a free elf, and no elf is supposed to be free, Professor Slytherin. Dobby is a terrible, terrible elf!"

"You're...wait." Nizar pinches the bridge of his nose. "You're all supposed to be free. Why are you castigating Dobby for having a status you're all supposed to have?"

"No house-elf is supposed to be free, Professor Slytherin!" Bificiss looks offended. "We be working for our witches and wizards, and that be the way of things!"

"Horseshit!" Nizar retorts. "I'm not even sure how anyone else acquired house-elves, as the original contract with the clan is for Hogwarts alone!"

Bificiss gives him a blank look. "Contract, Professor Slytherin?"
“Oh, bugger.” Dobby reappears with the tea tray set for one. “Dobby, do you know anything about the house-elves’ contract with Hogwarts?”

Dobby puts the tray down on a table that Nizar knows is not the same table he last saw during Hanukkah. “Dobby be knowing nothing of a Hogwarts house-elf contract, Professor Slytherin. None of the other house-elves be mentioning such a thing.”

“Right.” Nizar sighs. “Dobby, tell the elves I need to come meet with all of them in the kitchen in about…” He finds his watch where it was discarded on the sofa. “At five-thirty.”

“Dobby be doing that at once!”

Nizar turns to Bificiss once Dobby is gone. “What is Madam Malfoy’s message?”

“The Madam Malfoy wishes to meet with the war mage at a time when is convenient for him. She is available any time after eight o’clock of a morning,” Bificiss recites.

Nizar rubs his eyes and resigns himself to a morning of politics. “Tell her nine o’clock this morning, please. I’ll be ready for an early tea, but if Madam Malfoy requires something of more subsistence than tea, please tell the Hogwarts elves—without being rude to Dobby!”

Bificiss’s lip turns down, but he bows. “Bificiss will be relaying your message, and he will not be rude to Dobby this time.”

Nizar rolls his eyes after Bificiss departs. “Good gods.” He sits down, has enough tea to drown himself in, eats enough to carry him through until nine, and then readies himself for what might be an uphill battle in Hogwarts’ kitchen.

He’s proven correct when none of Hogwarts’ elves have the slightest idea what he’s talking about. “Is this why you’re all wearing only tea towels, and none of your silver or gold?”

That nearly sets off an uproar. “Elves is not to be having gold!” Tinny exclaims. Rubinny faints and lands next to the poor, drunken elf nesting in front of the fireplace.

“They stole your culture, and they enslaved you. Great,” Nizar knows he isn’t going to get anywhere easily when that sets the elves to wailing and pulling their ears again. “Listen, please.”

Gradually, the elves settle down, though the drunken one is sobbing. Tinny and Filky are still trying to get Rubinny back on her feet. “I know that the way things currently are is all you remember, but I’m one thousand twenty years old. I was here when your kind first came to Hogwarts, then known as Hogewáþ.”

Dobby’s eyes go wide. “The Professor Slytherin be saying that elves were not always in Hogwarts?”

“Of course not.” Nizar notes how most of the elves avoid standing too close to Dobby. “Would it help you lot if I showed you the original contract?”

Filky is brave enough to speak up first, but then, she’s the one of the few elves patient enough to deal with Severus even in his worst moods. “The Professor Slytherin should be showing us this contract.”

“Arcesso contractum interis Kumbā de Brae elfos et Hogewáþ.” Nizar scowls when nothing happens. “What the fuck?” He repeats the spell and still—nothing. “All right, now I’m annoyed.” Nizar retrieves his wand long enough to cast his Patronus and then speaks to it in Parseltongue. “Sal. Not an emergency, but urgent. Find me in the kitchen at Hogwarts.”
“If there isn’t tea on, it might be a good idea to make a strong cup,” Nizar tells the elves, and then uses his watch to check the phase of the moon while waiting.

In less than three minutes, Salazar Apparates into the kitchen with a ferocious scowl on his face. “You are taking advantage of the fact that I missed you by waking me before the fucking sun rises,” he growls.

“The sun be rising, actually,” Filky says, unconcerned, and hands Salazar a steaming cup of tea.

“I love you,” Salazar tells her, and possibly scalds his tongue by drinking the tea before it has a chance to cool. Filky blushes a vibrant, green-edged violet and mutters about the Master Salazar being welcome.

“The Master Salazar,” Tinny whispers. It’s a phrase that’s repeated by every elf in the kitchen. Even the sodden one by the fireplace lifts her head to find out what’s happening.

“Not a Master. Just Salazar, please,” Salazar requests, but Nizar doesn’t think it’s a request that will be easily honored.

Nizar waits until Salazar looks less likely to commit murder out of sheer spite. “Sal, the fucking contract for the house-elves won’t come to me.”

“What? That’s ridiculous.” Salazar frowns. “Arcesso contractum interis Kumbâ de Brae elfos et Hogewâ!” The early morning scowl returns when the contract still doesn’t put in an appearance. “What the hell could have happened to it?”

“Portrait. Frame,” Nizar reminds Salazar while glaring at him. “I have no way of knowing. I just know it’s not answering.”

“Which means someone has placed the original somewhere in a manner that keeps it from responding to the magic.” Salazar sits down on a bench at what Nizar thinks might actually be one of their original trestle tables. “I remember the terms, but not the whole of the contract.”

“They don’t remember that it existed. They don’t remember their own culture, Salazar! When did that fucking happen?” Nizar asks.

“I don’t know exactly when it changed. When I left first left the school in 1039, no one had elves in their employ but the school.” Salazar winces at the bemoaning wail that breaks out at the word employ. “When I returned in the 1300s, suddenly all of the wealthy magical families had house-elves that they claimed were bound to their family lines. I’ve long suspected that the elves lost knowledge of the contract, and those twits simply stole house-elves from the castle and told the elves it was supposed to be that way. Without a contract to reference, who are they to argue?”

“These twits would be the same ones spouting nonsense about blood purity, wouldn’t they?” Nizar isn’t surprised when Salazar nods. “Shit.”

Salazar accepts a second cup of tea with a grateful look. “Some of those families maintain those views to this very day. Others learned better, but kept their house-elves. At that point, they didn’t know any differently, either.”

“Master Slytherin, Dobby is wanting to know how house-elves came to Hogwarts,” Dobby requests with wide eyes.

“Ah, well.” Salazar tilts his head at Nizar. “That would be his doing.”
Nizar stares at his brother. “It is?”

Salazar rolls his eyes. “I’d dearly love to throttle whoever moved your painting, even though I’d have to learn enough necromancy to resurrect them from the dead first.”

“Let’s not be raising the dead. It’s too early for that,” Nizar says. “Tell them, Sal. I just introduced cracks into their world. The elves need something.”

“Right, then.” Salazar puts his empty cup aside. “In the winter of 993, my brother comes stumbling back to Hogewâþ with a half-dead elf in his arms. It took some time for that poor elf to recover, and when he did, he confirmed what Nizar had already found—non-magical folk had destroyed your home, the wood that your particular type of elf took their name from. Kumbā de Brae. You’re all descended from the elves who dwelled within the Grove of Brae.”

“Winky be hearing of the grove,” the sodden elf at the fireplace whispers, which causes those nearest her to squeak in surprise. “Winky be thinking it was a myth.”

“Not at all. Merely long gone. Besides, I’m a bloody myth, and yet I’m just as real as those trees once were,” Salazar says. “Such an act not only destroyed an important bit of magic remaining near the Heights, it also left your entire people homeless. The contract we’re speaking of was not slavery, nor inescapable binding, no matter what others of this time will say. It stated that we of Hogewâþ would give you a home, clothing, what care for your health was needed, safety, and pay in the form of refined but unstamped goblin gold or silver.

“You were crafters, you see,” Salazar continues, seeing dismay and horror on the elves’ faces. “You didn’t want money, but raw materials in order to create. You either kept those creations for yourselves, wearing them proudly, or you gifted them to magicians or humans you favored. In return, your clan of elves looked after us—the cleaning of the castle, the cooking of meals and serving them, and protecting students who needed such. We all thought it a very fair exchange, especially as an elf was free to leave if they decided to return to the wood. Some of them did, that first spring, but others quickly became accustomed to life in a magical castle.”

“Do you have a Pensife?” Nizar asks while the elves mutter fearfully among themselves. “Somehow, I think this would be going so much better if we could show them.”

“I’ve one…somewhere,” Salazar finally says. “I’m not recalling its current location, but I own one. Why not borrow Dumbledore’s? I know he has one.”

“I’d sooner break it over his head,” Nizar growls.

“Oh, now there is your morning Deslizarse crankiness. I was wondering where it had fled. Why so cross with the headmaster today, hermanito?”

Nizar crosses his arms. “Because there is a very intelligent, kind-hearted man living in a fucking shack and grateful for that meager roof over his head, yet there is a castle right here with plenty of living space in it that he’s never been invited to dwell in.”

Salazar nods. “That would do it. You’re referring to Hagrid?”

“Yes.” Nizar scowls. “I’m also not fond of the fact that he’s been left uneducated, despite living right next to a school—not to mention it is a school he now teaches for. He asked me to teach him how to levitate, as everyone else told him that it wouldn’t be possible for him to learn the skill.”

“Nizar, it is far too early for me to want to kill so many people,” Salazar replies. “Just…one justified killing at a time, please.”
“Is the Master Slytherin returning to Hogwarts?” Rubinny asks. Tinny is still fanning her face, which is far too pale for an elf with her complexion.

Salazar nods. “I am, though it isn’t supposed to be today, or yesterday, or two weeks ago. I keep telling my brother that it will be the end of this month, and yet he keeps calling me back here!”

Nizar raises an eyebrow. “It was important, Sal.”

“I know. It is.” Salazar lets out a long sigh. “No one is saying you have to change your ways,” he says to the elves. “But the ways you’re accustomed to—many were forced upon you, and aren’t yours at all. I’d like you all to at least think on that. I have to go. I had enough to do this morning before learning the full extent of this. Good morning, elves. Good morning, pain in my arse.”

“Good morning, irritant,” Nizar replies, watching as Salazar Disapparates.

He glances down when Dobby gives a gentle tug to his sleeve. “Dobby wants to try it, Professor Slytherin.”

“Try what?”

Dobby gives him a cautious look. “Crafting,” he whispers.

Nizar opens his mouth to reply when inspiration strikes. “You know, that’s brilliant timing. I happen to have need of something to be crafted.”

* * *

Nizar leaves his classroom door propped open, even if he’s not certain how Narcissa Malfoy plans to arrive. He hopes she’s sensible enough not to use a Floo without asking permission, considering his might be lethal.

Just as she was in school, Narcissa is exceptionally prompt, and arrives just as his watch strikes nine by means of knocking on his door. “Good morning, Madam Malfoy.”

“Good morning, Professor Slytherin,” Narcissa replies with a graceful nod. “Or should it be…?”

“We’re in a school, where I work. Please not the other title,” Nizar requests, and is granted a faint, perfected Pureblood smile. “Come in, please.”

“You live where you work?” Narcissa asks in a polite tone, glancing around Nizar’s sitting room after he escorts her inside.

“Doesn’t everyone in this school?”

“Yes, though I think you might be the only one in such close proximity to your own classroom,” Narcissa replies.

“That is probably true, considering half the staff seem to go to great pains to hide their living quarters from the student body.” Nizar isn’t surprised when a tea tray appears on the table without an elf accompanying it. All of them are displeased with Lucius Malfoy for sacking Dobby, even if Dobby is pleased by the situation. None of them are certain of Narcissa’s intentions.
Nizar waits until they both have tea, though he’s grateful to see that there is something more substantial than biscuits involved. “What brings you here, Madam Malfoy?”

“Your ability to remove the Dark Mark from those so inflicted,” Narcissa says with surprising honesty.

Nizar smiles. “How do you know that I can do such a thing?”

“Because Severus would be dead if you had not,” she whispers.

Nizar studies her expression, but doesn’t attempt to read the surface thoughts behind her eyes. He suspects she’s trained against such intrusions, anyway. “You care for him.”

“As any intelligent, educated, courteous Slytherin cares for another,” Narcissa says. “Severus has been a good ally and a staunch defender of my son, even when Draco might not have deserved that protection.”

“He is a good man, yes. I hope you were not overly attached to Madam Dolohov.”

Narcissa frowns. “No one has seen her since the eve of Christmas Day. Your work, Professor Slytherin?”

“No. Salazar’s. He took offence to her carrying of dangerous tales to Voldemort.” Nizar restrains a sigh when Narcissa flinches “It’s only a name, Madam Malfoy. Don’t grant him any more power than he already has.”

“There were times during the first war when it seemed as if his very name would summon him.” Narcissa lowers her eyes as she sips at her tea. “Some of us prefer to be cautious.”

“Or proactive, if you’re here to see the Mark removed.”

“Actually…” Narcissa puts down her cup. “I wondered if it were possible to only remove the part of the Mark’s magic that gives the Dark Lord the ability to kill his followers.”

“All right. Now I’m intrigued. Why?” Nizar asks.

“Because of Margot’s actions, you no longer have a spy in the Dark Lord’s ranks. I would not be able to maintain such a position for very long, not without endangering my son as word of our supposed ‘rift’ gained ground, but I would assist while I can.”

“No, you misunderstand. Why?” Nizar asks again.

Narcissa’s eyes narrow. “I am a Black, and not a nice person—nor will I ever be. However, even I have standards of behavior that I shamelessly violated during the first war, before my son was born. Draco reminds me that one should be better than that. There is a difference between killing in his defence and killing the weak, but Bellatrix can be a terrible influence. I do not reference her as an excuse, since I knew my own mind.

“I suspect your brother has his own spies among the Dark Lord’s circles, but with Lucius’s absence and Severus unable to be there, I am of his most trusted Death Eaters. If I hear only one thing that assists in the Dark Lord’s defeat, it is still one thing I have done to make up for what can never be changed at all.”

Nizar nods in recognition of her words. “Who else wants out?”
Narcissa grimaces. “You truly do mean to test my sincerity, don’t you?”

“If you wish to spy, you do need to be well aware of the fact that it means confiding secrets to those you are spying for,” Nizar responds, annoyed. “Who, Narcissa?”

“Marguerite Davis, to my surprise. Not her husband, and her daughter emulates her father. Blanchette Carrow, who might become the only member of that family to survive the war, as the others are firmly attached to the Dark Lord. Urith Avery, though her brother is beyond all hope in every sense of the word. Phillip and Nicola Macnair, who are more concerned with their nephew Xavier’s welfare than they are with war. Gamelin Rowle, who might seek you of his own volition very soon; he is the only member of his entire clan who has an ounce of sense. Tristan Parkinson, Pansy’s father, is not Marked, nor is his wife Violette, but they have come to disagree over where their loyalties belong. Tristan prefers to side with the House of Slytherin, in both senses of the word. Violette does not.”

Nizar retrieves his wand from his sleeve and holds it up. “This is only a diagnostic spell,” he tells her, casting it non-verbally. “If you carry a blood contagion, I need to know before I work with the Mark so I can protect myself from it.”

Narcissa draws herself up, affronted. “I would never!”

“Can the same be said of Lucius?” Nizar asks, and Narcissa’s ivory skin pales further. “You’re either certain he is disloyal to your marriage, or not certain, but either way the result is the same, isn’t it?”

“It is,” Narcissa agrees in a stiff voice. “The results?”

“You should be supplementing your diet with iron,” Nizar says. “You’re borderline anemic. Otherwise, you’re healthy.”

“Thank you.” Narcissa still looks disgruntled.

“Two warnings.” Nizar waits for her to meet his eyes. “If you’re lying about your desire to remove the Mark, this will not succeed. It will not harm you, though I will be very, very upset that a liar is seated in my home.”

“I understand. The second?” Narcissa asks.

Nizar smiles. “That was the second warning. Roll up your left sleeve, Madam Malfoy. This will take a few minutes.”

It’s much easier to alter the Mark than to remove it entirely. Once it’s done, Nizar temporarily lifts the warding on his Floo so that Madam Malfoy can depart that way instead of going back down the stairs. The moment she’s gone, he calls for Dobby.

The house-elf appears, still pulling on an extra pair of green socks. “Yes, Professor Slytherin?” He peers up at Nizar. “The Professor Slytherin is not looking well.”

“The Professor Slytherin has done far too much in too few days and somehow still doesn’t know how to sleep to make up for it,” Nizar replies dryly. “I need two things, Dobby—an owl stand, and a bloody Restorative from Madam Pomfrey’s office. Can you fetch those for me?”

Dobby nods at once and Disapparates. He returns seconds later with a stoppered Restorative Potion and vanishes again.

By the time Nizar is feeling less like field carrion, Dobby is back with an owl stand. “Dobby be
finding it in the room where everything is hidden.” He places it next to the window. “It being a good, heavy old stand meant for large, cranky owls.”

“Thank you; that will do nicely. I have a feeling I’m going to be seeing a lot more of Nygell than either of us prefer.”

Dobby gives the owl stand a critical look and nudes it over an inch for no reason that Nizar can determine. “Dobby liked the Professor Slytherin’s other owl better.”

Nizar glances at the portrait of Hedwig, who is preening at the elf’s words. “I probably did, too. I imagine it’s why I bought a complete bastard of an owl. One cannot easily replace greatness.”

Hedwig butts up against the front of her painting, as if trying to get head-scratchings.

“If that owl being down here, maybe the Professor Slytherin’s first owl can teach the new owl manners,” Dobby mutters.

“Maybe. Dobby, how do I purchase refined silver?” Nizar asks. “If you’re serious about crafting, that is.”

“Dobby is most serious!” the elf exclaims, and then frowns. “The Professor Slytherin will have to buy it from the goblins. Dobby does not know of anyone else who deals in precious metals in the magical world.”

“You know, I could bloody Summon raw silver, but refining it is a necessary part of the process, and I’m not that patient.” Nizar scowls. “Dammit, why does everything in this century have to be so ridiculously complicat…ed…oh.”

Dobby follows Nizar as he gets up and yanks his door open, emerging into the classroom to stride through it, open the outer door, and step out into the corridor. “What is the Professor Slytherin doing?”

“The room where everything is hidden. Everything.” Nizar paces in front of his classroom door’s usual spot until that blackened door reappears. He pushes it open and goes inside, glad that it no longer feels vile. It is now exactly what Severus dubbed it—a rubbish pile.

Dobby catches on after another minute as Nizar explores the room, which seems limitless. He’s going to have to fix that; it’s a bloody waste of magic that could be put to better use. “The Professor Slytherin is thinking that everything is being the house-elf contract, too?”

Nizar nods. “I knew that Horcrux was here for three reasons only: I’d stolen part of Voldemort’s magic; I’d been away; Fred and George had opened this aspect of my room. If a Horcrux can be here for decades, undetectable, why not a contract that was also meant to be indestructible?” He cups his hands and whispers into his palms. “Invoca Luz que busca. Encuentre el contrato de Hogewáþ escrito para los elfos de Kumbā de Brae.”

An orb of light appears, one that shifts between scarlet, royal blue, emerald green, and gold. Dobby claps his hands in delight when the floating light drifts to the right. “It be finding something, Professor Slytherin! Why does it change color?”

“The Founders’ magical signatures are attached.” Nizar ducks under a precariously leaning tower of broken chairs. “Whereas yesterday’s was violet because…and actually, I have no idea why. Unless Voldemort managed to put only his familial magical from the Gaunt line inside that particular Horcrux.”

“Magicians can be separating out their lineage magics?” Dobby asks, scampering to keep up with
Nizar’s quick pace as the orb moves faster.

“If Voldemort recognized that he carried familial magic from two different lines...then yes, he could have. He might have been ashamed of his Gaunt heritage and wanted only the Slytherin aspect, which is stupid. Granted, that’s a theory that depends upon two things.” Nizar stops; the orb is hovering over a wooden clothing chest that would have been used at any point from the beginning of the millennium up through the fourteenth century—if he’s remembering that conversion from chest to wardrobe correctly. “I don’t know if the Gaunt’s familial magic was violet, and I don’t know if Voldemort did it on purpose. I just know that this Seeking spell’s color focuses on what it’s finding, not who is casting it.”

Dobby leans forward and looks at the chest. “There being tricky magic curses on that, Professor Slytherin.”

“Nizar, Dobby. If we’re in private, my name is Nizar.” Nizar pulls out his wand. “I’m in no mood to be set on fire by someone else’s shoddy spell.”

“Dobby...Dobby be proud to be calling the Professor Slytherin by his name,” Dobby whispers. “Nizar is certain?”

“Absolutely. We’re friends, right?” Nizar asks, dismantling the first curse.

When he glances down, Dobby’s large green eyes are filling with tears. “Friend?”

“Unless I’m objectionable?” Nizar dismantles the hex.

Dobby hugs his leg. “Nizar is not objectionable! Nizar said he was Dobby’s friend before, but that was before! This is now, and you is thinking of Dobby the same way!”

“Always nice to have confirmation that I wasn’t an arsehole,” Nizar murmurs, ducking down enough to pat Dobby’s shoulder. “If it wouldn’t give Dumbledore a complete fit, I’d hire you away from the school. Granted, I do believe Filky might also have a meltdown over the idea.”

“Filky is a proud Slytherin house-elf,” Dobby agrees. “Filky would be unhappy if she didn’t get to serve the Professor Slytherin.”

Nizar rids the chest of the last curse, breaks the lock, and kicks the lid open, just in case someone spring-loaded yet another trap inside. Instead, there is simply an empty wooden chest with a leather scroll-case inside. “If Salazar and I had been properly awake earlier, we’d have thought of this at the time.” He reaches down and picks up the case, shaking it to confirm that there is indeed a scroll inside. “I think we should open this in the kitchen with the other elves present, don’t you?”

* * * *

Nizar sits down on the kitchen floor cross-legged with elves flocked around him. Even the ones who are the most disturbed by the idea of “pay” are present, wanting to know more of their history within the school. “Oh, good. We wrote it in Cumbric. Because that was intelligent,” Nizar grumbles as he unrolls the ancient paper.

“We cannot be reading it?” Tinny asks, wringing his hands.
“I didn’t say that.” Nizar Summons a scroll of blank paper from his storage room and places both scrolls, unrolled, onto the floor. “Updating translation spell,” he tells the elves. “Your own magic will tell you that it’s only translating and writing out the original in modern English, not changing its terms.”

The words appear line by line. The elves all press in closer until Nizar practically has elves in his lap and perched on his shoulders, but he doesn’t mind. Anything to end this blasted fucking enslavement.

We, Rowena of Raven’s Claw, Shining Wisdom of the East, Salazar Fernan, Casa de Deslizarse, Emerald Flame of the West, Godric of Griffon’s Door, Guardian Fire of the South, Helga Hugðileypuf, Golden Light of the North, for the remedy of the destruction of the Grove of Brae, put forth these terms for the good of the elves of Kumbā Brae.

Let it be known that the first measure is one of fair exchange. Food granted for food prepared and served. Clothing and cloth granted for clothing tailored and mended. Cleaning of the castle for appropriate living quarters. Education in exchange for the safety that is provided. Freedom granted for those who it pleases, for which **nothing** shall ever be required in trade, as it is a right the elves of Kumbā Brae are always to have.

Part the second is not of fair exchange, for we wish to give more than the elves of Kumbā Brae will accept. The elves of Kumbā Brae will protect this castle and its residents from any measure of harm that falls outside the means of schooling. In return, every individual elf of Kumbā Brae will receive five penigas of refined gold or silver, as to their preference. These five penigas will be paid in full measure at the conclusion of every week. These terms are binding for as long as an elf of Kumbā Brae chooses to reside in Hogewáþ, and will never cease.

If an elf is taken from Hogewáþ without knowledge of this contract, or true understanding of the elf, the elf is to be rightfully returned to Hogewáþ, or reclaimed by those who hold the castle’s magic at the time such kidnapping occurs. All elves of Kumbā Brae who choose to live in Hogewáþ will be educated in full understanding of this contract and the protections it grants them.

This binding contract is witnessed by Nizar Hariwalt, Casa de Deslizarse, Protector and Instructor of Hogewáþ and Britanni Bellum dux Magum, Sedemai of Griffon’s Door, Countess of Castleview over the Heights of Brae, Instructor of Hogewáþ, and Alicia of Raven’s Claw and Moray, Healer and Instructor of Hogewáþ. Dated this twelfth Februarius 993, written in the halls of Hogewáþ. This contract is always be stored in a place of safe access.

“What is a **penigas**?” the sodden house-elf named Winky asks. Nizar thinks she seems less inebriated than she had been that morning.

“Some terms don’t translate very well. It equates to a half-ounce,” Nizar says as he makes another copy of the original Cumbric contract. If only the books in the library could be treated similarly, but they have spells of protection attached that prevent magic from being used on them at all. Every book in Hogwarts’ library does, a bit of spellwork that must have been added after the Founders’ time.

“Though by modern rates of pay, it should be an ounce per week, not a half-ounce. However, I’ll fight that battle with you lot later. What I **am** going to do is leave the original contract in your safe keeping.” Nizar re-rolls the scroll and hands it to the nearest elf, whose eyes try to bug out of her skull.

“We can’t be keeping this!” Effiny squeaks.

“You read that contract. It says you’re to have it.” Nizar makes another copy, this time of the English
translation. He gives the original duplicated translation to Dobby, who rolls it up with reverential care. “Discuss it among yourselves, but know that this is the way it was meant to be. As Salazar said: you don’t have to choose to change things now, but you should consider what sort of people you once were, and the people you deserve to be.”

*          *          *          *

Hermione gives up on trying to play Exploding Snap with Ginny, Ron, and the twins. It’s too many games in a row, but it’s also absolute frustration with Fred and George’s new deck of cards, which don’t like to stay what they are for very long. She likes a bit more stability in her life, thank you. Well. She did like it, once upon a time, and then Harry changed everything. Now she’s wanting that lack of stability, that lovely intrigue and the need to think on a problem. Card games just aren’t the same.

She wanders down the stairs and through the fourth floor corridors on a whim. She doesn’t go this way much, not when there are no classrooms in this area—none that she knows of, anyway. Hogwarts still has secrets that the Marauder’s Map hadn’t shown them.

Drat. She didn’t want her thoughts going in that direction. Wondering about the map makes her wonder about Harry, and now it’s January with no sign of him at all.

“Fortunata, I really don’t know. I couldn’t get a sense of time from any of those spells for when they were cast, and that style of chest was in use for over a thousand years.”

Hermione peers around the corner and sees Professor Slytherin addressing a life-sized painting. “Er—hello?”

The professor glances at her and smiles. “Miss Granger. You’re not interrupting.”

“I just wanted to be sure, sir.” Hermione walks over to look at the painting, which is of a lovely woman with Nizar’s complexion, black hair, brown eyes, and a sweet smile with a twist of wickedness at the corner. Her wand is on prominent display, tucked into a wide sash wrapped around her waist. “Hello, ma’am.”

“Hello, Miss Granger,” the portrait replies. “It’s a pleasure to meet the smartest magician in the school.”

Hermione blushes. “I’m probably not,” she protests.

“Oh, you absolutely are,” Nizar counters. “Miss Granger, this is Fortunata Constanza, my first apprentice and Salazar’s eldest daughter. In her day, she was the smartest student of Hogwarts.”

“The competition was stiff, too,” Fortunata says, smiling. “Just as it is now.”

“How does one go about being apprenticed to a wizard or a witch—uhm, I mean, to a magician today?” Hermione asks.

“I’ve no idea.” Professor Slytherin tucks a scroll under his arm. “I know that if it does still happen, it probably occurs after your graduation from this school, not before. I think that’s stupid, by the way.”
“You think a lot of things are stupid, sir,” Hermione dares to say.

Professor Slytherin tilts his head and then shrugs. “That’s because they are. Tell me—rumor once brought to me the fact that you were trying to organize some sort of house-elf rights movement. Is that true?”

Hermione bites her lip before nodding. “It is true, but no one would help me. No one would take me seriously. Even Hagrid said that what the house-elves do is just their way, and trying to mess with it was disrespecting them.”

“He was half right, and you were half right, so between the two of you, you have an entirely correct hypothesis.” Professor Slytherin hands over the scroll. “Read it. I just rediscovered it today. The house-elves of Hogwarts already know, and they’re…well, they’re not taking it well, but at least they’re not panicking.”

Hermione reads what has to be a translated copy of the original. She can feel her eyes widening and her eyebrows rising as she goes through the simple legal terms of the contract. “So…they’re supposed to do what they do in Hogwarts, but not for the reasons they think?”

“Essentially.” The professor gestures at Fortunata. “We were trying to narrow down at what point this contract was hidden from the elves, but we don’t know. We only know that it was, and Salazar only knows that there were no house-elves outside of Hogwarts in the 1100s. By the time he returned in the 1300s, there was not only a newfound ideology of Pure-blood bigotry, the families who were the worst offenders had somehow acquired house-elves.”

“They took them.” Hermione is suddenly furious. “They took them straight from the castle. Because the elves didn’t know any better.”

“We suspect so.” Professor Slytherin gives her a curious look. “Are you still interested in your house-elf cause, Miss Granger?”

“Yes! Absolutely I am!” Hermione says at once, shaking the contract. “Especially after reading this!”

“Then I need copies. You can use a duplicating spell—I’ll teach you—or write it out by hand. Everyone in the school needs to see this, and the best way to do so is to make certain it’s posted in every Common Room and on every announcement board.” Professor Slytherin frowns. “I’m tempted to buy a page in the Daily Prophet for it to be printed, but I’m not sure I trust that rag of a newspaper to print it correctly.”

“Then we’ll start with Hogwarts,” Hermione says, feeling grim, dogged determination settle into her bones. Maybe this isn’t Harry-levels of intrigue, but it’s something important. “Then I can make a copy to send to the Ministry.”

“I think sending it to the Ministry itself would be useless. Sending it to certain individuals within the Ministry, however…” Professor Slytherin smiles at her. “Like one Madam Bones, head of the Ministry’s Magical Law Enforcement department.”

Hermione grins. “Maybe I’ll make her copy first and send it off by owl.”

“Use mine. He’s a grumpy bas—twit who needs something to do with his time aside from sulking,” Professor Slytherin says. “He’s almost entirely black but for a few spots of white on his breast; he’s large and cranky and answers to Nygell. You’ll know it’s him because his mood will get worse when you call his name.”

“All right, sir. Nygell it is.” She listens to the instructions for the duplication spell, which is
appallingly simple and should really be part of the curriculum. For some reason, her saying so makes the professor laugh.

Then Hermione hesitates, even though she’s already itching to get to work. “Sir, the day I met you, you were…you reassured me about Harry. No other teacher had really bothered to do that, not in a way that felt like they meant it. Do you—do you know if anything has happened since then? Does anyone know anything new? He-was-my-friend-and-I-miss-him,” she blurts the last out in a rush.

Professor Slytherin regards her with an odd expression on his face. “If I were to swear to you that he was safe, would you believe me?”

Hermione latches onto those words like they’re a lifeline. “Is he? Is he safe, sir? Where is he? How do you know?”

“He’s as safe as anyone is with that noseless walking corpse strutting around,” Professor Slytherin says. “As to the rest? I cannot tell you, as it’s literally not safe for you to know. All I can do is tell you that he’s fine.”

“I—wait.” Hermione frowns. “Does this have anything to do with your brother suddenly turning up?”

Professor Slytherin raises an eyebrow. “Still can’t tell you. Go copy that contract and send it off to Madam Bones, Miss Granger. Why should I be the only one suffering a surfeit of politics on a Sunday?”

“Er, yes sir,” Hermione says, watching him walk away. “I—really don’t understand. Why all the secrecy over Harry? It’s not like they cared about him that way before.”

“Maybe they didn’t,” Fortunata’s portrait says, making Hermione jump; she’d forgotten the portrait was there. “But others do care, Miss Granger.”

“Yes, but why would he care?” Hermione asks, baffled.

Fortunata glances down the corridor both ways before she grins at Hermione. “This one is not such a secret, though it should be treated as one. Your friend who is missing is related to the Founders. He is descended from one of Rowena’s grandnieces, one of Godric’s daughters, and one of my father’s cousins. Many magicians on this isle can claim a family link to one or two, but your friend is the only one outside of that noseless walking corpse who also has the claim of my father.”

“Oh.” Hermione covers her hand with her mouth for a moment. “Oh. Family. They’re family. Harry must be so happy to have family again. He—he always wanted one.”

For some reason, Fortunata’s smile seems terribly sad. “Yes, Miss Granger. Having such does indeed make him happy.”

Chapter End Notes

Still confused by being invited to a real con. Just: Bwuh?
Catch the Trick of It

Chapter Summary

“Is that where the bat rumors came from, Professor Snape?”

“Sadly, unfortunately, *no*.”

Chapter Notes

Not quite-to-schedule update, but I'm rewarding myself: I just finished a task that stressed me out to the point of fucking heart palpitations that are only just now sort-of calming down.

For everyone involved: a nice extra-long chapter.

Severus wakes up alone in bed, which is a bit disappointing. Sometimes Nizar’s insomnia chooses the absolute worst moments to present itself, but at least there is a note waiting on the other pillow.

*Five of a morning and politics. WHY.*

“That was not actually enlightening, Nizar.” If anything, that has been a looming threat since the twenty-fifth.

Severus has breakfast served by Filky, who seems exceptionally distracted. When he asks if anything is the matter in the castle, she mutters something about a contract and Disapparates. Odd.

He knows better than to look for Nizar when he’s mentioned politics, if only because Severus does not want to become involved in said politics if he can avoid it. His life revolves around them enough; even with the lingering threat of life as a Death Eater no longer hanging over his head, he still has to navigate the politics that are unique to Slytherin House.

When Nizar doesn’t turn up at lunch, Severus starts hunting for him. He doesn’t think Nizar is avoiding him, but Severus does suspect that the man might need to be reminded to eat. On the way, he passes Miss Granger, who has an armload of scrolls and a ferocious scowl on her face. He wisely decides he isn’t going to become involved in *that*, either.

The most common places to find Nizar are his office or his private study, muttering at books while he sits at the old slanted scribe desk. Today, Nizar is not in either place, his classroom, or anywhere else in his quarters. Severus checks with Fortunata, who admits she spoke with him that day but hasn’t seen Nizar since that time. He bites back muttered swearing under his breath, returns to Nizar’s quarters, and finds the stupid map in its new home on Nizar’s mantelpiece.

“Behave yourselves, blighters,” Severus says as he unfolds the map, and then speaks the password.

“*Mister Padfoot is saying ‘Oh God, why?’*”
“Mister Prongs is telling Padfoot to shut up! What is it that Snivellus is wanting?”

“I’m looking for your son, you idiot,” Severus growls, and the map appears in spreading black lines of ink.

“How. How did you get down there? I was there not a half-hour ago,” Severus mutters when he finds the dot marked Nizar Deslizarse in the Great Hall. It’s accompanied by dots for Minerva McGonagall, Ron Weasley, and Luna Lovegood. Severus blinks a few times and leans down until his nose is almost touching the paper. In the faintest of lettering, so pale it’s almost invisible, is a dot marked Helena Ravenclaw.

“The ghosts appear on the map. Did you blighters plan that?” Severus asks, not really expecting an answer.

“Mister Moony says he does his blasted homework, Snivellus.”

“Mister Prongs says Mister Moony is a lying liar, as Mister Prongs had no idea the map could see the ghosts.”

“Mister Moony says Mister Prongs just wasn’t paying attention.”

“Mischief managed!” Severus barks, if only so he doesn’t have to listen to the captured essence of arguing fifteen-year-olds any longer. He folds the map and places it back on the mantelpiece.

When he turns around, his attention is caught by Galiena’s empty portrait frame; she is in the next frame, hissing over a text with Elfric. “Galiena, why is the full moon such a visible aspect of your portrait?” The moon was full on the fifth, and it’s just starting to show the signs of waning.

Galiena glances up at him. “Father didn’t tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

“In life, I had lycanthropy,” she says. “I like to have the moon as a reminder, though whether or not I choose to shift to a wolf is to my preference. Portraits don’t have lycanthropy, after all.”

Severus stares at her. “Lycanthropy. You were a werewolf.”

Elfric glares at Galiena and hisses at her in what must be at least several sentences. “Oh—yes, I suppose I shouldn’t have forgotten that.” Galiena looks sheepish. “Father wouldn’t have told you because you fear werewolves. He wouldn’t have wanted to make you nervous. My apologies.”

“You’re a portrait. You have no reason to apologize to me at all,” Severus replies, even though his heartbeat picked up the moment he heard her say lycanthropy. He makes himself breathe normally. If he could endure Lupin’s presence during the day on full moons while the man taught at Hogwarts, he can bear a portrait’s lycanthropy. “Is it…is it rude to ask when?”

“No; it’s not rude at all.” Galiena returns to her own portrait frame and sits down; a ginger cat from a portrait on the second floor of the castle promptly jumps up into her lap. “I was still a child, gone home for the month-long holiday of our planting season. Before my seventh birthday, my family was targeted for vengeance by a half-trained magician who held a grievance against my mother for rejecting his courtship a decade before. He taught himself the Tempero Curse and cast it upon a man with lycanthropy, an innocent, and forced him to attack us on the night of the full moon. My parents were killed; I suffered a slash over my arm that passed on the curse.”

“I’m sorry,” Severus murmurs.
“Why?” Galiena smiles and strokes the cat in her lap. “Thanks to our potion, once a month I was a wolf with a mind of her own. I ran amidst the trees and roamed the fields on those nights, content and happy. The rest of the time, I was human. There is nothing horrible about what I suffered. To be fair, though, I drank the potion that my father is seeking, not that steaming swill now given to werewolves.”

“And you don’t recall how to brew it, I assume,” Severus says.

Galiena releases a sigh. “No. Brewing potions was not my talent, Severus. That was my uncle’s gift, and when inspiration struck, my father’s. Neither of them recall how to brew it, and it was not written in one of the books Father kept in these rooms.”

“I’m not certain how you coped so well. I’m assuming you did,” Severus adds, and Galiena nods, smiling again. “The first time I faced a werewolf, I was fifteen and not injured at all, but that moment still haunts me.”

“Yes, well—it was easier to put the fright behind me when I was surrounded by those who cared for me and tended to my needs.” Severus tries not to wince. The only comfort he’d had at that time was Nizar, trapped in a portrait and still doing his best to help Severus deal with late night panic attacks from terrible dreams of that fucking tunnel.

“I was younger, Severus,” Galiena says. “I remember my birth parents, but the memories are very faint, even for a portrait. I tried not to think of them often, because otherwise I would most often think of them dying. My father was already one of my teachers, and he claimed me almost at once despite still being young, himself. There was no formal adoption until I was a bit older; Father wished for me to be certain it was what I wanted.”

Severus nods. “He is…quite considerate when it comes to the desires of others,” he says, trying to contend with a new sympathy for Lupin that is very much not wanted. He doesn’t like Lupin, but he does like Galiena deSlizarse. If she were alive today, she’d be subjected to the same prejudices and dangers that Lupin faces every day.

No; this is too much horrible, moral-laden introspection for a Sunday. “I’m off to find your father,” Severus tells her before Apparating directly down to the disused back stairwell on the first floor. That gives him only one flight of stairs before he’s entering the Entrance Hall and approaching the Great Hall. Hopefully, Nizar hasn’t vanished from the Great Hall and holed up elsewhere in the meantime.

“Blimey, I have no idea what to make of this,” he hears Weasley say.

Miss Lovegood’s breathy voice is distinctive. “I think it’s sweet.”

Severus enters the hall to find Miss Lovegood and Weasley both seated at the Gryffindor table. Minerva is standing next to them; all three are staring upwards. He follows their gazes to find the Grey Lady in the air, leading Nizar through a long-outdated minuet.

“You know, you would not be stuck here if you would simply forgive the man,” Nizar is saying. “Also, who came up with this stupid dance?”

“The French,” Helena Ravenclaw answers. It’s the first time Severus has ever heard her speak. “And I will forgive him when Edvard apologizes to me, and not a moment before.”


“Slytherin?” Weasley blurs. Miss Lovegood, Severus is interested to note, doesn’t seem surprised at all.
“Every few centuries, someone finds out, and the results are always entertaining,” the Grey Lady confides.

Severus has the very odd thought that he’s glad a ghost has recovered enough from a terrible emotional shock to desire a dance. “Nizar, what are you doing?”

“Helena wished to dance, and since I am one of the only people in this castle who can oblige her that she does not actively despise…here we are.” Nizar makes a disgruntled face as the Grey Lady demonstrates a twirl that spins him in the air. “French dances are stupid.”

“Why is the Ghost of Ravenclaw Tower…uh, not a Ravenclaw?” Weasley asks, trying not to sound like he’s sputtering.

“Because Edvard had already claimed the dungeons, and I wanted to be as far from him as possible.” The Grey Lady sniffs in disdain. “As if I’d want to share company with the man who caused my death.”

“A Ravenclaw is many things, Ron,” Miss Lovegood says. “And a Slytherin also prides themselves on cunning. Besides, Helena Ravenclaw is Rowena’s daughter. Why should she not be a ghost of our Tower?”

To his credit, Weasley has mastered his sputtering. “I suppose I just thought that all the ghosts were of their original Houses. It’s sort of implied.”

“Actually, only Gryffindor and Slytherin can claim such,” Minerva tells him, “now that I know of the Grey Lady’s original affiliation. The Fat Friar was not a student of this school.”

“His name is bloody Johnathan!” Nizar yells. “What is with you people and derogatory names? Muggle is an insult! Stop calling people that!”

“I think you are too little, too late on that front, Nizar,” Minerva says. “It’s too many centuries ingrained.”

Nizar scowls. “I do not want to have a conversation about ingrained racism right now, and why that is a pitiful excuse.”

“Oh, that looks fun!”

Severus glances over as Ginevra Weasley joins them. “Do we have an entire castle full of gingers?” He is normally aware of such things, but he has been both absent from this castle, and pleasantly distracted.

“We always used to stay for Harry, like family would,” Miss Weasley says. “It seemed wrong to give up on that this year, even if we don’t know where he is.”

Nizar glances down at Miss Weasley. “So he would want you all to be miserable?”

Ron Weasley scowls. “It’s called loyalty, you Slytherin git!”

“Manners,” Nizar reminds Weasley in an absent voice. He continues to dance with the Grey Lady, but is still taking occasional glances at the two Weasley siblings.

Severus realizes, with a sharp pang, that Nizar didn’t know. Nizar has no memory of the fact that the entire Weasley clan practically adopted Harry Potter. Molly would have made it official and kept him permanently if Albus had allowed her to do so.
He can’t remember what he has and has not mentioned. He’s not even certain if it’s a subject that should be pursued.

“Helena tells me, Mister Weasley, that you play chess,” Nizar finally says.

Weasley looks confused by the shift in topic. “Yeah.”

“She also says that you’re quite good.”

“One of the best in the school, if not the best,” Weasley says, drawing himself up proudly. His sister rolls her eyes.

“Really.” Nizar smiles. “Want to prove it?”

“Wait—against you?” Weasley asks.

“Maybe. Though I’d really like to see you play against one of Salazar’s portraits.”

“How the—how can a portrait play chess?” Weasley asks, frowning.

“Parseltongue, Mister Weasley,” Nizar replies. “Salazar tells me the move he wishes to be made, I make it for him, and you try to counter it. I do really want to see if you play chess better than you write essays.”

To Severus’s intense amusement, Weasley turns scarlet. “It was sixteen feet!”

“That you had two entire months to write. You also picked a topic that is considered to be year-two level, even by the governing board’s shoddy standards. If you had managed to convince me that it had value as a fifth-year topic, we wouldn’t be having this conversation.” Nizar glances down at Weasley. “You still have to re-write that one, you know. And you also have to write the essay due at the end of Februarius—February.” Nizar blinks a few times and looks back to Helena. “I’m blaming you for that slip,” he says, and the Grey Lady smiles again.

“Re-write it? Why didn’t you just fail me?” Weasley asks in dismay.

“If you don’t try to get it right, how will you ever learn anything?” Nizar counters.

“Now I know why no one was complaining about my essays last month.” Minerva smirks at Nizar. “You’d already left them terrified.”

“I still want to know how Professor Slytherin is doing that,” Miss Weasley says. “I’d like to be able to fly without a broom.”

Miss Lovegood laughs. “Ginny, gravity is just an idea that we’ve all agreed to accept. Why should he not be able to do so?”

“Can you fly?” Miss Weasley asks, glaring at Miss Lovegood.

“Not yet. Mother could, so I imagine I’ll catch the trick of it one day,” Miss Lovegood replies serenely.

“Indeed.” Severus holds out his hand. “Miss Lovegood, if you are already so inclined?” If he is going to begin his first teaching term without the Dark Mark tomorrow, this is an excellent place to start.

Miss Lovegood smiles as she accepts his hand. “You were a very good dancer during last year’s ball,
even if you only did so for the required first dance.”

“Minerva has never let any student pass through these walls without learning.” The moment Severus has her other hand, he lifts them into the air.

“You never told me you could do that!” Severus hears Minerva shout over Miss Lovegood’s delighted laughter.

“Do what?” Severus asks innocently. Nizar just looks irritated that he’s trapped in a seventeenth century dance instead of something far more modern.

“Severus Snape, you know exactly what I’m speaking of!” Minerva shoots back.

“He’s flying.” Miss Weasley is staring at him. “Our Potions teacher can fly, Ron.”

“I kind of noticed that, Ginny!” Weasley’s mouth is hanging open. “Is this a Slytherin thing, or what?”

The Grey Lady rolls her eyes. “I loathe your education, Mister Weasley.”

Severus gives Weasley a dry look. “I learned this,” he says, “from a Gryffindor.”

“Lily Evans could—” Minerva makes a choked, enraged sound.

“You knew Harry’s mum?” Weasley asks in disbelief.

Miss Weasley glares at him. “If you ever listened to our Mum and Dad, you’d have known that already, you idiot!”

Severus shakes his head. “Miss Weasley, you would also not know that particular detail unless you were eavesdropping.” She doesn’t manage the best expression of innocence, but she also refuses to open her mouth and incriminate herself further.

“They were the same year in school, Mister Weasley,” Minerva says while Weasley continues to gape like a dead fish. “Lily was our best flier, and I could never convince her to take a place on the Quidditch team! She disdained brooms as silly toys!”

“That Firebolt thing is not a toy at all.” Nizar lets out a ragged breath. “Helena, I have to stop, or I’m going to fall and land on a table.”

“Your stamina is lacking,” Helena teases him with a merciless smile.

Nizar smiles and plants a kiss on her ghostly cheek. “It absolutely is not.” Then he drops down to the floor in a controlled fall. The moment his feet are on the ground, he collapses onto a chair and leans against the table.

Severus judges Miss Lovegood’s progress and then releases one of her hands. “I will not let you fall,” he promises in a quiet voice.

“Oh, I know.” Miss Lovegood lifts one of her feet, puts it back down, and then does the same to the other. “Professor Slytherin was levitating. You’re actually flying.”

“You would be correct.”

“There’s a difference?” Miss Weasley asks. “Aren’t they both the same sort of method of defying gravity?”
Nizar snorts. “Miss Weasley, were my robes doing that while I was in the air?”

“Well, no.” Miss Weasley tilts her head. “Is that where the bat rumors came from, Professor Snape?”

At least the question is being asked politely, both in word and tone. “Sadly, unfortunately, no.”

Miss Lovegood studies all four of her limbs before she looks around with an entranced expression. “Oh, how fascinating!” Then she gently tugs her hand free of Severus’s grasp and steps out into the air. She isn’t wearing robes that might impersonate wings, but her trainers are trailing opaque white mist. “I told you I’d catch the hang of it!”

Miss Weasley is staring up at Miss Lovegood much the same way her brother is: with her jaw hanging open. “Someone please tell me we are going to teach people how to do this. Somebody.”

“My schedule’s packed solid.” Nizar raises his eyebrows when both the Weasleys and Minerva glare at him. “You try to re-teach yourself two dead languages, and see how long it takes you!”

“I’ll do it.” Miss Lovegood takes a fumbling loop around the Great Hall, a wide smile on her face as the white mist stretches out behind her. “Mother would be so pleased!”

“She would be,” Severus agrees in a mild voice, which causes the Weasleys to turn and stare at him, instead. “It took me far longer to achieve what you’re doing now without eating quite a bit of dirt.”

The Grey Lady is following Miss Lovegood. “I’ll have another dancer! Wonderful. Johnathan is terrible at it, and Nicholas can’t give up on anything Elizabethan.”

“You haven’t advanced beyond the minuet,” Minerva observes. “I’m not certain you’ve the right to cast aspersions on another’s dancing.”

“Blasted French,” Nizar mutters, which makes Miss Weasley giggle. “Baise le français et leur stupide putain de langue.”

Minerva seems torn between laughter and distress. “Nizar. Please do not say that in front of the students. I do not care that it is a holiday. Please stop.”

“You speak French?” Miss Weasley asks, her eyes bright with curiosity. At least Nizar’s literal foul language has distracted the Weasleys.

Nizar nods. “Everyone did for several centuries after the Norman invasion. It became the entire island’s academic language, much to the irritation of the Scots. Gods, but that was all so annoying.”

Severus drifts back down to the floor while Miss Lovegood continues to tumble around in the air, followed by a gleeful Grey Lady. The Friar, Johnathan, has entered the room, and looks boggled by the sight of Miss Lovegood flying around the Great Hall. “Minerva, you do recall what fifth-year children are like.”

“That does not mean I’m going to encourage it,” Minerva retorts. “No matter the language!”

“How many languages do you speak?” Weasley asks Nizar. “You didn’t remember during that first class. Or you remembered but you didn’t—never mind.”

If Nizar is annoyed by Weasley’s lack of any sort of title or honorific, he doesn’t show it. “English, Old English—we called it West Saxon English at the time, since there were a few dialects of Saxon still lingering. Francais, Scots Gaelic, Castellano, Latin.” Nizar hesitates. “Bits of Leónese have returned, along with Euskaran, Arabic, Pictish, and Irish Gaelic. I’m learning Welsh, but still recall
almost nothing of Cumbric, even if I can recognize the difference between it, Cumbrian, and Old Welsh. I used to know Breton, Bavarian, Norn, Norse, two different dialects of Chinese, one that is probably Mandarin…and…I don’t recall anything else, but there could be.”

“Why so many?” Miss Weasley asks. “That’s incredible, Professor!”

There is a pleased glimmer in Nizar’s eye when Severus chooses to sit down next to him.

“Languages can be interesting, but it was not my favorite subject. I learned out of necessity, Miss Weasley. The world was a lot larger in those days, but it was also so much smaller. If you traveled from Moray to Persia, what guarantee would you have that you would find someone who spoke your language who could then translate on your behalf? Besides, anyone who conducted business on this island, schooling included, had to know Pictish, Gaelic, Cumbric, English, Norn, Norse, and *françois* just to cope.”

“That sounds like a right pain in the ar—” Weasley catches himself and looks up at Minerva, who is regarding him with her arms crossed. “Backside.”

“It sort of was, yes.Hmm. Speaking of pains in the backside. Dobby?” Nizar calls.

The house-elf appears on the chair next to Nizar. “Good afternoon! What is the Professor Slytherin wanting?”

Nizar glances at Weasley. “In the storage room of my quarters, the portrait frame mounted closest to the outer wall—will you fetch it? I’ve released the magic for that portrait alone to be moved. After that, a chessboard and a timer, please.”

Dobby beams. “Dobby will be doing that at once!” he declares, and Disapparates.

Minerva begins to smile, though she is trying to hide it. “A timer?”

“Without a timer, this game will take anywhere from three minutes to three months.” Nizar grins at Weasley, who does not have the sense to look doubtful. “Salazar’s record is sixth months before his opponent gave up and set the chessboard on fire.”

“I can’t imagine what could have possibly incited that response,” Severus says in a dry voice. “And who would that have been?”

“Not me,” Nizar says. “I’m not that sort of chess player. That would have been Marion of Inverness, apprenticed to Rowena Ravenclaw. Such a sore loser.”

Dobby brings the portrait, which Nizar pins in place in the next chair with a sticking charm so that it’s upright. “Salazar! I know you’re paying attention; you always pay attention when I move this frame!”

“I was busy!” Slytherin retorts as he appears on the canvas. “I see we’re up to mischief. Greetings, Professors and Weasleys.”

“Hi again, sir!” Miss Lovegood calls, which makes Salazar lean forward and tilt his head to catch a glimpse of her. Severus isn’t expecting that to result in a confusing feeling of *nostalgia*. The last thing he wants is for Nizar to be trapped in a fucking portrait again.

“Hello, Miss Elemental Magician! I see you’re up to Myrddin’s tricks.”

“Yes, sir!” Miss Lovegood replies, laughing as Peeves materializes in the air in front of her. Peeves looks miffed when she flies directly through him.
“Myrddin?” Weasley repeats, baffled.

“He means Merlin,” Miss Granger says as she enters the Great Hall. “Honestly, Ron, it’s like you never pay attention at all!” She looks up, but doesn’t seem very surprised to see Luna in the air. “Elemental witch?”

“Magician please, darling Gryffindor! Magician is a much more flexible, useful term,” Slytherin says. Weasley frowns. “So…Merlin could fly?”

“It would be more accurate to say Myrddin did whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted to do it, as he was six centuries old and didn’t care about anyone’s rules any longer, including his own.” Slytherin’s eyes light up as Dobby puts the chessboard and the timer down in front of his portrait. “Oh, and it’s to be a slaughter.”

That makes Weasley scowl at the portrait. “Not bloody likely, mate.”

Granger slaps Weasley on the back of the head. “Manners!”

Weasley rubs his head and looks at the portrait again. “Not bloody likely, sir,” he says, and Granger gives Weasley an approving look.

“Well, that was effective. Maybe I should resort to such a thing more often.” Minerva catches Severus’s gaze as the chess pieces set themselves up while Weasley sits down across from Slytherin. “Fifty sickles on the Gryffindor.”

Severus lifts an eyebrow. “One Galleon on Slytherin.”

Minerva looks miffed. “Five Galleons, then!”

“Ten.”

“Please stop adding to the pressure!” Weasley exclaims, horrified. “If you’re going to bet on me to win or lose, please do it somewhere else!”

“First move to you, Mister Weasley,” Slytherin’s portrait offers, glancing down at the board.

“Right.” Ron hits the timer, glances down, and moves a pawn before slapping the timer again.

Salazar looks at Nizar and hisses in Parseltongue. Nizar shakes his head, as if in disapproval, but moves a knight forward before resetting the timer for Mister Weasley’s benefit.

In less than ten minutes, half the pieces on the board have been obliterated. Nizar is glowering at Weasley in what looks to be a full temper. “Where is this skill in my Defence classes?”

Weasley resets the timer before glancing at Nizar in confusion. “It’s not the same thing.”

“Not the same—” Nizar notices Minerva staring at him, so whatever he says is in Parseltongue, and amusing enough that Slytherin laughs so hard he nearly misses out on his turn.

“He is very, very good,” Slytherin says in English after asking Nizar to move a bishop. “Who taught you, Mister Weasley?”

“Taught?” Weasley asks, taking Slytherin’s bishop and resetting the timer. Nizar buries his hands in his hair and lets out a yell of sheer outrage.
Minerva gives Severus a smug look when Slytherin’s king throws down his crown in disgust. “Pay up.”

Severus rolls his eyes and hands her five Galleons. “Your portrait is out of practice!” he tells Slytherin.

Slytherin is scowling. “I want a rematch!” he demands.

“He’s going to be insufferable,” Miss Weasley says of her brother. Weasley is standing in his chair and shouting his victory up at the school ghosts, all who gathered to watch. Miss Lovegood still has not come down from what seems to be her new favorite vantage point.

“This is five Galleons short!” Minerva declares, glaring at him.

“You never agreed to ten,” Severus responds. “Therefore, it does not count.”

“Dobby, please put my brother back where you found him before he can try to coax the victor into a rematch today. The students are due back soon.” Dobby smiles at Nizar and snatches up the portrait frame, which is still grumbling over the loss, and disappears with it.

Weasley drops back down into his seat and notes the expression on Nizar’s face. Some of the cheer from his success dies an expressive death. “You’re going to make my life hell for the second half of the term, aren’t you?”

Nizar gives Weasley a flat stare. “You just won a game over a chess player who was never defeated from the Founding of Hogwarts until his departure. What do you think, Mister Weasley?”

“I think I’m going to find a rock and hide under it during next class,” Weasley replies.

“Monday is the lecture cycle. Good luck finding a rock,” Nizar says as Albus enters the Great Hall.

“Oh, dear. What did I miss?” Albus asks upon seeing the chessboard and its fragmented pieces. The defeated king is still trying to beat the white queen to death with its lost crown. The queen is holding the king back with one hand while mocking him.

“Ronald Weasley just defeated Salazar Slytherin’s portrait at chess,” Minerva announces proudly.

“Ah! Continuing the fine tradition. I suppose that would make this particular game now the finest one fought at Hogwarts, don’t you think, Mister Weasley?”

Weasley turns scarlet again. “Maybe, sir.”

Nizar’s brow furrows. “Tradition?” he asks, just as Severus recalls part of the trap that was meant to safeguard the Philosopher’s Stone. Not that any of it was very effective against Voldemort.

“Oh! Mister Weasley fought his way through one of the most devious chess games ever programmed. Your brother helped me with that little puzzle,” Albus goes on his way, already intent on seating himself at the staff table when the students arrive.

Nizar’s eye twitches. “I’ll kill him.”

“Which one?” Severus asks.

“Either is fine.” Nizar looks at Weasley. “Just because you’ve now defeated my brother twice does not mean you’re allowed to escape the consequences!”
Weasley grins so wide that most of his teeth are visible. “Whatever, Professor!” Even Granger looks pleased with him.

“It’s still not the finest game fought. Marion and Salazar claim that title just for sixth months straight at one game,” Nizar says in irritation.

“Six months is quite a long time. Were they often at other tasks?” Minerva asks.

“If by other tasks, you mean getting entirely distracted and retiring to a bedchamber together? Certainly,” Nizar answers her. Weasley turns a rather entertaining shade of violet on top of the scarlet, while Ginevra clamps her hand over her mouth to hide a blushing smile.

Severus shakes his head. “Siblings with other siblings, I see,” he says, which causes Granger to join in on the round of underage student embarrassment.

Nizar glares at Severus. “Peregrine and I were friends,” he emphasizes. “Marion was the one foolish enough to agree to marry Salazar.”

Minerva starts laughing. “Was the incineratory chess match before or after the betrothal?”

“BEFORE!” the Grey Lady shouts as Dobby returns to claim the chessboard, timer, and still-arguing pieces.

“That chess match was their bloody courtship.” Nizar rests his face in his hands and sighs when the other ghosts start laughing. “Miss Lovegood! Come down from there before you exhaust yourself and suffer an unfortunate fall.”

Miss Lovegood graces them with a dainty landing. “That was quite enjoyable. Thank you for showing me, Professor Snape.”

“You’re welcome, Miss Lovegood,” he says, which causes the students (but not Miss Lovegood) to boggle at him. Even Minerva looks surprised.

“It’s as if everyone is shocked that you have manners, and yet I’ve seen you demonstrate them in public before,” Nizar says, the corner of his mouth turned up.

“I think it’s more that they expect public eviscerations,” Severus replies.

Filius comes rushing in, panting for breath. “The train arrived five minutes early!” he gasps out as the other members of Hogwarts’ staff and holiday student population begin streaming into the hall. “Fortunately without mishap, but I suggest we all find our seats!”

“Are you looking forward to the latter half of this term?” Severus asks as they walk towards the staff table.

Nizar nods. “I do actually like my job, you know. Are you looking forward to it?”

“Actually, I’m looking forward to tomorrow morning far more.”

“What? Why?” Nizar asks, but Severus merely smiles and refuses to answer.

* * * * *
Nizar still hasn’t convinced Severus to tell him what might be so interesting about Monday morning by the time it arrives, though Severus will admit his attempts at coercion were admirable. Students are filling the Great Hall with chatter before they return to classes. Severus is still trying to wake up enough so that he isn’t glaring at everyone and everything in existence. Nizar has had enough tea and can now speak to the others with coherency; Minerva has finally stopped growling under her breath about sunrise.

At seven-thirty, the owls arrive bearing that morning’s mail. Nizar snatches up Minerva’s copy of the *Daily Prophet* before she can grasp it. “Borrowing this!”

“Give it back when you’re done, you complete cheat,” Minerva mutters. She picks up an envelope and begins slicing it open with a clean table knife. She already learned not to try to steal Severus’s copy, as he is not above stabbing the offender with whatever tableware is available.

He began subscribing to the *Prophet* in December when Nizar gained consistent interest in stealing the paper from Minerva. That left Severus with no time to read it before class, as he’d once been stealing it from Minerva first.

Severus watches Nizar unroll the paper from the corner of his eye, wondering if he’s judged the *Prophet*’s timing correctly. He knows he’s right when Nizar spies the front page and promptly snorts tea out of his nose.

“Oh, I have to see this.” Minerva leans over to look at the paper while Nizar is still staring at it in horrified fascination. “That is a very nice picture.”

“Does no one in this bloody century know what manners are?” Nizar shouts in outrage.

“They do include not shouting in a crowded dining hall.” Minerva pats Nizar’s arm before giving Severus a smug look.

Severus puts down his tea in order to find out what caused Nizar to lose his composure. He suspects, but he isn’t certain until he unrolls his copy of the newspaper.

It is a nice picture, and not as intimate as Severus might have expected. Whoever took the photograph of himself and Nizar in Diagon Alley must have fled to escape notice before that particular, public kiss. However, given Severus’s hand on Nizar’s cheek and the expression on Nizar’s face, the photograph’s context is obvious.

“They could have published this over the weekend, but instead, they waited until the start of the school term.” Severus hides a pleased smile from Nizar, who is still ranting.

“Gossips. Magicians are the worst. Blasted. Gossips!”

“So it’s true?” Pomona asks, looking gleeful.

“It’s been *obvious* for weeks,” Minerva tells her, sounding cross. “I told you the man didn’t deny it the last time you asked!”


“That we are.” Severus puts the newspaper aside. “Do you know who reads the *Daily Prophet*, Nizar?”

“Most of the student body?” Nizar lowers the *Prophet* to glance out at the student tables. Quite a number of them are staring, pointing, or just look completely bewildered by the idea that their
teachers are actually human beings. Granted, most of the disbelieving looks are directed at Severus, not Nizar.

“All of Wizarding Britain, basically,” Severus replies, giving Nizar a bland look.

“All of—” Nizar finally starts to smile. “You devious fucking bastard.”

“Nizar, the holiday is over,” Minerva reminds him in a stern voice. “Language. Now please do inform those of us who are less inclined towards blatant manipulation as to what you’re smiling about?”

Nizar’s smile gets even wider. “That was a very public manner in which Severus just announced where his loyalties lie. I almost want to be able to see the expression on that walking corpse’s face.”

Severus nods. “I did ask if you minded.”

“I wasn’t expecting a front page spread of a photo from a gossip rag masquerading as a newspaper,” Nizar replies, “but I still don’t mind.”

Sasha leans back in her chair so she can see their section of the table. “Pay up, Minerva!”

“Like hell!” Minerva retorts, forgetting her own words about language in front of the students. “We don’t know when this came about!”

Nizar’s smile gains teeth as he looks at Minerva. “Fourth December.”

Minerva fills the air with Scots Gaelic that colors the cheeks of more than a few northern-dwelling students, and causes Severus to smile over his tea. “Must you gamble on everything?” he asks her.

“It’s a fine Scottish tradition,” Minerva retorts.

“Well, yes, but so was hitting gophers with sticks. Then someone realized they could just get a ball and no one would have to wait around for a gopher to show itself any longer,” Nizar says, which makes Filius choke on his morning tea.

Albus is twinkling with infernal vigor. “I suppose congratulations are in order, then.”

“Oh, please.” Nizar rolls his eyes. “You already knew, you sack of wet hens strutting about in retina-burning robes.”

Filius gags on his tea again as Albus chuckles. “Will you please stop doing that?”

Nizar smiles at Filius. “Stop being such an easy target.”

* * * *

“You’re not bloody serious,” Weasley says in response.

Draco glares at him. “Of course I’m serious! Why would I make up something like that?”

Draco pauses, thinking on it. It’s a good theory.

“No, in this case, the extra shiny bit of prestige is just a bloody side benefit,” Blaise drawls. “C’mon, you nitwits! Think on it!”

“I’m thinking on: why is Draco telling us?” Susan Bones asks, one hand planted on her hip.

Draco looks at Dean Thomas, Seamus Finnigan, Weasley, Longbottom, Granger, the Patil twins, Kellah Shafiq, Theo, Blaise, Millicent, Pansy, Daphne, Terry Boot, Sue Li, Hannah Abbott, and Megan Jones. “I’m telling you lot because you’re the ones I trust who won’t have anything to do with him,” Draco says.

“Right. Like it won’t get out that our teacher is Britain’s war mage,” Terry says sarcastically.

“Yes, that part is obvious; please start paying attention to the Professor’s statements about verbal defence,” Draco retorts, and Daphne stifles a giggle. “It’s the how we found out that I’m telling you idiots about!”

“All right, I’m biting,” Abbott says. “How, Malfoy?”

“House-elves can’t lie,” Draco says in a low voice. “They can refuse to tell you things, or they can be ordered not to say something, but they can’t lie about what they say. It’s something about their magic. It’s why Mother always uses the house-elves to announce guests. Even if someone was Polyjuiced, the elves would announce them as who they really are. Bificiss announced Professor Slytherin as Britanni Bellum dux Magum.”

“No, he’s right. That’s really useful,” Granger says, her head tilted to one side as she thinks. It’s… nice, actually. A nice look. If only she would…well…

Her hair is sort of lovely that way, actually, now that Granger has grown taller. It looks a lot less like it’s trying to take over her head.

Oh, Merlin, Mother might kill me. Draco can’t afford to develop a crush on Granger, even if she’s the smartest witch on the entire blasted planet.

“What is it, Hermione?” Parvati asks.

“Hogwarts has house-elves that belong here,” Granger says, frowning. “If we ask them to announce any guests of the castle, or at least verify their identities against people who are on a list—people they shouldn’t be let inside, for example—then we have one less danger to worry about, don’t we? It’s in the contract that Hogwarts’ elves are to protect us and the castle. Why don’t we ask them?”

“If it’s part of that contract, why weren’t they doing it already?” Boot asks.

“Maybe someone told them not to,” Theo says, his expression curdled with distaste. “Someone who wanted to make bad things happen here. Maybe even the same twat what moved the Professor’s portrait.”

“We don’t know when that happened, though,” Weasley says.

Longbottom shakes his head. “I don’t think knowing when or who matters all that much, Ron, just that it happened.”

“I heard them talking about it. Professor Snape and Professor Slytherin,” Millicent whispers. They all have to look up at her, which makes her duck her head so her voice doesn’t carry. “If Professor
Snape hadn’t put the Professor’s portrait back where it was supposed to be, Professor Slytherin would have died. The magic that fueled all the charms would have run out."

“Blimey,” Weasley mutters. “What do you do if you want to control the way people think? What do you do if you want to off an’ change the way people interact and play?”

“Take away the positive influences and leave only the bad ones behind,” Daphne says, all hint of laughter gone from her face. “Professor Slytherin not being there to tell us that Salazar Slytherin’s Entrance Hall portrait was corrupted and wrong. People making out like Slytherins are the enemy because of what that same portrait is saying we’re supposed to believe. All of us believing it, because that was our House Founder.”

“Sabotaging Helga Hufflepuff’s reputation so no one takes her House seriously,” Abbott growls. “Nothing about who she was is in that stupid Sorting Hat song. Just that she’ll take everyone who no one else thinks is worth anything, and that’s absolute sodding rubbish!”

“Leaving Ravenclaws with the notion that we’re apart and above all this.” Padma looks angry. “Before the Professor started chivying us to actually see each other, how many of us talked to people in other Houses?”

“No. Not ’less it was to start a fight. Ferret.” Weasley smiles.

Draco rolls his eyes. “Weasels and ferrets are related.”

“I know, and I’m still not over that part,” Weasley says.

“Shit!” Boot holds up his watch. “Time for class, you berks!”

They’re into the classroom and sitting down at their desks just as the chime announces that it’s time to begin. Professor Slytherin is seated behind his desk with his boots perched up on the desktop, leaning back in his chair. “Good morning.” His eyes track over the room as he looks at each of them. “Well, that bit of rumor didn’t take long to circulate, did it?”

“So…Britanni Bellum dux Magum—that’s true?” Bernicia Blishwick squeaks.

The professor nods. “It is. To be honest, it surprised me, too. I’d forgotten.”

“How do you forget being a war mage?” Macmillan exclaims.

“I can’t remember my parents or my children’s birthdays. How do you think?” Professor Slytherin replies, narrow-eyed. “If I can forget how I adopted my sons, all of their birthdays, my grandchildren’s faces…”


“But you being a war mage—that means you’re really powerful!” Goyle declares.

“Really? Why?” Professor Slytherin asks. “Why does that make me more powerful than any of you?”

Lavender Brown starts to look confused, which Draco privately thinks is a too-common occurrence. “Because…you’re a war mage.”

“Lesson time, then, and a useful one, too, even if there aren’t many of us left.” Professor Slytherin smiles at them. “A war mage is linked to the land. This means two things: their magic comes from
the earth, and their loyalty is to the ruling government—and that isn’t necessarily given to someone in an elected position, but who the majority of that land’s people put the most faith in as their ruler. In Britain’s case, that isn’t the Prime Minister of Wizarding Britain or the United Kingdom, not to any parliament or magical council. Right now, that’s the Queen. She’s the most stable icon this island has had for over forty years, she’s the commander of Britain’s standing military, and the magic of this land still recognizes the British crown. As a war mage, I can’t access any of that supposed strength unless the whole of Britain is endangered, or the Queen asks for my assistance.”

“But you’re fighting Voldemort. He’s a danger to everyone,” Granger points out—correctly, Draco thinks.

“He is, yes. One day I might actually have to call a war mage’s strength from the soil and turn him into so much corpse-paste. In the meantime, it isn’t necessary,” Professor Slytherin says. “Thus, I’m no more powerful than any of you. What I have is knowledge. I know how to properly utilize the magical talent I do have, and that’s what I’m trying to teach to all of you. Knowledge and the training in how to apply that knowledge makes you powerful, young magicians. The rest is merely icing.”

“Like what, sir?” Draco asks, hoping to push the conversation in a particular direction.

To his delight, the professor obliges him. “Let’s talk about a healing tool of exceptional strength, its positives and its few negatives, and then discuss the reasons why the Ministry might have banned the whole of that tool from your education.”

* * * *

It’s the first day in Severus’s entire career as Potions teacher for Hogwarts that no one misbehaves. Nothing explodes, melts, or emits toxic fumes. The dunderheads are too busy staring at Severus whenever they think he’s not looking. He’d be irritated, but no one is blundering and making terrible mistakes, so he ignores it.

He isn’t in the mood for the Great Hall at lunch, so instead he sends a message to Nizar, inviting him for lunch in his quarters downstairs. Nizar appears three minutes later, looking grimly pleased with himself.

“And how is your day going?” Severus asks.

“They wanted gossip, but I only gossip about myself, not others,” Nizar replies. “I told them that I used blood magic to save someone’s life over the holiday. I then forced them to listen and discuss all the merits of Blood Magic against its few demerits, and to think on the Ministry’s ruling that all blood magic is considered to be Dark Magic. It was an excellent distraction. You?”

“I didn’t have to distract them at all. They were too busy staring at me, potentially trying to determine if I’m a Polyjuiced imposter.” Severus rolls his eyes. “I didn’t remind them that Polyjuice must be refreshed every hour or it wears off.”

“Ah, but these were your one hour classes. Plenty of time to hide your imbibing of Polyjuice.” Nizar blinks a few times and then grins like a fiend. “Well, that was an inappropriate thought.”

“Dare I ask?”
Nizar props his chin on his hand. “Oh, I was just wondering what you’d taste like.”

Severus deeply resents the fact that he blushes over that comment. “You do recall that Polyjuice takes thirty days to brew.”

“Twenty-eight days. A lunar month if you time it right.” Nizar smiles again. “I might also be thinking that it would be highly entertaining to swap places for an hour just to fuck with people.”

“You know, I’m actually glad you argued with that fucking Sorting Hat.”

After lunch it’s harder, and he’s not sure why. Severus has to keep reminding himself that he doesn’t have to be ruthlessly vile, that the points he takes can be for genuine infractions rather than the need to create animosity. Perhaps the staring is getting to him; perhaps he’s always been crankier after lunch, since his reprieve from mayhem is so short.

Perhaps he really isn’t meant to be a teacher.

Severus dwells on that thought while dealing with the sixth-years’ Double Set, his last class of the day: Sourav Kartik, Katie Bell, and Nandini Johar of Gryffindor; Anthony Rickett and Heidi McAvoy of Hufflepuff; Cho Chang, Eddie Carmichael, Marcus Belby, Hermani Roshan, and Marietta Edgecombe of Ravenclaw; Ramsay Urquhart, Kinjal Bhatia, Gertrude Meads, Cassius Warrington, Terrence Higgs, and Archana Shetty of Slytherin. There is some staring among this group, as well, but most it this time is coming from certain Slytherins—those who are inclined to follow the Dark Lord.

To follow Voldemort. There; he does not have to keep to that very annoying habit, at least.

Otherwise, it’s a normal class. They listen to him when it’s required, and ignore him to concentrate on their brewing when appropriate. Miss Bhatia has a breakthrough when it occurs to her to substitute eyebright with vinca. It’s an absolutely brilliant deduction for the potion they’re brewing, and Severus tells her so. She lights up like a torch and spends the rest of the class beaming.

All right. Perhaps he isn’t terrible at teaching. Nizar did say he wanted to see what Severus would create of himself if allowed to do it without another’s dictation.

One day is not enough on which to base a decision, but by the time class is over and Severus is in his office awaiting the dinner hour, he’s still thinking on Miss Bhatia’s brilliance. That she is one of his Slytherins is a pleasant bonus.

Nizar arrives at dinner ahead of Minerva. “You look happy,” he says, stealing Minerva’s usual seat. Minerva lets out an annoyed huff of a breath but takes Nizar’s place at the table, muttering complaints under her breath about what it takes to break in a good chair.

“I have spent the day in an excellent mood, thus every single student in almost every class spent the entire day completely terrified of me,” Severus replies.

“You must be so pleased.”

“For varying reasons.” Severus picks up a goblet. “Did you receive any Howlers? I only earned two, but they were timed to arrive before dinner.” He’d also found their contents amusing. He doesn’t even need to be concerned with in-House politics, as those two particular idiots do not have children in Hogwarts.

“It must have taken them all day just to figure out what they wanted to yell about,” Nizar says, which makes Severus smile. He’d thought of that, too. “No, no Howlers for me. Three poisoning attempts
after lunch, though, each delivered by regular Owl Post. Your friends don’t seem to like me very much.”

Severus gives Nizar an irritated look. “Please don’t insult me by calling them my friends. What did you do with the poisoning attempts?”

“Threw them away. They were so half-brained it almost wasn’t worth the fire that burnt them to ash. Oh, and if you desired to date someone who would not keep trying to…oh, what are the Muggle-borns calling it? Oh—push all your buttons, that one. If that’s the case, you are dating the wrong person,” Nizar says.

“I thought you didn’t care for that word.”

“I don’t. But until I can back-translate enough to remember what it means in order to prove that it’s an insult, I’ve chosen to fight the battles I currently know I can win.” Nizar reaches out and puts his hand over Severus’s goblet before he can bring it any closer to his lips. “Like you not drinking that.”

Severus rolls his eyes and puts it back down on the table. “You can’t be serious.”

“If you’d gotten that any closer to your face, the castle would have informed you of the danger…or she might have simply Vanished the liquid. She likes you.” Nizar looks at Severus from the corner of his eye. “But that wouldn’t be useful. Can I borrow that?”

Severus waves his hand. “By all means.”

Nizar picks up the goblet and leaves the table, followed by the curious eyes of every teacher attending dinner. To Severus’s relief, Nizar heads in the direction of the Ravenclaw table. Severus has known every single Slytherin at that table for their entire time in Hogwarts. Some of them might want to bend knee to Voldemort, but Severus would like to think they would not be so willing to poison their own Head of House—or at least he’d like to hope they’d do a more subtle job of it.

Nizar stops and turns to face a few of the sixth-year Ravenclaw girls. “Miss Bluebell.” The student in question, blonde-haired and green-eyed, Severus remembers, if only because she’d done fairly well in class and yet still managed to score a Troll on her bloody Potions O.W.L. “Old wizarding name that arose in the mid-fourteenth century, yes?”

Bluebell gives Nizar a cautious nod. Severus tilts his head at Minerva and then murmurs, “She absolutely refuses to look at that goblet.” It’s just like every other goblet at the staff table but for Albus’s, who really should be told that he can wait until his next life to become a dragon or a magpie.

“Poisoned?” Minerva sighs without making a sound. “Oh, Merlin. She’s on the list of Marked Ravenclaws.”

“I know.”

Severus can’t see the expression on Nizar’s face, not when his back is to them, but the Ravenclaws can. Several of them are quietly scooting away from Miss Bluebell, who has Nizar’s full attention.

Nizar holds out the goblet in offering. “Would you care for some?”

“I—no thank you, Professor,” Bluebell stutters. “That’s for teachers.”

“And thus it’s perfectly harmless, isn’t it? Unless there is something you’d like to tell me.”
“No, sir,” Bluebell says firmly. “There isn’t anything I need to tell you.”

“That’s really too bad.” Nizar’s words drop into the silence that’s been growing ever since he stopped at the Ravenclaw table. “You see, I’m a first-generation teacher of this school, Miss Bluebell. You might have heard me mention that before; and if you didn’t, I know your fellow Ravenclaws would have informed you. Shamefully, you don’t seem to have been paying attention.”

Nizar leans forward so that his shadow falls over Miss Bluebell’s plate and hands. “The castle’s magic is very particular, fine-tuned, and utterly precise in a way that yes, does stand up in a Ministry courtroom. I know exactly where the neural toxin in this goblet came from, Miss Bluebell. Last chance.”

There is a sudden scraping noise as Filius stands up in his chair. “Answer him, please,” Filius orders her.

Miss Bluebell lasts another five seconds before she cracks. “They made me! They all made me do it! My parents, my uncle—”

“Did they make you take the Dark Mark, too, Miss Bluebell?” Nizar interrupts her tearful confession. “Because that sort of blood magic requires consent.”

Severus is on his feet the moment he realizes Miss Bluebell is drawing her wand. “MISS BLUEBELL!” Filius roars in anger.

“AVAD—” is as far as she gets before Miss Bluebell’s oak wand explodes into tiny fragments. She falls back, clutching her hand and screaming.

“The Ravenclaws would have taught you of that danger, too,” Nizar says over the din. “I suppose you weren’t paying attention then, either.”

Despite the wooden splinters that flew through the air, Severus notes that no one else was harmed by exploding wand fragments except Bluebell. Given the racket she’s making, she might also be missing the ends of her fingers. All of the Ravenclaws who were sitting close to Miss Bluebell before the altercation began are now as far away from her as they can get without leaving the table entirely.

Dinner turns into a spectacle. They’re joined by Poppy, and then shortly thereafter by Nymphadora Tonks and Kingsley Shacklebolt on behalf of the M.L.E. Nymphadora is greatly offended on Severus’s behalf over the attempted poisoning.

“This is the fourth poisoning attempt today, and you didn’t inform us as to the other three?” Kingsley asks Nizar, scowling.

“I didn’t care because they weren’t attempts made by students. They weren’t even good attempts.” Nizar glances away after Nymphadora and Albus escort a still-sobbing Miss Bluebell to the headmaster’s office. “Are we done here?”

“I’ve the sealed goblet with me for its contents to be investigated. With Tonks taking Miss Victoria Bluebell to Azkaban for holding before her trial…yes, we are. Thank you, Nizar,” Kingsley says, but Nizar is walking away before he finishes speaking. “And you’re all right?” Kingsley asks Severus.

Severus frowns. “I was never in danger. I’m…disappointed.”

Kingsley eyes him. “That you weren’t in danger, or that we’re taking a student to Azkaban?”
“Quite possibly both. Excuse me, Kingsley. I have a House of Slytherins to reassure.”

“I’m glad,” Kingsley says before Severus can depart. “I’m glad the Mark is gone.”

Severus gives him a curious glance. “Why?”

“Because I think—I’ve always thought—that your talents are far more useful to the Order when they’re not forcefully strangled by having to play the role of a double agent,” Kingsley says bluntly. “Spies are nice, and you’re damned good at it, but it isn’t the only thing you’re good at.”

Severus frowns, nods to acknowledge Kingsley’s words, and departs the Great Hall. When he arrives in the Slytherin Common Room, everyone is already waiting, piled up on furniture, sitting on the floor, or standing in clusters around the room.

“Good evening. You have no idea how pleased I am that none of you were that utterly foolish.”

“You always did say that if we were going to poison you, we’d better not do a subpar job of it,” Miss Parkinson says, trying to sound cheerful.

“Indeed. While that drink was lethal, it was not subtle. The politics of the situation aside, I would have flayed the flesh from your bones for being that horrendously obvious,” Severus tells them, scowling.

“What are the politics of the situation, sir?” Pucey asks, mouth twisted into a grimace.

“Far more simple than you might think.” Severus considers revealing the lack of Dark Mark and decides against it. There are those who might consider that everything Voldemort and Severus have done since the twenty-fifth is part of a larger ploy and make foolish decisions, let slip useful plans. “My loyalty from September of 1971 until this very moment has been to this House. Not to a man, not to politics, and not the Ministry. My loyalty is to the House of Slytherin, and the ideals that it stands for. Nothing else.”

Those who are Marked or Death Eater-inclined don’t look convinced, but he doesn’t care. It’s those who are undecided whose minds he has to sway against idiocy.

“And you’re, uh…dating a literal Slytherin,” Miss Shah dares.

Severus lifts an eyebrow. “Miss Shah, that is merely a pleasing coincidence, one that happily doesn’t detract from my loyalty to this House at all.”

“Quite a bit of prestige in bagging an actual Slytherin,” Bletchley says in a sage voice.

Severus rolls his eyes. “He isn’t wild game. No wonder you’re still single, Mister Bletchley,” he says, and hears laughter from multiple points in the room.

After curfew, Severus goes to his quarters before Apparating directly to Nizar’s classroom upstairs. He knocks on the closed door and listens.

“Flip the S and come in,” Nizar says, which is an unusual instruction.

“I didn’t realize you could hear knocking at this door no matter the room,” Severus says when he opens the door to Nizar’s office.

Nizar is seated at his desk with his face buried in his hands. “It’d be foolish not to set the magic to tell me if someone was at my door, no matter which space I was in,” he replies in a muffled voice.
Severus considers his posture, and thinks on how he would feel if it were one of his Slytherins being led away to Azkaban. “This was not your fault.”

“She’s seventeen, Severus,” Nizar replies. “Seventeen-year-olds make mistakes.”

“That they do,” Severus says in acknowledgement of the reminder. “Fortunately, Miss Bluebell is still alive to learn from the experience.”

Nizar drops his hands and stares at Severus in disbelief. “Severus. She cast a Ministry-classified Unforgivable in this school with the intent to murder, and she did it in front of literally hundreds of witnesses. Tonks says there will be a very short trial before the Ministry hands Victoria Bluebell over to those damned Dementors.”

Severus flinches. “Yes. You’re right.”

“If she hadn’t attempted that spell, I was willing to give her every opportunity to change her mind—to save her fucking life.” Nizar raises his hand and wipes his face with his sleeve. “Gods damn this idiocy!”

“Is this guilt for something you could not stop, or concern for me?” Severus asks.

“Little of the first, more of the second. A lot from the third option.” Nizar swallows hard. “I hate that fucking bastard, Severus. I hate what he’s done to destroy the lives of so many people. There are many who will never have the chance to change their minds. They followed that fucking piece of filth because they’d been led to believe they were doing the right thing.”

Severus thinks on the names of dead Slytherins that Nizar spoke of during a faculty luncheon and decides to change the subject. “What was the neurotoxin?”

“You mean aside from it being fatal?” Nizar slides ones of his books over. “Enough of this to kill fifteen people.”

Severus glances down at the moving image of the serpent as it coils around its branches. “Black mamba. That’s illegal to import.”

“I hope Kingsley and Tonks have a lot of fun tracking down whoever was stupid enough to be that fucking obvious, too. Miss Bluebell didn’t acquire that venom on her own.”

The next morning’s Prophet has a third page article regarding a poisoning attempt at Hogwarts, but as yet they’re not naming anyone. Fudge, Severus thinks in annoyance. He couldn’t keep the news out of the paper entirely, but he’s done his best to neutralize any real information, or any actual emotive response it might invoke in a reader.

The sixth page has an article about one Impatience Selwyn, arrested for the illegal importation of black mamba venom. That separation of information also strikes Severus as being Fudge’s heavy-handed influence.

“Impatience. I always did say she was aptly named.” Nizar says in a low voice, and returns to his tea while scowling.
Etymology

Chapter Summary

“Etymology of what words?”
“Live, survive, and die.”

Chapter Notes

Thanks to the cheerleaders and betas, as always: @norcumi, @jabberwockypie, @mrsstanley, and @sanerontheinside!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Severus missed the house-elf contract’s posting on Sunday, but he notices it that Monday evening when visiting the Slytherin Common Room. The scroll posted to the student announcement board informs him of what Miss Granger had been up to, though Severus has no idea how she got the contract copy into other Common Rooms aside from Gryffindor’s.

Unlike her ridiculous S.P.E.W. campaign two years ago, this is historical reality. Free elves, trade for trade, and pay. Filky has been distracted ever since the contract was posted.

He goes to the classroom upstairs and finds Nizar in his office on Tuesday afternoon, which Nizar has free of classes. “Where did you find that house-elf contract?”

Nizar puts down the raven quill and massages his right hand while grimacing. “In the room where everything is hidden. It wouldn’t come when Salazar and I tried to Summon it. After I truly awoke for the day, I realized that aspect of my room was a brilliant place to hide something that was meant to be indestructible.”

“How are the elves taking it, then?”

“It varies. They want to hold onto what they’re used to, but they also have the original document written by the Founders of this school. They want to do as the Founders wrote, but it goes against centuries of horseshit.” Nizar sighs. “I told you my Sunday morning was politics. So is my afternoon today, actually.”

Severus steps into the office and closes the door. “How so?”


Severus nods in acceptance of Nizar’s reason for not wanting Miss Bluebell’s death. “What else?”

“One letter sent to Elizabeth Alexandra Mary Windsor, otherwise known as Elizabeth II.” Nizar rests his chin on his hands. “That is going to be so very awkward if the Ministry has kept the royal family
out of magical affairs.”

“I’m looking forward to the absolute fit Cornelius Fudge is going to have if he discovers that his feared Slytherin rival met with the Queen without obtaining Ministry permission,” Severus says.

“There is that to look forward to, yes.” Nizar cocks his head, as if listening, before he looks at Severus. “Narcissa came to see me. She had me alter the Dark Mark so that Voldemort cannot kill her with it…so she can spy on my behalf.”

Severus finds the only chair in Nizar’s office and abruptly sits down on it. “Spying. Narcissa.”

“She has her reasons to do so, but has no plans to continue the endeavor the moment it becomes untenable. And…she likes you.” Nizar smiles. “Not in a way that would feel like competition, mind. I suppose it would be more accurate to say that she respects your intelligence and your talents, which is about as close to liking a person that I think Narcissa is capable of. She isn’t nearly as broken as Bellatrix, but she does not have much use for people beyond her own son.”

Severus takes a look at the stack of sealed letters on Nizar’s desk, pinned in place with a temporary sticking charm. “You’ve done more than that.”

“Narcissa named those who wish to be parted from Voldemort’s company. Those are some very carefully worded letters of inquiry as to whether they’re serious, or if they’re attempting to court death by trying to fool me. I hope it’s not the latter. Getting rid of bodies is irritating,” Nizar says.

“If they attack you in this castle, you contact the M.L.E., you idiot,” Severus reminds him. “Let them cope with removing unwanted corpses. How many?”

“Eight.” Nizar taps the stack of letters. “Not as many as I’d hoped for, but eight is greater than none at all. Five of them aren’t Marked, but part of the nonsense of politics is making sure they all know that they’re welcome to get the fuck away from that noseless walking corpse. The other part is making sure they understand that I’m not asking them to swear loyalty to me. That’s the last fucking thing I need in my life.” Nizar picks up the letter he was working on when Severus entered the office. “And finally, one request to send off to the goblins for the purchase of refined silver.”

“Why do you need silver? Or are you planning to pay the elves out of your own pocket?” Severus asks.

“If I tried to do that before they were ready, they would revolt. I’d like to avoid a house-elf revolt,” Nizar replies. “No; I need something made to replace what was…no, not lost.” Nizar’s brow furrows. “Given. I gave it to Galiena. Everything of value beyond certain items, I gave to Galiena and her family. I kept what was practical, things I would actually need after leaving that stupid portrait.”

“You kept very, very little, then,” Severus says.

“But they might have.” Nizar looks over at Severus, frowning. “I need to go to Gringotts.”

Severus leans back. “Right now?”

Nizar sighs and rubs his hand again. “No, not right now. I’ve too much to do here. Perhaps later, when I feel like I can submit the claim for the deSlizarse vaults without having an emotional breakdown in the middle of a fucking bank.”

“You can do that?” Severus asks in surprise. “Claim a vault from part of the family if there is no one else?”
“Yes. I had to remember it was possible, first, since goblins don’t exactly advertise such things,”
Nizar says. “Why?”

“I’m the only person of the Prince lineage left, unless someone had a child out of wedlock that has
never been discussed,” Severus replies. “If I’m truly the last, then I can claim my grandparents’ vault,
no matter what their Ministry paperwork has to say on the matter.”

“What do you expect to find?”

“Not riches, certainly,” Severus says dryly. “We were not a wealthy family by any stretch of the
imagination. Family relics, however…those would be nice to recover. We weren’t always a
wretched family, either.”

Nizar shakes his head. “You’re not wretched, Severus. I’m given to understand that your maternal
grandparents and your parents are the only ones to hold that distinction.”

Severus rolls his eyes. “Given to understand that by whom?”

“By you, you idiot.” Nizar smiles. “We’ll go together, then. Perhaps in February. I’d like to drag
Salazar along with me—I suspect he might have forgotten his Gringotts vault exists.”

* * * *

Other than Miss Bluebell’s provided drama, and his Slytherin’s smugness that Severus is dating a
literal Slytherin, the term continues as normal. Severus sees no need to alter his teaching methods
overly much, though he does temper his favoritism back down to appropriate levels rather than Death
Eater-expected lunacy. That confuses all of his students to such an extent that the first week of the
new term is quiet while the intelligent and the dunderheaded alike both try to comprehend this new
state of affairs.

On Wednesday, Severus retrieves last term’s Veritaserum antidote potion attempts and returns them
to the Weasley twins, Parangyo and Shaw, Greenwood and Applebee, Eastchurch and Ichijoh.
“Four possibilities, none of them fatal,” he announces to his class of seventeen students. “Even if
they make one ill, I’ve remedies for that. The successful brewers will not be testing their creations, as
that is in part their reward for getting to that particular stage. Their laboratory mice are the rest of you.
One test subject for each potion, and they get to choose. What are the rules?” Severus asks Miss
Greenwood.

“You can’t ask personal questions of the person under Veritaserum, or ask them to divulge personal
information about someone else. You can’t ask about politics, religion, or family intrigues.” Miss
Greenwood frowns. “And…no asking about anything related to money. Is that all of them, sir?”

Severus looks at the rest of the class. “Define a personal question.”

“Difference between asking your mouse if they’d consider dating someone, or if they have dated that
same someone,” Munslow says. “The latter being the improper one, sir.”

“Very well. Miss Eastchurch, Miss Ichijoh—you’re first.”

Miss Eastchurch points at Towler of Gryffindor, who blanches. “No one else is going to be asking
me questions, are they?” he all but squeaks as Severus gets out the phial of Veritaserum.
Severus glares at Towler. “None of us are that curious, Mister Towler. One drop versus three drops—why a difference?”

Towler just looks hapless, too preoccupied with experiencing Veritaserum to answer. “It’s the time involved, sir,” Gupta says. “One drop for, say, a minute of truth, and three drops for about a half-hour, which varies depending on the person. Thirty minutes is just an average.”

“Very good. Stick out your blasted tongue, imbecile,” Severus orders Towler, who gulps and then does so. One drop of Veritaserum, quickly followed by Miss Eastchurch dosing Towler with their crafted potential antidote.

“Why didn’t you ever try out for Quidditch, Towler?” Miss Ichijoh asks, crossing her arms.

“I think Quidditch is stupid,” Towler responds at once.

“Oh, that’s not going to earn him any points,” Miss Johnson says, smirking.

“That would not be a successful antidote, though you may be on to something,” Severus tells the two young women. “He didn’t have the daze associated with Veritaserum use.”

Parangyo and Shah get one lie and one truth out of Gregory Munslow, which is more than Severus was expecting. Greenwood and Applebee have a failure in terms of a Veritaserum antidote, but Miss Fairbourne emits puffs of smoke with every word she speaks. It’s an intriguing side effect.

The Weasley twins’ effort is also a Veritaserum failure. Maybe. Severus isn’t certain, as their potion also convinced Miss Randle to literally speak Greek. No one in the classroom can interpret what she says. “How?” Severus demands of the twins.

Fred and George glance at each other. “To be honest, sir?”

“No idea.” George looks thoughtful. “But that’s still a useful formula.”

“You have no idea how much I loathe admitting that I’m intrigued. I want to see your notes on this formula at the beginning of our next class.”

Severus’s second Tuesday of the resumed January term is irritating for the first hour, and then provides an unwelcome shock for the second when a student yells, “SHIT!”

He draws in a breath—he is not going to murder Longbottom—before he turns around. Instead of the melting cauldron and horribly spreading mess he expects, there is only an overflowing cauldron, a scowling Longbottom, and acid-like splash marks on the stone ceiling above Longbottom’s cauldron.

“Uh—sorry, sir.” Longbottom is using his wand to keep the mess from spreading. He’s even doing a semi-decent job of it.

“Five points from Gryffindor for language that most certainly does not belong in my classroom,” Severus says in a forbidding tone, crossing his arms. “Clean that up, Longbottom, and then you will stay after class. The rest of you have ten minutes remaining, and I suggest you use it.”

Severus waits until the other students have departed, some more willingly than others. “That is both not the lesson, and not a melted cauldron.”

“Nossir,” Longbottom says in a rush. “But today’s potion didn’t have plants in it.”
“So I gathered. What were you attempting?”

“Chelidonium Miniscula, sir,” Longbottom answers him, glancing up at the ceiling when a drop of liquid falls down into his half-full cauldron.

It isn’t a simple analgesic, but well within the skill range of a fifth-year student. “What did you change?”

“I reduced the swallowwart by half.” Longbottom sighs. “Not a melted cauldron, but still an explosion, sir.”

“Give me your stirring rod.” Severus waits for Longbottom to hand over a glass rod that has the beginning of a fracture lancing down the side. He stirs the potion once, lifting the rod up and allowing the sickly yellow potion to slide down the glass.

“Come back for detention tonight at seven-thirty, Mister Longbottom, and be prepared to brew this potion again. I suggest you try it again at one-sixteenth the original measurement for swallowwart.”

Longbottom frowns. “W-won’t that mean the potion isn’t really…a potion, sir?”

“There is a point to my instruction, Longbottom,” Severus tells him. “Think on it. You’ve still failed today’s lesson by not brewing what was assigned.”

“Wh-what if…what if I already did it, sir?” Longbottom asks.

Severus puts the stirring rod back into the cauldron. “You need a new stirring rod before evening.” It isn’t wise to trust a repaired glass rod to a magical potion. “And did you?”

“Yes, sir.” Longbottom swallows. “Over the winter break, sir.”

“Did it explode?” Severus asks dryly.

“Well—no, sir. No plants, sir.” Longbottom gets a corked flask out of his bookbag. “See?”

Severus lifts the flask into the air so the torchlight shines through its contents. “Your color is off, but…this is an Acceptable-grade effort. Congratulations; you’ve not failed the day’s lesson, after all.”

“Sir?” Longbottom sounds baffled.

Severus lowers the flask. “All I’ve ever wanted from any of you dunderheads is that you at least attempt to improve. Seven-thirty, Mister Longbottom. Do not be late, or you’ll have a very, very long night in this classroom.”

“Would it work?” Longbottom asks him of that night’s brewed potion. “I really—I don’t know how to tell, sir, aside from trying it, and since I can’t tell if it’s toxic, I’m not really in a hurry to put it on my skin.”

“Which is wisdom most fools in my classes never seem to develop.” Severus lifts Longbottom’s replacement glass rod out of the cauldron to observe the potion. “It would function as it is supposed to, but with far less efficacy. However, it did not explode or ignite. Congratulations; you are making progress.”

“I—thank you, sir,” Longbottom whispers, flabbergasted. “How do I…how do I make it as effective as it’s supposed to be?”

“That is the question, isn’t it?” Severus stirs the potion again, thinking. “You know plants, Mister
Longbottom. What else has the ability to create analgesic properties?"

Longbottom blinks a few times. “Quite a few, actually, Professor.”

“Then your task has now become two-fold.” Severus puts down the stirring rod. “To the first, you need to discern if there are any plants you can safely mix in with swallowwart at these much reduced amounts that will create a potion as effective as the original Chelidonium Miniscula. Take. Detailed. Notes,” he adds in a flat voice, glaring at Longbottom until he gulps and nods.

“What’s—what’s the second task, sir?”

Severus Vanishes the contents of Longbottom’s cauldron. “It was Professor Slytherin who suggested that you and your plant-fueled blunders are the product of something very right to have caused such extensive, consistent destruction. If you could create those explosions deliberately, you’ve crafted a new manner of destruction that might have some use.”

“It’s usually Seamus people look to if they want explosions, sir,” Longbottom says doubtfully.

“Mister Finnigan’s explosions are most often the result of accidental magic, emotional responses that cannot be controlled until he outgrows them, and that day is coming soon. Yours are the result of magical talent that is not being harnessed correctly; thus, there is a distinct difference.” Severus stares at Longbottom. “I am in my office from seven o’clock until curfew every weeknight unless something untoward occurs. It is a safe space to brew that does not require the indignity of a detention, and I suggest you take advantage of such generosity.”

Longbottom looks like someone has told him he is about to witness an execution, but he nods. “Uh—yessir. It might be a day or two, sir. Research on analgesic plants and all, I mean, sir.”

“Wise decision.”

“I guess. I just…why are you doing this, sir?” Longbottom asks.

“Did you see last Monday morning’s paper, Mister Longbottom?”

Longbottom’s eyebrows go up. “I don’t know of anyone who hasn’t seen that, sir.”

“I am doing this, Mister Longbottom, because I am trying to solve a problem.” If Longbottom is yet another method of trying to discern if he likes teaching, or he only tolerated it in order to fulfill a debt, that is his business. “Now get out of my classroom.”

*          *          *          *

Not being beholden to Voldemort any longer has made Severus feel years younger. It’s reflected in the way some of the stress lines clear from his face, the way he doesn’t have to worry about his hands shaking after a bout with the Cruciatus Curse, and in the fact that none of his students seem to know what to do with a Potions Master who looks so bloody smug all the time.

Of course something would occur that might sour his mood.

Lucius Malfoy returns to the school in the third week of January, which immediately does an excellent job of trying to ruin everyone’s winter. Lucius calls for a staff meeting of all employees,

 evaluated by the AI to be a faithful recreation of the natural text
mandatory, on Saturday before lunch. The meeting takes place in the Great Hall, which is a foolish decision for Lucius to make—Albus makes certain that Lucius has to face the staff table like a petitioner.

“It has come to the governing board’s attention that the curriculum set forth for Defence Against the Dark Arts is not being adhered to,” Lucius announces.

“Just now? I thought you’d have known that already after reading your wife’s correspondence.” Nizar’s smile is bright and vicious. “Did you enjoy Azkaban, Mister Malfoy?”

“My short-term imprisonment is not something we are gathered to discuss—” Lucius tries, but apparently none of them are in the mood.

“I find that I am uncomfortable with the idea of you maintaining your representation on the governing board, considering that your trial is still scheduled,” Minerva says with a dainty sniff. “You might turn out to be a criminal in truth when your trial is complete, and such should not be in charge of the education of our young witches and wizards.”

“That is hardly the point—”

“Given that is the task of the school governing board, I think that is the point, actually,” Aurora joins in, smirking. “It’s even in the title of your job description, Mister Malfoy.”

Lucius looks to be grinding his teeth. “That is Lord Malfoy, Madam Sinistra.”

“The Malfoys haven’t been nobility since the International Statute of Secrecy was adopted by the British Ministry of Magic.” Nizar’s smile actually manages to seem more vicious than before. “Therefore, Professor Sinistra’s title for you was correct. You’re merely rich. You’ll have to settle for that.”

Lucius narrows his eyes at Nizar. “And what of yourself, Slytherin? That means you are also not nobility.”

“I was a citizen of the kingdom of Moray, which is now sadly defunct, but I’m also a citizen of León y Castilla.” Nizar lifts both eyebrows. “The Kingdom of España told the Statute to bugger off, so yes, I am still titled nobility. Isn’t that the most amusing thing?”

“Quite,” Lucius grates out.

“Do you require a residence, Lucius?” Severus asks, deciding that he really can’t let the opportunity be wasted. “Draco has not mentioned your return to the Manor. My home in Cokeworth is available, of course.”

Lucius glares at him in a way that speaks of wishing for Severus’s sudden, painful death. “I would not rely too heavily on my son’s word. Thank you for your kind offer, but I am in no need of such charity.”

“Are you certain, dear lad?” Filius blinks up at Lucius in apparent concern. “Severus has informed us that his home is not palatial, but at least he has never returned from its confines smelling of mold.”

“It’s a very particular type of mold, too,” Nizar says, “one most often found growing on corpses.”

A muscle beneath Lucius’s eye tics. “Are you going to resume following the original Defence curriculum, Professor Slytherin?”

“We’re not discussing my time on that island!” Lucius shouts, his cheeks flushing with rage. Then he checks himself, straightens, and pushes his hair back into place with his gloved hands. “If you will not perform the job to the governing board’s specifications, then it is my sad duty to inform you that your services are no longer required by this school. You’ll have the rest of the weekend to vacate the premises, of course, while the governing board assists the Headmaster in finding a new instructor.”

Nizar leans back in his chair. “You both think revenge is truly going to be that easy, don’t you?” he asks in a soft voice. “You cannot relieve me of this post, Lucius Abraxus Malfoy. Hogwarts herself will not permit it.”

Lucius sneers at him. “We shall see. Then there is the matter of our Potions Master. Complaints against his style of teaching have been ignored by the governing board in the past, but given current events, we feel—”

“We? Are you carrying around the rest of the board in your back pocket, Mister Malfoy?” Sasha asks with a sweet smile.

Lucius ignores her. “—we feel that the time has finally come to take such complaints seriously, and remove Severus Snape from his post.”

“Same difficulty, Lucius.” Severus enjoys the way Lucius’s eye twitches again. “The board does not have the authority to remove me, either.”

“If you are both referring to the Headmaster’s authority over this school, the board’s unanimous agreement can override his decisions when it comes to the safety and well-being of Britain’s magical children,” Lucius says.

“Not quite. Unless Minister Fudge has somehow come up with a way to bring me up on charges?” Albus gives Lucius a look of polite interest. “I’ve been waiting with no little expectation to see if such a thing comes to pass.”

“No,” Lucius growls. “However, the judgement of the governing board will stand.”

“Do you have a…a book, a roster, a ledger, something that lists the current staff of Hogwarts?” Nizar asks. “You should investigate its contents if you do.”

Lucius frowns. “Very well. If you’re so insistent upon seeing your name removed from the ledger for this school…” He reaches into his robe pocket and pulls out a ledger bound in red, muttering a word under his breath before he thumbs it open. “Ah! Here it…is…” Lucius’s eyes grow comically wide. “That cannot be possible.”

“Is there something wrong?” Minerva asks. Severus glances at her, knowing she is well aware of the reason why they cannot be sacked.

Lucius slams the ledge shut. “Very well. Just because some of you are proving difficult to remove does not mean others have the same immunity.”

Nizar shakes his head. “Oh, Lucius. You are so very, very bad at this game.”

Lucius is jerked forward several steps when the ledger is magically pulled from his hand. “What—”

Nizar catches the ledger on its arrival, taking a moment to page through it without needing to mutter
any sort of magical password over its cover. “So very bad at blackmail and extortion. One would suspect you were honestly Sorted into the wrong House.”

He closes the book and looks up. “Lucius Malfoy, you’ve declared yourself to be a danger to this school three times over. Leave.”

Lucius draws himself up. “I beg your pardon?”

Nizar doesn’t bother to stand. “I am the titled Protector of this school, Lucius. Leave now, or you will not like the consequences.”

“You can’t—” Lucius starts to say, right before he disappears.


“He wouldn’t leave voluntarily. I did it for him,” Nizar explains.

“I want to be concerned by how you did so, but mostly I am far too satisfied to have witnessed that,” Filius says, grinning.

Albus glances at Nizar. “Where is Mister Malfoy now?”

“Did you know that someone in Hogsmeade raises hogs?” Nizar smiles. “Their pen is enspelled to ensure that the animals can’t be harmed by magic, it’s fully enclosed…and the gate can’t be opened from the inside.”

Minerva starts cackling. “Nizar, you shouldn’t have! It’s not even my birthday!”

“Oh, I know, but I missed another’s birthday and wanted to make up for it,” Nizar says, just as Severus realizes that someone is clapping.

He turns around in his chair to observe Salazar Slytherin leaning against the doorframe of the back stairwell, applauding. “That was quite the gift. I’ll treasure it, little brother. Alas, that I missed his arrival in the hog pen.”

“Ah. I see you’ve returned at an interesting time,” Albus says as Salazar abandons the door and approaches the table.

“Nizar let me know that there was an officious twit within the castle, and that the results would be fun.” Salazar points at Nizar. “See, now that is a reason to call me here.”

“You again.” Minerva has her arms crossed, pretending to be displeased, but Severus has known when she’s faking such a thing since his first year of teaching in Hogwarts.

“Myself again, Lioness,” Salazar replies, offering her a courtly bow that somehow does not appear pretentious in the slightest. “I trust I find you well?”

“Perhaps you do,” Minerva admits, and then jerks away from Nizar in surprise when Nizar flings the red ledger at Salazar.

“What can that stupid governing board do to Hogwarts?” Nizar asks Albus, ignoring the mutters of realization coming from the rest of the staff.

“The governing board is merely meant to be oversight to the school, something that, with Lucius Malfoy’s devoted guidance, it has failed at for many years,” Albus says. “However, they can go to the Ministry and advise Minister Fudge on what should be done, and it is the Ministry who
contributes the funds that supply Hogwarts, including staff pay. We’re fully funded through the end of this term, but not for the next.”

“You needn’t worry about that.” Salazar doesn’t look up from paging through the ledger. “Consider the matter of funding this school taken care of.”

Albus looks surprised. “That is a great deal of—”

“Money?” Salazar closes the ledger and faces Albus. “Of course it is. I’m one thousand twenty-six years old. You think I’d spend all of that time on this earth and not plan for the worst sort of failings? The interest generated from that account alone will more than satisfy the school’s budgetary requirements each year. Speaking of which, everyone here is long overdue for a bloody raise.”

Salazar holds out the ledger and watches, impassive, as it bursts into brilliant green flame that quickly consumes it. Salazar brushes a smear of ash off on his black denims.

“Emerald Flame of the West,” Severus murmurs.

Salazar nods. “I earned my name, Severus, and I did it in such a manner that Godric heard it before we’d ever met.”

“Then…you’re really him,” Filius squeaks.

“Well, I’m certainly not Godric. He was taller, red-haired, and lived to the ripe old age of one hundred seventy-five before passing,” Salazar tells them, which makes Minerva bite back a snort of laughter. Severus looks at her, raising an eyebrow; she scowls back at him.

“And outlived all of his children,” Nizar says. “The ones we knew about, anyway.”

“We all did.” Salazar’s smile is pained. “You, myself, Rowena, Godric—every single one of us outlived all our children. I’ve often thought that someone with particularly good aim cursed those who Founded this school.”

“Indeed.” Nizar stands up. “Forgive me, I’m being rude. Everyone who is currently terrified out of their wits for no good reason at all, this is my brother, Salazar Fernan, Casa de Deslizarse of Castile and Gipuzkoa, still recognized Marqués of León by the Spanish monarchy. Since the house-elf made a point of it, Salazar Slytherin is also known as the Emerald Flame of the West, Preeminent Potions Master of Spain and Great Britain, holding masteries in Mind Magic, Earth-speaking, Herbology, Divination, and Astrological Magic. He is a Hogewáþ Founder and a Keeper of Hogwarts’ Western Magic.” Nizar smiles at Salazar. “Did I name them all?”

Salazar rolls his eyes. “Why is it your memory is always pristine when it comes to things that are a pain in my backside?”

“Because it’s more fun that way,” Nizar says. “Obviously.”

Quintinus stands up and points one trembling finger at Salazar. “’Twas your lot what left a murderous basilisk in this school!”

“Murderous?” Salazar gives Quintinus’s finger a look of polite interest. “In one thousand years, only one student was killed by a basilisk’s stare at Hogwarts, an event which didn’t come to pass until Tom Marvolo Riddle came to this school. Funny, the timing on that.”

“We’re aware that the basilisk was merely a tool, not the cause.” Albus gives Quintinus a stern look until Quintinus sits down again. Then he turns his attention back to Salazar. “It’s not often I hear a
list of titles longer than my own. I find it to be quite a relief.” He smiles at Salazar. “So: we meet again for the third time this month. I take it you have plans, since you have gone out of your way to introduce yourself to my staff.”

“I always have plans. However, in this case, there are a few particular ones.” Salazar conjures a chair and sits down on it, lifting his legs to plant his feet on the edge of the riser. “I thought it might be a good idea for your staff to be used to my continued existence, given that I plan to move back into my own home at the end of this month.”

“Both of them here. Oh, God, this is terrible,” Pomona mutters under her breath.

Salazar glances at her. “Oh, you’re going to be a bit of fun, aren’t you?” He sighs and looks back at Albus. “And that would be a prime example of why I’m doing this early. You see, I’m not used to bearing the brunt of our reputation the way my brother is. There are very few who know me in this time who also know me by my true name. Perhaps I’m attempting to get used to the taste of infamy, as well.”

“And aside from the infamy? Then what?” Charity asks.

“This school has a charter, a Founding document,” Salazar replies. “That document carries more weight than the Ministry, since it is far older than they and pertains to the autonomy of the castle itself. There is no allowance in that charter for a school governing board of oversight—that’s a Ministry-imposed bit of nonsense that has done nothing but whittle away at the education the children in these halls are meant to receive. Your seventh-year students are the magically trained equivalent of thirteen-year-olds from the time of this school’s Founding.”

“Nizar has spoken of that, yes,” Minerva says.

“But just before you say no to all that nonsense, we don’t!” Minerva declares, and then glares at the others as if daring them to contradict her. Not even Argus says anything, even though he’s starting to get twitchy after weeks of student vengeance on Nizar’s behalf.

“And what of yourself?” Albus asks.

“I’m here for my brother,” Salazar says. Severus doesn’t think it’s his imagination that the weariness has returned to his features. “I’ll not be sticking my nose into any of your affairs, never fear. Well—unless you’re terrible at your profession. That might be enough to gain my attention.”

“Oh, I don’t think that will be a concern at all,” Albus says, but Severus notices several glances cast in his direction. More fool them; Severus has produced more Outstanding and Exceeds Expectations students from the O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s in thirteen years than Slughorn managed over the course
of his entire career.

“Perhaps we could review this Charter together. In my office?” Albus offers.

Salazar nods. “That’s agreeable, though it will be after lunch. I’ll be taking it elsewhere, thank you.”

“I heard there was a bit of a scuffle on the first day of term,” Salazar says once they’re in Nizar’s quarters. Severus wasn’t in the mood to remain in the Great Hall, not after dealing with Lucius Malfoy and his blasted mold-infected clothing. When Nizar asked him to join them upstairs, Severus had quite literally latched onto the opportunity and refused to let go of Nizar’s hand until after the Apparition upstairs.


“Bad choice of words, then.” Salazar hesitates. “It’s never your fault, Nizar. She made her choice.”

“And she may never be given the opportunity to make a different one!” Nizar scowls at his brother, furious. “Why the fuck did Albus Dumbledore hire no one but incompetents to teach Defence? There has been one exception in fifteen years!”

“Barty Crouch Junior is no longer in the competent category?” Severus asks, curious.

“No.” Nizar looks down at his tea. “It turns out there are quite a number of lessons in that basic and stupid governing board curriculum that the Death Eater was ignoring. Lack of ability to perform to standard.”

“Speaking of things not to standard, I received a very interesting letter the other day by owl.” Salazar waits until Nizar looks up. “The bloody Queen, hermanito?”

“I did write that it was optional,” Nizar replies. “I suppose your attendance at that meeting will depend on how much you’d like to stick it to the Ministry on Hogwarts’ behalf.”

Salazar leans back, staring at Nizar. Then he places his hands over his breast. “You always know exactly what to say to make me do vile things to the deserving.”

Nizar smiles. “Please; it does not take that much skill to encourage you.”

“Speaking of…encouragement.” Severus glances at the pair. “I’d be pleased to see this school no longer hindered by Ministry dictation, but the fact that Albus jumped upon the idea so quickly—that concerns me.”

“It should concern you. Dumbledore only does so if he thinks he can use it to his advantage. On behalf of the good of all, of course,” Salazar adds, rolling his eyes. “Once he realizes what the Charta entails, he’ll fight it. Subtly, but he’ll fight it.”

Nizar looks at Salazar, baffled. “Aside from the obvious: why?”

“It’s not obvious to some of us,” Severus puts in, annoyed.

“As Nizar recalls, even if he doesn’t remember the full extent of it, those who hold the castle’s magic—the Heads of Houses—are supposed to be those with the most authority over Hogwarts,” Salazar answers them both. “They are the head teachers of each House and thus are meant to be fully in charge of the education each student in their House receives.”
That is displeasing to hear. “But we’re not,” Severus says. “We’re not fully in charge of that at all.”

“Over the centuries, that power came more and more to be in the hands of the Head of Hogwarts alone. The school governing board’s oversight is irritating, but the Head of the school is the most powerful figure in Hogwarts,” Salazar says. “However, the Head is not supposed to hold that power.”

“When need became necessary, Godric and Rowena founded the idea of a neutral leader of the school.” Nizar has the intent expression he develops when he’s struggling to recall memory that is actively attempting to escape him. “Godric stepped down as Head of Gryffindor House to take up that neutral posting…but I can’t recall when that happened.”

“Before I left. It was 1035,” Salazar tells Nizar. “Helga stepped down first, in 1031, when that fucking cancer kept interfering with her ability to teach, let alone perform magic. Her replacement was…ah!” Salazar snaps his fingers as the name comes to him. “Theodora Grypusdor, Godric’s eldest daughter. Yes, she was a Hufflepuff, and for very good reasons,” he says to Severus. “Godric’s replacement was Tholy mac Duncan of Alba. We all thought he was a bit old to take on the post at age fifty-three, but he lived to be one hundred twenty, so what the fuck did we know?”

“Who took Ravenclaw and Slytherin, then? I can’t remember that, either,” Nizar says.

“Adelaide Ravenclaw, Rowena’s granddaughter—though not until Rowena’s unexpected passing. Rowena held her House until the end.” Salazar lets out a long sigh. “As for mine? Vanora, Nizar.”

Nizar’s face breaks out into a bright grin. “My granddaughter held our House? I hope I remember that one day. I’d like to recall her acting in that role.”

“I actually hate to steer this conversation back to its original topic, as it’s fascinating…but the Headmaster’s true role in this castle?” Severus prompts.

“Yes, good point.” Salazar leans back against the sofa. “A Head’s duty to Hogwarts is only meant to be of management and politics. While a Head of this school can teach, that is a separate role. A Head of House should never also be the Head of the school—that is blatant conflict of interest. For example, the ultimate decision on whether a student should be expelled is a duty that lies with the Heads of Houses, who must come to a unanimous decision before any punishment can be carried out. The Headmaster, as a neutral figure, can only weigh in on that decision if the infraction is so terrible that there is no choice but to involve the Council—what you now call your Wizengamot and the M.L.E.”

“As in the case with Miss Bluebell,” Severus murmurs.

“Exactly. Albus Dumbledore is not supposed to be acting in a pastoral role, either—that of providing guidance. That is the job of one’s Head of House, for very good reasons,” Salazar emphasizes. “A Head of Hogwarts does not dwell within the politics of each House, no matter if they’re originally from the House of a student needing that sort of emotional guidance. A true Head of Hogwarts would be a liaison to the government, meant to act in the best interest of the school, not the Ministry. They would oversee the receiving of this school’s funds and their distribution, ensure that everyone is paid and properly supplied for the term, that necessary acts of maintenance are performed, and so on. Politics and management. That’s it.”

“Dumbledore had his fingers in quite a number of pies,” Nizar says. “Fudge has ensured that he has almost none left, and this would reduce the pie count even further.”

“It would,” Salazar agrees. “And that will be the ultimate test—does Albus Dumbledore remain at
this school because he believes it is right to do so, or does he remain for his own gain?"

Severus is left discomfited by that, as he has no idea which category Albus might fall into. He understands more of Aberforth’s motivations, and Severus barely knows the man at all.

When Salazar departs to show the Headmaster the school’s Founding Charter, Severus goes downstairs, intent on grading that week’s classwork until the evening curfew. He’s on the fourth floor when Minerva leaps out of a side passage, grabs his arm, and drags him back into hiding like a trapdoor spider.

“I just wanted to warn you,” she hisses when he glares at her. “They’re all bloody desperate for information on Salazar Slytherin, and no one is safe!”

“Do you mean the students or the staff?” Severus asks, dusting off his sleeve.

“Our bloody colleagues! The students would actually behave themselves,” Minerva replies. “They won’t ask directly, so instead they’re asking myself and Albus. Since they know of your rather direct association with Nizar, they will also be after you.”

“For fuck’s sake,” Severus mutters. It’s a mark of how flustered Minerva is that she ignores his language. “I am not above hexing my way through the ranks just to have peace.”

“I’m aware. I had to threaten Pomona and Charity with turning them into frogs, which did include actually getting out my wand to start the process!”

“It would be simpler to just kill them,” Severus says.

Minerva sighs. “Merlin, but don’t tempt me.”

When Severus gets to the third floor, he’s waylaid at once by Barnaby and Poppy, who usually cannot even stand to be in each other’s presence. If there was ever a worse idea than their marrying, it was their divorce. Severus and his classmates had not been joking at all when they said those two in the same passage was like witnessing World War III in action, and no one wanted to go to the hospital wing that year.

“Is it true that he is over a thousand years old?” Barnaby asks in a loud whisper that carries down the hall.

Severus stares at him. “If you’re referring to Salazar Slytherin? Yes, as is Professor Slytherin. A wizard with a long lifespan is not a new development, Barnaby.”

“Yes, but one was in a portrait,” Poppy says. “With definable magics, within Hogwarts. It’s quite a bit different when it’s a Founder returned to us!”

Oh, for— “Poppy. Nizar was in this blasted castle in 990. He’s a Founder in all but title! This is still not a new development.”

Poppy frowns, presses her lips together, and then nods. “Yes, I do see your point.”

“At least one of you has sense,” Severus mutters, and departs to Barnaby’s sputtering.

The Runes teacher finds him on the second floor. “Oh, for God’s sake.”

Bathsheda ignores his displeasure. “Severus. What is he…what is he like?”

That isn’t as annoying a question as she could have voiced. “Entertaining,” Severus replies. “Excuse
Eustas is next on what seems to have become a gauntlet to proceed through. “Should we trust him?” he asks, his wizened face twisted up in a terrible scowl.

Severus glares at him. “I don’t even trust you,” he says, and pushes his way past.

Sasha just wants to gush about how much she desperately wishes to discuss the castle’s art and architecture—particularly its architecture—with a man who was here to see it constructed. All right; that sounds sensible enough. Perhaps that’s why Nizar tolerates her.

Aurora, Cassandra, and Quintinus want to know how Salazar survived the centuries in such prime physical condition. “Go bloody well ask him! I’m not going to be party to your prurient gossip!”

Aurora raises her eyebrow at Severus. “This is not prurient gossip, Severus. This is a fact-finding mission.”

Severus stares at her. “You were Sorted into the wrong bloody House.”

She tilts her head. “It’s a possibility. The Hat did spend three minutes trying to make up its mind.”

Severus rolls his eyes. “Merlin lived to be over six centuries old. If he can do it, why not Salazar, Merlin’s last student?”

Cassandra’s brow furrows. “I thought it was the other way around.”

“Merlin was born in the fourth century. Salazar was born in the tenth. I do hope you can perform simple maths.” Severus stalks away while they’re still mulling over that particular tidbit.

It’s Sybill who is utterly chilling, an encounter he wishes to God he never had at all. “Severus. I’m so glad it’s you.”

“Oh, now what?” Severus asks, trying not to hex her to get Trelawney out of his way. “Dire prophecies about Slytherins?”

Sybill looks at him and opens her mouth. What emerges is not whiny and shrill, disjointed and sloppy, but low-toned and harsh. He’s heard that voice before, and it takes all of his willpower not to attempt escape through the nearest wall.

“The Chosen One will return to face him, appearing as the spring moon dies. They have Marked each other as their equals, but equal they are not. Blood calls to blood and spirits will rise, and the very earth will shake before they both die.”

Sybill blinks a few times and then looks at Severus without any hint of oddness in her gaze. “Oh! Severus. There you are. I had a question I wished to ask you.”

Severus is clenching his jaw so hard it’s difficult to respond. “Yes?”

She smiles. “What sort of drink do you think Salazar Slytherin prefers?”

“Probably not sherry,” Severus answers, and Apparates right there in the corridor, secrets be damned. “Nizar!”

“Oh, directly into my quarters for once. That’s convenient,” Nizar says, glancing up from the book he’s reading on the sofa. Then he frowns. “All right, I know we have an entire fucking castle full of them, but you really do look like you’ve just seen a ghost.”
“I direly wish it had been a mere ghost.” It takes him several tries, and a full shot of Death in a Bottle, to be able to repeat Sybill Trelawney’s unexpected and sincerely unwanted prophecy.

Nizar rests his chin on his hands. “I’m really upset that it sounds like someone informs Voldemort that he needs to challenge the fucking throne.”

“Trelawney speaks a prophecy that talks of you dying, and you’re concerned about Voldemort waging war against the throne?” Severus asks in angry disbelief.

Nizar looks surprised. “I’m not un Concerned, but I ‘arrived’ in October, which is most certainly not spring, Severus.”

Severus pinches the bridge of his nose and decides he is not going to have this conversation sober. “You’re trying to view it on the slant,” he says after drinking a second shot.

“Considering that I refuse to die for Voldemort’s pleasure? Yes.” Nizar reaches out and grabs Severus’s hand, removing him from the armchair and convincing Severus to sit down on the sofa. “Look. Two of those things have already happened—the Blood Summons and the Marking. We already knew that there was an imbalance of power because of what the stupid fuck has done to himself with the Horcruxes, displacing his own magic.”

“Dying sounds very specific,” Severus says in a flat voice.

“Yes, but she wasn’t,” Nizar counters. “That last part only speaks of they. She never explicitly states it’s myself or Voldemort. These two who are going to die? That could literally be anyone.”

“Are you spouting nonsense in an attempt to make me feel better?” Severus asks.

Nizar smiles. “Prophecies are tricky. Why, is it working?”

“With two prophecies from that woman, both stating that you and Voldemort are going to die? No.”

“Either must die at the hands of the other,” Nizar quotes from the first prophecy. “No, I suppose it wouldn’t be very reassuring.” He stands up and tugs on Severus’s hand until Severus gives in and gets to his feet. “Come on. We’re going downstairs.”

“Nizar, I am truly inebriated right now. Where the fuck are we going?”

Nizar takes a moment to retrieve Kanza when she rears up, hissing what is undoubtedly a request to go with them. “The library. It isn’t the bit about dying that should be the biggest concern.”

Severus frowns and follows him. “Because Voldemort was considered dead in 1981.”

“That’s part of it. In prophecy, even a figurative death is considered a death. I’d imagine that a large part of Wizarding Britain believes that child to be dead, too.”

“Minerva was convinced for a few minutes on the night of thirty-first July that the child was dead,” Severus murmurs in recollection. “Muffliato. Yes, it will actually follow us,” he explains to Nizar of the charm.

“That’s ingenious.” Nizar waits until they’re outside his classroom to resume their conversation. “Neither can live while the other survives. That is the part that’s problematic.”

“Hence my concern, Nizar.” Severus reminds him. “Unless you’re saying that the first prophecy no longer applies due to your brother’s meddling.”
“I like it when someone else calls Salazar’s shenanigans meddling. Usually it’s just me.” Nizar leads Severus to a hidden stairwell that goes down to the third floor. “The trouble with prophecy is that it tends to take the past, present, and future into account all at once. I don’t like the idea of facing this imbecile for a third time with unanswered questions, which are often pitfalls waiting to happen. I also really dislike seeing you distraught. Hence, etymology.”

Severus shuts the door to the stairwell, which immediately takes on the appearance of the surrounding stone, hiding it from all but the most persistent seekers. “Etymology of what words?”

“Live, survive, and die.”

Irma Pince is enthralled when Nizar asks her for etymology guides on English words. “Don’t you two go off and tell anyone, but I purchased the *Oxford English Dictionary* the Muggles put together. I keep it just for this sort of thing. I hide the printing information with a charm so any student needing it won’t notice.”

“I won’t tell a soul,” Nizar promises.

Severus nods as well. It’s difficult enough to get most of the dunderheads to use a reference properly. He isn’t going to compromise one by revealing its origins to a Pure-blooded idiot. “Never, Irma.”

“Those are gigantic,” Nizar says when she takes them to the room hosting the dictionary. The *Oxford English Dictionary* is not one book, but an entire series of them that fills the shelves on one wall.

“That they are,” Irma says proudly. “The covers are from the 1950s, but a spell keeps them up to date when Oxford edits them each year. I’ll leave you both to it.” When she goes out, she shuts the door. Severus locks it behind her, not in the mood to deal with potential interruptions.

“Live, *L*-volume.” Nizar picks up a book that looks like it might weigh twenty pounds. “I’m glad these are labeled on the side with the places they leave off.”

“*S* it is, then.” Severus scowls as he realizes that there are multiple volumes devoted to the letter *S.*

Nizar puts the *L*-volume on the table and then grabs the appropriate *D*-volume. “This should be fun.”

“Fun?” Severus glares at him. “I just want that fucking book to have a meaning for *die* that does not mean dead!”

“Anything?” Nizar asks after Severus has given up and used a magnification charm just to read the tiny blasted text.

“For survive?” Severus nods. “Mid-fifteenth century, originally used in combined Old English and French terminology regarding legal inheritances. Original Old French *souvivre*.”

“Latin basis in *supervivere*, then,” Nizar says. “It has the same meaning as the modern English term.”

Severus shuts the ridiculously large book and wafts his hand at the cloud of dust that arises from its pages. “Did you find anything of a more encouraging nature?”

“*Die* was not encouraging,” Nizar replies. “Almost all of the early variations specifically deal with death, and the ones that don’t revolve around suffering, ending, or becoming senseless.”

“That…is not helpful. At all.”

“I did say that.” Nizar closes the *D*-volume, puts it aside, and replaces it with the *L*-volume. “*Live,*
however, was far more useful. The adjective form from the 1600s refers to *burning or glowing*, like in conditions of fire, or *full of active power*. Skip to the end of the 1700s, and it becomes *containing unspent energy or power.*

Severus rubs at his forehead. “Then it’s possible that the original prophecy means that neither can be truly *powerful* while the other survives.”

“Possibly,” Nizar muses. “Voldemort’s power would be in the figurative sense. By conquering the enemy that vanquished him in 1981, he spreads fear, and fear grants him more followers who will wage the war that will gain him control of Britain. When the soul jar was still an aspect in play, Voldemort’s true death would have meant freedom, which is another type of power.”

“Then the opposite of *live* might mean a loss of strength.” Severus tries not to grimace. “That also sounds like an unpleasant possibility.”

Nizar hesitates before speaking. “Not if it was me giving up the war mage title.”

Severus can’t decide if he has a headache from Death in a Bottle, or from trying to interpret tiny blasted text. “You can do that?”

“I mentioned that before.” Nizar closes the second book. “I’ve been a war mage for longer than literally anyone else in recorded history at this point, Severus. I’d be happy to destroy Voldemort and then let that power go back to the earth.”

“Why not pass on the title?”

Nizar gives him an odd look. “I’m not royalty, Severus. I can’t name someone else as a war mage.”

“Merlin wasn’t fucking nobility,” Severus points out.

“No, but Myrddin was also the arsehole who routinely walked *across* the Black Lake because he’d decided it took too fucking long to walk around it.”

“A valid point,” Severus concedes. He lifts the heavy book and puts it back on the shelf. He has been smart enough not to dare Irma’s wrath since his first week in this school. “All right. Given this expansion of possible outcomes, I’ll admit that I am less distraught.”

“Good.” When Severus turns around, Nizar kisses him.

“Not that I’m complaining, but what are you doing?” Severus asks in bemusement.

Nizar smiles at him before tracing his fingers over Severus’s lower lip. “Living.”

Severus bites back laughter. “Please do not turn that into a euphemism, and please, if you have nefarious plans? *Not* in this library. Irma has an uncanny sense for this sort of mischief, and that is not a conversation I ever wish to have with a librarian.”

Nizar smirks, grasps his arm, and Apparates them upstairs. He shoves Severus down onto the sofa, undoes his trousers, and proceeds to give Severus the best damned blow job he’s ever had in his entire *life*.

“Now are you distracted?” Nizar asks, peering up at Severus with his arms crossed over Severus’s legs.

Severus huffs out a sigh and pulls Nizar up until he can kiss the idiot. “Yes. Exceptionally so.”
Nizar finds Salazar that evening sitting in his own quarters. Salazar is staring at the paintings that line the wall across from the windows, studying the portraits while they watch him in return. “Sal.”

Salazar blinks a few times and then smiles at him. “No knocking of any sort. How very impolite, little brother.”

“I am not knocking on Fortunata’s portrait. You need a bloody door chime if you’re so concerned about my method of entry.” Nizar sits down on the sofa opposite Salazar. “There was an incident while you were torturing Dumbledore with the Charter.”

“He was a bit unsettled, yes.” Salazar’s attempt at levity dies when Nizar doesn’t smile. “All right. Tell me.”

Nizar does so, including the research that followed the sudden bit of prophecy. He has no plans on telling Dumbledore. Gods know what the man would make of this bit of prophetic nonsense.

“A second prophecy about the two of you. I can’t say I’m pleased, because I’m really not,” Salazar says. “How did Severus take it?”

“It scared the hell out of him,” Nizar says bluntly. “It took a while to convince him that die doesn’t necessarily mean a literal death.”

“It had best not.” Salazar shakes his head. “At least it’s not spring until the Equinox in two months.”

“Then I refuse to let it overly concern me until then,” Nizar says. “I have other things to do. Please remind me of how I make a Pensife, since I can’t remember each step.”

Salazar smiles. “All right. That I can do.”

Nizar looks at the faint reflections of the portraits caught by the glass in the windows. “How does it feel to be home, Sal?”

“I don’t know yet.” Salazar’s eyes drift back up to the portraits. “I’m realizing that I’d forgotten much of what they all looked like.”

“The Preservation Charm’s failure. I… I forgot my kids, Sal. I forgot they ever existed until I stepped foot into my quarters again for the first time.” Nizar blinks a few times to clear his eyes. “I’ve never told anyone that—including Galiena, Brice, and Elfric. You lot behind me aren’t to say a word to them, either.”

“No, Uncle,” Betisa agrees in a shocked whisper. The other portraits that are awake chime in.

Salazar’s eyes are overbright in a way that makes the green seem more vivid. “You’re saying it could have been so much worse, then.”

“It usually can be, yes.”

“It never gets any easier. Losing people.” Salazar swallows. “If anything, it gets so much harder.”

Nizar nods. “What did it take for you to go into that house in Little Whinging on thirty-first July and
send me off?"

Two glittering drops leaves Salazar’s eyes and paint his cheeks in long lines. “Every single bit of strength of will I’ve ever fucking possessed.”

Chapter End Notes

Guess what? I'm reprinting my book for its 1-year anniversary, which includes (finally) the PG13-ish version people wanted/needed! Visit my Tumblr (deadcatwithaflamethrower) for more information, because if I try to give you links, then AO3 gets upset.
The yellowed page of the book is opened, revealing a handwritten note:

"That is a lot of house-elves."

Chapter Notes

Nizar is lying on the floor of his classroom with his eyes closed on Sunday afternoon when there is a knock on his open classroom door. "Come in."

"Did you know that the sound of that music can’t be heard in the corridor?" Miss Granger asks him curiously.

Nizar nods without opening his eyes. "That is sort of the point. Wouldn’t want to disturb anyone with any sort of racket, would I?"

"It wasn’t racket!" Miss Granger retorts, sounding angry. "It was beautiful. Mister Filch was just…"

"Bitter." Nizar turns his head so he and look at her. She’s still standing near the door, a scowl on her face. "Argus Filch is bitter, as he lives in a society that treats him as a second-class citizen, while he also has to cope with being surrounded by things he will never be able to grasp for himself. His sort were not badly treated in my day, but in Mister Filch’s case, I believe the damage has long since been done."

"Like the house-elves," Granger ventures after a moment.

"You can’t force someone to change, even if you believe their lives to be abhorrent. That must be their decision alone."

Granger’s scowl melts into a thoughtful frown. "But—you teach us. Teachers do force us to change our minds."

"No." Nizar shakes his head. "Teachers present the material in a structured environment, giving you the knowledge and forms of encouragement meant to help you accept and learn that knowledge…but we can’t force you to actually learn it. Students skive off on classes; they sleep through lessons; they turn in subpar work or poor practical performances. They’ve not been forced to do anything. You choose to learn, or you do not."

"I suppose," Miss Granger says in a way that suggests she’ll be mulling that over for a while. "What are you listening to?"

"Oh—Salazar discovered that I’d found a band called Mazzy Star while in London, and insisted I had to have a vinyl recording of someone named Tori Amos. It’s an album called Little Earthquakes."
I’m not sure what I think of it yet.”

“It is rather grim for something that sounds sort of happy. Oh! Wait here. I’ve got one in the Common Room that you might like better.” Miss Granger rushes off with Nizar staring after her, baffled.

She returns ten minutes later with a vinyl album cover in her arms. “Sorry it took so long. It was in the bottom of my trunk. No one wants to listen to it in the tower—they’re all into the Weird Sisters. Can I?”

Nizar waves his hand at the turntable on his desk. “I’m assuming that if you own vinyl, you know how to use the table.”

“Yes, sir.” Nizar watches Miss Granger use the lever to lift the needle from the current album. She stops the rotation, puts *Little Earthquakes* back into its paper sleeve, and then takes out her own album to put on the turntable. “This is a lady named Loreena McKennitt. My parents got it for me, I suppose thinking the music matched my environment. I didn’t really have the heart to tell them that wizarding students are just as much into rock music as normal kids.”

Nizar props himself up on his elbows, curious, as sound begins filtering in from the charm he applied to the classroom walls. Then he sits up, entranced. “There are people still recording music with the old sounds.”

Miss Granger smiles, pleased, and brings him the album cover with its internal copies of each song’s lyrics. “I thought it might suit,” she says, sitting down on the floor next to him.

“One would almost think this is a trade. Or blackmail,” Nizar says, glancing over the words as the familiar sounds of the old horn pipes begin to play.

“Maybe it is. You have made a point of talking about how trade is important.” She looks nervous when Nizar glances up. “Your—your brother. Is he coming back?”

Nizar smiles. “Be more specific.”

“More specific.” Granger makes a face. “Is your brother coming back to *stay here*? To teach?”

“I don’t know about teaching, but to stay here? Yes, he is.”

Miss Granger leans forward. “Can I tell anyone?”

“It isn’t a secret, though the real concern should be: will they believe you?” Nizar asks.

“Some of them might. Ron can be a prat, but he isn’t a complete idiot. Usually.” Granger wraps her arms around her denim-clad knees. “Do the other teachers know?” When he nods, she asks, “How are they taking it?”

“Remember how they responded to me?” Nizar lifts his hand and tilts it back and forth. “A bit worse in some cases, a bit better in others. Your Head of House likes him, even if she’s not yet willing to admit it.”

“Oh my God.” Granger covers her mouth with one hand, but her eyes are bright with laughter. “There are going to be people whinging in the halls about conspiring with the enemy!”

“Only the foolish,” Nizar says, amused by her response. “What did you think of him, Miss Granger?”
“Well, I only met him for a few minutes, and it was in the middle of whatever bit of magic attacked you,” she says. “It’s hard to judge someone in just a few minutes, but he was polite, professional, and even though he’s older, he really looks a lot like you.”

“When it’s not been bleached by the sun, my hair is the same color as his. We used to tell people we were twins just to mess with them—if they’d done something to deserve it, at least.” Nizar smiles. “I’d forgotten that until I realized my hair was growing in darker, as there is a distinct lack of sun in the north. I’m still trying to decide if I’m going to use magic to change it to match the rest of my hair until I can go south for the summer.”

“Is it difficult to become a Metamorphmagus? I imagine it must be, since only Tonks and a few others who are born with the talent seem to know how to do it,” Granger says.

Nizar rolls his eyes. “If you’re still interested, and you get an Outstanding in Transfiguration on your O.W.L.s, we’ll discuss your learning it once you’re of age in seventh year.”

“I don’t have to wait until seventh year,” Granger tells him. “My seventeenth birthday is this coming September.”

Nizar turns to stare at her. “Truly? Because I’ll need an assistant next year to replace Fred and George.”

Granger blushes. “You mean me? But Defence isn’t my best—”

“Direct combat might not be your best trait, but Defence is about far more than knowing how to knock someone onto their backside with a wand,” Nizar says. “Top marks in your year, Miss Granger, and I will not be surprised if you repeat that with February’s essay. Consider it a trade. I’ve looked up the laws regarding magical apprenticeships, and the only requirement is that you must be of legal magical age. You don’t have to have graduated this school yet. You could potentially earn your first magical mastery before you leave Hogwarts.”

“But… a concentration?” Granger asks hesitantly.

“I’m given to understand that’s for university, or you can simply keep finding magicians to apprentice under for every branch of magic you’re interested in,” Nizar says. “And if you were to, oh, go into politics, verbal defence is definitely going to be a key part of your success.”

Granger looks surprised. “How do you know I’m considering politics?”

“It was a theme threading its way throughout your last essay. Besides, you began your first political crusade in your third year. Why wouldn’t I suspect such?” Nizar asks, grinning. “Can I borrow this album?”

“Uh—yes! Yes, certainly. As long as I can borrow the Tori Amos album. I’m sure I can convince the Tower to listen to it after I inform them that most of the songs are about sex,” Granger says in a practical voice, though she blushed on the last word.

“Sneaky Gryffindor. Deal.”

After Nizar migrates from the floor to lying atop the length of his desk, Theodore Nott is the next to rap on his door. “Hello, sir. Got a minute?”

“I have several, and many more besides.” Nizar looks at him. “Are you back with us, Theo?”

Theo nods. “Yeah. Mum’s officially divorced, and my father is officially ejected from the house and
wards. I’m just glad he moved into her family home instead of the other way ’round. The only reason Draco can keep his father out of Malfoy Manor is because the magic recognizes that Lucius is still technically linked to Azkaban, and magic doesn’t much like that place.”

Nizar files that interesting bit away for later. The more he hears about Azkaban, the worse it gets. “Are you all right?”

“I am, sir. I mean, it’s not like I had much to do with my father. Vice versa, really, I guess. It’s more like a terrifying house guest has finally moved out of our home.”

Nizar snorts out an amused laugh. “I’d imagine so. If it ever feels otherwise, you can still speak to me of it, or to your Head of House. He’s more familiar with this sort of situation than I. Speaking of Professor Snape, does he know you’re back?”

“Told him, first. Sort of my responsibility. I just thought you should know, too, sir,” Theo says, smiling. “Gossip and all.”

“I can’t fathom why you would bother. Or are you referring to the paper released on eighth January?”

Theo draws himself up proudly. “I might’ve made Professor Snape sputter a bit when I told him it was about time, and he really ought have done so at least a month previous to that. Then I got ejected from his office. Worth it.”

Nizar smiles. “Good job.”

“It might not be Outstanding-grade verbal defence, but that was a first for me.” Theo tilts his head. “What is this music, sir?”

“Miss Granger introduced me to it in trade. Her name is Loreena McKennitt, and she seems to have done her homework regarding ancient musical sounds. This one in particular is called ‘Santiago,’ and is about the sacred city of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia. I’ve been there—well, I was there a long time ago. I saw it before Almanzor destroyed it, and then after, when they were trying to rebuild.”

“You should teach history, sir,” Theo offers after what feels like an uncomfortable silence. “You’d be a hell of a lot more interesting than Binns.”

“No.” Nizar tries not to sigh; Theo has enough to concern himself with. “I don’t remember enough of it.”

It seems like Theo has been gone less than a minute before Ron Weasley knocks on the door. “Sir, I—what is that music?” Weasley asks, looking baffled.

“That’s history in musical form. Now there is a class that really should be added to the curriculum if Professor Harper isn’t already teaching it,” Nizar says. “What can I do for you, Mister Weasley?”

“I finished re-writing it, sir. I hope,” Weasley adds, and holds out a scroll.

Nizar takes it, sits up, and unrolls the scroll. “I hope so. I’m not above making you re-write it again.”

“But—please just fail me,” Weasley begs. “I did actually research this one, sir!”

“So you did. Chess strategy as relates to real-time combat. Good premise.” Nizar frowns. “Are you making use of the twins’ Spell-Checking Quills?”
“Yes, Professor. I’m not that great a spelling. Hermione calls it dyslexia—no, that’s numbers. Whichever the one it is that refers to words.”

“Dyslexia is the one for words. Dyscalculia is for numbers.” Nizar lowers the scroll to look at Weasley. “You do know the magic on those quills only lasts for two months, yes?”

Weasley blanches. “Oh, Merlin. How bad is it?”

“Aside from the fact that this says your name is Roonalb Wasley, you’ve managed to misspell chess as quest, quench, chest, and cheer, respectively.”

“Oh, no.” Weasley buries his head in his hands. “I can’t write sixteen feet again! My bloody hand will fall off!”

Nizar snickers. “It will not. However, I will teach you a useful charm that will repair spelling mistakes. Hopefully, anyway.”

“Hopefully?” Weasley drops his hands. “Why just hopefully, sir?”

“Modern English is a disastrous combination of multiple languages, that’s why.” Nizar sits up and regards the scroll before getting out his wand. “Hie enim error, recta orthographiam.”

“Hie enim error, recta…orthogriph?” Weasley tries.

“Write it down,” Nizar suggests, fishing a scrap piece of paper out of his desk drawer and handing it to Weasley. He spells out the charm and then repeats it again. “Hie enim error, recta orthographiam. Use your wand and try it. If you’re really dyslexic, you might already have mixed up the letters.”

Weasley’s face brightens when he casts the correctly pronounced charm. “You’re right, I did. What about my essay, professor?”

Nizar takes a second look. “Well…good news and bad news. Part of it is now in Latin. Fortunately for you, I can read Latin.”

Weasley waits, shifting from one foot to the other, as Nizar reads through the rest of the essay. “Well?” he finally bursts out. “Did I fail again?”

Nizar rolls up the scroll. “No. By actually putting in some effort, you’ve jumped from Troll to Acceptable. It would be an Exceeds Expectations, but I don’t give full credit for late work.”

“Yes, but I still passed this time!” Weasley crows. “I’ll take it!”

“Mister Weasley!” Nizar waits until he has Weasley’s full attention again. “Keep this in mind for February’s essay. Also: this is a starting point. You’re a natural tactician and it shows, but you limit yourself to the style of chess. Chess, by its very design, has a limited number of outcomes. Battlefields do not. Put in some research and expand the way you think, and your next essay might be something that even Godric would appreciate.”

“Why Godric?” Weasley asks, taking back his scroll when Nizar holds it out.

“Godric of Griffon’s Door was a Master of War, magical or otherwise, though he didn’t like that such mastery was necessary.” Nizar lies back down on his desk. “Challenge yourself. You’re better than you give yourself credit for.”

Weasley hesitates at the door. “You wouldn’t really make me re-write it again. Would you?”
Nizar grins up at the ceiling. “Four people thought the same. They’re now on their third draft—and before you give a thought to House prejudices, one of them is indeed a Slytherin.”

“I wasn’t—I wasn’t going to. Think that, I mean. You’re so scrapingly fair an’ all, someone could probably use the edge of that as a knife.”

Septima Vector is next. Nizar wonders if this is what the phrase “revolving door policy” refers to. “Can I help you, Professor Vector?”

“Yes, actually.” She hesitates for a moment before shutting the classroom door. “I have something to say.”

Nizar lifts his hand and waves it. “By all means.” None of his instincts are speaking up about impending attack, at least. That’s already a positive step.

“Minerva let it slip that you’re a war mage. A war mage of Britain, specifically.”

“That is what Britanni Bellum dux Magum means, yes,” Nizar says.

“I—yes.” Septima clears her throat. “My family can trace our lineage all the way back to Rome, in the days before it was an Empire. When Rome fell, we went on to the Byzantine Empire. When Byzantium and the Sasanian Empire fought in what looked to be an unceasing war, we moved again to the Holy Roman Empire, hoping to find Rome’s glory restored. When we found nothing but more fighting, we eventually came to settle in the newly formed kingdom of England.”

Septima draws in a breath. “The forebears of my family on British soil have long passed down the story of how our line was saved by Britain’s last surviving war mage, which none of our line had seen since the days of Rome.”

Nizar glances at her. “What year?”

“1013. The invasion that ultimately saw Prince Swein Forkbeard drive King Æthelred out of England.”

Nizar puts his head back down on the desk, gazing up at the ceiling. “I remember that. We were fighting against the orders of Æthelred. He’d formally banned magic users from his kingdom in the summer of 991, and promptly started bankrupting England by paying gold to the Danes so they would leave him in peace. Didn’t work so well.”

“But the throne of England was threatened,” Septima says.

“It was, yes. It gave us the means to defend those who needed it, and to relocate those who would no longer be safe if the Danes took the throne.” Nizar thinks back on some of those skirmishes and can almost smell the smoke of burning homes. “Praenomen Mathematica.”

“My forebear said to one of those who helped them that they needed a new means to carry themselves. He was asked if he meant a new vector…and that has been the family name ever since.”

“Not my fault,” Nizar says at once. “Blame Rowena for that one. She made terrible jokes in an attempt to improve horrid situations.”

“But you were the war mage in 1013.” Septima seems desperate for him to confirm that.

Nizar smiles. “I was the war mage of this isle as of 992, Professor Vector.”
“Then why did you not say anything?” she asks.

“Even if I had remembered—and I didn’t until recently—I wouldn’t have said a damned thing,” Nizar sits up and glares at her. “You and the others and your bloody prejudice. You think there’s not a bit of goodness to be found in a Slytherin, that we’re not capable of such a thing. Then you discover that I literally have the power to sink this island beneath the ocean for all time, and suddenly you’ve decided I must be a worthy person, after all.”

“I—”

“Do the Slytherin students in your class ever speak to you? Do you ever have to field a question from a Slytherin? Or is it only the third-years, who quickly learn not to bother—that even if you grant them an answer, there is a coldness to your eyes that the other Houses never see? Children are not stupid. I know you’ve done such a thing because many Slytherins who’ve dwelled in my Common Room over the years told me so. How long does it take you to convince them not to come back for next term, I wonder?”

Nizar leans forward and pins the woman with an icy stare. “Do you understand how that places the students of this school in danger, Septima Vector?”

“Just because my subject is strict—” Septima tries, but Nizar cuts her off.

“I do not like hypocrites, Septima Vector. You need to understand that while I am a war mage, I am the titled Protector of this school first. If you do not gain a swift understanding of how your prejudice harms students by keeping them from getting the education they are entitled to within these halls, I can assure you, it isn’t Salazar Slytherin you need to fear.” Nizar flicks his finger at his classroom door, which opens on silent hinges. “Now, get out. Come back when you’ve more brains in your head than to be impressed that I didn’t let your family line die out a thousand years ago.”

Nizar waits until his classroom door slams shut before he lets out a shout of frustration. “Bloody hell, what is the matter with people?”

His office door opens behind him. “I don’t know, but that was so exceptionally satisfying to witness.”

Nizar glances over his shoulder at Severus. “What were you doing in there?”

“I Apparated to your quarters, looking for you. When I didn’t find you, I tried your office. Once I shut the door, I could hear that you were out here with company.” Severus crosses his arms and smiles. “The only thing better will be the look on her face at dinner. She’ll still be angry that you finally lost patience with her.”

The sound of a gong ringing fills Nizar’s ears, and he winces. “Oh, I need to adjust that alarm charm.” He opens his door again in response to the emergency stone outside being wand-tapped; Fred and George immediately rush inside. Both of them look stunned. “Gods, what now?”

“I think you should really, really come downstairs and take a look, Fearless Leader Professor!” George gasps. “Ground floor in the Entrance Hall.”

“And you, too, Professor Snape,” Fred adds. “It’s…uh…well, it’s a sight.”

“One that everyone is trying to look at, I imagine.” Nizar waves them forward. “Come here. We’re taking a shortcut.”

Fred and George respond to Apparition within Hogwarts like any pair of mischief-makers—they
immediately want to know if they can do it, too. “Absolutely not,” Severus informs them, scowling. “That’s the last thing anyone in this school needs.”

“Besides, it’s only for those who hold this castle’s magic, and right now, that’s only four people.” Nizar pushes open the door to the disused stairwell where it exits out on the first floor. “Come on.”

When they reach the bottom of the stairs, it’s to find the Great Hall crowded with students, staff, and…elves. There are so many house-elves of varying skin tones, eye-color, and tea towel garb that Nizar isn’t certain where to look first.

“That is a lot of house-elves,” Severus murmurs, a disquieted expression on his face.

“Please, please can you tell me why you’re all here?” Minerva is asking the elf closest to her, an old one with wrinkled brown skin and copper eyes. His tea towel is white with a scarlet stripe, but Nizar can’t recall whose House holds those colors.

“Gellis already be saying that he be talking to the Protector, and only the Protector of Hogwarts!” Gellis replies, scowling.

“Fortunately for this blockage in the hall, I’m right here,” Nizar says, which immediately gains him the attention of every single new house-elf arrival. There are squeaks and murmurs of “The Protector!” from a multitude of house-elf throats. “Why are you here?”

Gellis disappears and reappears in front of Nizar. “Gellis being the one who is speaking for all,” the elf informs him. “We elves all being here because house-elves of Hogwarts be showing all the elves in all the other wizarding homes the first contract. The only contract. Gellis is reading the binding contract that his grandparents made with the Founders, and Gellis is being angry, Protector. Gellis didn’t know about this contract. A wizard be taking Gellis from Hogwarts when Gellis is young, saying an elf was Hogwarts parting gift to all its students. Gellis did not be knowing this. Gellis be knowing it now.”

“How old are you, Gellis?” Nizar asks.

Gellis lifts his head so his old, draping ears slide back over his shoulders. “Gellis is being seven centuries and five decades, Protector. Gellis is being taken by a Bulstrode wizard from Hogwarts when Gellis was two decades and five.”

“1270.” Nizar glances around at the sea of expectant elf faces. “What do you want to do?”

“We be wishing to come home, Protector,” Gellis answers for them. “We all be leaving the witches and wizards who were not to be having us, and we be returning to where we belong.”

“Right.” Nizar doesn’t say that their clan in the early years of Hogwarts had been much, much smaller. If this castle needs more room to support those who rely on her protection, she can be convinced to provide it. “How many of you are there, Gellis?”

“There being three hundred two, Protector,” Gellis says proudly.

“Bloody fucking hell,” Fred blurts in a high-pitched whisper. Nizar pretends not to have heard, and suspects Severus might be doing the same, if only out of self-defence.

“All right. Then you’re staying,” Nizar says, which is when everyone tries to start talking at once. The elves are excited, happy, anxious, or nervous bundles of all three emotions at once. The students and staff are in an uproar. Nizar gives up, puts his hand on the nearest wall, and makes a simple request.
A moment later, there is complete silence in the hall as the castle obligingly mutes everyone. “Shut. Up.” Nizar glances at Gellis and lifts the silencing spell from the old elf first. “Take yourself and your companions down to the kitchens and the housing that lies beyond. I’ll meet you down there later.” Gellis nods and vanishes. “Minerva.” He lifts that part of the spell next. “We’re not going against that contract.”

“No. Of course not. I’m only concerned about feeding three hundred more mouths,” Minerva replies.

“As someone very recently declared: consider it taken care of,” Nizar says, and Minerva nods. “Malfoy, before you turn purple, what is it?” he asks, lifting that part of the spell.

“But—my—our—mother’s house-elves are in with that batch!” Draco says of the elves that are leaving the Entrance Hall, Disapparating in clusters. “What are we going to do without house-elves?”

“You’re wealthy,” Nizar responds in irritation. “Stimulate this island’s pathetic magical economy and pay someone.” He looks at the others as he lifts the silencing spell. “Now, unless someone has something truly useful to contribute in this moment, get out of this hall!”

“You are tetchy today,” Severus says in a low voice, unheard over the unhappy muttering coming from those who are drifting away from the Entrance Hall.

“Yes. Should I apologize? Because I’m not going to.”

Severus looks at Nizar from the corner of his eye. “Oh, I didn’t say it was a problem. I approve. I was just curious as to what brought on the mood.”

“I didn’t want to push on the first day. I haven’t, unless there has been immediate danger such as that damned blood quill, or Miss Bluebell’s poisoning attempt.” Nizar sighs. “But it’s been nearly three months, and I’m not that patient in the first place. I’m doing my job, Severus, and my job has some very specific rules attached.”

Minerva comes up to them. “You do realize that there are a number of wizarding families who are going to rush off to the Minister for Magic and complain that Hogwarts has stolen all of their house-elves, don’t you?”

Nizar smiles. “Yes, I thought that might be a side effect.”

“You realize that he’ll try to blame Albus?” Minerva asks.

“Oh, that had occurred to me, as well.”

Minerva nods. “Are you going to let Fudge do so?”

Nizar’s smile drops away. “Gods, don’t tempt me.”

“I’ll put good odds that he arrives in an hour and a half,” Severus says to Minerva. “Five galleons?”

“Ten,” Minerva says, sniffing. “You still owe me five from that chess match, and I’ll claim it one way or another! An hour, Severus.”

“I’ll go for five Galleons on one hour, fifteen minutes,” Nizar puts in. “In the meantime, I’m not in the mood to wait around for a summons from that man and his hideous hat. I think we should be waiting to give him a proper reception. Minerva, would you please inform Albus of the situation and our impending visitor?”
Minerva smiles like her Animagus form and strides off. “Fred, George, I’d like for you to gather the useful members of Hogwarts’ staff and tell them they’ll be needed upstairs in the headmaster’s office.”

Fred and George slap hands. “On it, Fearless Leader Professor, sir!” Fred declares as he and George begin running in opposite directions.

“Proper reception.” Severus smiles in realization. “Salazar is still within Hogwarts, isn’t he?”

Nizar grins. “Yes, he is.”

The Weasley twins’ ideas of useful faculty is composed of Filius, Pomona, Hagrid, Poppy, Aurora, Rolanda, Irma, Quintinus, and Cassandra. Nizar isn’t surprised by those who are absent except for Sasha until he realizes that Sasha is not politically minded, and would likely try to stab the Minister the moment he opened his mouth. While he does sort of want to see an artist slaughter an idiot, it wouldn’t serve any good purpose.

The hour passes without Cornelius putting in an appearance. Instead, they receive a message delivered by an unknown Patronus and a voice Nizar doesn’t recognize, informing them that the Minister for Magic is requesting an emergency meeting, scheduled for a half-hour hence.

“I’m making fifteen Galleons this evening,” Severus says, and Minerva glares at him.

The flames turn green two minutes after that, emitting not the Minister, but Sirius Black. He draws back in surprise when he sees how many people are in Dumbledore’s office. “Am I interrupting something?”

“Are we turning you in?” Rolanda asks, wide-eyed.

“Nonsense,” Dumbledore answers. “We did have that discussion as to Sirius’s innocence at the end of last term, did we not?”

“Good. If we were doing so, I was going to stop you,” Rolanda returns dryly.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Severus asks.

Black looks to be on the verge of an insult before he abruptly changes his mind. “I was coming to thank whoever just rid me of Kreacher. I will give them their weight in gold for doing that.”

“Oh, you’ll be blaming myself and my brother for that.” Nizar glances over to see that Salazar has joined them. Instead of the non-magical clothing he’d been wearing earlier, he has on a long black silk vest that Nizar thinks he might recognize, but it’s not one of his own.

Black blinks a few times. “Are you two deliberately trying to give me a reason to like Slytherins?”

Nizar rolls his eyes. “Of course. Every decision we make is with your sanity and comfort in mind.”

“Well, someone should be thinking of that, at least,” Black says. “What’s the occasion, then?”

“Hogwarts has suddenly become home to an extra three hundred two house-elves,” Albus informs Black with a cheerful twinkle. “Cornelius is on his way to visit, no doubt to make accusations. Would you like to stay and witness them?”

“Only as long as I can hide behind Rubeus. I’m not giving Cornelius an easy excuse to call Dementors here from Azkaban, and not only because I want to live,” Black replies.
“Still here, I see,” Pomona says to Salazar.

Salazar raises an eyebrow. “I know. How dare I inconvenience you when you weren’t even aware of my continued presence in the first place.”

“Hmph,” Pomona grumbles, but Nizar notices the unwilling smile tugging at her lips and hides a smile of his own. Maybe they’re finally getting somewhere.

“Where did you get that?” Nizar asks Salazar in a low voice.

Salazar adjusts the cuff of his sleeve, which is silk, not linen. It’s a shirt once meant for Court instead of daily wear. “It seems that your quarters were not the only ones saturated in house-elf Preservation Charms. What remained here is in the same condition as the day I left.”

“Is any of it mine?” Nizar asks, and doesn’t trust the grin he receives in response. That means it’s something he didn’t like.

“I notice no one is overly concerned by the one-thousand-year-old Founder hanging about,” Black says.

Poppy sighs. “We all met him yesterday.”

“Whereupon he outlined how we’re going to be removing Hogwarts from Ministry control.” Aurora grins. “For the record, I am fine with this plan.”

“Then who would have control?” Black asks, frowning.

“The school,” Salazar answers. Nizar allows his gaze to slide over Dumbledore, but notices that Dumbledore’s smile has slipped a bit. He must not have been pleased to find what his role in this castle is meant to be, but they can shove him back in the direction of the Wizengamot after Britain sees sense and ousts Fudge as Minister. Dumbledore will be content again the moment he has his fingers in other pies, not just Hogwarts alone.

“Sirius, if you’re going to hide to enjoy the upcoming spectacle, you might wish to do so now,” Minerva says. “The Minister might arrive early.”

Black nods. “Good point. ’Scuse me there, Rubeus. If you feel something grabbing your coat, it’s just me using it to gag myself so I don’t laugh at that idiot.”

“My coat’s not really been in the sort of places you’d want it to be for that, Sirius,” Hagrid rumbles, smiling as Quintinus edges away from his coat sleeve.

“I ate rats for a year, Hagrid,” Black says in a muffled voice. “Your coat cannot possibly be worse.”

At exactly a half-hour past, the flames turn green, emitting an already red-cheeked Cornelius Fudge. Nizar isn’t surprised by his promptness. He’s only surprised that Fudge waited this long before daring Hogwarts again after Nizar forced his employee out of the school at wandpoint.

Of course, after Dolores Umbridge earned a year in Azkaban for use of Forbidden Dark Artefacts against Minor Wizarding Children, perhaps Fudge didn’t want to take chances.

“Where have you placed the stolen house-elves?” Fudge demands at once.

“Good evening, Cornelius. Would you care for some tea?” Albus asks, ignoring the Minister’s rudeness. “It’s the dinner hour, so I imagine you must be famished.”
Nizar smiles. Dumbledore is a manipulative bastard in a way that he appreciates. It would be nice if it was properly applied manipulation all the time.

“I—wha—tea—no!” Fudge sputters out. “I have been visited by numerous fine, upstanding wizarding families this evening, and all of them, to a wizard, have told me that Hogwarts has stolen their house-elves!”

“That’s a grave charge, Cornelius. Should you not have Madam Bones of the Magical Law Enforcement department with you?” Albus asks, affecting a somber air. “If there is theft to be spoken of, it is only proper that the M.L.E. be involved.”

“I—I wanted to ascertain the situation for myself, first,” Fudge blusters.

“Then it should be questions you are asking, should it not?” Salazar asks, and offers the Minister a wide, unfriendly smile when Fudge looks at him.

“Now see here,” Fudge says, frowning. “Who are you, good sir?”

“That, Minister, is Salazar Slytherin. Nizar Slytherin’s brother.” Minerva keeps her expression utterly bland when Fudge glares at her.

“Impossible!”

“I’m afraid it’s not.” Irma peers down her nose at Fudge. “If you’d been a good student and done your research, you would know better. There are numerous ways in which a magician can extend their life, Cornelius.”

Fudge turns bright red. “Salazar Slytherin. A portrait of his brother was ludicrous enough. Salazar Slytherin is—a myth!”

“I am that, too,” Salazar admits, and then straightens in place. “Minister Cornelius Fudge, I am Salazar Fernan of Casa de Deslizarde of Castile and Gipuzkoa, and formerly of Moray while that kingdom existed. I am the Marqués of León and Castile, a citizen of the Kingdom of España and recognized by their Crown. Speakers of Cumbric and Old English referred to me as Salazar Slytherin, and I am not at your service.”

Fudge foolishly decides to disdain both the librarian and Salazar. “It’s a complete impossibility,” he insists, scowling. “First a man who spent a thousand years in a painting, and now you? I think not!”

Nizar watches as Salazar looks at Dumbledore, who seems to consider the silent question before he nods. “Very well then,” Salazar says. Many never have the chance to realize that the lazy smile on Salazar’s face is a warning of danger and death. “I suppose I shall have to prove it.”

Nizar takes a deep breath as the sense of magic in the headmaster’s office thickens, filling the air and making it feel like he’s being supported by a cloud. Then the castle floor beneath Fudge rises in a speedy blur as the stone reforms, putting Fudge on a pedestal that is half the height of the tower.

“What have you done?” Fudge yells from his new perch.

“Well, you’re such a self-important man. I thought you’d appreciate the opportunity to stand so tall!” Salazar calls out, which makes Aurora place both hands over her mouth.

“Oh, my. You really, really do not like him, do you?” Nizar asks.

Salazar shakes his head. “That is putting it mildly, little brother.”
“I am the Minister for Magic!” Fudge yells from above.

“Good for you?” one of the nearest portraits of a fourteenth century Headmistress offers Fudge. “I’m sure that does you no end of good when you’re shouting it from this height.”

Nizar glances at Severus. “You’re going to want to catch him.”

“I do not want to catch that man,” Severus replies crossly.

“I’ll do it,” Filius says just as Fudge yells, “GET ME DOWN FROM HERE AT ONCE!”

“At once? All right,” Salazar agrees. The platform is sucked back into the stone, leaving Fudge hanging in the air before he falls. Filius gestures with his wand and catches the Minister so he doesn’t splatter onto the floor.

Fudge collects himself and gets his odd hat firmly shoved back down on his head. “Are you attempting to murder me?” he roars, turning an alarming shade of blue-highlighted violet. Nizar finds himself wondering if the man suffers from some kind of blood pressure disorder. “I’m the Minister for Magic!”

“And I am one of the Founders of this school. I came here in the year 984, the month before I turned fifteen. Not only was I Myrddin Wyllt’s last magical apprentice, I was one of the Four chosen by Myrddin to Found this school and bear its magic.” Salazar’s chin come up as his shoulders go back; he is at once every inch a powerful magician from a bloodline that was ancient when Athens was just pondering the notion of becoming a state. “This castle is a part of me, and I’m a part of her; thus, she will do whatever I say. That does include entombing you in a wall,” Salazar adds. Nizar hears someone desperately using cloth to muffle hysterical-sounding laughter.

“Upon your arrival, you’ve been rude, you’ve insulted myself, my companions, my brother, and refused graciously offered hospitality, which was a grave offence in my day, Minister,” Salazar continues. “You’ve also endangered countless lives by refusing to admit that my many-times great-grandson is alive and presenting a threat to these isles.”

“You can’t know that,” Fudge utters, resettling his hat again in an obvious nervous tic.

Nizar rolls his eyes. “I carved a hole in the side of Voldemort’s fucking face in December! Of course the prick is alive!”

Fudge pauses with his hands still gripping his hat. “You’ve personally encountered You-Know-Who?”

“Twice since I fell out of your snidely mentioned painting,” Nizar replies, “and you’re well aware of the second encounter, so you pretending ignorance of the matter is irritating.”

Fudge turns redder still. Nizar hopes the bastard won’t expire within Hogwarts from bursting blood vessels in his brain out of sheer outrage. “If I were to admit this…this rumor, there would be a panic!”

“People are already panicked,” Minerva snaps, glaring at Fudge. “An informed populace is one that can safeguard itself, you officious twit!”

“Why you—”

“Do shut up,” Salazar says to Fudge. “There is another matter I wish to address.”
“I am the one who demanded this meeting!” Fudge reminds them. Nizar is amused to note that most of the gathered staff seems politely baffled by that notion.

“Minister.” Salazar’s voice has gone cold and forbidding. Fudge’s shoulders hunch up as he turns his head to regard Salazar again. “We will address my concern, and then perhaps you can remind us of your own difficulties that visited you this evening.”

Fudge narrows his eyes. “Very well.”

“You’ve abused your power,” Salazar says flatly. “You’ve used it to run a publicized campaign meant to tarnish and vilify a fifteen-year-old boy, one who also happens to be a member of my family.” Salazar’s eyes are sparkling green and silver as he stares at Fudge. “Libel is a crime, Minister, especially libel against a minor who is recognized both as a citizen of Wizarding Britain and of the United Kingdom. It interests me that this particular law has been conveniently overlooked so that you can…do what, exactly? Make yourself appear to be important? What sort of man does his best to destroy a child’s life for the sake of politics?”

Fudge’s skin tries to take on the multi-toned hues of a dark eggplant. “That isn’t at all what has occurred!”

“I can read, you imbecile,” Salazar replies, unimpressed. “Every day. Every paper. Front page or otherwise, you painted a member of my family as insane, as a vain, attention-seeking fear-monger, a threat—except those traits are what I see reflected in you, Minister.”

Fudge is no longer sputtering. Instead, he looks murderous. “How dare you, sir!”

“How dare you,” Minerva hisses, her eyes glittering with rage. It’s a wonder the Minister doesn’t catch fire from the strength of her gaze. “Harry James Potter is of my House, and every day I’ve had to read of your tarnishing his character, his deeds, and his dead family, while we wait and wring our hands because that same child is missing and feared for. I long thought you an imbecile, but I never thought you cruel and heartless, also!”

Salazar shakes his head. “You might be the most useless man I’ve ever met, and I’ve met many. Now, unless you’re prepared to discuss other business, you will kindly depart.”

“You cannot dismiss me!” Fudge turns his glare on Dumbledore. “Albus, this will not stand!”

“Most of us are sitting,” Dumbledore replies in a mild tone. “It isn’t standing at all, is it?”

“DUMBLEDORE!”

Dumbledore smiles at Fudge in calm reproach. “What are you going to do to me next, Cornelius? You’ve displaced me from all the positions I held but this one, and you have no say over my being Headmaster of Hogwarts.”

“I can have you charged with fear-mongering!” Fudge declares. “Charged with a crime, I would have the power to remove you!”

“You would not.” Salazar looks unimpressed. “Firstly, we have a Deputy Head who would immediately assume the role. Minerva McGonagall has good and decent standards that you would be contending with, but I do not think the Lioness would be so nice about dealing with your nonsense.”

“Certainly not,” Minerva sniffs, looking at Fudge as if he’s a fly that needs swatting. “Especially not after your forced placement of Umbridge in this school, her torture of our students, and her educational campaign intended to leave students ignorant of the subject she was meant to teach!”
“Secondly, there is no way in hell I would let you sack the annoying Gryffindor over there,” Salazar adds, smiling.

“Dumbledore!” Fudge shouts again.

Dumbledore raises his eyebrows. “By rights, he does actually have seniority in this matter, Cornelius. I myself am grateful that one of our Founders finds me tolerable.”

“Hogwarts’ school charter has no allowances for a school governing board of oversight.” Salazar walks forward until he’s only a foot away from Fudge, staring him directly in the face. “You will disband that board of governors, or we’ll simply pretend it doesn’t exist. Either is fine by me. If it makes you feel better to pretend you have control over this school, then I suppose everyone needs to stroke their ego somehow. You will also end your smear campaign against my family member. I don’t care if you refuse to publicly acknowledge Voldemort’s existence, but you will end that campaign against Harry James Potter. The boy has been missing since his birthday. One would think the Ministry would be a bit more concerned with a missing child’s welfare.”

“The Ministry does not concern itself with the welfare of our children,” Aurora mutters in a grim voice. “They never bloody have.”

“Perhaps the Ministry’s grown too big for its britches,” Salazar says musingly.

Nizar sighs. “No, Sal. You do not get to dismantle an entire government. Encourage someone competent to lead it, instead.”

“You’re questioning my—”

“Dear God, shut up!” Severus glares at Fudge until the man blinks in shock and steps back. “We’re not questioning your competency. God knows you don’t have any in the first place!”

It isn’t just Fudge’s worthless bluster, Nizar realizes. He really doesn’t like the man—he hasn’t since the first moment he saw him on first November.

_Perhaps it’s because you once knew him, and found him wanting_, Nizar thinks, and then works to keep the frown from his face. That would make sense, though it’s an annoying sort of sense.

Fudge puffs out several angry breaths. “There is still the matter of the stolen house-elves.”

“I’m afraid you’ll find that Hogwarts was not the party that performed the theft.” Cassandra is who they decided would present Fudge with a copy of the original contract, as she appears the least threatening of all of them—which would be a foolish mistake to make, given what Nizar knows of the Shafiq family.

“What is this?” Fudge unrolls the contract and reads it, his eyes and cheeks bulging as he does so. “This—this is—poppycock!”

“Minister Fudge.” Nizar smiles when Rowena’s 1015 portrait appears next to Elizabeth Burke in her frame. “Did you not yourself admit in this very room that the words of the Founders’ portraits within Hogwarts are Ministry-binding?”

Fudge might actively be trying to swallow his tongue. “I might have admitted to such.”

“Might.” Rowena gives Fudge a flat stare. “That document you are holding, while merely a copy, is a magical reproduction of the original, which resides in the school at this very moment. It is a legal and binding document, Minister Fudge, something I suspect you _must_ have known of already.”
“Why else would you not bring any representative of the M.L.E. with you, if you were so certain a theft had been carried out?” Nizar asks in a quiet voice, smiling at Fudge when the Minister glares at him.

“Unless you were aware already that these families who voiced their concerns were complaining that the beings they stole from their rightful home had been returned to that home by just and legal means.” Quintinus’s smile is nasty. “How many house-elves did you lose this evening, Minister?”

“That is none of your concern.” Fudge rolls up the scroll. “I will be taking this with me.”

“Of course you should do so. Madam Bones already has a copy, after all.” Salazar grins at Fudge. “The magical signatures of the Founders and the contract’s witnesses embed themselves in every single copy. If you attempt to prove it a forgery, you will fail.”

“Is there anything you actually needed today, Cornelius?” Dumbledore asks politely. “While not a school day, it is a Sunday evening, and my staff needs to prepare for Monday morning.”

Fudge’s expression twists up, as if he’s trying to eat an entire lemon at once while also expiring of excessive blood pressure. “No. No other business.” He glowers at Salazar. “I will encourage the Daily Prophet to shift its focus on to other matters.”

“No. You’ll make certain that blasted rag prints a full front page retraction of what it’s said of Harry James Potter.” Salazar tilts his head. “Certainly that’s reasonable enough?”

Fudge pulls his hat down further onto his head until his eyebrows disappear. “Reasonable,” he repeats in a gruff voice. “Very well. You may regret this meeting, Slytherin.”

Salazar affects complete innocence. “Why?”
Plotting

Chapter Summary

"A Slytherin Founder is better than Petunia bloody Dursley any damned day."

Chapter Notes

I kinda forgot it was Friday. (Except now it's Saturday.) Whoops.

All hail the cheerleaders and the betas, @norcumi, @jabberwockypie, @mrsstanley, & @sanerontheinside!

After the Minister has departed through the Floo, Black leans out from behind Hagrid. “Bless you for letting me witness that, Albus. I feel like I’m a year younger.”

“I thought you were going to choke on my coat, trying not to laugh at that man,” Hagrid says.

“I thought Fudge was going to expire on the floor.” Poppy puts one hand to her breast. “That man’s blood pressure cannot possibly be good.”

Severus’s lip curls in disdain. “Maybe he’ll save us all the trouble and drop dead.”

Black winces. “Fuck, but I have to say it: I agree with Sni—with Snape. Why can’t miracles happen?”

“Who would be next in line until a vote could be held? Isn’t his current Undersecretary—oh, my.” Filius begins to smile. “Wouldn’t it be Percy Weasley?”

Hagrid chuckles. “I might pay to see that.”

“Dear Merlin, that would be hilarious,” Rolanda declares, and starts laughing.

“Detrimental, ultimately, as Percy’s agenda would be to continue Cornelius’s agenda,” Dumbledore reminds them, though he is smiling. “I do admit, it would be rather entertaining.”

“Stop disparaging a graduate of my House,” Minerva sniffs. “Even if he is currently acting like a pompous twit.”

“I know there will be those who won’t agree with this sentiment, but after what I just witnessed?” Filius beams at Salazar. “Master Slytherin, welcome back to Hogwarts.”

“If I get to verbally eviscerate pompous idiots every day, it will be quite the welcome indeed,” Salazar replies.

“No, I agree,” Pomona says, to Nizar’s complete surprise. “That was…I just watched you fight on behalf of both our school and a missing child against odious bureaucracy. I have my reservations, but
they are far fewer than before, Master Slytherin.”

“Salazar, please. I’m no one’s master.”

Black has an odd look on his face. “Spoken like a man who understands what it’s like to be trapped in a cage.”

“Of multiple types, yes,” Salazar says. “None of them are the sort I fancy a return to.”

Cassandra lets out a discreet cough. “My apologies, but Albus was right. It’s Sunday evening, it’s still the dinner hour, and some of us have to prepare for the morning.” She, Pomona, Poppy, Aurora, Rolanda, Irma, Quintinus, and Filius file out of the office, leaving Albus, Minerva, Severus, Nizar, Black, Salazar, and Hagrid behind.

“Remember the days when we could just kill those who were so intent on deliberately endangering others to achieve their own selfish ends?” Nizar asks.

“Yes.” Salazar crosses his arms. “I’m still so very tempted.”

Nizar bites back a smile. “Don’t. We’re trying to clean up your House’s reputation, not blast it to smithereens via assassination.”

Black jumps in alarm when a house-elf Apparates into the room, relaxing only when he recognizes the elf. “Oh, Merlin! Kreacher, don’t do that. I need the years I’ve got left in me!”

Kreacher scowls up at Black before ignoring him completely. “Kreacher is looking for the Protector. Gellis and Filky both be telling Kreacher that the Protector is here.”

Nizar glances at Black, but Black just shrugs in confusion. “That would be me, Kreacher. What do you need?”

“Kreacher…” The old, palsied elf looks to be struggling for words. “Kreacher be needing help,” he lets out in a raspy whisper. “Kreacher can only now remember his years in this school. Kreacher forgot—he forgot what he was supposed to remember.”

“How old are you?” Salazar asks as Nizar stares at the house-elf. The name might be familiar, and Kreacher was a Black house-elf…

“Eight centuries and three,” Kreacher answers, clutching his hand to his chest to grasp something hidden under his dingy tea towel.

“Born in 1192,” Severus murmurs. “I hadn’t realized house-elves lived that long.”

“When their people were free to be themselves, their lifespan averaged a thousand years,” Salazar says. “There is more than one reason I’ll see to it that the original contract is recognized.”

The old house-elf frowns before looking at Nizar again. “Kreacher be needing the Protector’s help. Only the Protector’s help!”

“Then they won’t interfere unless I ask, and I won’t ask unless it’s truly necessary.” Nizar steps forward and looks down at Kreacher. “What’s wrong?”

Kreacher pulls the mysterious something and its golden chain over his head. “Kreacher made a promise to Regulus Black. Kreacher promised Master Regulus that he would destroy the bad thing, but Kreacher cannot be doing it.”
“Oh, fuck,” Salazar whispers.

Kreacher gestures for Nizar to holds out his hands. Then the elf drops a locket into Nizar’s left hand.

Nizar freezes in place, staring down at the locket. He almost can’t feel the way it’s burning into his skin, almost can’t hear the whispers trying to weave their way into his thoughts. His eyes are on the round and ornate gold of the locket, the individual emeralds picking out the green $S$.

“No.” Salazar sounds heartbroken. “No, not—no—I’ll BLOODY FUCKING KILL HIM!”

“He doesn’t mean you,” Nizar says to Kreacher.

Kreacher sounds offended. “Kreacher be knowing that.”

“Minerva—find…find something that…” This is a strong soul jar, stronger than Rowena’s corrupted diadem. Why is it stronger?

_Because it’s his third Horcrux. He was still far more himself_, Nizar thinks as instinct fills in the blank spots of what he knows. By the time this was made, Voldemort was a master of crafting inanimate soul jars. “Find an implement that you can use to remove this from my hand by using the chain—but don’t—don’t touch it.”

“What is wrong, Salazar?” Albus asks in concern.

“Fucking bastard,” Salazar hisses. “I’ll send him into oblivion with a smile on my face!”

“Sal!” Nizar barks, catching Salazar’s attention. “No, you won’t, because that isn’t near the vengeance he deserves for this! Now please calm down until I can _think_ again!”

Minerva returns with a long brass pole, one Nizar thinks used to be part of one of Dumbledore’s clutter of odd devices. She slides it through the gold chain; Nizar grits his teeth and refuses to allow his hand to clench around it like the soul jar wants. He should have been able to sense that the moment it entered the castle—

No. House-elf magic. The house-elf didn’t want it noticed, so it wasn’t.

Nizar hisses when the metal is pulled away. His palm is angry and blistering, the pain announcing itself now that the influence of the soul jar is gone.

“Dammit.” Severus grasps Nizar’s wrist in order to inspect the damage. “Are you all right?”

“No. I’m really, really fucking angry,” Nizar replies, swallowing. “It’s just a burn. It’ll heal. It’s what that fucking bastard—” He has to bite back the words, or he’s going to be screaming them. Salazar is staring at the locket in wordless horror, weeping in silence.

“I take it that this item has some significance beyond historical fancy,” Minerva says in a quiet voice.

Salazar nods. “That was my wedding gift to my second wife. I kept it with me for centuries until a magician who married into the Gaunt line stole it. I’ve been searching for it ever since, but never—I never found it.”

“What the fuck is that thing?” Black asks. “I know from the painting downstairs that it’s the Locket of Slytherin, but what _is_ it? It smells like death.”

Nizar tries not to jerk his hand back when a burn cream that feels like liquid ice is slathered over his hand. Severus glares at him in silent order to hold still.
“It’s a Horcrux,” Albus says in tones of great resignation. “One of the items Nizar brought to our attention at the first Order meeting he attended.”


“To see it destroyed,” Kreacher answers, granting Black no title whatsoever. “Master Regulus knew it is being one of the Dark Lord’s weaknesses, and the Master Regulus wanted to see the Dark Lord defeated.”

“Regulus—he did—” Black puts his hand over his mouth and turns away from them, his shoulders hunched.

“He’s cursed it.” Salazar prods at the suspended locket with the tip of his wand, his eyes glittering with fury. “Tom Riddle not only destroyed my wife’s locket by corrupting it, he placed a further curse on the inside. Opening it would be unwise.”

Nizar feels his heart clench. “Then Marion’s portrait is gone.”

Salazar nods. “I’ve the other. It would have been nice to have both, but…I still have the other.”

“What do we do with that thing?” Hagrid asks.


“He’s right.” Salazar steps back from the locket, his face damp with tears. “We’ve no choice.”

Albus gets up from his chair and approaches the fireplace. “There are a few members of the Order who should witness this. Excuse me for a few minutes,” he says, and disappears in a burst of green flame.

“I have to retrieve a tool.” Nizar thinks on it, decides that he no longer cares, and Apparates from the headmaster’s office to his storage room. He retrieves the seax in its sheath from the chest before taking a few minutes to cradle Kanza in his hands, soothing her. She knows that locket, too—she used to curl around it as Marion wore it, saying she made the elegant bit of jewelry even more beautiful just by being near it.

“It smells only of him,” Kanza hisses in displeasure, winding her way through Nizar’s fingers over and over like an angry, glittering ribbon. “It should smell of her.”

“I know, dearest.” Nizar sighs. “Do you want to stay here while it’s destroyed?”

Kanza thinks about it, shakes her head, and then climbs his arm to curl around his neck again. “I will see it destroyed.”

When he Apparates back into the office, Albus has returned with Lupin, Tonks, and Kingsley. Albus gives him a disapproving glance. “The Anti-Apparition Wards exist for a reason, Nizar.”

“As do the exceptions, Albus,” Nizar retorts. “Hello Kingsley, Tonks, Lupin.”

“Good evening,” Kingsley replies, voice and expression equally sober. “I wasn’t expecting to see any of you again so soon after the incident with Victoria Bluebell.”

The Horcrux, Marion’s locket, has been placed on a small table by itself in the middle of the room. “Look, but don’t touch,” Severus tells the others in a harsh voice. “House-elf magic shielded Kreacher from its damage, but not Nizar’s hand.” Nizar holds up his burn paste-coated hand to
demonstrate, though the blisters are already fading.

“Another one.” Lupin frowns down at the locket. “That’s in the Entrance Hall painting of Salazar Slytherin. You’re wearing it in that painting.”

“I kept it after my wife died,” Salazar explains. He’s facing away from the table, his gaze hard and unforgiving. “It was stolen in the 1400s.”

“I’m—that’s terrible, mate. I’m so sorry,” Tonks says.

Salazar nods. “Thank you.”

“How many does this make?” Lupin asks. “How many Horcruxes does that bastard have?”

Nizar glances down at his sheathed blade and counts aloud. “Nagini, the serpent. Marion’s locket. Rowena’s diadem—yes, it was found, and then immediately destroyed, as it had been corrupted just as this locket has been. Tom Riddle’s diary, the one that caused such trouble in 1993. The Potter child. Five Horcruxes.”

Dumbledore gives him a sharp look while the others stare at him in varying levels of disbelief. “I did not want that part known!”

“Too fucking bad.” Nizar isn’t in the mood to dither over any of this nonsense. “Potter is no longer a Horcrux, anyway. The soul shard was removed.”

Black finally finds his voice. “THAT BASTARD DID WHAT TO MY SON?”

“Oh, so you’re admitting to it?” Salazar asks, glancing over his shoulder.

Black clenches his jaw before he shrugs and looks away. “Remus already knew. Then people who came to the house started paying attention to the repaired family tree.”

“Son?” Minerva repeats, wide-eyed.

“Triad-marriage,” Black mumbles, shoving his hands into his robe pockets. “We didn’t tell anyone outside of Remus and Pettigrew because of the war. Harry is James and Lily’s biological child. He’s mine by our marriage.”

“I want t’say congratulations, but it seems a bit late. And a bit crass,” Hagrid says.

Black reaches out and tugs on Hagrid’s coat. “It’s all right, Rubeus. That night—I should have told you.”

“That weren’t your fault, neither.”

“I wish I had known,” Albus says.

“Yes, well.” Black shrugs again. “It’s not like you stopped by Azkaban to ask.”

Nizar keeps his expression still, but inside, he’s feeling all but gleeful. That is dissent, the voice of a man who has suspicions as to the use he is being put to. That is something Nizar can happily work with.

Salazar glances at him. You are Estefania’s evil creation, is the thought lurking in his eyes.

She’d be proud, Nizar responds the same way, and turns his attention back to the others just in time
to catch Severus looking at Black as if he’s finally done something interesting. Nizar and Salazar aren’t the only ones who noticed, then.

“Harry was a Horcrux.” Lupin’s voice is flat with anger. “Please explain that.”

“You cannot create a living Horcrux in the same manner as you create an inanimate one,” Nizar says. “Voldemort didn’t know the difference. He was successful, but the blowback from the improper spell destroyed Voldemort’s physical form in 1981. Sometime afterwards, he must have uncovered the method to do it to the living, else that giant pit viper wouldn’t have been a Horcrux.”

“Ah. I see.” Dumbledore peers over his glasses at Salazar. “I presume this means that you are the reason Mister Potter disappeared after midnight on his birthday.”

“I am,” Salazar replies, his tone full of frost.

“Where is he?” Filius asks. “We’ve been so concerned—”

“Is he all right?” Black is wide-eyed. “My family has terrible ideas on education, Slytherin. If you shove part of yourself into someone else, you have to make—make room.”

“He is well,” Salazar answers, which is true, if unspecific. “I refused to leave him in such unpleasant circumstances. After his last four years at this school, I decided a more personalized education was necessary.”

For a moment, Nizar isn’t certain how Black is going to react. Then he draws in a breath and says, “Thank you. I know what Petunia is bloody well like. Thank you.”

“When will we see him?” Minerva asks.

“He’ll be returned to you in fine working order,” Salazar replies, which is again, not specific, but few seem to notice. Minerva is one of those who do, but she seems willing to wait to seek further answers.

“When?” Rolanda insists.

Salazar glances at her. “When it is proper, and not a moment before.”

Severus frowns and looks at him. Nizar gives a faint shake of his head; he refuses to let that second stupid prophecy become known to anyone in this room.

“Look, I’m actually fine with this. A Slytherin Founder is better than Petunia bloody Dursley any damned day,” Black says, scowling. “And since I really am his legal guardian, it’s my say. Leave it be.”

“Well—” Filius tries, but Hagrid shakes his head.

“Sirius says it’s his call, so it is, Filius,” Hagrid says, frowning. “I’d rather see Harry, too, but I don’t want ’im dead, either.”

“Returning to the matter at hand: I brought you three here because you are the most active members of the Order aside from ourselves,” Dumbledore tells Tonks, Kingsley, and Lupin. “Familiarize yourself with the magic of a Horcrux, though as you’ve been warned, touch it not. If there truly are more Horcruxes aside from this one, we’ll need to be on our guard.”

“The cup. Helga’s cup. Does anyone know where that is?” Nizar asks as the others investigate the
Salazar shakes his head. “There was a family that claimed to be descended from her who took ownership at one point, though if the blood was true, they would have been descendants of Helga’s siblings, not Helga herself. The cup in their possession went missing in…1950, I believe.”

“And one of Miss Smith’s last visitors before both her death and the cup’s disappearance was one Tom Marvolo Riddle,” Dumbledore says, frowning. “Horcrux number six.”

“Seven,” Nizar whispers, seized by absolute certainty. “There are seven. Prime numbers, seven is so bloody important—he made seven.”

“Seven.” Salazar scrubs at his hair “Then after this, two will remain.”

“And with Godric’s historical possession, the sword, safely within Hogwarts, there is no telling what the seventh Horcrux might be,” Minerva says.

“Oh, that’s horrible,” Tonks’s voice interrupts the discussion. Her face scrunches up in distaste as she examines the Horcrux. “He murdered a child to make this.”

“You can tell?” Nizar asks in surprise.

Tonks gives him an absent nod. “We didn’t exactly need to concern ourselves with Horcruxes, but an aspect of Auror training is being able to identify crimes by magical residue. This was made with the death of a desperate child—someone homeless. Easy prey.” She bites her lip. “That completely rotten bastard.”

Kingsley gives Tonks a grim smile. “Some of us are more skilled in this area than others. I knew it was crafted by murder, but my senses are not fine enough to determine the victim’s identity.”

“Albus.” Severus waits until he has Dumbledore’s attention. “If you care at all for that table, you’ll find something else to rest that Horcrux on when it’s destroyed. Their deaths are…messy.”

Dumbledore nods. “I recall Nizar saying as much. The table is replaceable.”

Nizar looks at his brother. “Salazar?”

Salazar shakes his head. “I can’t, hermanito. It would be too much like stabbing her, and I’ve few enough memories left of Marion. I’d like to not taint what remains.”

Nizar nods, walks over, and presents the seax to Black. “You’ve lost much to Voldemort. It’s your kill,” he says of the soul jar.

Black pulls the blade free of its sheath. “I thought it took basilisk venom to destroy one.”

“It’s on there already. Don’t touch the edge of the blade,” Nizar warns him. “All you have to do is either stab it or chop the fucking thing in half. The venom does the rest.” Then he turns away. He cannot watch this process. He witnessed the diadem’s death, and that was hard enough. This is worse; this is as if Voldemort personally attacked his family, and it fills him with rage and grief in equal measure.

There is a long pause, fraught with tension. “What’s wrong, Sirius?” Kingsley asks.

“It’s a nasty bit of work, and it’s loud. Keeps trying to convince me not to destroy it, because I’d be destroying something that rightfully belongs to James and Harry. The bloodline. That’s all true, isn’t
Black asks Salazar.

Salazar doesn’t turn around to answer the question. “Your son by marriage is a descendant of a younger cousin of mine. Eneko was also of the Deslizarse line, though he didn’t bear the name.”

“Come on, Sirius,” Lupin encourages Black in a tight voice. “It’s no longer theirs. It’s Voldemort’s, and I remember the strength you once used to fight against that bastard. Use it now, you stubborn shit!”

“I love it when you’re encouraging,” Black replies in a dry voice.

“Just stab the fucking thing!” Lupin retorts.

“When it starts to eat through the table, you’re going to want to Vanish it,” Nizar says, and then a horrendous, shrill scream rends the air. The tone is different—a child’s denial and fear is intermixed with Voldemort’s soul fragment’s tortured screaming.

Somewhere in Britain, Voldemort is feeling this death. Nizar hopes he enjoys it.

“Oh, Merlin, that is horrifying,” he hears Minerva whisper. “That poor lass.”

“Black blood. It is bleeding black—oh, it’s black acidic blood.” Tonks’s voice is thick with distaste. “Are all Horcruxes like that?”

“If you destroy them? Sometimes, though Voldemort’s Horcruxes seem to be more dramatic than others we’ve dealt with,” Nizar answers her. “If you’re removing a soul jar safely from a living thing? No, it’s nothing like this. That has a lot more to do with Mind Magic.”

“I’m Vanishing this,” Kingsley says after another minute. “It’s very close to eating through the wood, and I imagine it would damage this floor.”

“It might curse this floor.” Nizar’s chest is aching like he’s taken a hard blow, but he sounds normal enough. “Child, diary, snake, diadem, locket,” he murmurs under his breath as Kingsley utters the spell to Vanish the table. “Five. Five is a strong number, but it’s not enough. It has to be seven.”

“Are you certain?” Severus asks him in a low voice close to his ear. Nizar was so distracted by grief that he didn’t even notice Severus’s approach.

“We know that’s not the last, and seven is an important number. Voldemort used items that held great significance to him,” Nizar says in a louder voice, so that the others will hear. “Voldemort isn’t dead; I would know.”

“Because you are Britanni Bellum dux Magum,” Minerva says, and Nizar nods. It only took a house-elf’s declaration and a dream to make him pay attention to what one of his senses has been trying to tell him for months. He can feel the threat Voldemort represents like an ill cloud to the southeast, but to a war mage it’s merely threat in potentia.

“That’d be a short list. I went to school wi’ that bloke. Tom Riddle was never much fond of anything,” Hagrid says.

“Hogwarts.” Dumbledore sounds thoughtful. “He was exceptionally fond of Hogwarts, considering he wished to dwell here all year round as a student. He desired to work here when he thought he’d gained enough of an education to impress the Headmaster. Unfortunately for him, Dippet was gone. I was Headmaster, and I refused to grant Tom Marvolo Riddle the Defence posting he applied for. That is when he cursed the post.”
“No.” Nizar shakes his head as he turns around, glad to see that both table and Horcrux are gone.
“That’s when he made the curse worse. The first curse he created was much older, meant to prepare the Headmaster of Hogwarts to be willing to accept a young teacher out of desperation. Others kept taking the post for Defence, remaining a year or two, and then quitting for sudden, often inexplicable reasons.”

Dumbledore rubs at his beard. “Yes, that’s true enough. And there is that interference you spoke of, meant to prevent true learning from taking place. Yes…yes, I could see how Tom would have been planning such, even before he left Hogwarts upon graduating.”

“Can Voldemort make more?” Tonks asks, still wrinkling her nose over the soul jar’s death. “More Horcruxes, I mean.”

“Not after using really slipshod necromancy to gain a body,” Nizar replies with a grim smile. “Stupid and sloppy. He gave himself unchanging life. He can’t split off another part of his soul even if he wanted to.”

“That’s convenient, at least. We won’t have to worry about tracking down new Horcruxes every month.” Lupin sits down in a chair, looking drained and exhausted. It makes Nizar more determined to find the original potion, which never left Galiena with these sorts of terrible aftereffects. It’s the bloody new moon, not anywhere near the full moon, and Lupin still looks ill.

“We need to get back,” Tonks says, and Kingsley nods. “We stole a bit of time to come here, and if we linger, it’ll be noticed.”

“Thank you for informing us of this,” Kingsley adds. The Floo turns green and they’re gone, vanishing through the flames.

“I need to be seeing to Fang,” Hagrid mutters. “Think I might need a bit of air after seeing that thing die, too.” When he goes out, Minerva follows him.

“I suppose we should go back,” Black begins to say to Lupin, but Nizar catches his attention.

“My apologies. I’d like to speak with you, if you don’t mind.”

Black looks surprised. “All right.”

“I feel the need for clearer air. I do believe I’ll go on to the dining hall.” Dumbledore rises and exits the office, leaving them alone.

“Well?” Black asks.

Nizar glances up at all the portraits. Some he trusts; others, he doesn’t. “Not here.”

“My quarters, then,” Salazar offers. “Severus, Remus Lupin, feel free to join us.”

“I think I’m too curious not to,” Lupin says. Severus gives Nizar a bitter glare, but otherwise seems resigned to the necessity.

Then there is the matter of a house-elf blocking Nizar’s path. “Kreacher is grateful to Master Slytherin,” he says. “You is being correct, and Master Regulus…Master Regulus be speaking of you before. You were kind to him.” The house-elf hugs Nizar’s legs. “Thank you for helping Kreacher to keep his promise to Master Regulus.”

“You’re—you’re welcome,” Nizar manages, and the house-elf Disapparates the moment he finishes
“I know you’re plotting.” Severus murmurs in Nizar’s ear as they descend the moving staircase.

“When am I not plotting, Severus?” Nizar asks, and smiles when Severus takes his hand.

On the fourth floor, Salazar introduces Black to Fortunata. It’s Lupin who smiles at once in recognition. “I used to speak to her when I was too ill to go to class after the full moon. I’d no idea she was your daughter.”

“If I told anyone, they would cease to speak to me. You would have, also,” Fortunata says in a gentle voice.

“I probably would have. I was a twit,” Lupin agrees. “But not now, Lady Fortunata. Sirius?”

Black sighs. “I’m behaving myself, Remus. I am. I am going into a Slytherin’s home willingly, and I will not be an arse.”

“It’s very…Slytherin,” Lupin says diplomatically of the green sofas and the silver-embroidered throw pillows.

“The elves decided upon a theme as they updated the interior over the centuries, and they kept at it,” Salazar replies, waving his hand at the portraits. “My family. Please feel free to introduce yourselves; I need to borrow my brother for a moment.”

“And bloody well be polite,” Severus orders the other two in an unforgiving voice, scowling.

“I do actually have manners!” Black insists, but then the door closes behind them after Salazar drags Nizar into the nearest bedroom. This one is still set up to be a sleeping chamber, and bears hints of Betisa’s tastes.

Nizar reaches out and hugs Salazar without being asked. “I’m sorry.”

Salazar’s arms tighten around him, almost to the point of pain. “I’ve borne so much, hermanito. I thought I could bear anything now, but I was wrong. It’s as if I’ve lost her all over again!”

Nizar rests his hand on the back of Salazar’s neck. “No. You lost her once, a long time ago, and too damned soon. You still have a portrait in that sitting room who will remind you of all that was, and one day, you’ll see them all again. So will I.”

Salazar steps back and dries his face. “You’re so bloody sensible when you’re not the one having the emotional breakdown.”

“Someone has to stay sane while everyone else loses their minds,” Nizar says. “Besides, I’m not—I’m angry, Sal. That was my response to this. I’m really fucking angry, and I am going to do my best to make him suffer in a way that best suits Tom Marvolo Riddle.”

“And I’m certain it will be worthy.” Salazar cleans his face again. “Right. Let’s go back out there, if only to ensure those three refrain from murdering each other.”

When they return to the sitting room, Severus is seated on the sofa that faces the portraits, watching Lupin and Black in complete disapproval as they examine—or in Lupin’s case, actually address—the portraits on the wall. Ouen is awake and excitedly talking to Lupin about his werewolf cousin Galiena.
“Where is she?” Lupin asks, looking both charmed and baffled by the portrait’s enthusiasm.

“My quarters,” Nizar offers, which gains him their attention.

Salazar waves his hand at the unoccupied sofa. “Please, have a seat. Dobby?”

Dobby pops into the room, wearing silver ladies gloves without the fingers, gold socks on his ears, and an emerald green tea towel. “What is the Master Salazar wanting?”

“For you to please call me by another title,” Salazar requests, wincing. “I say it true when I tell everyone I’m no man’s master. Could you bring tea for five, Dobby?”

Dobby tilts his head as he looks at Salazar. “Not a master. Then…you is being Professor Salazar, so there is not being confusion with the Professor Slytherin!” he declares, and disappears.

“But I’m not—” Salazar rolls his eyes. “Fine. It was true once anyway, even if we used no such titles.”

“Twenty Galleons says you’re teaching again before the end of February,” Nizar says.

Salazar glares at him. “Thirty if I’m not,” he insists. Nizar smiles in acceptance. He already knows who is going to win this wager.

Lupin finally tears his eyes away from the portraits to sit, and Black follows. “That moment with the stone platform. Can you do that all the time?”

Salazar shakes his head. “No. It takes time to convince stone to move in such a fashion, even with magic. The act was swift because I began planning such a thing with the castle the moment I was informed as to what sort of person we were to be meeting.”

Lupin stares at Salazar. “You mean you went into that meeting already plotting to humiliate Fudge.”

“Wouldn’t you?” Salazar counters. “I am not fond of the despicable, and I know exactly what sort of man he is. Besides: did it not prove my point?”

“Speaking of points…please, can we quickly get to the point of this meeting?” Black requests. “Snape is trying to set me on fire with his eyes, and I have concerns he might actually succeed.”

“Not like it’ll be your first time being set on fire,” Lupin mutters.

“The point: Black, do you know where your family originates from?” Nizar asks. “In truth, not the limits of the townhouse’s tree.”

“Call me Sirius, please,” Black requests. “And no, I don’t. I know the Ancient and Noble part of the family name is meant to be literal, but not how. I take it you do?”

“He was a Slytherin. Of course I do.” Nizar sits down on the sofa when Dobby returns with a tea tray and immediately grabs a cup. His head aches from the Horcrux’s feel, not to mention its death, and he wants something familiar.

“Even I don’t know this,” Salazar admits, waiting for the others to take tea or decline before pouring a cup. “I was a bit preoccupied with trying to learn the new blasted language everyone was speaking when I returned to England. I left français and Old English behind and returned to the monstrosity that is Middle English.”

Lupin smiles. “That would have been a bit confusing, yes.”
“In the year 1330, there was born a prince who would be known first as Edward of Woodstock. At age two, he would become the Earl of Chester; at age six he would become the very first duke named in the kingdom of England: Edward, Duke of Cornwall. When he came of age and proved himself to be one hell of a military commander, the black armor he wore earned him the name of the Black Prince.”

“Royalty.” Black stares at Nizar. “You’re kidding me.”

“I’d be attempting to come up with something more fanciful if I were,” Nizar says dryly. “Edward’s second and acknowledged illegitimate child was also named Edward, born in 1353. He was intelligent, charming, and unfortunately for his father, he was magical.”

“England hadn’t yet rescinded its ban against magic-workers dwelling in the kingdom. The Black Prince’s younger son Richard II, King of England—he saw the sense in having capable defenders of his realm and did away with Æthelred’s ban. Of course, this unfortunately helped lead to his being deposed, but no one re instituted the ban until someone got it into their head to outlaw witchcraft.” Salazar shakes his head. “James I of Scotland was a terrible influence.”

“But we’re back to young Edward, older than Richard and magical. Edward came to Hogwarts to dwell here for the rest of his childhood, and in the non-magical records it’s listed that he died young—all meant to safeguard a royal magical child who was technically Heir to the English throne.”

Nizar smiles. “Excellent example of a Slytherin. He stood out in a century that is largely forgotten for me. He wrote to the Black Prince that he was giving up any claim on the throne, and took the name Edward Black in honor of his father. You’re descended from the first duke of England. The only reason you’re not still a recognized magical duke is the Statute of Secrecy.”

Black is frowning. “We could have lost that title at any point, especially if there wasn’t a direct line of descent.”

“There was. Your family held the title until the Statute passed—they were all Slytherins, Black!” Nizar adds when Black still looks doubtful. “Of course I knew who still bore what title!”

Salazar is looking at Nizar with a half-curved smile on his face. “Oh, little brother. I sense shenanigans.”

“It’s your own fault for giving me the idea in the first place,” Nizar replies. “The second point I wished to discuss is this: in our day, and for the longest time, there was no Ministry. There was a magical Council, and it existed solely to judge crimes of a magical nature, as they would understand the magic involved better than a non-magical court. Otherwise, we magicians were subjects governed by the land we lived in, and we followed those rules. We were not a separate community, nor are we meant to be. The Ministry came about not long after the Statute, claiming that secrecy meant separation from the non-magical world…which the Statute does not speak of.”

“Right. The Statute’s only concern is keeping magic secret from Muggles,” Lupin says in agreement.

Nizar sighs. “Muggle is an insult. Please stop using that word, even if I can’t remember why it’s an insult.”

“I don’t recall, either,” Salazar adds. “I only remember that it’s a very old insult.”

Black suddenly treats Nizar to sharp focus that reminds him very much of Narcissa. “The Britannia Bellum dux Magum has to be known to the throne of the land in which they reside. You have to meet the Queen, and if you’re planning to swear protective fealty to the Crown…you won’t be a citizen of only Wizarding Britain. You’ll be a citizen of the United Kingdom, one Her Majesty can
choose to recognize by noble title as well as war mage title.”

Severus raises an eyebrow at Lupin. “Did prison make him more intelligent?”

Lupin snorts. “More political-minded, maybe, once he calmed down. He was always smart; he just chose to act like a complete imbecile.”

“I resent that. I chose to act like three-quarters of an imbecile,” Black responds. “When you meet the Queen, you want me to accompany you.”

“Among others,” Nizar says. “Those who I know once held title and will be open to the idea.”

“You’re right.” Salazar reaches out to nudge Nizar’s shoulder. “Our sister would be pleased, and she would be crowing about it for months on end.”

“What is the purpose of having certain wizards as dual citizens and Crown-recognized nobility?” Severus asks, giving Nizar a narrow-eyed look of suspicion.

Nizar smiles. “Well, if you’re going to dismantle a most unnecessary form of government, this is how you start.”

Black leans back against the sofa, looking thoughtful. Severus’s eyebrows have gone up in surprise. It’s Lupin who puts down his teacup and stares at Nizar. “Why the bloody hell would we want to do that?”

“Magicians going to prison without trial,” Nizar says softly, and Lupin stills. “Werewolves in chains instead of being treated as the human beings they are. Bigotry to a horrifying extent. While the sentiment did exist in our time, such prejudices did not keep magical students from receiving an education. We had werewolves, half-giants, half-Veelas—all of those magical beings who are compatible enough with humans to produce children. Hogwarts hosted them all. The school governing board would have denied a student like Miss Fleur Delacour from attending Hogwarts. Fortunately, France’s school isn’t that fucking stupid.

“Hagrid should have had a full education, and only managed his first three years before Tom Riddle effectively used whispers of rumor about giant heritage against him. It doesn’t matter that Hagrid’s name has been cleared; he can’t finish his schooling because anyone with giant blood is also banned from Hogwarts. Getting rid of the governing board’s influence is only the first step in rectifying that—the Heads of House all need to be in agreement to rescind all of that nonsense. In the meantime, we have a government that is directed by only one man. A badly structured Wizengamot with only one person who chooses which crimes will see a trial, and which will not—though with a current lack of a Chief Warlock, it’s now one single member of the M.L.E.”

Nizar pauses, locking eyes with Black. “Who was in charge of the Wizengamot in 1981, Sirius Black? Who decided you were to receive no trial, while Bellatrix Lestrange, Rodolphus Lestrange, Rabastan Lestrange, and Barty Crouch Junior received an extensive one overseen by Bartemius Crouch? You were accused of killing twelve and betraying two more. The four of them literally killed hundreds.”

Black swallows before nodding. “That has occurred to me, yes. It’s not as if there is much to do in Azkaban aside from think, and I can think just as well in my Animagus form as I can otherwise.”

“You’re plotting a revolution,” Lupin says, looking gravely concerned.

“No. Those are messy and often result in worse consequences,” Nizar replies in disdain. “If you want to truly change the system, you use its own rules, but you use them your way.”
“Estefania’s terrible creation,” Salazar repeats. Nizar reaches out and slaps his head, which just makes Salazar chuckle.

“Are you saying that Albus deliberately made that choice against Black?” Severus asks. His expression is still, but there is a disturbed flicker in his eyes.

“Not necessarily. I think it’s probably more accurate to say that he let emotions rule his decision regarding Sirius Black, and that is the problem. Despite a court’s presence, two people hold all of the power in Wizarding Britain,” Nizar says. “Even the throne of León had more bloody oversight than that.”

“One man made a choice in anger, and there was no one to stop him.” Lupin slowly nods. “I can’t say I agree with your aims, but I certainly agree with your reasons.”

“Why not? My aims are to have magicians of this isle realize that they are not separate from it. The Muggle-borns and the Half-bloods know it; most of them live in both worlds. They pay bloody taxes to one of them if they have British-recognized property or employment. I’m discussing the restoration of fair representation. That’s it.”

“Then why bother with magical titled nobility?” Lupin asks, scowling.

“Because those who were titled magical nobility were, in later centuries, almost always Pure-bloods.” Salazar has a sharp grin on his face. “And who does the Ministry cater to, Remus Lupin?”

“The Pure-bloods,” Black answers when Lupin is silent. “If you convince those who have the most influence first….”

“Even if it takes a while, opinion will shift to match those with the most power.” Severus crosses his arms. “When is this meeting?”

“Saturday, the third day of February.” Nizar looks down at his half-drunk tea and taps his finger to the cup to warm it again. “Salazar?”

“I’m already a citizen of the United Kingdom under a false name.” Salazar shrugs. “I haven’t been recognized as a citizen under my own name on this isle since the days of Moray. It might be nice to have that back.”

“How many are in Hogwarts?” Severus asks. “How many students in this school come from formerly titled families?”

“A handful. Not many,” Nizar replies. “I’d rather take a very small group that I trust to behave, to want their titles back for the right reasons, and who will understand exactly what it means to become a citizen of the United Kingdom, not just Wizarding Britain.”

Lupin still appears to disapprove. “Suppose we were to go along with all of this. When would it begin?”

“If Fudge keeps his word and prints the retraction, that’s the moment it begins.” Salazar props his chin on his fist and looks pleased with himself.

Lupin’s eyes widen before he groans and drops his head back against the sofa. “Oh, God. I can’t believe I fucking missed that!”

“How can you expect to be a competent werewolf spy if you overlook something that damned obvious?” Severus asks in irritated disbelief.
“He’s just getting slow in his old age.” Black pats Lupin’s shoulder. “It’s all right. We’ll put you in the best werewolf hospice money can buy.”

“Oh, fuck you,” Lupin replies, putting his hands over his face.

“Holy shit.” Black pauses mid-motion, his eyes huge. “I just realized—a citizen of the United Kingdom can ask for asylum. I could ask the Queen for asylum from the Ministry, and the Ministry would have to abide by it if she grants it.”

“That had also crossed my mind, yes.” Nizar grins. “Well?”

“I’m in,” Black says. “Remus, even if you don’t agree—”

“I’m participating,” Lupin emphasizes, “if only to be certain that one of us is present to be the voice of reason.”

“Then dear God, find someone else, because you’re bloody terrible at it,” Severus retorts. “I watched you fail at being the voice of reason for five-and-a-half years.”

Lupin hesitates. “Seven. It should have been seven years of you watching me fail at it. I never really did grow much of a spine until we were fighting in the war.”

Severus doesn’t flinch or allow his expression to change. “It should have been, yes, but what is done is done.”

“I have to ask—was that bit in the paper on the eighth of this month a political ploy?” Black asks Nizar.

Nizar gives him an innocent look. “Of course it was. Not my political ploy, mind.”

Black makes a face. “More directly, then. Are you and Snape actually...you know. Dating?” He says the word like it tastes bad.

“Is that still an accurate term?” Nizar asks Severus.

“We’re not engaged, betrothed, or wed, so yes,” Severus responds in a curt voice.

“Yes, but—” Black glances at Severus again, who glares back. “Are you happy?”

Nizar rubs the bridge of his nose. “Yes. Why the fucking interview, Black?”

Salazar curses in three different languages and slaps his hand over his face. “Compitalia. You were in close confines with a werewolf three days before the fucking full moon.”

“Oh.” Nizar blinks a few times. Lupin looks as if he wants the floor to swallow him; Black just seems miserable. “Yes, that would definitely do it.”

“Can we Obliviate them?” Severus asks, scowling as he realizes what that means.

“No—well, not yet,” Nizar decides, to Black and Lupin’s obvious relief. Too bad for them that he’s busy thinking about political leverage. “They haven’t told anyone else, which means they’ve learned some bloody discretion since the 1970s. That took long enough.”

Severus does not look impressed. “Obliviation would be simpler.”

“All right. Go ahead. Then you can explain your actions to the three children lurking in those portrait
frames who dearly want to meet their grandfather by marriage,” Nizar says flatly.

“Please, Severus,” Galiena says as Lupin and Black turn around in surprise. “Do you have any idea how long it’s been since I’ve had another werewolf to speak to? They’ve been banned from Hogwarts since the fourteenth century!”

“Er—hello?” Black’s voice is high-pitched in response to the three new faces. Nizar thinks dark thoughts about Sirius Black deserving this shock for giving him the same, even if he’s used Mind Magic to delay his response. The emotional inconvenience of the situation has to wait.

“You must be Galiena,” Lupin says to Nizar’s daughter.

“I am,” she replies, inclining her head.

Nizar sighs. “Galiena deSlizarse, Brice deSlizarse, and Elfric deSlizarse, this is Remus Lupin and Sirius Black.”

“Well that just made this ten times worse,” Black croaks. “I’ve got grandchildren, and they’re…”

“Long dead, yes.” Brice looks sympathetic. “Time can be a circle, but that doesn’t make it a kind one.”

“We never had grandparents of any sort, even before Father claimed us,” Galiena translates for Elfric, who has abandoned Old English in a fit of nerves and resorted to Parseltongue.

“Just as we never had a great-aunt or uncle,” Imeyna adds.

“But Father talked about you, sometimes—especially you, Remus, given that I was infected with lycanthropy at age six,” Galiena says. “You could say we know of both of you from two different perspectives.”

“I have no—I have no idea what to say,” Black whispers as he turns around.

“I do.” Lupin clasps his hands. “We understand why you wouldn’t announce such a thing.”

“Voldemort,” Black says, his eyes narrowing in anger.

“But why not tell us?” Lupin asks.

“Please recall that I mentioned the Preservation Charm’s magic didn’t function as it should. The first time we met on tenth December? For me, that might as well be the literal first time,” Nizar says. “I don’t remember you. I don’t remember being that child. I didn’t even know until the nineteenth!”


Severus treats them to a look of complete disdain. “Considering it’s been three weeks and you’re both still committed to hapless flailing? Better than you.”

Black glowers at him. “Excuse my hapless flailing, Severus Snape! I learned my son is still alive and then immediately had to contend with the fact that I’ve lost him anyway! Of course I’m still fucking flailing!”

Severus frowns until Nizar glances at him. “The magical adoption. It’s magic-binding, it’s blood-binding—magical adoptions are permanent. I don’t have a biological connection to Sirius Black. I can’t be legally recognized as his Heir in any form. I don’t blame him for being upset.”
“And there is the fact that you said you hadn’t yet forgiven me for 1975,” Black says with a wince.

“No, I haven’t. Have you ever apologized and meant it? Or more specifically—have you ever apologized in a manner in which you were not thinking only of yourself or Remus Lupin?” Nizar asks bluntly.

Black cringes a little. “No. Maybe I should have, but I’m a petty bastard who was fully convinced there was no point in apologizing to someone who was eventually going to prove out to be the enemy.”

“Fuck you, too,” Severus growls.

“Yes, I know!” Black throws his hands up into the air. “Petty bastard—I did mention that part, right?”

“I’m not hearing anything enlightening,” Nizar says.

“Yes, well…I’m still trying to come to terms with you and him,” Black mutters. “One miracle at a time, all right?”

“He means, ‘Can we speak to you?’ now that this is something we’ve discussed and didn’t get Obliviated over.” Lupin musters a vague smile. “If you’re not opposed to the idea. Both of us fucked up beyond belief in regards to our responsibilities, and fortunately, you survived it.”

“With bloody intervention,” Salazar puts in, annoyed. “And I’m not just speaking of Albus Dumbledore.”

“Yes, well…that, too,” Lupin admits. “We’ve been wondering since second January when we realized what had to have occurred regarding Harry—I mean Nizar.” Lupin makes a face. “Sorry, I…Sirius had to explain to me what a real magical adoption was, and I’m still getting used to how final they are.”

Black reaches out long enough to grip Lupin’s shoulder. “Time-Turners exist. Was it that?”

“No,” Salazar replies. “But the magic is similar to what empowers a Time-Turner. In fact, it’s a bit terrifying in its simplicity, which is why I’ll be telling no one how it works. I’ve only ever used it twice, myself—once to test it, and once to save my brother’s life.”

Severus gives Salazar a look of polite disbelief. “You sent yourself back in time.”

“By a month. I did make certain to stay out of my own way, but I had to know the magic would work as it should.” Salazar shakes his head. “It does, however, knock you on your arse.”

“Of which I remember nothing at all.” Nizar looks at Lupin and Black. His life is already strange; he can handle this. “I’m not opposed to…to speaking, but only on three conditions.”

“Name them,” Black says at once.

“I hate the disparate terms,” Nizar complains under his breath before saying, “I know you’re both trained in Mind Magic, what you call Legilimency and Occlumency. Lycorus Black made it mandatory that all children of the Black family were to learn both before they were allowed to socialize with anyone outside the family. Werewolves have a natural defence against someone attempting to pry into their thoughts, but I imagine you’ve only improved upon it since then.”

“I have,” Lupin says, “but those aren’t conditions.”
“No. That would be the first if you hadn’t, as Dumbledore is a Mind Magic practitioner with some very rude habits,” Nizar replies. “The first condition is you tell no one about this. I don’t care if they’re family, in the Order, or you’re going to fucking marry them tomorrow—no one else.”

Lupin and Black glance at each other. “Done,” Lupin says heavily. “We’re sort of out of close companions to confide in, anyway.”

“Condition two is that you have to send word in advance, which ties into condition three: those discussions you’re interested in having can only occur in mine or Salazar’s quarters. I don’t trust walls in other places not to have ears.”

“That’s reasonable,” Black says at the same time that Lupin asks, “What’s wrong with Grimmauld Place? If there is a security problem, the Order needs to know.”

Nizar hesitates. “It isn’t only his rude habits regarding Legilimency. I don’t trust Dumbledore. At all. And before you say anything,” he warns Severus and Salazar, “it isn’t just about what the Founders told you. It’s something else.”

“What else?” Salazar asks, frowning.

“I don’t know!” Nizar exclaims in frustration. “If I knew, I’d actually say!”

Severus lets out an irritated huff of air and reaches into his robe. He draws out the silk bag that holds the tarot cards and removes the deck.

“I didn’t know you had much faith in Divination,” Lupin observes in a mild voice.

Severus doesn’t deign to respond. Instead, his fingers pluck along the edges of the cards until he draws one forth and puts it on the table between the sofas. “Fuck.”

Black glances at it. “Elderberry. I’m already aware of the fact that we missed dinner, and dessert.”

“No, you idiot,” Severus says at his most caustic. “That’s a raw example of the plant and berry. All but one species of elderberry is poisonous if it isn’t cooked first, and even that exception can make you ill if ingested raw.”

“I don’t think this is in regards to a literal poisoning.” Salazar is studying the card with his bearded chin clasped in his hand. “Does anyone know what that man’s wand looks like?”

“Fifteen inches, with some oddly carved elderberry designs. Really not the best sort for dueling, not with the weight on it so uneven,” Black says.

“Then it’s only a descriptor card for Albus.” Lupin looks relieved. “Nothing else.”

“Probably. Or his wand is involved in some important future event.” Salazar continues to gaze at the card before he Summons a shallow silver bowl, one that looks vaguely familiar. It isn’t until Salazar holds it out to Nizar that he recognizes it.

“Seriously?” Nizar conjures two handfuls of snow and dumps them into the bowl. “You could conjure your own bloody ice, you lazy shit.”

Salazar murmurs the charm under his breath that warms the bowl and melts the ice. “Yes, but you always have a much easier time of calling forth raw elements than I do.”

“Since when?”
“Well—not all of them,” Salazar murmurs. “Definitely water, though, which used to drive everyone to drink, as you’re not actually a Water-Speaker.”

Lupin winces and rubs his ears when Salazar’s wand strikes the side of the bowl three times, the sound ringing out like a gong. “What the hell is that noise?”

“Well, definitely water. I’ve seen it before—water reminiscent of the River Styx. There’s some danger there.” Salazar’s voice is chilling, his eyes intense as he glances down at the bowl. “I saw it several times during the last war.”

“What?” Nizar asks.

Salazar leans over and puts the bowl on the table, revealing that it’s full of rippling black water. “The last time I scryed and received nothing but water reminiscent of the River Styx, the newly dead had just been raised as Inferi to do another’s bidding. I saw it several times during the last war.”

“Please do not tell me Albus has gotten into the habit of raising the dead,” Severus says in displeasure.

“No.” Salazar strikes the bowl again and the water clears. “I think that your card and this water are showing interrelated events, not events Dumbledore causes. If it’s truly related to Nizar’s ill feeling, it may only mean that the man does not handle the situation well.”

“Is there a good way to deal with Inferi?” Lupin asks.

Salazar glances at him, a hard set to his mouth. “Yes. Burn them to ash and put them out of their misery.”

Nizar decides to leave Severus and Salazar to potentially have an argument about elderberries—or about Divination. Nizar isn’t certain which it will be, but he knows the expressions on both their faces, and neither is convinced as to the other’s interpretation of their findings. He announces that he’s sending Lupin and Black off before he leads them upstairs to the seventh floor. “Disillusionment Charm,” he murmurs, and they obey without hesitation. Lupin has potential excuses as to why he’d be in the castle, but Black does not.

“You live in the Room of Requirement,” Black says in surprise when they arrive in the corridor. Then he boggles as Nizar’s door appears without any pacing needed. “How the—how are you—how did you do that?”

“It’s my room,” Nizar replies, amused. “I created it, Sirius.” He pushes the door open, makes certain there are still no curious students milling about, and then ushers the other two inside so they can drop the Disillusionment Charms.

“You created it...because you were here when Hogwarts was still being built.” Lupin lets out a low whistle as he takes in the large space of the classroom.

“Sort of, but I’m also tied into this castle’s magic. I don’t have the same sort of dramatic potential Salazar demonstrated for that idiot Minister, but creating something within an existing space? That isn’t difficult, just tiring.” Nizar decides not to mention that he doesn’t remember anything of how to do so. That lack is irritating enough on its own.
“What did Salazar Slytherin do to Fudge?” Lupin asks curiously.

Black grins. “I’ll tell you later.” Then he takes another look around the room. “I’ve been in here before. I wanted privacy and asked for a room no one was using. Tried to open that door over there, and it bloodied my hand.”

“Good. Opening others’ doors without permission is rude.” Nizar is glad the S is still flipped for his quarters; he only has to open the door. “Come in. You can leave by my Floo instead of risking Dumbledore’s office, but don’t try to Floo here without making certain I know of it first. I keep it blocked and warded. Also, I hate the fucking thing.”

“You always did.” Black peers around the sitting room. “You told me. Not nearly as elegantly as ‘Fuck Floo Travel’ but close enough.”

“I stand by that opinion, thank you.” Nizar shuts the door. “Oh, the children are back.”

“At this point, we’re stalking all of you,” Bryce says dryly. “It’s something for a portrait to do.”

Nizar turns around to find that Black is staring at the snowy owl’s portrait. “Hello, Hedwig. I suppose that answers the question as to what became of you, too.” Hedwig tries to butt up against her painting to say hello to Black. Apparently Black is a likeable sort unless he’s decided he hates you—which, Nizar thinks in amusement, is very much a Black family trait.

“Can I ask…” Black gestures at his own hair. “What happened there?”

“I only remember it being like this,” Nizar replies. “Though this lighter color is actually from sun exposure, before the portrait. Without sunlight, my hair is the same color as Salazar’s.” He can’t resist smiling. “I used to match Salazar’s hairstyle if we were going to visit people we didn’t like, and they couldn’t bloody well tell us apart. That was a lot of fun.”

“There.” Black points at him, a faint smile on his face. “That is James Potter’s idea of a pleasant evening.”

“Yes, but I count getting to stab the deserving as part of the fun,” Nizar says.

Lupin snorts. “And that would be Lily.”

Nizar thinks on Lily’s devoted friendship with Severus, and what it took to destroy it. “Somehow, I’m not really surprised. I don’t remember how to put my hair back the way it was for...for myself. Then.” That sounded unbelievably awkward. “My eyes, I can do, but I’ve looked like this for over a thousand years. This is me.”

“I don’t care. You’re alive, and you’re all right. That’s all I wanted,” Black insists.

“Even if he’s still baffled about the Slytherin bit.” Lupin looks amused when Black glares at him.

“More the one thousand years old part, but yes, the Slytherin bit is also...odd,” Black finally admits.

“How would you have handled it if you’d come out of Azkaban and discovered you had a son in Slytherin instead of Gryffindor?” Nizar asks.

Black frowns. “Given that I was about three-quarters out of my bloody mind at the time, I’m really not sure if I noticed the colors on your school uniform. I just saw you.”

“Good answer.”
“Why?” Black asks, just before he starts to smile. “You argued with the Hat.”

“Apparently so. Severus once overheard my third-year self confide that to a first-year Gryffindor. The Hat’s first choice was not Gryffindor,” Nizar says. “Draco had such terrible inclinations towards acting like his father when he was younger.”

“You’re James and Lily’s child. I wouldn’t have been surprised,” Lupin mutters.

Nizar wants to ask questions, to discuss his parents, to learn what they were like beyond James’s hatred of Severus and Lily’s kindness—and he can’t. The words stick in his throat. “You should go,” he says instead. “Everyone missed dinner, and I’d very much like to lie to Dumbledore about how long you were here, and what was discussed.”

“What are we going to say was discussed?” Lupin asks as he runs his hand along the scarred wood of Nizar’s ancient table.

“You can tell him I heard rumors about the existence of a certain map that reveals the entirety of this castle.” Nizar smiles when two men give him equally guilty expressions. “And I had questions about it. You’ll be honest when you say that, as I do have a question. Prongs is doing a very good job of mitigating it, but how in the entire hell do I convince it to be polite to the man I’m dating?”

Lupin grimaces. “I’m not certain it can be done.”

“Prongs is helping?” Black looks surprised. “And Remus is right. Without all four of us, the primary build of the map can’t be altered. It will update as the castle changes, and relabel things accordingly, but we made the personality impressions permanent. How did you get the map?”

Nizar retrieves it from the mantelpiece and holds it out. “You’re not keeping that,” he says to them in warning. “I hid it in a personal item I don’t remember owning and gave it to Salazar for safe-keeping in July.” Not that he remembers that, either. “I found it when Salazar gave the item back to me last month.”

“Doesn’t this bring back memories?” Black asks Lupin as they unfold it.

Lupin’s eyebrows draw together at whatever the map has to say. “Yes. Memories that help me to recall that I was a rude little twit. You know, I’d completely forgotten that we’d embedded insulting charms into the map for Severus until two years ago, when the map introduced itself to him.”

“Entertaining?” Black asks, not looking up to notice the glare on Nizar’s face.

“No, actually. It made me feel about three inches tall.” Lupin folds the map, despite Black’s clear desire not to be done with it yet, and gives it back to Nizar. “It’s still yours. Along with the cloak, I suppose.”

Nizar gives him a blank look. “What cloak?”

“I hope you remember that one day,” Lupin replies. “It was your father’s, and it was also quite useful. Sirius, we should go.”

“But—”

“Everyone is completely overwhelmed, including Nizar,” Lupin interrupts Black, frowning. “We need to go home. You can fall apart once we’re back in London.”

“How did you know?” Nizar asks.
Lupin gives him a wry look. “You and Salazar might look quite a bit alike, but you still have a great deal of your mother in you. The expression on your face was similar to hers when someone had finally stepped on her last nerve.”

When they’re gone, Nizar reseals the fireplace and then leans against the wall. “Fuck, I did not need this sort of complication.”

“They’re decent sorts. Well, now they’re decent sorts,” Galiena says. “It’ll be fine, Father.”

“I just—I can’t be the person they’ve been looking for.”

When Nizar turns around, Galiena has a gentle smile on her eternally young face. “I think, perhaps, that they already understand that.”

* * * * *

“Well?” Remus asks after they’re both safely in the kitchen of Grimmauld Place.

Sirius holds his finger to his lips and then gets out his wand. The spell-canceling charm causes three torches to flicker out, a dish to explode, and a spider to fall to the ceiling in an unhappy curl of dead limbs.

“Son of a bitch,” Remus whispers.

“No one is paranoid without good reason unless they’re mentally ill, and my son is not mentally ill,” Sirius growls. “He never has been!”

“Where were we when we discussed Harry on second January?” Remus asks, picking up a shard from the broken dish. He can’t tell what he’s feeling at the moment. He doesn’t want to consider this a betrayal, but the Order meets in this kitchen. What point does setting listening spells serve? All it does is imply a lack of trust.

Now he feels ill. Not this, not again. The distrust, the accusations—those were bad enough during the first war.

“In my bedroom. No one can get inside unless it’s my hand on the doorknob, and no one has been in that room with me except for you since I was twelve years old.” Sirius shakes his head. “Twelve years and nothing, Remus. Between Nizar and that elderberry card, I’m really not in the mood to take chances. If it turns out Albus is just thoughtless, as old Aberforth says, then fine, I’ll accept that. If I learn that Albus really was trying to use my son as a trump card against Voldemort? That, I’m far less inclined to forgive. Not after what it cost us last time.”

“Sirius—”

“Remus. You’re my best mate, but you didn’t spend twelve years in a square bit of carved rock with nothing to do but think.” Sirius slides his wand back into his sleeve. “I’m not all that thrilled about my son’s dating choices, but aside from the fact that Nizar is older than everyone in Britain except Slytherin? James and I started that war with Snape, Remus. We started it, we ended it, and we were right bastards to do so.”

Remus stares at Sirius. “I’m sorry, I’m having trouble with the fact that I’m listening to you have a
mature discussion about Snape.”

Sirius snorts in wry amusement. “You’re not the only one, trust me. It feels like I’m betraying the Marauders, and I’d like to hope that I’m not still mentally twelve.”

“Not twelve. More like fifteen or so,” Lupin says, biting back a smile when Sirius rolls his eyes.

“Do you know what I realized about the infamous werewolf incident while I was in Azkaban?”

Remus is beginning to recognize that this is a conversation that has to have been building steam for a while. “What?”

“Snape never told anyone about you,” Sirius replies, which startles Remus. “You terrified the fucking life out of him, and the best revenge, the easiest revenge, would have been to tell everyone in the school, no matter what Albus had to say…and he didn’t. Snape didn’t, and we all overlooked that, thinking as we did that no one would go against Albus. That’s wrong, though. If Snape had really wanted to, he could have told everyone in a way Albus would never have been able to prove.”

Remus swallows. He hates being reminded of that night, hates that he would have killed someone without memory of it but for waking up with a corpse at his feet and blood on his face. “You’re right. He didn’t.” Severus could have completely destroyed his life and chose not to. In 1993 he dropped hints about werewolves, but still never actually said anything. It was Sirius who accidentally outed Remus’s condition after Sirius was imprisoned in the Dark Tower in Hogwarts, still affected by contact with far too many Dementors—he’d been terrified for Harry and Remus’s safety.

Sirius looks at him, the expression on his face saying he knows what Remus is thinking of. He still hasn’t forgiven himself, though Remus forgave Sirius a few months after it happened.

“This other bit took me a lot longer. I didn’t want to believe it, Remus. By my tenth year on Azkaban, though, I’d made up my mind. Albus hated the Slytherins. He hated them even more than we did. There were a few seconds that next morning when I thought Albus was going to punish Snape for something I’d done. Even I know that I should have been expelled.”

“Are you certain you’re not the one who is paranoid?” Remus asks, hoping for levity. Wanting it. Please.

“I didn’t come out of Azkaban a nice person,” Sirius says quietly. “I’m so fucked up from that place it’s a wonder I ever sleep at night, Moony. But I’m not paranoid. School and the war are the clearest memories left in my head. I know what I saw on Albus’s face. I know what I saw on Albus’s face tonight when Nizar said that Harry had been a Horcrux. No, the worst thing about all of this is that I know I’m right.”

“What are you going to do?”

Sirius sighs. “I’m going to protect my family, even if my remaining family has proved himself to be quite capable of carving holes in Voldemort. That’s who I stand with, Remus.”

Remus nearly quails. He doesn’t want to go against Albus, but Sirius is right. His first loyalty is to his family—and it always should have been. “All right. I’m with you on this, Sirius. I’ll even go with you on third February.”

“Thanks, Remus.”

“Thank me by helping me put my family tree back together proper,” Remus grumbles. “Someone in my line held a title, and if we’re going to do this, I’d like to have enough of a voice to make a
difference.” He might be a werewolf, but it will be harder for certain families to ignore a werewolf with a noble title, no matter how minor. Observed social mores dictate that Remus would outrank them, and thus Pure-bloods would have to pay attention to him.

*Some days I think I learned far too much about Pure-blood politics from Sirius and James.*

“That shouldn’t be too hard.” Sirius runs his hand down over his face. “I didn’t get to watch him grow up, Moony. I missed my son’s childhood…but because of a bloody Founder of Hogwarts, my son got to grow up happy. I couldn’t give Harry that.”

“You wanted to,” Remus ventures, hating the guilt in Sirius’s eyes.

“Yes, I did—but I couldn’t.” Sirius stares at the far wall for a moment. “My son is the titled protector of Hogwarts. Merlin himself made my son the war mage of the British Isles, and what does he do with that sort of power? He teaches, Moony. He’s a bloody teacher, and when he’s not teaching, he’s plotting ways to make things better for other people.”

Sirius is smiling when he faces Remus, pride and grief a bitter blend to witness. “James and Lily would be so fucking proud of him.”

Remus swallows again and nods. “Yes. They truly would be.”
Chapter Summary

"Is it true?"
"Lots of things are true. Please be more specific."

Chapter Notes

No, that is not a real play. (Maybe.) No, you may not steal those lines. They're original and they belong to me.

Also:

*insert author cackling here*

“What are we waiting for again?” Severus asks, pacing back and forth.

“Just a moment. Oh, there she is,” Nizar says as Miss Granger arrives, out of breath and her hair even more frazzled than normal. “I wasn’t sure if you would join us.”

“Close—to—curfew,” Granger gasps out, pressing her hand to her side. “But not—missing this, Professor!”

Severus glares at Nizar. “Really?”

“She started this.” Nizar ignores Severus’s baleful look as he tickles the pear in the painting. “She should see the results.”

“Professor Snape, sir,” Granger greets him properly once she has enough air to do it with.

“Miss Granger,” Severus replies in irritation. “Is the entire school following you?”

Granger gives him a baffled look. “Not a lot of people care, sir. Not aside from whinging about being inconvenienced.”

“Of course not. Well? Come on!” Severus orders when he has to hold the kitchen painting open as the magic tries to shut it again. “If you’re accepting Professor Slytherin’s invitation, don’t dawdle!”

Severus smiles when Granger hurries down the steps and then follows her at a more respectable pace. It is nice, from time to time, to remind the students that he is still himself, no matter who he is dating.

“Professor—Master—sir—what do I call you?” Granger is asking Salazar in student desperation when she finds him in the kitchen.

“The elves are insisting on Professor Salazar. I suppose that will have to do,” Salazar replies, still
looking put-upon for having to cope with such a thing. Severus has no sympathy for him at all.

“Professor Salazar, then,” Granger says. “Er—why are you still here? Here again?”

“The elves, Miss Granger,” Salazar answers. “Right now, I’m here for them.”

“Oh, and you’re the reason Minister Fudge came to the school and provided us all with an entertaining evening.” Nizar adds, smiling at Granger. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen a human being turn so many different shades of red and purple without dropping dead.”

“Alas, he did not,” Severus mutters, but Granger hears him anyway. The wide-eyed expression on her face, he is amused to note, is not entirely one of disapproval for the sudden death of their current Minister.

A door appears at the rear of the kitchen as Salazar approaches it. He puts his hand to the old iron latch, lifts it, and swings it open. “After all of you.”

Severus follows Nizar and Miss Granger—and nearly collides with Granger when she halts in the doorway. “Move!” he barks, annoyed, and she practically leaps aside. Then he realizes what caught her attention and stares.

“Trees,” Granger whispers. “There are trees, everywhere—this room is gigantic!”

“They were grove elves, Miss Granger,” Salazar explains after he closes the door to the kitchen. “The elves of the Grove of Brae, near the Heights. Of course we would give them a home that closely resembled their own.”

Severus looks at the tall oaks, the graceful willows, silvery birch; hawthorn and juniper, alder and ash, rowan, elder, and cherry. There is an enchanted ceiling above that is currently letting in starlight; during the day sunlight will shine on the greenery below. The branches of all the trees have grown and weaved together, providing places for elves to sit and socialize, for young elves—he has never seen a child house-elf before—to run in safety from one end of the room to another while suspended in the air. In platforms around the room, stacked level by level, are enclosed living spaces hidden behind walls and doors with similar iron latches. There has to be wizarding space involved, as well as illusions. He’s been in the air above Hogwarts and has seen no hint of a glass ceiling above this area of the castle.

“I thought the Fair Folk couldn’t abide the touch of iron,” Granger says. “I mean, I don’t know if they are Fair Folk, but…they’re elves.”

“Not all of the Green Folk have the same strengths, or the same weaknesses,” Salazar replies. “The sound of chiming bells will deter some, but not others. Iron is not a weakness to all, either. For these particular elves, iron is merely another form of earth. Goblins find iron to be an irritant and would prefer to work with anything else, but the Ministry restricts their crafting.”

“Do they really—oh, there are fairies in the trees!” Granger points at twinkling lights that are either adult fairies, or very ambitious fireflies. “Is it an entire ecosystem?”

“We gave them back their home, as much as we could.” Salazar halts the aging house-elf that acted as representative to the incoming three hundred two returned elves. “Is there enough room for all?”

Gellis frowns. “We could maybe be using another level of homes,” he says, “but Hogwarts is not being home to the number of elves the Founders built our place to hold. There are only six hundred fifteen of us, Founder Salazar.”
Salazar sighs and nods. “It should be so many more. Another level you shall have, then. Make certain the Headmaster knows of what increases will be needed to feed and clothe those who dwell here. If the Headmaster doesn’t act on it, tell us. My brother and I will fulfill your needs, as we promised. The same for the contract—if you decide to begin crafting again, we will provide.”

Gellis nods. “The Founder is fair, and we elves are grateful.”

“It’s like visiting bloody Rivendell,” Severus says. Salazar tilts his head before shrugging in wry agreement.

“Just without the stone buildings,” Granger murmurs. “The ones built around the trees.”

“What’s Rivendell?” Nizar asks.

“You can read The Lord of the Rings on your own blasted time,” Severus tells him. He never wants to give himself that kind of headache a second time.

“Needless to say, it’s described as quite a bit like this, though it was a different type of elf who dwelled there.” Salazar reaches over and places his hand on the wall. “The castle and I have already been discussing the possible necessity, so this will take but a moment.”

Severus sucks in a breath, startled, when the magic of Hogwarts increases in sensation until it’s almost like a low whine in his ears. Then the ceiling above them gains height until it’s a full level higher. The circular level emerges into being next, complete with walls, doors, and iron latches for each completed elf-sized residence. Then Salazar expands the crafted sky so that more of it can be seen before he drops his hand.

“Now I understand. There would be no tunnel at all,” Severus says to Nizar, speaking of the original entrance to the Chamber of Secrets. Nizar glances at him and nods, both understanding and agreement.

“This is amazing. Thank you for thinking of me, Professors,” Granger is saying. “I had no idea where the elves lived. I don’t think anyone did.”

“If you choose to visit, make certain you ask them. Barging into the kitchens is fine, as that is public space, but this? This is not,” Nizar says.

“We—we can visit?” Granger sounds surprised.

“Why not? The elves are people, too. However, unlike during their Hogwarts duties, elves within their home are not bound to that contract unless it is an emergency,” Salazar adds. “They welcome those who fight for them on their terms, Miss Granger. Not by forcing them to work on the terms of another.”

Granger flushes. “Yes, sir. I realized that, sir.”

Once they return to the kitchen, Nizar sends Granger back to Gryffindor Tower with Sassy’s assistance. “That way she doesn’t get caught out beyond the Prefect’s curfew,” Nizar says.

Salazar slumps down at one of the trestle tables. “I’m not used to doing this sort of work. I’m all but done in.”

“Then I’ll take you home. Severus, would you meet me in my quarters?” Nizar waits for Severus to nod before he Side-Along Apparates Salazar upstairs.
Severus chooses to take the slower route, walking from the kitchens to the Grand Stair and making the climb. On the way, he passes Argus and Mrs. Norris, both of whom seem even twitchier than usual. Severus wonders how long it will take Argus to realize that apologizing for his blunder will cause the students’ vengeance to cease.

When Severus arrives, Nizar is already waiting for him. “There you are. I wondered if you were off clearing up mischief.”

“It is nice that you always assume I’m not creating it.”

“I assume more screaming and explosions would be involved, that’s why.” Nizar walks over to Severus and rests his forehead against Severus’s chest. “I have no idea what to do.”

“About what?”

Nizar sighs when Severus wraps him in a tight embrace. “I have a parent who is not my parent, and I’ve no idea what to do about that—or if I should do anything at all. Also, I’m miffed that of the three possible parents, the one who survived once tried to kill you.”

“Then don’t do anything about it,” Severus suggests. “Let Black make that decision, and if it’s a disagreeable one, you’re free to tell him off for being foolish.”

“Salazar did say I tore him a new one in a language he doesn’t speak. I could do that again,” Nizar muses, tugging on Severus’s hand until they’re heading towards the bedroom. “I’m kidnapping you again, by the way.”

“The absolute horror,” Severus drawls, pleased.

* * * *

Nizar is expecting to begin a practical class with his fifth-year Gryffindors and Slytherins on Wednesday morning. Instead, he takes in the expressions on twenty students’ faces and sits down on his desk. Most of the Gryffindors look some level of baffled, while his intelligent Slytherins seem perturbed. It’s the expressions on Goyle, Crabbe, and Tracy Davis’s faces that tell him this is something he needs to address.

“Well?” Nizar glances around at them. “No one’s mentioned a murder, so there must be some other reason for you all to look so concerned.”

Miss Dunbar’s hand flies into the air, so he nods at her. “Is it true?”

“Lots of things are true,” Nizar replies. “Please be more specific.”

Dunbar flushes, but before she can ask a proper question, Dean Thomas blurts out, “Snape is really a spy?” The vicious pleasure on Miss Davis’s face intensifies at his question.

Ah; now he understands. He isn’t surprised, and Severus will not be, either. Nizar is mostly amused by the fact that their baby Death Eaters think this will somehow be a form of revenge, especially when it took them nearly a month to speak of it.

“Was. Past tense, Mister Thomas. Yes. He was. I take it everyone knows?”
“If they don’t yet, they probably will know by dinnertime the way everyone gossips.” Miss Granger is scowling. “Honestly, anyone with half a brain could figure that out!”

“Not until after the paper on the eighth, Granger!” Parkinson insists. “We would have known instead of just taking bets on things!”

“Fair point,” Granger grants her.

“All right. And?” Nizar asks. Twenty faces stare back at him.

“And?” Vaisey repeats, looking bewildered.

“And, this is a shocking realization why, exactly?” Nizar glances at the Slytherins, most of whom are beginning to get over the shock of that reveal. Crabbe and Goyle still look pleased, but Davis is scowling. The Gryffindors are a bit less bewildered, at least.

Maybe Voldemort told their parents not to allow their baby Death Eaters to spread word until yesterday evening. A distraction, then? No; there would be a bit more drama involved. Nizar has no sense of Voldemort removing his foul presence from Little Hangleton.

Perhaps it only now occurred to Voldemort that some people simply aren’t intelligent enough to divine the truth even if it’s staring them directly in the face.

“Because…it’s…Professor Snape?” Weasley ventures when no one else says anything. “He’s not exactly one that I’d look at and trust to be on my side.”

Nizar smiles. “Exactly. The best of spies are distrusted by the side they’re spying for and beloved by those whom they are spying upon. One could go to the trouble of being a spy whom your allies all like, yes, but then the dance to convince the enemy that you’re truly your allies’ enemy is more complicated, annoying, and a complete pain in the backside. Why make the job any more difficult than it has to be? It’s also why the best of spies do not have concerns over whether or not they are liked. They concern themselves with the task, not a popularity contest.”

“He has been calmer since the term resumed,” Longbottom tells the others. “I mean, Professor Snape isn’t trying to win any popularity contests now, either, but he’s not…”

“Entirely, viciously mental,” Finnigan finishes, which causes a few students to laugh. Nizar lets them; Severus is vicious, but he no longer has to aim that fierceness in directions it does not belong. If they choose to believe otherwise, that is not Nizar’s problem.

“Did you teach him any of this, sir?” Bulstrode asks. “From the portrait, I mean.”

Nizar considers his words. “I taught him certain things that your Head of House then turned into tools for spycraft, but I didn’t teach him of spycraft.”

“Why not?” Miss Greengrass asks, looking fascinated.

“Because I didn’t know about the spy bit, either. Not then.” It’s a partial truth with no clear definition on when. Some of these students, like Draco, will know the truth of when loyalties shifted—the children of Death Eaters who don’t want to be Death Eaters themselves. The others don’t need that information. Nizar isn’t going to make Severus’s task at finding his own path any harder, not when fifteen years of spying have done enough damage.

“Now. We are here to expand on the ideas involved in dueling rather than the melee activity I’ve exposed you to in the past. Not to gossip,” Nizar says.
“And you’re going to tell us why you walk funny, right?” Miss Brown asks, grinning.

Nizar rolls his eyes. “I do not walk funny. I walk properly, and during this class, I will be demonstrating exactly why. However, if anyone would like to guess?”

Granger raises her hand, a look of utter scholastic abandon in her eyes. “I read up on it! It’s because the way you move means that you are faster, have better balance, your steps are quieter, and—oh, yes, it hurts your knees less over time!”

“Exactly. Let’s get started with my funny walking,” Nizar emphasizes, and temporarily Vanishes all of the desks the moment everyone is on their feet.

“Oh, I’ve already heard,” Severus tells him at lunch, both of them hiding in Nizar’s quarters. Nizar’s feet are aching from four straight hours of demonstrating why the placement of feet and measure of stride are so fucking important, and he does not want to deal with the damned stairs. Severus, he suspects, just doesn’t want to deal with the staff.

“Nothing unsurmountable, then?” Nizar asks, removing his boots and socks before pressing his feet against the cold stone floor. Better. At least he won’t be repeating any of that after lunch. His third years are getting a proper discussion of Dark creatures, accompanied by a stern talking-to about why the Ministry’s definition of Dark is complete rubbish. Dark and Evil are not bloody synonyms! The only thing the third-year textbooks from the governing board are good for is a useful tool for demonstrating how the Ministry is prejudiced, bigoted, racist, speciesist, and wrong.

Some students, he knows, are going to take to this lesson more quickly than others.

“Not at all. Just irritating,” Severus rolls his eyes. “I’m yet again disappointed that no matter their allegiance, none of my Slytherins seem to have any inkling as to what subtlety really means.”

“Well, now they have Severus the Spy to emulate as an example of the ultimate level of subtlety,” Nizar replies, grinning when Severus glares at him. “Well, if they didn’t learn it from the professor, then they can at least absorb the idea that you spied for the Order for fifteen years without being caught.”

“Beryl,” Severus says.

Nizar dismisses the dead Death Eater at once. “An outlier. She didn’t like you and looked for reasons to suspect you, reasons which I unfortunately provided. That isn’t the same as being bad at your job.” He pauses. “You know, there is a very thin line between spycraft and politics. You could offer lessons.”

Severus does not look impressed. “Nizar, I have enough work involved in convincing two-hundred-odd students not to die from sticking their heads into their own cauldrons mid-potion. I am not adding lessons in bloody spycraft to my day!”

Nizar only has to deal with an hour of his first-year Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs after he discusses and demonstrates Defence from actual threats with the third-years. (Most of them are beginning to adjust to the idea that words are just as effective as a wand in certain situations, if not more so.) The first-years are enthusiastically helping to retrieve discovered portraits, clothes, and other items of interest that reside in sections of the rubbish room aspect that older students have already confirmed not to hold cursed items. The students think it’s a lark, and Nizar rewards them with the magician’s equivalent of hide-and-seek for the latter half of class.

Sasha is often in the rubbish room’s aspect now that she knows how to access it, and today is no
exception. Nizar is contemplating asking the elves to put a leash on the woman so she doesn’t keep wandering into the room and forgetting to come back out again. There are many things in here to be distracted by, paintings included.

So far, Nizar hasn’t recognized any portrait that has been found. Some of them are old enough to be from his own time, but he doesn’t know those painted, and they don’t recognize him, either. Maybe just afterwards, then. The age feels correct, and not everyone would come down to the Slytherin Common Room even when it was still a public space in the castle.

Miss Zeller of Hufflepuff brings him a portrait of two women together, one seated and one standing. Both portraits are awake, but are staring out of their frame as if it’s been a very long time since they’ve had anything new to look at.

“Should I add it to the collection we’re still sorting through, Professor?” Miss Zeller asks.

Nizar is about to say yes when something about the seated portrait’s features strike him as familiar. “Wait. Not yet.” He accepts the painting from Miss Zeller and props it against a shelf at eye level, studying the occupants.

The woman who is standing looks like a Briton from Strathclyde, those who most often still had dark hair, dark eyes, and pale skin. The seated woman has black hair, hazel eyes, and sun-kissed skin, and she smiles when she sees him.

“Hello, Grandfather!”

Nizar has to swallow down a lump in his throat before he can answer in Parseltongue. “Vanora. I thought it might be you. You look—you both look wonderful, dearest.” He is vaguely aware of Miss Zeller’s gleeful squeak as she races off. “And it’s a pleasure to meet you, Ankharet,” he adds in franceis, thinking it the best neutral attempt to make.

The native Briton inclines her head in a graceful, abbreviated bow. “And you, Founder of my profession.” Thankfully, she is speaking Old English, not bloody Cumbric. “I taught Defence while Vanora safeguarded the students of our House.”

“Delightful,” Nizar replies, smiling. He keeps speaking in Old English, but suspects that Ankharet knows enough of Parseltongue to understand them both. “How long have the two of you been in this bloody rubbish pile?”

Vanora and Ankharet glance at each other. “Well…” Vanora’s portrait blushes. “We don’t actually know, Grandfather.”

“We don’t recall.” Ankharet sighs. “We went so sleep one night from our vantage point on the wall of the Defence Tower. When we awoke the next morning, we were here. We called out for others, and none ever answered.”

“We’ve spent much of the time napping, but it has to be the year 1,995 if we’re speaking to you now.” Vanora frowns. “Good God, that’s at least seven hundred years, then! We think we were relocated in the 1200s, you see, but…we’re still not certain.”

“It’s February—Februarius—of 1996, actually. And please do not mention your complete awareness of when I was going to be available. Most do not know, I’m not telling them, and I don’t remember large swaths of the last thousand years.”

“Oh. Oh, dear,” Vanora murmurs as Miss Zeller returns with a flock of her classmates. “Mother was worried about that possibility.”
“He knows this one!” Miss Zeller announces excitedly. “They’re talking, so the professor knows these ladies!”

“Professor?” Vanora repeats curiously.

“A modern term for teacher. A title,” Nizar says, and switches back to modern English. “I know the seated magician, yes, though I never met her wife.”

Miss Jugson’s eyes grow huge. “Wife?”

“I do keep telling you all that we cared not a whit about gender divisions in our time,” Nizar reminds them. He restrains the urge to be utterly sarcastic; they’re only eleven. Most of the first-years are sheltered and innocent in a way Nizar can scarcely comprehend. “The Briton standing in this portrait is Ankharet of Gall-ghàidhil, the ancient Kingdom of Galloway. She was the teacher of Defence not immediately after myself—I can’t recall who took on that role after the painting—but she was the teacher of Defence when my granddaughter, Vanora, took on the post as acting Head of Slytherin House when Salazar departed.”

“Wow,” Hughes breathes, staring at the portraits with a Ravenclaw’s wide-eyed fascination. “Your granddaughter, not one of Salazar Slytherin’s kids?”

Nizar glances at Vanora and hisses out a repeat of the question. He’s curious, too.

“One of my great uncle’s great-grandchildren was Head of our House after my death,” Vanora says, and then frowns. “I’m sorry. I cannot recall their name.”

“That’s all right.” Nizar switches back to English, tells his students what was said, and then dismisses them for their free period of casting at each other with harmless spells and jinxes while darting around the shielded and safe area of the rubbish room. He needs to decide where to place this portrait. By rights it should hang in the castle proper, but he wants this link to the later generation of his family nearby.

The entire castle is nearby. The rest of the castle’s portrait denizens will want to greet them, not to mention help Vanora and Ankharet to learn modern English. Nizar can place their portrait, with a proper identifying plaque, and visit it anytime he likes.

If he finds individual portraits of Vanora and Ankharet, he is going to put those in the public space and retrieve this one. Anyone who complains can fuck right off; he can claim a family heirloom if he likes.

“The Defence Tower’s walls inside the castle are a bit crowded now;” Nizar says in Parseltongue. “Any preferences for a public space, dearest?”

“Somewhere that sees a lot of people,” Vanora says, her voice full of longing. “My love is grand company, but we’ve only had each other to speak to for a very long time.”

“One of the primary passageways, then.” Nizar gives idle thought to the Entry Hall and dismisses the idea for now. Salazar wants to hang all of the 1015 paintings there. Vanora and Ankharet were third-generation teachers, not first. If that plan changes due to a lack of 1015 portraits, they can reconsider the idea.

He escorts the students from the rubbish room at the end of class, gives Sasha a warning look about not missing dinner—again—and goes downstairs. The Grand Stair is a bit crowded with portraits, but he finds a suitable place for Vanora and Ankharet and mounts the frame to the stone. Then he retrieves two silver sickles from his pocket and Transfigures them into plaques bearing their names,
titles, and roles within Hogwarts. Somewhere, there is a goblin screeching in outrage over Nizar’s transfiguration of goblin-minted coin into another object. Much like anyone who would object to him claiming this painting, the goblin will have to cope.

Nizar returns to his classroom to find Narcissa Malfoy waiting for him in a display of utter displeasure. “Madam Malfoy. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“I wish to speak to you. Regarding my son and his…curious shift in belief,” Narcissa replies coldly.

Nizar gestures to his door. “Then by all means, please come in and enlighten me as to what’s troubling you.”

Inside his quarters, Narcissa does not put aside her chill demeanor. “I’ve had to hire servants!”


“Yes, please. Why am I hiring servants, Nizar Slytherin?”

“Because you no longer have a cadre of slaves to do your bidding. How terrible that you lose such lofty social standing.” Nizar waits until an elf pops a tea tray into place without putting in an appearance.

“It would have been nice to have some sort of warning,” Narcissa hisses through her clenched teeth before accepting tea. “It was a bit of a scramble to replace the staff necessary to run a manor, Lord Nizar.”

“Oh, my title again. You must be truly angry.” Nizar smiles and salutes her with his teacup. “I hope you’re not looking for an apology, especially as slavery has been illegal in Britain since 1833.”

Narcissa delights him by rolling her eyes. “No. I’m merely angry at being unexpectedly inconvenienced. I do not have experience at hiring staff, Nizar. No Pure-blood has such training.”

“You must have learned quickly, or you would be in a much poorer mood,” Nizar notes.

“I did, but I was told often when I was younger that I excelled at rising to the occasion. I admit, having humans in the manor aside from myself is a pleasant change. The house-elves were not unpleasant, but with Draco in school and Lucius…unavailable, I was very much alone. I do not prefer it.”

“That, I can understand,” Nizar says.

Narcissa’s angry glower finally begins to ease. “I didn’t know the goblins offered any sort of services beyond the bounds of Gringotts. I now have an employed goblin for the purposes of accounting. I also did not realize Lucius did such a poor job until I needed to take on the task. The goblin—Therassiss is her name—is stridently, scrupulously accurate, and has excellent financial advice that has been lacking in our lives. I might be angered by the time spent rectifying the house-elves’ disappearance, but I think the goblin’s assistance alone will offset the expense needed to pay both her and the new staff.” She smiles. “I am, as Draco said in the brief letter he sent me to pass on your suggestion, ‘stimulating this island’s pathetic magical economy.’”

“It is pathetic,” Nizar replies. “Spending coin means that many hands benefit rather than a select few, and when there are more beings who can afford to spend money on things that are not restricted to the necessities of survival, others also benefit. Think of how greatly magical shops would improve if they had more competition.”
Narcissa frowns again. “Now I understand why Lord Salazar was so offended by everyone’s distinct lack in the understanding of economics on Christmas Day. That is an interesting point, one I didn’t have the education to consider before. I do not like being ignorant.”

“How are the other Pure-bloods of your acquaintance responding to the dramatic and awful change to their lives?” Nizar asks.

Narcissa bites her lip against a vague hint of unladylike chortling. “Poorly. Most of them have yet to stop whinging long enough to seek out employable magicians for their homes.”

“And I would imagine they’re ignoring the Squibs.”

“I did not. One does not need magic to dust a table. Blanchette Carrow is not ignoring them, either,” Narcissa says after selecting a delicate bit of marzipan from the tray. “But she was always quite sensible.”

“Sensible enough to write and assure me that while she must play at politics in her public life, she stands with me rather than Voldemort.” Nizar grins when Narcissa gives him a startled look. “She was the first to reply to my carefully worded letters of inquiry.”

“The hell they will,” Nizar says flatly. “I don’t care if that fucking idiot Fudge comes here with an army. They will not be re-enslaving Britain’s last remaining clan of house-elves.”

“Last remaining clan?” Narcissa asks politely.

“There were once others. I imagine they fled the island the moment they realized that their kin in Hogwarts were being slowly enslaved. If the school founded by Myrddin was not safe, then it was wise to assume that the island itself was not safe,” Nizar answers.

Narcissa nods. “Intriguing. Unfortunately, I have no other useful intelligence to offer you—well, aside from Lucius’s return to the Riddle Manor after his recent visit to Hogwarts.” She pauses. “Voldemort was not pleased that Lucius was bested so easily, and with such a foul smell to pair with it. If one were not suicidal, one might say he was frightened.”

“Lucius or Voldemort?” Nizar asks.

Narcissa makes an amused sound. “Both.”

“I didn’t expect much to have changed, but that’s all right. I have intelligence you can pass on, instead.” Nizar puts his empty teacup aside when Narcissa gives him her sharp-eyed attention. “You’re aware of Voldemort’s goal in regards to the Department of Mysteries.”

“Yes.” Narcissa looks disquieted. “His plans in that matter are unchanged, though he is…this is another thing I would never say to the Dark Lord, but he is floundering in how to once again make the attempt. I do not understand his obsession, but he seems certain that a clue to victory lies within the prophecy that once foretold his defeat.”
“Then here is what you’ve learned. How you came by this information, you can decide for yourself. The trouble Voldemort has experienced in the past is due to a simple security measure, if a very inconvenient one. The globes in the Hall of Prophecy can only be handled by those to whom the prophecy refers—in this instance, only Tom Marvolo Riddle, Voldemort, or Harry James Potter. If anyone else were to grasp that particular globe, they would be just as Confounded as Broderick Bole.” Nizar tries not to grind his teeth. Arthur told him that Bole was recovering until someone gave him that damned plant. He still has no idea how Healers could look at a cutting of Devil’s Snare and not recognize the plant for what it is. High scores in Herbology are a requirement for becoming any sort of Healer in Wizarding Britain.

“Ah.” Narcissa’s brow furrows. “A Hall full of globes that are useless. How very like our Ministry.”

“I said much the same.” Nizar sighs. “Idiocy. Regardless, you will be informing Voldemort that you’ve discovered that I really do know of a way to circumvent that security measure. I really can retrieve the prophecy he seeks.”

Narcissa stares at him, nonplussed. “You mean to have the Dark Lord’s focus on you again.”

“Well, it didn’t work out very well for him the last time he tried that, did it?” Nizar is still quite pleased with the results. “Three dead Death Eaters and a dead, oversized serpent. Oh, and that lovely hole in the side of Voldemort’s face.”

“The Dark Lord has taken to wearing a half-mask to cover the new deformity,” Narcissa says after a moment. “I’m not certain it is an improvement beyond the relief I feel at no longer having to gaze at his exposed teeth any longer.”

“Vanity.” Nizar shakes his head. “It’s a bit late for Voldemort to be concerned with such things.”

“I believe it has very little to do with vanity, and quite a bit with not wishing to display proof of his defeat at your hands to everyone the Dark Lord encounters,” Narcissa says.

“That is an excellent point.”

Narcissa uses the act of pouring a second cup of tea to mask nervous fidgeting. “You wish to bait the trap. I understand the motivation, but I would hate for others to pay the price.”

“The students will be safe within Hogwarts’ walls. Severus is already aware of what I’m telling you, the potential for danger, and what that could mean,” Nizar says. “He thinks of it as a provided opportunity to kill any Death Eater he likes if they’re fool enough to try to act against him.”

Narcissa’s lip curls up. “That sounds very much like Severus. Always so practical.” She lifts her eyes from her tea to look at Nizar. “Do you truly have the means to retrieve that prophecy globe without young Mister Potter’s assistance, Nizar? Or am I lying to the Dark Lord?”

Nizar picks up a biscuit that is not a sugary disaster, smiling. “In the instance of this particular globe, I do indeed have the means to retrieve it, Narcissa. You won’t be telling him any lies at all.”

Narcissa finally releases a frustrated-sounding exhale. She’s too well-trained to be so obvious, but Nizar knew every single Black Hogwarts has ever hosted, and knows relief when he sees it. “When I pass this information on, it may increase your danger immediately.”

Nizar finishes the biscuit, which has a strong flavor of cinnamon and cardamom. “I don’t think it will. He took his time to prepare for the Blood Summoning trap in December, and still it failed. Voldemort will be even more cautious now. I don’t expect him to trouble me directly for at least three months.”
“Are you willing to place a wager on that?” Narcissa asks with surprising dryness.

“Absolutely not. Madmen are bloody well unpredictable. He might actually be stupid enough to attempt to encourage me to retrieve that stupid prophecy tomorrow.”

*          *          *          *

Salazar publicly returns to Hogwarts that Friday evening after dinner. He does it in typical Slytherin fashion, which is to simply turn up in the Entrance Hall to see what sort of attention he attracts.

When Rubinnny pops into Nizar’s quarters to announce Salazar’s presence in the castle, Nizar goes downstairs and finds Salazar seated at a table in the Great Hall. There is a chessboard on the table, a timer, and a determined Ron Weasley seated across from him.

“Oh, this again,” Nizar says to Severus, who is standing on a chair at the Slytherin table to be able to see over the small crowd of students. Nizar accepts Severus’s hand up to stand on the next chair available. To Nizar’s surprise, Severus pulls Nizar in close to his side. “So we’re to be giving the students gossip fodder, then?”

Severus smirks. “No, the Prophet is doing that well enough. I’m just not in the mood to act in an entirely professional manner when the school day is technically over with.”

“I’ve been mobbed by pleased Slytherins for weeks on end.” Nizar takes in the destruction on the chessboard so far. Even on a three-minute timer, the game is going apace. “You’d think they’d arranged this themselves, the devious little fiends.”

Nizar glances around the hall. Minerva is present, as is Filius, who is also standing on a chair out of pure necessity. Otherwise, it’s those students Nizar quietly thinks of as the obsessed academics, a rather equal number from each House, pushing the crowd up to thirty-eight students. “Salazar, you bold bastard,” he murmurs. “His portrait will be so miffed that Salazar got the rematch and he didn’t.”

Severus leans in close. “Has Weasley started applying these skills to your classes?”

“It took a few hexes to his backside, but I think he might actually get there,” Nizar answers. “Ron Weasley has also come a long way from first November, when he declared me his enemy. He knows exactly who he’s playing against, and he’s doing so willingly.”

A cheer goes up from the students. Weasley smiles as he uses a pawn to obliterate a knight. “Your move!” Weasley says brightly.

Salazar is smiling, resting his chin on his clasped hands. “If I take your bishop with a pawn in one move, will you tell me who taught you to play?”

Weasley frowns. “Maybe.”

Salazar nudges a black pawn forward, which takes great delight in crushing the bishop into broken shards. “Well?”

“You did, sort of.” Weasley grins at Salazar. “Technically, this is our third match, and I won the first two.”
Salazar rolls his eyes. “Ah. That explains the Lioness’s immediate bet upon you to win this game.”

“She won the last wager. Maybe she’s feeling lucky.” Weasley makes a move and slaps the timer.

Severus turns his head as Miss Lovegood clambers up onto a chair to join them. “How many students in this room recognize who Mister Weasley is playing against?”

Lovegood tilts her head. “I think half of them suspect, and the other half are unaware, Professor. He doesn’t quite look like his younger portraits, after all, and he looks almost nothing like the one in the Entrance Hall.”

“Mister Weasley!” Nizar calls.

Weasley half-turns in his seat as the timer for his move begins. “What, Professor?”

“Win this game, and I might offer you an extension on your February essay so that you do not submit a horrific excuse to maul the English language any further.”

Weasley nods and turns back around. “Right, that tears it. You’re going down.”

Salazar’s smile widens. “How long?”

“Sixteen bloody feet,” Weasley answers in disgust, moving his surviving bishop before slapping the timer again.

“He’s being nice to you.” Salazar proceeds to castle Weasley. “Check, Mister Weasley.”

“Nice, my backside,” Weasley mutters, a comment that rings out in the silence of academically or chess-inclined students. “That wasn’t smart, by the way.” He captures Salazar’s queen with his last pawn, taking his king out of check.

“Oh, perhaps not. However, the lure of tempting targets…” Salazar reaches out and moves his remaining knight. “Checkmate.”

Weasley’s head jerks back and forth as he takes in the whole of the board before he yells, “DAMMIT!” His king throws his crown down onto the board in disgust.

“You know, I’d take points for the swearing, but Minerva is making that child’s exclamation absolutely tame in comparison,” Severus comments as Minerva continues to rant in Scots Gaelic. Certain northern-born ears are turning varying shades of scarlet and purple.

Nizar smiles. “Mister Weasley, you almost won that game. If you hadn’t let the lure of the queen blind you…”

“Yeah, I noticed.” Weasley sighs. “I still didn’t do all that badly.”

“Not at all.” Nizar shifts his gaze to Salazar. “Sal, what did you do? Stride into the castle and challenge the first ginger you found to a game of chess?”

“It’s a fine tradition, but no—this one started it. Gaped at me and then yelled about wanting a rematch for the beginning of the month.” Salazar looks amused. “You’re underage, aren’t you?”

Weasley leans back from the table, wide-eyed. “Mate, I don’t even turn sixteen until March.”

“Of course you don’t. Confession from me, then, Mister Weasley—one you get past your fifth century? It’s really difficult to guess at people’s ages unless they’re as wrinkled as a blasted walnut.”
“SAL!”

Salazar shrugs. “Nizar, after a while, you really do have to get used to the fact that you’re older than literally everyone else.”

“S’all right. I’m just not usually hit on by…well, anyone, actually,” Weasley says.

“That’s because you’re a dingbat,” Granger mutters under her breath. Nizar wonders how many times Miss Granger has witnessed Weasley overlook the fact that another has flirted with him. Maybe he should consider adding something about that to verbal defence. Observation and awareness of the romantic is also useful, even if one doesn’t intend to follow through on it. Nizar’s flirtations in Court had served a purpose that was not romantic, even if he’d had vague hopes of also finding someone in a sea of fools who might be fun to take to bed. Unfortunately, that had not been successful.

“Oh, Mister Slytherin.” Half of the group of students glances up at Lovegood, quickly followed by the rest when they realize she isn’t addressing Nizar. “I am not flirting in the slightest, especially as I’m younger than Ron, but if you’re up for a game, say, after breakfast in the morning, I’d love the opportunity to share one with you.”

“Darling Ravenclaw, that is going to depend on how hung over I am come morning,” Salazar replies.

“Ho, shite,” Finnigan whispers. “I didn’t think it was really him!”

“Seriously?” Thomas elbows Finnigan in the ribs. “You’ve really got to be more observant than that, Seamus.”

“Fuck me sideways!” Montague bleats.

Severus rolls his eyes. “I have to take points for that, you imbecile!”

Nizar notes that Severus is biting his lip to keep from smiling as fourteen of the students surrounding Salazar and Weasley flock away from the table as if they’re one organic being. “Well, at least they’re not literally fleeing,” Nizar mutters.

Salazar regards the group of wide-eyed students who are clustered near Minerva and Filius. “Dear gods. I’d really hoped you were exaggerating, little brother.”

“Not at all, and this is the smart batch, idiota,” Nizar replies. “Geniuses! This is Salazar Slytherin. Considering he’s managed to not eat any of you for the time it took to play a game of chess, you’re probably going to survive the experience.”

“Probably,” Fred repeats.

“I do enjoy it when he makes a point of adding in a degree of difficulty,” George adds.

“One of the Founders is back, then. I can handle this,” Macmillan says, even if he looks rather green. “Is this like…was it another portrait?”


“Are any other long dead Founders of our illustrious school going to turn up? First headmaster, by chance?” Thomas asks.
“No, Godric died of old age,” Salazar answers. “If you wanted to talk to your second Head, Brian Wulfric, be glad that he is also very much dead.”

“They let Wulfric—” Nizar puts his hand over his eyes. “No, I can’t. I’d dig him up just to throttle him if I tried to discuss the matter.”

“Not a nice bloke, was he?” Miss Weasley asks.

“I’m not sure Wulfric knew the meaning of the word. So glad he was not one of mine,” Salazar mutters. “Rowena often contemplating staking him out in the field for carrion.”

“Hard to think a Ravenclaw would be…like that,” Boot says.

“We all have our quirks,” Salazar replies. “Take Phineas Nigellus Black, for example.”

“Last Slytherin Headmaster,” Miss Abbott identifies him with a sage nod.

“Old Phineas was so universally hated by every single person in this school that his own House poisoned him just to get a replacement in,” Salazar tells them. “It takes quite a bit of talent to convince an entire House to do that, especially when it’s us.”

Miss Greenwood is frowning. “How do you know that, sir?”

Salazar smiles. “I got one of the perpetrators really pissed and convinced them to admit it,” he says. Filius has to turn sudden laughter into a fit of coughing.


Salazar mock-sighs. “Spoilsport.”

“I’m in agreement with the professor who is actually still employed here.” Minerva glares at Salazar. It’s amusing when he leans back from her in alarm. “Everyone, off to bed! It’s near enough to curfew that some of you won’t arrive in time unless you make haste, and Argus has been in quite a mood this month!”

“I wonder what’s got old Argus in such a foul mood,” George says in a thoughtful tone as the twins leave.

“Couldn’t possibly tell you, mate,” Fred replies. “Mayhap it was something he ate.”

Nizar helps Minerva, Severus, and Filius to roam the Great Hall, rounding up stragglers who are trying to linger under Disillusionment Charms. “The next student I find will lose their House one hundred points, even if they’re from my own House!” Severus finally announces. That seems to be the bit of encouragement needed; Nizar listens as more than one set of footsteps leave the Great Hall.

“Are you in for the long haul this time, sir?” Filius asks, grinning up at Salazar.

Salazar shrugs. “I’m certain to be a fascinating fixture at mealtimes. How is your father faring?”

Filius looks surprised by the question. “He is well, Salazar. I didn’t realize the two of you were acquainted.”

“Your father is a bit older than he likes to admit,” Salazar says, which makes Filius grin again. “Ask him about the riot in front of old Gringotts in Edinburgh in the late 1500s. See what sort of face he makes.”
“I’ll be certain to do so.” Filius makes his way from the hall, still chuckling.

“Oh, please stay!” Salazar begs of Minerva when it appears as if she’s going to follow Filius. “Your company would be most welcome.”

Nizar smiles at Minerva. “You might wish to escape. He’s clingy.”

“She’s two of my greatest weaknesses, little brother!” Salazar declares. “Scottish and capable of keeping secrets!”

“Never mind.” Nizar rolls his eyes. “Minerva, please drink this idiot beneath the table with the alcohol I know he so wisely brought to share with us. He deserves it.”

“I’ve just been flirted with, and you’re challenging my constitution. At this point, I’m staying!” Minerva replies, smiling.

“Oh! I didn’t realize our random guest had returned!”

Nizar catches a hint of wild color visible at the corner of his eye and refuses to turn his head. Salazar, however, is not so fortunate.

“Headmaster,” Severus greets Dumbledore in a neutral voice.

“And how would you be this fine evening, Salazar Slytherin?” Albus asks.

“Blind!” Salazar gurgles, turning away from Dumbledore to dig the heels of his palms into his eye sockets. “Oh, gods, why?”

Nizar looks up at the ceiling so he isn’t tempted. “He does that, brother.”

“How do you live here with someone blinding you all the time?” Salazar yells.

“By not looking at those robes, or by Transfiguring them when his attention is distracted.” Nizar dares to glance at Severus, which doesn’t require looking to his left. “It’s the lime green set, isn’t it?”

“I was always told I looked dashing in this color,” Dumbledore says in a merry voice.

“Still blind!” Salazar reminds them.

“Albus, please.” Minerva sounds as if she’s desperately trying not to laugh. “You’re torturing the poor man. That’s cruel.”

“I shall bid you all good evening, then. I was already on my way upstairs. Good night, Slytherins.” Salazar raises his left hand in the classic Brittonic salute with his arm still covering his face. Albus only chuckles and continues on down the passage.

Salazar rubs his eyes again and then blinks several times. He looks like someone who’s been clubbed upside the head, and is still trying to decide if the perpetrator should die for the offence. “Please, let’s go upstairs to Nizar’s quarters. I want no chance encounters like that one again!”

“Yes, please. If I’d looked at those robes, I’d be contemplating vomiting right now.” Nizar smiles at Minerva. “Have you reached the point of integration with the castle’s magic of being able to Apparate within her walls yet?”

Minerva frowns. “I hadn’t tried. Should I do so?”
Nizar waves his hand. “Be my guest and attempt to Apparate to my classroom. If it fails, I’ll help you to avoid the stairs myself.”

Minerva Disapparates, to Nizar’s pleasure. That means her integration into the magic’s Southern Seat is almost complete. The three of them Apparate upstairs to join her in Nizar’s classroom, where Minerva looks both shocked and pleased with her success.

“It drives Albus completely up the wall,” Severus tells Minerva. “Do keep Apparating at random times. The Headmaster should remain on his toes, after all.”

“Toes.” Minerva snorts. “Yes, I quite agree. Nizar, you should have mentioned the Apparition to Filius before now. He’d have volunteered the moment we returned from holiday.”

“I’ll keep that in mind for later,” Nizar says as he opens the door to his quarters.

Minerva glances around Nizar’s sitting room with polite curiosity. Nizar looks over to find that Hedwig is gone from her usual portrait frame. Across the room, Galiena winks at him, one finger to her lips. Minerva would recognize Hedwig, then. He’ll have to bear that in mind.

Salazar reaches into his beaten leather coat and pulls out two bottles of Fire Whiskey, several pints of mead, and two litres of a non-magical crafted alcohol called vodka, piling them all onto Nizar’s table. Nizar conjures two more chairs that are a match to the originals. The house-elves bring crystal tumblers and shot glasses, along with a tray of snacks, probably hoping to stave off imminent alcohol poisoning.

“You mentioned something about Scottish and keeping secrets?” Minerva is on her third shot of Fire Whiskey; Severus is nursing a tumbler of it; Nizar and Salazar have, for some reason, launched into an unspoken competition of shot consumption from the vodka. It’s definitely not going to be Nizar’s favorite drink. Vodka is nothing like what he’s enjoyed in Castile and in the Mediterranean, but if completely pissed is what Salazar is aiming for, it will certainly do the job. “Would I be reminding you of someone named Marion, perhaps?” she asks.

Salazar nods. “Marion was not Scottish at the time. Inverness was still held by Moray in those days. Given how the kingdom fell together, she might as well be considered such, though. She was certainly Gaelic.”

Minerva pours another shot. “Nizar has shown me a painting in this school of your eldest daughter, but she looks far more like you. Not Gaelic at all.”

“Fortunata’s mother was my first wife, Orellana.” Salazar glances at his shot glass and then downs it all at once. Nizar grimaces and copies him. “Orellana died while birthing our second child.”

Nizar stills as the mental flash of blood on his hands repeats itself. “Oh. Zuri. I’d—I’d forgotten that.” He doesn’t want to remember any more of it, either. He suspects it is a far worse memory than even Salazar’s stark, honest words suggest.

“You remember enough. That is what matters, little brother.”

“That may be true, but please change the subject,” Nizar requests.

Salazar nods at Minerva. “As for the Scottish bit: you’re not alike in appearance, you and Marion. She had hair of deepest garnet with fiery green eyes, and her skin was quite sun-darkened for a Gael. Alike in fire—that would be more accurate to say of you both.

“Marion and her family were at home in Inverness, just returned from one of their many trips to the
East for trading along the Old Road. It was autumn in 995, I was twenty-five years old, and I fell completely in love with her the first time I saw her.”

“September. The equinox,” Nizar says as the memory filters in. “You were utterly certain you had to be in Inverness that day, even though you had no idea why.”

Salazar nods. “Marion was sixteen and magical, but hadn’t ever realized the strength of it. When her family left for the next trip to the East, Marion remained at Hogwarts to learn under Rowena’s deft hand. She was one of Rowena’s best students aside from Nizar’s own daughter.”

“You and Nizar. Your conversations are always such fascinating windows into history that we’ve all but forgotten,” Minerva murmurs.

“Nizar would say that it’s due to the fact that we don’t quite know when to stop talking unless politics are involved,” Salazar replies. “As long as we’re discussing marriages, why is a fine lass like yourself not wed?”

To Nizar’s amusement, Minerva’s cheeks take on a faint pink-violet cast. “Oh, I’m too old for such things now, Salazar.”

Severus shakes his head. “Ridiculous. Unless you’re planning on casting off this mortal coil come sunrise, you’re still young enough. You only turn seventy in the spring.”

Salazar pours another shot. “Come now. Gossip for gossip, Lioness.”

Minerva glares at Severus for a minute, notices Salazar’s charming smile, and gives in. “All right. I was married once, for a time. His name was Elphinstone Urquhart. A good man from the Isle of Man, we used to say. But he was poisoned, during the first war—our first war against Voldemort, I mean. I imagine you’ve seen far more of wars than we.”

“Far too many, Lioness,” Salazar agrees.

“The poison didn’t kill him,” Minerva continues, “but his health was never the same afterwards. He encountered a Venomous Tentacula in the wild one day, and didn’t make it home in time for the antidote.”

“I remember Severus speaking of that,” Nizar says quietly. “He attended the funeral. 1983, wasn’t it?”

“It was,” Minerva confirms. “I remember at the time thinking it so odd that Severus was also passing on a portrait’s condolences, but it was appreciated sentiment, nonetheless.”

Salazar rests his hand on Minerva’s arm. “I know that pain. I also know that it never stops hurting, so when I say that I’m sorry for your loss? I mean it truly.”

Minerva looks surprised. “You warned me he was cranky,” she says to Nizar. “This is quite the opposite.”

Nizar smiles. “It’s not morning yet, Minerva.”

* * *
The first bottle of vodka is gone, as is the first Fire Whiskey bottle and two bottles of mead. Severus has to remind himself that he has been to Spain, and a Spaniard’s recreational drinking is a British man’s night in the hospital. The same can be said of the Highland Scots, as Minerva has kept pace with Nizar and Salazar without a hint of difficulty.

“I’ve never heard the whole of it,” Minerva confesses when the subject of prophecies is brought up. “I’ve heard it paraphrased, but never fully spoken.”

Nizar glances at Severus. “I promised I wouldn’t.”

Severus rolls his eyes before quoting the prophecy learned from the Pensieve: “*The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches, born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies. The Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not. Either must die at the hand of the other, for neither can live while the other survives.*”

Minerva’s scowl is positively ferocious. “It sounds as if Voldemort and Harry are meant to kill each other!”

Salazar nods. “Without certain steps being taken, that is exactly what was meant to happen.”

Nizar leans back in his chair and glares at Salazar where Minerva can’t glimpse the expression. Salazar lifts an eyebrow, acknowledging the hint.

Severus agrees with Nizar; Minerva does not know Occlumency. Black and the werewolf do, else he would have left Hogwarts long enough to Obliviate them both just to protect Nizar’s identity from Voldemort. He is already uneasy that Minerva now knows the prophecy…but as Salazar has noticed, Minerva McGonagall is quite capable of keeping secrets.

Minerva is still frowning. “Which is why you chose to act as you did.”

“It is a large part of why I did so, yes,” Salazar answers. “Letting them kill each other was not the proper solution.”

“IT never should have been allowed to hold such sway in the first place, that prophecy. It was just—he was so young…” Minerva bites her lip. Nizar digs out a handkerchief and passes it over without glancing at Minerva. She takes it, dabs her eyes, and then blows her nose. “Thank you, dear.”

“I’ve had to do that a lot these past few months. Different people, but usually for the same reason,” Nizar says.

Minerva nods and dries her eyes again. “I think of him often, Nizar. He is of Gryffindor, yes, but I am quite fond of Mister Potter for reasons beyond simple House affiliation.”

Severus glances over to see the twist of guilt momentarily mar Nizar’s features. Then Nizar says, “You know, if one wanted to be in a position to be more well-informed of things that are meant to be utterly secret, one might wish to learn Mind Magic for secure mental shielding. Occlumency, Minerva.”

Salazar looks surprised, but nods. “That would be quite useful, yes, especially as I’ve learned that no female teacher in this school knows proper Mind Magic. I would be at your service for lessons, Lioness.”

Minerva purses her lips. “You speak of not having a female teacher trained in Mind Magic as a failing of the school. Aside from my curiosity about the magic itself, it does seem to be a necessary
correction if you mention it for the reasons I suspect. Do you think I could learn it?"

Nizar salutes her with his refilled shot glass. “I wouldn’t have suggested it if I didn’t believe so, Minerva.”

Severus waits until Minerva is temporarily distracted by a conversation with Salazar involving the basics of Occlumency before he meets Nizar’s eyes. Why? he asks silently.

The answer arrives not by means of brief Legilimency, but a scrap of paper landing in Severus’s lap. He picks it up and reads it beneath the shelter of the table.

*If you were not here, and I was within Hogwarts’ walls alone, she is one of the few I would consider sensible enough to confide in. She no longer has the threat of sacking lingering over her head when she learns of Dumbledore’s choices, so he cannot get rid of her for voicing dissent—and she will. She’s too protective not to be outraged by Dumbledore’s decisions regarding a child who was one of her favored students. We’re going to need that sort of dissent in order to restrict Albus’s activities as Headmaster to what they should be, rather than what he would prefer. I would prefer that our other Head of House’s dissenting voice be able to defend herself against Dumbledore’s rude mind-reading habits.*

*Also, I hate leaving someone in a state of undeserved misery. She’s more upset by that child’s disappearance and continued absence than she has ever let on.*

Severus frowns and Banishes the bit of paper. Those are all very good points. Severus would be disdainful of sentiment fueling the decision, but it’s tempered by the sensibility of making certain Minerva knows Occlumency. That Salazar would be her teacher will do more to mend the political fractures between Slytherin and Gryffindor House, as well.

He refocuses on Nizar. *Are you certain that Estefania Deslizarse was the more terrifying politician in your family?*

Nizar smiles. *Yes, absolutely.*

Perhaps Severus should speak to Estefania’s portrait again. If Nizar is this consistently, subtly manipulative, he really wants to know of Estefania’s exploits.

Dobby and Filky pop into the room and give the empty bottles of liquor a look of complete horror. “Don’t worry,” Severus murmurs. “They’ll all live through it. I think.”

“The Professor Snape is being too wise to drink that much,” Filky says.

“Wisdom only in that I know better than to try to compete with the Scottish or the Spanish in regards to drinking.” Severus raises an eyebrow at the challenging look Minerva is giving Salazar Slytherin. “Though bringing in a tea tray with water and several doses of the personal hangover cure I keep in my office might not be amiss.”

Filky snickers. “Filky will be fetching it,” she says, and disappears.

Dobby sidles closer to Severus. “They all be drinking for sad reasons. That is never a good reason to be drinking.”

“Sometimes that is the only way to cope with what is gone.” It’s one of the reasons why Severus limits himself so stridently when it comes to alcohol. He’s only made it to his second glass, and it will be his last of the evening.
The elf gives him a surprisingly dry look. “Dobby is thinking that the Professor Snape be doing the same.”

“Perhaps.” Severus glances at Nizar, who is leaning back in his chair and watching Salazar flirt with a tolerant smile on his face. “But I do not have nearly as many reasons to do so as I once did.”

* * * *

Nizar wakes early on Saturday morning, but at least the sun is rising. He lifts his face from the mattress, puts his pillow back where it belongs, and gets dressed in the dark, leaving Severus to sleep.

The first thing he does is find one of the phials of a single dose of the hangover cure, drinking it down and ignoring the bitterness beneath the potion. Then he drinks an entire cup of cold water before moving on to a tea tray with a warming charm set on the teapot. Aside from Myrddin’s stupid blood-cleansing potion, Nizar hasn’t awoken with a hangover in a long time. Whatever vodka is made from, he is not a fan.

He walks back down the hall and notices that the door to his study is pulled shut but not latched. He gives the door a gentle nudge, peering in long enough to find that Salazar pulled out the bed from beneath the sofa. He and Minerva are curled up on it beneath a blanket.

For a minute, Nizar just stares at them, heedless of the rudeness. Salazar is an incorrigible flirt, but he doesn’t actually attach himself to others unless his feelings are…intense. That he’s chosen Minerva is going to take a bit of getting used to, but gods know the woman deserves to be happy.

He wants them both to be happy, but Salazar negotiated specific terms with an Aspect.

Nizar quietly pulls the door shut again. A silencing charm keeps the lock and latch from making any noise to disturb those still sleeping.

* * *

“He really told you that. You’re not serious,” Nizar says over breakfast on Saturday morning.

“Yes, he really said that,” Severus replies, not sure how it came up. He’s not even certain how he’s managed to be awake this early, but tea and bribery must have been involved. His only comfort is that Salazar and Minerva are just as irritated by it daring to be morning already.

“Manipulative,” Salazar says, pouring a phial of hangover cure directly into his tea.

Severus tries not to make a face. “That,” he declares, “is vile.”

“That sort of manipulation—oh, you meant the tea.” Salazar takes a sip. “I can’t taste anything yet. Taking advantage of that while I can. Something about tea always gives this particular potion a bit of a boost, anyway, but only if it’s black leaf.”

Severus resolves to keep that in mind. “You’ve an opinion, Minerva?” he asks instead, noting the
expression on her face.

“Yes.” Minerva is copying Salazar’s act with the hangover cure.

“Don’t add sugar,” Salazar advises. “That leads to unpleasant side effects.”

“So noted.” Minerva stirs her tea with brisk, angry efficiency. “Albus told you at the conclusion of the Yule Ball last year that we Sort too soon, yet Nizar said once that we’re Sorting at the same age as they did when the Hat was first created.”

“He did,” Severus confirms again. “I had the distinct impression that he was referring to me in particular.”

“Horse. Shit,” Nizar says in a flat voice. “You didn’t argue with the Hat, and the Hat didn’t hesitate to put you in the House you fucking well belonged in, just as Minerva would have thrived in either Ravenclaw or Gryffindor.”

“I don’t like it.” Minerva sips her tea, her expression puckering. “Salazar, you’re a dear, but that is awful. The potion on its own is more tolerable.”

“Not everything I do should be considered advisable, Lioness,” Salazar replies, smiling.

“Albus saying that to you—it sounds very much as if he was trying to plant doubt,” Minerva says. Severus frowns. “It did not make me unhappy…and then it made me angry. The only doubt I’ve ever had about my own House has revolved around how many of us were stupid enough to ally with Voldemort. That Albus would imply that I should have been Sorted elsewhere implies that everything about Slytherin House is wrong, and that is an insult to my students.”

“You never mentioned this happening, either,” Nizar says.

“I didn’t know how to articulate it beyond the anger.” Severus watches in amusement as Minerva grimly chokes down the doctored tea so that she can replace it with a cup that hasn’t been contaminated by a potion. “But everything we’ve spoken of lately regarding Albus—his motivations no longer make sense to me.”

“If your only concern is to win a war, his motivations make perfect sense.” Salazar points at Severus with his teaspoon. “Take Herbology, for example.”

“You mean aside from Pomona’s whinging about the Slytherins within our midst?” Minerva asks dryly.

“Yes, aside from that. Severus here noted when she took on the subject that a student’s knowledge of potions ingredients plummeted. Now, one could postulate from that result that Pomona Sprout is a terrible teacher, yet what she does teach is grasped by the students in her classes, and students test well at the end of every year in that subject.” Salazar puts his teaspoon back into his cup. “But the first hypothesis isn’t necessarily the correct one.”

Nizar glances at his brother. “She only teaches dangerous magical plants. Plants that can be weaponized.”

“And thus one would need to know how to survive an encounter with them.” Salazar’s smile is too grim to be pleased.
“A curriculum adjusted for learning how to fight in a war, but not necessarily one that is useful for anything else.” Minerva frowns. “Pomona didn’t school in Britain—she attended the magical school in Ireland. If the curriculum were handed to her, she wouldn’t know that it was lacking. It could easily be argued that such was the way Hogwarts always did things, and other subjects made up for the lack. Potions, perhaps.”

“That is where his motivations stop making sense!” Severus snaps. “If Albus were doing as Fudge is cowardly insinuating and crafting an army with each academic generation, why hire such miserable excuses for Defence teachers?”

“That is where logic fails, yes,” Salazar agrees, pouring a second cup of tea. “It would only make sense if he were allied to Voldemort, and I’m absolutely certain he isn’t.”

“Thank God for that, then,” Minerva grumbles. “Are you certain the Defence postings weren’t simply an aspect of the curse?”

Nizar shakes his head. “No. It interfered with learning that took place in that classroom, and would create circumstances that would force a teacher to leave at the end of a single term, but there was nothing in that rotten jumble of magic that would influence Albus’s hiring decisions regarding teachers.”

“Unless there is something else within this castle doing so,” Severus suggests.

Salazar shakes his head. “No. I’ve been from the dungeons to the towers, looking for any such hint of wrongness. There is nothing else like that. The only space I didn’t check was the Chamber, but as it’s magically separate from the castle proper, I don’t consider it a concern.”

“Perhaps we’re simply out of useful teachers of magical Defence,” Minerva offers.

Nizar points at Severus while scowling. “Here’s one, right here. Even if Severus only taught the class for a year, that’s one term when Hogwarts students would have received a decent education. Someone covers Potions for a year—it’s much easier to find a Potions Master who wouldn’t mind the year’s pay—and then the curse would have booted Severus back over to take Potions again. That red ledger of Lucius’s from the governing board. I don’t know if Dumbledore takes accurate records, but they did record every hired Defence teacher per term, along with a list of those who were asked but turned down the opportunity. None of those who were asked, aside from Lupin and Moody—even if Moody was supplanted—were good choices. They were worthless, buffoons, dangerous, or all three.”


“Then what is to be done?” Minerva asks. “Is there anything we should do?”

“My brother is solving the problem with the Defence post,” Salazar answers. “Otherwise? We listen. Watch. Confide in one another. And perhaps introduce Pomona Sprout to the original curriculum of her subject.”

“And if it can’t be found?”

Salazar glances at Nizar and shrugs. “It isn’t as if I can’t craft one appropriate for every year level, though students used to lesser memorization will not thank me for it.”

“I fucking well would,” Severus mutters.

“With good reason, too.” Nizar eyes Minerva and Salazar. “It’s too early for any further discussion
of logic or lack thereof. I’d rather gossip about a Gryffindor and a Slytherin sharing a bed.”

Minerva blushes when Severus turns to stare at her, astonished. “I suppose that’s fair, given how much I prodded at you in December regarding yourself and Severus.”

“I’m curious as to whether this was a mere drinking misadventure,” Severus says.

Salazar grins. “I’m never that far gone, Severus.”

“Nor am I.” Minerva draws herself up with great dignity. “It was a…a mutual decision.”

Nizar smirks at them. “I’ll say. Should we tell anyone, then?”

“Why?” Salazar looks incredibly pleased with himself. “It’s far more entertaining to watch as everyone else tries to figure it out on their own.”

“Yes, that. Quite. Let’s choose that option,” Minerva insists. “Let them suffer.”

Salazar smiles in delight. “And they say those of my House are vicious.”

The rest of the weekend passes pleasantly, for the most part. It’s just not something Severus is used to, this—this socializing.

Nizar smiles. “Then it’s both sparring and socializing that you say as if they’re dirty words.”

“This is really not something I’m accustomed to,” Severus replies as they step into Salazar’s quarters. Minerva is already there, curled up on the end of one of the two sofas without shoes or boots on her stockinged feet. “Also, I’m truly not over the name of Godric’s firstborn child.”

“Ozymandias is not that unusual,” Nizar says.

“You would say that. That one was your fault,” Salazar tells them as he emerges from the hallway.

“Not everything is my bloody fault, Sal!”

Salazar grins. “But that one was. You were attempting to learn Greek from Rowena and discovered that their name for Ramses II was Ozymandias. There was much complaining on how that was a stupid decision the Greeks made, and it would have been more polite to use his real name. I did enjoy Percy Shelly’s use of it when he wrote the poem that made the name famous again, though.”

“Oh, I’m also quite fond of that one!” Minerva smiles. “My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings; Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!” she quotes.

“And there are so many to whom those words could apply,” Salazar says. “So many names lost to history, written by the victors to so often shame the defeated.”

“Can we please find a subject less maudlin?” Severus requests. “It’s Sunday. I do not want to teach in the morning suffering that sort of mood. It makes me consider poisoning the deserving more often than usual.”


“That is usually a constant refrain of dirty jokes,” Minerva says dryly. “It’s easy enough to avoid the maudlin.” Then her eyes light up. “You saw him perform!”

would have been a terrible scandal if the public caught wind of it, but he was also sly enough to include women in his plays who wanted to act just as the men did, but only those women who were capable of pretending to be men who were pretending to be women. Those were some of the most brilliant people on stage during that period, and it’s a shame they’ll never be known for it.”

“I didn’t think Shakespeare would have dared go against society to that extent,” Severus says.

“That man dared to go against social mores almost every time he put quill to paper,” Salazar replies, settling down on the couch next to Minerva after Nizar and Severus are seated. “I think I saw every play that man ever put forth in London. One in particular was my favorite, though it’s also one of his lost plays.” He shakes his head in regret. “If I recalled the whole of it, I’d set about to ‘discovering’ an old copy, but I don’t. Bit on the depressing side, which is probably why I recall some of it so well.”

“What was it about?” Nizar asks.

“It might have been a bit of a precursor to ‘The Tempest,’” Salazar says after thinking on it. “Some of the themes were similar. The desire to restore the worthy to their rightful places, the intent to reveal the vileness beneath a pretty façade—though the main character’s goal was to gain magic to do these things, not choose to give it up. I’ve never been able to forget one verse in particular:

“Betwixt these lies
my tongue no tales will tell;
For faith of thee, only truths will I speak,
this coward who dwells among the meek.
Nay; here shall I stand
before this bottomless well;
In these waters I see reflected your eyes
within the hourglass which holds naught but sand.”

Nizar perks up. “Wait. I’ve heard that before.”

“You’re certain?” Salazar asks in obvious surprise.

“Absolutely,” Nizar says, and quotes what seems to be the next part:

“And here from this promontory
the wake of failed vows fill the vast sea.
Truths they all were, and falsehoods they be
for I could not stand and hold so finely.
A twisted tongue in truth were mine;
Regret is my paint, and what I enshrine
Salazar stares at Nizar. “Where did you hear that?”

“That would be the play that started the argument in the school as to whether Shakespeare was a magician or not—and I can’t remember its title. It’s why his surviving plays are in the library here.” Nizar smiles. “Granted, no one ever quite made up their mind, but since it couldn’t be disproven…”

“None of this fulfills my request for less maudlin topics, the play included.” Severus tries not to feel entirely discomfited. He is not fond of the idea that Shakespeare wrote lines that too closely align to facets of his own life.

“Then I’ll irritate you, instead,” Nizar says. “Minerva, last week I told Sirius Black about the first two ancestors of his family—the Black Prince and his son, Edward Black. I’m amused that we have a child by that very same name in this school right now.”

Severus eyes Nizar. A reminder that Black exists, and that Severus will have to deal with Black in a setting that requires not eviscerating him, does indeed count as irritating.

“Edward is a Muggle-born, but the coincidence is amusing, yes,” Minerva agrees. “What House was the first Edward Black Sorted into?”

“Slytherin.” Nizar is giving Minerva an odd look. “Our current Edward Black isn’t from a non-magical family. His magic is from a lineage, not a chaotic sprouting.”

“That might be the first time you’ve mentioned chaotic magic, or at least that I can recall in opposition to the magic that follows a family lineage,” Severus says.

“I’m just glad he bloody well remembers it,” Salazar says irritably. “No one else does.”

“I probably recalled it because it was useful, Sal, but that also means I’ve stumbled onto yet another subject that’s been forgotten—no.” Nizar frowns. “I would imagine this was knowledge deliberately destroyed to fuel the bias of blood prejudice.”

“That one.” Salazar scowls at the opposite window. “Definitely the latter.”

“Miss Granger is an example of a chaotic expression of magic, as she really does come from a non-magical family,” Nizar tells Severus and Minerva, “though that expression of chaotic magic can lead to the creation of new lineages. Magic often follows family, which Severus and I have discussed before.”

“Indeed.” Severus murmurs. “How is it that you’re so certain Mister Black of Gryffindor comes from a magical lineage, unlike Miss Granger?”

“I don’t actually know. I think it might be something I picked up from years of sitting in a portrait with not much else to do,” Nizar says. “It’s not something I can see or feel. I just know, Severus. It’s why I always knew which of our Slytherins were from non-magical families without needing to ask.”

“Did that come with the ability to identify lineages, perhaps?” Salazar asks.

Nizar shakes his head. “If they express their magic in a visual way that matches a known family’s magic, or if their family is actively claiming them, that’s how to find out. I’m not a magical
“Think of what a useful talent that would be,” Severus says. “Edward Black. You don’t think—”

“No,” Nizar says at once. “Not with those listed dates of death on the Black family tree. There are other magical Black families still, just not in Britain, and thus not eligible to be Heirs to the London branch of the family. Lycorus Black is responsible for every single Black family member we’ve dealt with in Hogwarts since 1837, but he also had four siblings: Phoebe, Hesper, Eduardus, and Alexia.”

“Yet another Edward,” Minerva notes.

Nizar nods. “Two of those four siblings, Eduardus and Hesper, married individuals that the family disapproved of, so they left Britain. If they had children, they were taught somewhere that wasn’t Hogwarts. None of the Black family portraits are aware of what happened to Phoebe.”

“Edward Black could be descended from one of those families that left Britain, then,” Minerva says.

“Sirius Black’s family doesn’t have the best reputation,” Nizar says. “If I were a Black that moved back to the isle, I don’t think I’d be in such a hurry to tell anyone, either.”

Minerva frowns. “Should we mention it to him, perhaps?”

“Dear God, no.” Severus glares at her. “We are not that child’s parents. That is their job, not ours.”

“Besides, magic can skip generations, even if it’s based on a lineage. His parents probably are non-magical,” Nizar says.

“Are you going to weigh in on this, Salazar?” Minerva asks.

Salazar lets out an amused snort. “Not my place to weigh in, Lioness. I’m not a teacher here.”

“Yet,” Nizar says under his breath.

Severus isn’t surprised when there is a frown on Nizar’s face when they go downstairs to his quarters to retire for the night. There is something about a Monday morning early rising; Severus’s mood is vastly more tolerant if he wakes without having to cope with the bloody sunlight upstairs. “What is it?”

“What cloak?” Nizar asks, giving Severus a puzzled look. “Lupin said I owned a cloak. What is he talking about?”

Severus forgets his earlier discomfiture in favor of feeling like an unobservant idiot. “That’s right. You don’t have it—not anywhere in your quarters. Nor your wand.”

“No, I have the wand. Maybe. Brown varnish?”

“Eleven inches, holly with a phoenix feather core,” Severus says. “You do have that still?”

“Given that what you’ve said matches the description of what I found? Apparently so.” Nizar shoves his hand into his hair. “I put it in the same drawer I store my armor in.”

“You own armor.”

Nizar glances over and grins at whatever expression must be on Severus’s face. “I lived and fought one thousand years ago, Severus. Of course I own armor. Leather plate reinforced with magic. Godric gifted it to me when bloody Myrddin dumped a title on my head. Now: what fucking cloak?”
“You had a Cloak of Invisibility, one that used to belong to James Potter. That cloak also did not make my life easier,” Severus says in a dry voice.

“As I also have your gift and the safety it offers,” Nizar murmurs, words that sound like they’re being quoted. “Salazar. I gave it to him. I wonder what he did with it?”

“Ask him tomorrow. Tonight I just wish to sleep in preparation for the students’ first official meal with Salazar Slytherin.”

Nizar grins again. “That should be fun, if only because I’m going to watch most of the staff pretend that they are entirely fine with Salazar’s presence.”

Severus pauses in the middle of shrugging off his robe. “Nizar. The Sorting Hat.”

“What about the alcoholic felt?” Nizar asks, flopping down on Severus’s bed without bothering to pull back the quilt or undress. Severus pauses in what he’s doing; Nizar looks weary, despite the happiness he seemed to have taken from Salazar’s presence.

“You said that myself and Minerva were properly Sorted—more specifically, that Minerva would have thrived in either House. You, however—I truly do not believe that child would have thrived in Slytherin House, not as things were,” Severus says.

“Oh, yes. That.” Nizar cranes his head around so that he can look up at Severus. “Two things—either I confused the fucking hell out of that Hat by appearing to be Sorted when it had already failed at it, or I warned it in advance and don’t remember doing so.”

Severus inclines his head. “I suspect the latter. You do tend to like contingency measures.”

He knows at once that he’s given Nizar some sort of idea to mull over. It’s in the way Nizar’s eyes wander over in apparent study of the wall, the tilt of his lips. “Contingency measures. What counts as a contingency measure for that, I wonder?”

“Am I going to find out what you’re talking about?”

Nizar shakes his head. “Not until I come up with an actual plot instead of vague musings.”

“Why do you sleep like that?” Severus asks once they’re in bed.

Nizar lifts his head, a dark shadow in a room with almost no light at all. “Sleep like what? You’re going to have to be more specific.”

“I often find you with your face pressed into the mattress. It doesn’t appear to be a comfortable way to sleep,” Severus explains.

Nizar lies back down and is quiet for a few minutes. “Nightmares,” he says at last. “I used to—well. The results were loud. If I slept with my face against the bedding, it muffled the noise. I’ve never quite lost the habit.”

Severus feels an uncomfortable weight in his chest and a chill prickling his skin. “What sort of nightmares?”

Nizar sighs. “Many. I have a number to choose from, Severus.”
Severus awakens at six-thirty Monday morning, and isn’t much surprised to find that Nizar is absent from the bed. The man either sleeps in a way that requires Severus to pry him off in the morning, or he’s awake and gone before the bloody sun rises.

After he’s dressed for the day, he approaches the Great Hall for breakfast—only to find that its entrance is blocked by students who are watching something occurring inside. “Oh, now what?” he asks. The expression on his face gets him into the Hall, where he stops short as he realizes he’s joining a ring of spectators.

Nizar and Salazar are both insane, no matter how much Salazar Slytherin protests. The pair of them are within the protective circle of a Protego charm, *dueling* at seven in the morning. There is no doubt left in Severus’s mind at all that Nizar correctly named all of the Founders as complete lunatics.

Severus takes in the expression on Nizar’s face, and the glower on Salazar’s, and wonders if this is how they cope with the supposed infamous Deslizarse morning temper. Then he notices that Salazar has the hint of a smile, and the edge of teeth are visible at Nizar’s lips. This isn’t just about mood, but also politics. Students are crowding into the Hall to witness this duel.

Salazar Slytherin is being introduced to the student body in exactly the sort of way that will rouse curiosity before fear. They’re lunatics, but they’re also brilliant.

The tables and chairs are floating in the air near the ceiling to clear space. As the duel progresses, more students and staff arrive to fill it. Severus catches Minerva’s gaze from across the room and is amused to see her roll her eyes. She doesn’t keep up with Slytherin levels of intrigue, but she knows a staged act when she sees it, even if Salazar and Nizar are doing their best to hex the blazes out of each other.

The next spell they cast meets in the center between them, tying itself into a red and silver knot. “Oh, come off it, not again!” Salazar yanks at his wand, trying to free it from the spell.
“Of course it happened again. Eighteen spells, every single time.” Nizar shakes his wand in a vain attempt at untangling the knot. “Stupid priori incantamentu.”

The moment the priori incantamentu is released, Salazar swishes his wand in a way that blasts Nizar right against the shield charm’s wall. Nizar laughs and waves his free hand; Salazar slips and falls on conjured ice the same way Severus had in November.

George smiles. “That was cool.”

Severus glances over just in time to see Fred glare at his twin. “They’re having a duel with an ice jinx, and the best joke you can come up with is cool?”

“Well.” George tilts his head as Salazar banishes the ice and glowers at Nizar. “He is quite hot.”

“And you’re a flaming idiot,” Fred replies, looking despondent.

“I’m going to start taking points if you don’t stop making horrific puns!” Severus warns them.

There is a loud cackle above them just before Peeves drops a Water Bomb on the duelers. Salazar and Nizar are immediately drenched and standing in a knee-high pool of water that is trapped within the dueling circle by the shield charm.

Nizar and Salazar both look up at the offender. “Really?” Salazar asks, baffled.

Peeves immediately appears contrite, something Severus never witnesses unless the Baron is involved. “T’weren’t my idea! Miss Ravenclaw insisted!”

Salazar wipes water off his face. “Helena, darling: why?”

The Grey Lady crosses her arms and gives the brothers a haughty look. “It’s time for breakfast for these students, and the two of you are in the way.”

“Oh. Right,” Nizar says, pulling his wet hair out of his eyes. “Breakfast.”

Salazar glances around, as if noticing their audience for the first time. “Why didn’t you lot say something?”

“Because that was so awesome!” Miss Weasley declares, a sentiment repeated in varying forms by many of those present. Even Draco looks enthused, and he’s not looked excited by much of anything since the last day of term before the winter holiday.

“Yes, but—tea!” Nizar exclaims, miffed. “I’ll hex him any time you like, but you’ve all kept me from tea, you ingrates!”

Salazar dismisses the shield charm, which allows the water to wash along the floor in a sudden rush that soaks shoes and trailing robes in equal measure. Severus restrains a sigh and casts a drying charm on his boots. “There’d best also be coffee involved,” Salazar says.

“You drink that compost?” Nizar asks in disbelief.

“Oi, now, don’t mock the coffee!” George warns Nizar. “It keeps certain staff in this school sane, Your Leadership!”

“I do seem to keep missing the fun,” Albus says as he arrives, regarding the wet floor, wet duelers, and floating furniture with a thoughtful expression. “This will take some getting used to, I believe.”
Severus eyes him. “I find I prefer no longer being outnumbered.”

Albus twinkles at him. Bloody morning person. “I understand; I don’t like to feel that way, myself.”

Salazar and Nizar dry themselves off, though the water on the floor is already seeping through old stone cracks and crevices to disperse itself. Albus is the one to lower the tables and chairs from the ceiling, returning them to their proper places. “Perhaps you could duel elsewhere in the morning?” he suggests in a light voice.

“Why?” Salazar asks with a politely baffled expression.

“Hard to stage a demonstration on Defence if there is no one around to see it,” Nizar adds innocently.

“Defence.” Albus smiles. “Of course. Perhaps something timed to not interrupt breakfast, then.”

“Perhaps,” Salazar agrees. “Mealtimes are important, after all.”

Severus takes his usual seat, but Nizar claims Minerva’s spot; Minerva sits in Nizar’s chair while Salazar conjures one to place between Aurora and Minerva. Aurora looks startled right before her expression smooths over, intent on pretending that she sits next to a Founder of Hogwarts every day.

“They’re both seventeen,” Minerva says. “Are the Weasley twins earning their first magical mastery?”

Severus frowns, annoyed. He hadn’t even considered that aspect of their pseudo-employment.

Nizar tilts his head. “I’ll know by the end of the term.”

“The idea of the Weasley twins with a magical mastery in anything is vaguely horrifying,” Septima says. Perhaps Nizar’s verbal evisceration is bearing fruit; she doesn’t sound combative at all. Severus just doesn’t like the fact that he agrees with her.

“I think it’s a grand idea. If their schedule wasn’t already full, I’d be taking them on for a Charms mastery,” Filius says, to Severus’s surprise. “They’re brilliant. That Portable Swamp creation of theirs—I want one, I truly do.”

Severus is tempted to bury his face in his hands. He hadn’t thought in terms of magical masteries in regards to any of his students, even though he has a seventh-year N.E.W.T. class full of legal wizarding adults. He doesn’t even know how one attains a Potions Mastery beyond the Ministry’s inane requirements.

“I do recall from Nizar’s babbling—” Aurora favors Nizar with a teasing grin— “that a magical apprenticeship typically began at age fourteen, but the implication seemed to be that they would last three years.”

“Not necessarily,” Salazar replies. “It depended upon the magic, the student, and the teacher. My insane little brother here, for example, earned his very first magical mastery in less than a year.”
Nizar glances up from his plate. “I did?”

“You did,” Salazar confirms. “The second one took six months. I believe you decided sleep was an entirely unnecessary component of existence for that entire time. You were intent on learning it, so you did.” Salazar grins. “Then you collected the rest of the magical knowledge for a true mastery in Defence. You had it by your seventeenth summer.”

“That is a terrifying level of dedication,” Poppy says. “Though I mean terrifying in regards to your lack of sleeping.”

“The rest of it sounds completely normal,” Minerva agrees, smirking.

Nizar rolls his eyes. “You lot already knew that I was mental. Honestly: not news.”

Albus waits until breakfast is nearly complete, with ten minutes remaining before class. Then he stands up and approaches the podium. “Good morning. We’ve had an interesting start to this half of the term, and it’s a beautiful Monday morning.”

Severus glances up and confirms that Albus is not delusional today. The sky is clear and bright, almost entirely free of clouds.

“For the week’s announcements, I have very few. Slytherin and Ravenclaw have a Quidditch match this weekend. I do believe the weather will remain steady until Friday, whereupon it will drench us all on Saturday.” That announcement is met with displeased groans from players and audience alike.

“We also have… a… well.” Albus turns to look at Salazar, his eyes a bit too wide for it to come across as anything but delighted twinkling. “What shall I refer to you as?”

“I’m merely a guest, Headmaster,” Salazar replies, his expression a match for Albus’s.

Marietta Edgecombe stands up from the Ravenclaw table, frowning. “Are you really him?”

“Please,” Malfoy retorts from the Slytherin table. “You can tell just by looking at Professor Slytherin that they’re related, Edgecombe!”

“One of them is a Metamorphmagus. Besides, Polyjuice also exists,” Edgecombe sniffs.

Nizar rolls his eyes. “One-thousand-year-old hair is not viable for use in Polyjuice!”

“You’re in N.E.W.T. Potions, Miss Edgecombe,” Severus adds in a flat voice. “Please act like it.”

Salazar leans back so he can look up at the school ghosts still drifting about. “Helena, dearest! Ionnes! Who am I?”

The Friar smiles. “Salazar Fernan, Marqués of León, Casa de Deslizarse of Castilla and Ipuzko… though I understand that it is called Gipuzkoa now.”

“Salazar Slytherin.” Helena’s expression has sobered to the near-dreary expression Severus has seen on her face for most of the time he’s been aware of her existence. “My mother’s dear friend.”

Nicholas looks bewildered. “Good sir! Why are you not dead?”

Albus gives Salazar a nod, a subtle confirmation that the floor is his. Salazar looks at Miss Edgecombe. “I made a deal with an Aspect of existence to not die until Voldemort is defeated. That’s one of the most poorly worded bargains I’ve ever made, but to be fair, it was an Aspect, and I felt a bit overwhelmed.”
“Fucking up the adoption contract, I swear,” Nizar growls under his breath.

“Wait.” Macmillan at Hufflepuff’s table gapes in disbelief. “You guys truly knew about You-Know-Who a thousand years ago?”

Nizar sighs. “We’ve discussed that at length, Mister Macmillan, and I know your House is just as guilty about gossiping as the rest of them are.”

“Well, yeah, but...he’s a Founder!” Miss Turpin of Ravenclaw squeaks.

“You’re asking if we knew that my family line would culminate in something like Voldemort?” Salazar ignores the gasps that still rise from certain throats. “I’m a Seer, a proper scrying master of Divination. Some things shouldn’t be asked, and I went and did it anyway.”

“How did you find an...an...Aspect?” Thomas at Gryffindor asks.

Salazar’s expression doesn’t turn chill so much as it gains a wary, closed-off cast. “That is not information I’ll ever be sharing with a student, young Gryffindor.” He considers it. “Nor any adults, come to think of it. I did no evil, performed no harm to another, but it is generally considered unwise to attract that sort of attention.”

“Then why did you?” Zabini asks, curious.

Salazar turns his head to look at Nizar. “Because a Slytherin is loyal,” he says, “and protects what he loves.”

“He means he was desperate,” Nizar says dryly. Salazar puts his hand to his breast like Nizar has wounded him, but the effect is spoiled by his broad grin.

“Why didn’t the other Founders join you?” Miss Lovegood asks curiously. Severus is starting to wonder if the Hat needed to debate as to which House to place her in. She is a sly one, and hides it very well.

“They didn’t want me to do it. People aren’t mean to live a thousand years, darling,” Salazar replies, his smile fading. “It wears you down. We’d already seen the example of it in Myrddin. He lived to be six hundred ten, and the last two centuries were not his favorite.”

“You knew Merlin?” Malone squeaks.

_That, Severus thinks irritably, is a question asked by one who has never once bothered to read their history textbook._

“I knew him very well, young man. I came here from León in the year 984. When I met the old blighter, he said I’d taken my time, and couldn’t I have managed it a few years before that? Bear in mind that I was a mere fourteen years old, the youngest of the quartet he’d decided would build his school, and still he thought me late. But, I’m not the one who knocked out two of the old man’s teeth.” Salazar glances at Nizar.

Nizar scowls. “He made my daughter cry, and he deserved it.”

Severus glances over at Salazar. “Thank you,” he mouths. He’s wanted to advertise that interesting little fact. Salazar grants him a faint nod of amused recognition.

“You punched Merlin.” Ron Weasley grins. “That is mental.”
Fred stands up. “Can we deliberately fail our N.E.W.T.s? We’d really like to stay on and see what is going to happen next year.”

Nizar glares at him. “If you fail your Defence N.E.W.T., you will never be able to father children, Fred Weasley!”

Fred shrugs and sits back down. “Just thought I’d ask.”

“And now, I do believe it is five minutes of eight o’clock,” Albus says. “Classes begin momentarily, and we all have a busy day ahead of us! Remember not to tickle any dragons you might encounter in the halls.”

Ah; there is Albus’s morning dose of ludicrousness.

Nizar notices the expression on Severus’s face and leans in close, his breath a warm caress against Severus’s cheek. “What is it?”

Severus’s gaze is locked on the Slytherin table, where his students are rising from their seats. Their eyes are bright, their expressions animated. For the first time, he sees no hint of children who feel the edge of someone else’s boot prepared to stomp on them the moment they step out of line.

“I was just considering the fact that your insane morning demonstration, and a single conversation in this Hall, did more to raise Slytherin House’s standing in the eyes of this school than…” Severus hesitates. “I honestly don’t know how else it could have been achieved at this point, Nizar.”

“Things had fallen to quite a low and terrible point, yes,” Nizar agrees, using the cover of the table to grasp Severus’s hand. “Never again.”

“No.” Severus’s eyes linger on his Slytherins as they leave the Great Hall. “Not ever again.”

* * * * *

Nizar looks out at a sea of thirty-seven expectant faces. “Oh, so it’s to be that sort of class again, is it?”

“It’s your own fault, sir,” Miss Parkinson says, batting her eyelashes at him.

“Yeah. You talk to us, Professor.” Boot grins. “What a terrible precedent you’ve set!”

“Apparently,” Nizar says in wry agreement. “You do realize we have a lesson to discuss today.”

Miss Granger puts her hand up. “Ten questions.”

Nizar snorts. “Two.”

“Five!” Miss Greengrass tries.


“Deal,” Malfoy declares before anyone can blunder by trying to negotiate again. “How long have you known your brother was alive?”
“Remember the day I decided it was high time to jump out of a window?” Nizar smiles at the number of startled nods he receives. “There you are.”

“But—you were sad afterwards, not happy,” Miss Patil of Ravenclaw says.

Nizar raises an eyebrow. “Is that a question?”

“No!” Patil says quickly. “Not at all!”

“Good. You’re learning,” Nizar replies. “Think carefully on your last questions, as they’re all I’m allowing before you have to listen to me drone on.”

Miss Shafiq is insulted on his behalf. “You don’t drone. That is reserved for Binns, sir.”

He watches as his students confer. “All right, we’ve got one.” Miss Abbott turns to face him properly. “And it’s because we know we’ll get a lot of spouted rubbish if we try to ask Trelawney. If he knew about Voldemort a thousand years ago, why didn’t Salazar Slytherin kill Voldemort as a child? Or kill Voldemort’s parents, or do something else that would have ensured that Voldemort was never born?”

Nizar leans back in his seat. “That’s an intriguing set. My brother is a master of Sight, of Divination, but anyone who is a true master of that branch of magic will tell you that Divination is not a precise tool. Salazar can scry for the future upon water, but water doesn’t emit sound—he can see places or people, but without sound, he knows nothing of what they’re saying. He could know and see that someone was going to be causing an awful lot of trouble, and the nature of the question asked is also informative…but that doesn’t necessarily deliver to you a name.”

Nizar glances around the room. “Let’s play the morality game, a precursor to the ethics lectures some of you aren’t going to like very much. Say that Salazar was certain he’d found the boy Voldemort used to be, and killed a ten-year-old child. Do you think that murder—and yes, murder is exactly what it would be—is just? Don’t think about what you know of Voldemort now; think of what he hadn’t done then. No training in magic. No crimes committed. Would that be right?”

“Voldemort has killed a lot of people,” Vaisey says, gulping.

“Actually…he hasn’t,” Nizar says, surprising them. “Voldemort has performed horrific acts of magic and terrible murders, yes, but his Death Eaters hold the highest body count, both as a group and as individuals among them. Voldemort is happy to allow others to do his dirty work for him, as it gives him a greater sense of power.”

“Then Voldemort was the excuse a lot of others needed to be…foul,” Finch-Fletchley says.

“Some of them, yes, that’s true,” Nizar admits. “But there are others who needed no such excuse at all. They would have been terrible, and terrifying, if Voldemort never existed—Madam Bellatrix Black Lestrange, for example. I think she, much like Tom Marvolo Riddle, committed her first murder before she came of age. Walden Macnair, recently arrested in the Department of Mysteries break-in, was a happily employed executioner for the Ministry. Just because his kills were legal doesn’t mean he wasn’t using his job to satisfy darker urges. Thus, we’re right back to murdering a ten-year-old. How do you justify murdering a child for things that have yet to be?”

Nizar leans forward. “Divination isn’t exact. What if Salazar had killed a child that might never have grown up to become Voldemort at all?”

They all look suitably somber, to his relief—well, Crabbe and Goyle just look terrified out of their wits, but that’s still better than glee or indifference. “Are all the ethics lectures going to be this, uh,
intense?” Miss Brown asks.

“Yes. For good reason. Myrddin once told me that we, as magicians...when we call upon strong magic, we attract the attention of the gods. Now, I don’t care what religion you follow, or if you’re religious at all. That’s your concern, not mine,” Nizar says. “But certain spells require strong magic. I’ve felt, sometimes, that if I were to turn around at just the right moment, I would see someone standing behind me. It’s not a pleasant sensation.

“You should be trained in your magical talents, aware of your limitations, and comfortable in the decisions you make. You should be aware of the ramifications of your choices. Some of you even now think that you could cast the Killing Curse and walk away without ever feeling a twinge of guilt.”

Nizar lowers his gaze, as this is one instance in which he doesn’t want anyone to feel pinned down. Those who are trapped don’t like it very much. “But the person you’ve hypothetically killed had a life that affected the lives of those around them. Their existence mattered to someone. Think on how much you want others to realize that your existence matters, too.”

*          *          *          *

“And how was your day, little brother?” Salazar asks as Nizar approaches. He’s standing in the Entrance Hall, facing the four Founder’s portraits. He’s also added four random portrait frames; their normal occupants have been temporarily supplanted by the Founders’ portraits painted in 1015.

“It would have been fine, but everyone third-year and up had questions that devolved directly into philosophy, morality, and ethics,” Nizar replies, walking over until he’s standing next to his brother. “Hello, all of you.” His greeting is returned in an echo of four sets of voices, which is odd, especially given that Salazar is right next to him. This is why he never wanted a portrait of himself in his immediate vicinity; if he wants to talk to himself, he doesn’t need a canvas to do it.

“Let me guess: because I didn’t kill Voldemort before he had the chance to start a magical war in the first place,” Salazar says.

“Good guess. What are you doing?”

“The tampering you mentioned on the portraits here in the front hall.” Salazar’s eyes flicker from one painted face to the next. “After some thought on the matter, I asked the others to come down here. I wanted to compare the 1015 paintings to the 1035 set.”

“Staring at portraits instead of having dinner?” Nizar asks.

Salazar glances at him. “I don’t see you entering the Great Hall.”

“Ethics and morality. I’m really not in the mood to eat right now,” Nizar replies. “Any results from painting staring, then?”

“For both good and ill, yes.” Salazar steps back and gestures for Nizar to take his place. “Look at the differences between them, hermanito. Look close.”

Nizar gives Salazar a curious look before he studies the paintings. Helga and her older twin, though only her older painting holds the cup; Godric from the Headmaster’s office is lean and hale compared
to the grizzled redhead he aged into; Rowena’s hair never silvered, but her expression from one painting to the other weathered as the years passed with no word of Helena’s fate; Salazar’s paintings are so different, they may as well be different people.

Different people.

“They’re copies,” Nizar whispers, shocked. The four older portraits all look abashed. “And none of you knew.”

“Why would we, dearest?” Helga asks, adjusting her grip on the golden cup.

“If you’re going to rig the game, you don’t tell the participants,” Godric’s younger self says, scowling.

“Salazar?”

Salazar sighs and leans against Nizar. “I realized it in part because of the magic, but the rest came about when I started arguing with that daft idiot on the wall,” he says, gesturing at his elder portrait. “Whoever did the copying…they remembered enough to know that one of the Slytherin brothers had been a Metamorphmagus, but got it wrong which of us it was.”

Nizar looks at the reptilian-like pointed nails on older portrait-Salazar’s hands. “I had wondered why you’d gone to the trouble to do that to your fingernails. Do we know when this happened?” he asks as portrait-Salazar morphs his hands back to normal.

“After Godric’s time, certainly.” Salazar frowns. “But the portraits— whoever did this must have been copying the magical impressions of personality over from the originals, as they all remember quite a bit. It’s the pertinent details that are wrong, to everyone else’s detriment.”

“Like the fu—” younger portrait-Salazar catches himself before he swears in a public hall. “Like the blood purity nonsense.”

“The normal occupants of these frames have volunteered to spend time elsewhere while we four talk to ourselves and try to mend the damage. It’s the only opportunity we’ve had to ever get this close,” younger Rowena says. “Only Godric’s portrait in the Headmaster’s Tower had the means to speak to these four portraits, and since he could do it so little, he never had the chance to grasp what was truly amiss.”

“Because these portraits are frame-locked,” Nizar says. “Like mine was. They can’t wander, which means others typically can’t wander in to say hello.”

“And it’s been so. Bloody. Boring,” older Godric growls. “But there is no way to fix it. Salazar has already ascertained that the locking spell is built into the portraits themselves, and cannot be altered without destroying us.”

“Which I’d rather not do, even if you’re but copies of the old portraits,” Salazar mutters. “Gods know what happened to the originals.”

“Taken from the castle or destroyed.” Nizar sighs. “How much would you like to wager that these copies were made at the same time that my portrait was moved?”

Salazar shakes his head. “I’m not taking that wager, not when the answer is so obvious. The blood purity twaddle was already a mindset among the magicians of England when I returned for a time in the 1300s. These copies were made, and your portrait was moved, sometime between Godric’s death and…well, it takes time for ideas to entrench themselves. Somewhere between 1138 and the late
“It isn’t even that we mind being copies,” older Salazar says, still in the midst of adjusting his appearance to match Salazar as he is now. “That’s all a portrait is in the first place—a painted copy of a person. It’s the tampering that is vile, little brother.”

Nizar lifts both eyebrows. “That’s the first time I’ve ever heard you speak in English.”

“Yes, well.” Older portrait-Salazar lifts his head to look up at the frame of 1015 Salazar. “We’ve been discussing the matter. It’s one thing to hear that I’m wrong from you, and I do apologize for that rudeness, but it’s quite another to hear it from yourself, and on two different sides, no less.”

“You mean it was enough to overcome whatever part of the magic embedded in the copying decided you needed to be a twit,” Nizar says.

“That, too,” older Rowena says dryly. “Salazar performing the updating spells so that all of his portraits are aware of what he’s seen and done since 1039 has also been of great assistance.”

“And gods, but that took up most of my day. Translating over a thousand years is a complicated process.” Salazar glances up at the portraits. “I’ll leave you all to it, then, shall I?”

“That is fine, Salazar. If you won’t eat in public, then go find Severus and eat with him. I’ve not heard his voice in the Great Hall, and I have very good ears,” younger Helga says, smiling.

“Office,” Nizar discerns, and leads the way. Salazar is still bemused that everything Slytherin or Hufflepuff is below ground, though Pomona’s office is an exception to that. Nizar just thinks the Hufflepuff Head of House didn’t want to crawl through the stupid barrels any more than he does. Salazar has already seen the need to add a second entrance to Hufflepuff’s Common Room, though he won’t get rid of the barrels—too many of the younger students love the blasted things.

Severus’s voice responds to his knock. “Unless you are of my House or a literal Slytherin, go away.”

Nizar pushes open the door. “Oh, I see you had a good day.” Severus is seated at his desk, his face resting on the tabletop, and his arms are over his head. “Who did what?” he asks while Salazar glances around the room, intrigued.

“The first day of class this month, they were too stupefied to be idiotic,” Severus replies without lifting his head. “They saved it for Salazar’s return. I actually contemplated killing half of them.”

Nizar sniffs the air and wrinkles his nose. “You smell of burnt thestral hair and horseradish. Do I even want to know what the classroom looks like?”

“No. Not unless you want to witness the detention of the fifteen students who are cleaning it as of seven-thirty this evening.”

Salazar lets out an amused snort. “What did they do, try to set the place ablaze?”

Severus lifts his head, a glare on his face that doesn’t diminish when he finds Salazar inspecting his shelves. “That would be simpler. A large portion of them were thrilled with your being in the school. Another portion of students were terrified out of their wits. A third group were utterly distracted because of the attitudes of the first two. Thus, three-quarters of my students were not paying attention to a thing they were doing, and brewed potions like dunderheads. My sixth-years had to brew in a different room.”

“I might actually have to witness this disaster for myself.” Salazar’s eyes are tracking the ceiling
arches. “I like this place. I’d rather have sunlight to brew, but if you can brew by torchlight with ease, it’s quite the comfortable space. And oh, that expression,” Salazar adds when he notices Severus’s face. “What is that look for?”

Severus rubs at his forehead. “Nizar said much the same when he first saw it. You are the only ones to have ever done so.”

“The only problem I have is this script on the wall. Damn this island’s terrible Latin.” Salazar studies the archway behind Severus’s desk, which is labeled in Middle English script, black letters following the curve of the arch: *Potussa Carbonate*.

“I’d get rid of it if I could, but someone with the means spelled it to be a permanent part of the stone,” Severus says. “I’m not entirely sure what the cretin who wrote it was attempting to say.”

“To drink fire.” Salazar smiles when Severus gives him an odd look. “One gets used to translating an entire island’s bad Latin over the centuries. This is worse than most, as *Potussa* is appalling, and *Carbonate* didn’t exist in that form until the 1600s.”

“I’m aware.” Severus half-turns in his seat to regard the wall. “*Cabonem*, if that was their intent, would mean glowing coals. Someone was a masochist to want to do so.”

“Or really didn’t understand the difference in terminology.” Salazar glances at Severus. “Would you like it fixed? Or erased entirely?”

“Fixed,” Severus finally decides. “I don’t think I would ever get used to that particular archway being blank. Someone might also once have had good reason to place those words there, if very poor execution.”

Salazar places his hand on the wall. The black letters melt into nothing before reforming to read *Potare Ignis*.

“Better, if possibly not the greatest message for a student,” Nizar says.

Severus frowns. “If they’ve reached the age of eleven and they still don’t know that attempting to drink fire is a terrible idea, it’s their own fault.”

Nizar raises an eyebrow. “I’ve witnessed drunken seventh-years try to eat hot coals from the fireplace.”

“I still stand by what I just said.”

“Great bleeding fuck,” Salazar says when they enter the classroom.

“That is the least of the words I used once I got rid of them all for the day,” Severus replies in resigned disgust. Half the workbenches are destroyed, and one still has wisps of smoke rising from its surface, either from acid or a fire that refuses to be completely extinguished. The floor is a dangerous collection of both ingredients and colors of spreading liquid potions, some of which were never meant to mingle. There are still things dripping down from the ceiling. The chalkboard has a hole in it, and the wall behind Severus’s desk is Ravenclaw blue.

“Did they start a bloody war in here?” Salazar asks.

“That would be the second-years, the majority attending detention, and the reason my N.E.W.T. class had to take place elsewhere,” Severus replies.
“At least you don’t have Longbottom until tomorrow morning,” Nizar offers. He grins when Severus subjects him to a glare similar to the one Sirius Black claimed might actually set him on fire.

Seven-thirty brings Maxwell Harper, Colin Creevy, Lisa Turpin, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Vanessa Edgecombe, Euan Abercrombie, Seraphina Dolohov, and Rebecca Goldstein. The second-years who decided to duel in a Potions classroom are just behind them: Mafalda Prewett, Dennis Creevy, Stewart Ackerly, Hiroshisa Kubo, Eleanor Branstone, Nigel Wolpert, and Kevin Whitby. None of them seem thrilled to find Slytherin’s Head of House in literal Slytherin company.

“It wasn’t this bloody bad when we left!” Colin Creevyblurts in shock. “Uh, sir!”

“No. It wasn’t. Blame your extra time in detention tonight on your second-year companions. None of you are leaving this room until it is absolutely spotless.” Severus looks utterly forbidding, which Nizar finds thrilling, but as he told the other teachers that morning—he’s mental.

“That could take all night!” Prewett bleats.

“No actually my problem.” Severus stares at them when none of the students move. “Dawdling will not make this happen any faster. Do not step on any spills or touch anything that is still either damp or smoking. Shirk your share of the cleanup and you will be repeating this detention every single night this week, weekend included.”

That encourages them into more grudging activity. Severus watches with his arms crossed. “The two of you may as well leave. If I don’t oversee the entire process, they’ll still be at it by dawn—or they’ll start another foolish war.”

“Oh, I’ve a better idea.” Salazar grins. “I know you didn’t eat dinner, and neither did this idiot I’m related to. I also did not exhaust myself with teaching for the entire day. I’ll watch the darlings.”

“Watch them, or make the idiots disappear?” Severus asks.

“They’re young. I don’t do such to children.” Salazar’s grin widens as he notices that the closest students are becoming aware of what he’s offering. Half of them are turning unhealthy shades of pale. “Granted, if they disobey your instructions and sprout an extra limb from stepping on something they shouldn’t have, such can be fixed. Eventually.”

“You owe me nothing,” Severus says in a low voice.

“On the contrary, I owe you much that I’ve no idea how to repay,” Salazar counters. “Besides, at this moment, I’m still terrifying. They’ll clean the mess up twice as fast for fear of what I might do to them. We should take advantage of that while we can.”

“Students don’t generally fear you?”

Salazar shakes his head in response to Severus’s question. “Almost every student I’ve ever taught has wanted to learn, and thus incidents like these were rare. Students in this school whom I’ve met—I encountered many who don’t wish to learn at all. I don’t know why that is; I don’t know if it’s the insane schedule they’re meant to keep, the late start to their magical education, or if it’s some other problem I’m unaware of. Regardless, when you have students who do not wish to learn, animosity and carelessness often result.”

Nizar hooks Severus by the elbow. “Come on. Dinner. A free pass to slack off for the evening. Take it; he won’t offer very often.”

“Very well.” Severus presses his lips together. “Thank you.”
“Oh, that’s not needed. I’m going to have a fun evening,” Salazar replies, smiling at the fifteen miscreants again.

They meet Minerva out in the hall. “Oh; I was just coming to search for you.” Minerva holds out a scroll to Nizar. “This came for you during dinner by means of that terrible fiend you call an owl.”

“Thank you.” Nizar accepts the scroll, notes the seal, and immediately tucks it into his robe. “I’m surprised Nygell let you take it.”

“I threatened to stab him with a fork,” Minerva says tartly. “What’s happening down here? I heard much whinging about an unfair mass detention.”

“Unfair mass—” Whatever Severus means to say next, he chokes it down so it emerges only as a low rumble accompanied by the grinding of teeth.

“He means you should go look at the Potions classroom,” Nizar interprets.

Minerva gives them both a suspicious glance before she goes to do just that. A moment later, she shouts, “DEAR MERCIFUL MERLIN, WHAT ON EARTH DID ALL OF YOU COMPLETE IDIOTS DO?”

Nizar grasps Severus’s arm again and all but pulls him down the corridor, away from the classroom. “Yes, she’s entertaining, but you’re supposed to be having dinner with me.”

“It was worth it for the first shriek from her lips,” Severus admits grudgingly.

“Mm. Do you notice, Minerva is nearly as caustic and vitriolic as you, and yet no one claims her to be a terrible teacher, an unfit teacher, or refers to her by truly unfortunate names?”

Severus rolls his eyes. “She is a Gryffindor, and thus can do no wrong.” He glances around before leaning down near Nizar’s ear. “I based my teaching style off of hers after witnessing its great effectiveness as a student. No one seems to have noticed.”

“You should tell her,” Nizar says. “She’d be flattered.”

Severus chuckles. “She’s aware. She only ever has complaints if I’ve pushed too hard and caused nervous breakdowns or tears. The unobservant idiots never notice after such incidents that unless they’re about to cause dangerous blunders, I leave them alone until they need to be reminded of whose classroom they’re in.”

Severus still has to finish his available hours for Slytherin House, so they take dinner in his office, seated at the massive round table Severus calls his desk. A brief rise in the feel of the castle’s magic signals that he’s checked the entire dinner tray for poisons, traps, hexes, curses, or problems of any sort. After Miss Bluebells’ poisoning attempt, it’s a habit Nizar has been trying to encourage every member of staff to maintain. Most of them refuse, insisting that they’re not targets. Nizar is polite, and doesn’t grasp and shake them into realizing that Voldemort considers everyone to be a target.

After eating, Nizar retrieves the scroll from his pocket and cracks the seal. “That was prompt.”

“What was?” Severus asks.

“After the Crown sent word about an acceptable date, I sent Nygell back to them with a message asking about an appropriate time, as well as a location.” Nizar rolls up the scroll. “Apparently that time is ten o’clock, and the location is Downing Street in Whitehall. Isn’t that where the Ministry is?”
“And the Prime Minister’s residence, but I doubt that’s where we’ll meet,” Severus says.

Nizar nods. “They mention a car. I’m not looking forward to that.”

“Why not?”

“Severus, even if I’ve ridden in a vehicle before, I have no memory of it,” Nizar replies. “I don’t like unknowns in what might prove to be a tense diplomatic situation.”

Nizar catches a scrap of paper when it arrives in the air as the meal is almost done. He glances at it and scowls. “Oh, Dumbledore, you complete dick.”

Severus coughs and manages not to choke on his tea. “Congratulations; you’ve discovered a new word that I wish my students had never found in the first place. What granted Albus the honor of having it applied to him?”

“He gave Sirius Black my schedule,” Nizar hisses in outrage. “He had no bloody right to do that!”

“You’re the one who told Black you would speak to him,” Severus points out.

“Do not make me fling crockery at you.” Nizar shoves his chair back, still growling under his breath. “Yes, I said I’d talk to the man, but on my terms. I’m still—I’m not—fucking fuck! I need to go find out what he wants.”

“I did say we could simply Obliviate them.”

Nizar presses his fingers against his eyes. “As ill-timed as this is, I—that man married my parents, Severus. Unless he endangers you, Salazar, or our students…I can’t. I can’t do that. Besides, I’m still blaming Albus Dumbledore more for this inconvenience.”

“Albus was thinking in terms of politics,” Severus says, nodding politely to the elf who comes to retrieve the tray. Most of them are still wearing tea towels and nothing else, though a number of elves have abandoned the colors of other Houses and adopted Hogwarts’ neutral white. “Sirius Black, most likely coming to him with tales of wanting to make peace with the Slytherin who made his mother’s portrait be silent? Albus would jump at the opportunity.”

“I’m aware.” Nizar pushes his chair back under the table. “I know you’ll be awake until that detention is finished. When Salazar comes to find you, ask him about the Entrance Hall portraits. I’ll let you know if I convince Black to leave my quarters before bloody midnight,” he says, and Apparates to the disused, disguised seventh floor stairwell. He exits the door that hides the stairs and walks down the corridor, largely unsurprised to find a crowd of students surrounding a massive, shaggy black dog.

“Oi, Professor!” Thomas calls when he notices Nizar’s approach. “When did you get a dog?”

Nizar regards the mixed Houses who are petting the dog. “Congratulations. You’re all currently in the midst of spoiling an Animagus.”

“He’s an Animagus?” Mohammad draws his hand back like the dog bit him. “Er—isn’t this…uh…inappropriate?”

“No. As I said, you’re spoiling the Animagus.” Nizar gestures for them to clear him a path through to his own door. “Human thought but canine senses. He enjoyed that the same way a normal dog would. Now: you may all please leave so that my guest isn’t spoiled by anyone else.”
Nizar pushes open the classroom door and waits until the dog can escape the students—some of whom are still petting him, Animagus or not—and enter the classroom. Then he shakes his head and shuts the door in far too many curious faces. “That was the least subtle thing you might ever have done.”

Sirius Black is suddenly standing in the black dog’s place. “No, I’ve done far more blatantly obvious things in my day.”

“How fast did Albus Dumbledore jump on the chance to establish a political alliance between a Slytherin and yourself?” Nizar asks, opening the door to his quarters. He’s had enough people traipsing in and out of late that he’s taken to leaving the set for his quarters unless he’s actively using his office.

“I thought he might actually leap over his desk and shake my hand for making such ‘a mature, grown-up decision,’” Black quotes in a dry voice. “All I asked was if you were available this evening, and he gives me your entire teaching schedule.”

“Could you possibly forget that schedule?”

Black shakes his head as he steps into Nizar’s sitting room. “No such luck. I have… wait, Lupin told me once, there is a Muggle term—I mean a non-magical term,” he corrects himself, which improves Nizar’s mood immensely. “Eidetic memory. Perfect recall. After twelve years dwelling among Dementors, I wasn’t sure if I still had that talent, but every month that I’m away from that place improves things immensely. I can quote you the whole of every Order meeting that’s taken place since June of this past year.”


“No, thank you.” Black smiles at the portraits of the children, though Elfric is napping and Galiena is absent. Then he peers closer at Galiena’s portrait. “I didn’t notice the moon in her painting before. It follows the phases accurately?”

“It does. She appreciates having the reminder, even if being a portrait means she isn’t forced to shift on a full moon.” Nizar drops down onto his sofa and gestures at the armchair before removing Kanza from his neck.

Black sits down more slowly, his eyes on Kanza. “That would be the famous basilisk that Petrified herself a Horcrux and two Death Eaters?”

“That she is. This is Kanza,” Nizar replies as he watches her curl up on her warming stone. “She’s… oh. I can’t remember exactly when she was born. In the spring, I think. That means she’ll physically be three years old soon.”

“And mentally?” Black asks, watching Kanza settle herself.

“She’ll be nine hundred eighty-one. She’ll be ancient for a basilisk by the time she’s a grown adult.”

Black nods and drags his eyes away from her. “When will that be?”

“A basilisk reaches adulthood at the end of their first century, though they don’t necessarily stop growing. She’ll be too large to carry around when she’s twenty-five, but she won’t be too large to live in my quarters until she’s forty. After that…” Nizar looks at Black. “You came here to ask about basilisks?”

“No, I came here to ask about you,” Black replies, “but Kanza belongs to you, so technically, I’m
“Then I hope it’s not to whinge about my dating life again.”

“No.” Black sighs. “Remus has been making fun of me for weeks, saying that if you married, I would more than deserve the son-in-law I’d be getting out of it.”

Nizar stares at him. Then he starts laughing. “I agree with Remus Lupin—yes, you would utterly, completely deserve it!”

“You’re not actually getting married, are you?” Black asks.

Nizar tilts his head. “You know, if I told him that marriage would potentially cause you to spontaneously explode, Severus would say yes if I asked him.” Black looks so horrified that Nizar all but howls with laughter in response.

“It’s honestly a little bit terrifying, how much you take after Lily,” Black complains. “I’d like a chance to get used to…you being…well. You. First. Before I have to contemplate anything else.”

“I’ve known I’m your son for a little over a month. Relax. I will not be marrying anyone any time soon, as I’m still not used to this!” Nizar shakes his head. “I was a fucking painting until Hallowe’en of last year. That wasn’t yet three months ago, Sirius. If you think you’re having trouble adjusting, you are not the only one.”

Black has an amazed smile on his face. “You said it. You actually said it.”

“What? Which part?”

“You said you were my son. I know it’s not by birth, but it still—that does mean a lot to me,” Black says quietly.

Nizar has to look away from that intent gaze. He knows that expression. He saw it in the polish of a silver mirror or in still water often after Brice and Elfric’s deaths. “I know who your parents were, those who would have been legally my grandparents—oh, that was almost as difficult to say as claiming fucking Petunia Dursley.”

Black lets out a harsh laugh. “I’d imagine it would.”

“But: I know the rest of your entire family. Every single one of them a Slytherin except you,” Nizar says. “I know that your parents, aunt, and uncle didn’t leave you and Regulus with the best impression, but your line didn’t turn foul until Lycorus became the dominant head of the family in Britain. Most of the Blacks before that time were decent people, and I remember many of those names. What I don’t know…” He looks down at his hands. “Malcolm and Jane. I learned my mother’s parents’ names just recently. I know nothing about my father’s family.”

“James was an only child,” Black says after a few moments of uncomfortable silence. “A very, very late child—it’s a miracle your grandmother bore a child at all. They admittedly spoiled him rotten, but they were also…they were kind. When I ran away from that three-storey box of insanity in London, they took me in until I turned seventeen.” Black releases an amused snort. “They had no idea James was dating both myself and your mother by the end of sixth year, but I wasn’t about to say anything, since it meant—”

Nizar holds up his hand. “No! I truly do not need to know those details; that was implication enough.”
Sirius looks like he’s biting his tongue, but manages to skip the unwanted details. “Charlus Potter, married to my Aunt Dorea on the Black family tree—that’s your great-uncle. Your great-grandfather was Henry, a respected member of the Wizengamot and a complete troublemaker. Horrified one end of the societal set for having pro-Muggle views, and horrified the other for marrying an Indian woman. Henry pointed out that he wasn’t purely white, either, which scandalized the few who were still standing. Elizabeth Esha Fleamont. Before Imperialism happened to the family, their name was Lohat, which was supposed to be one hell of a lineage before it died out.”

“How the fuck does one get Fleamont out of Lohat?” Nizar asks, baffled.

“The Ministry and the British Government’s combined ability to make things as English as possible, whether you’re English or not,” Black replies.

“Good point.” Nizar missed the worst of four hundred years of British Imperialism by being in a portrait, but the Half-bloods and Muggle-borns in Slytherin House kept him informed of all the reasons why they loved or hated it—the love came from those who were both enthusiastically pale-skinned and English, while the hatred tended to burn in those students who only had full rights in the magical world.

“I know that my grandfather was given my great-grandmother’s family name, and that my grandmother’s name was Euphemia. Dumbledore mentioned it,” Nizar says. “But not…he didn’t have a reason to mention anything else.”

Black nods. “Euphemia Grace Pryce was from Cardiff, in Wales—she was a second cousin of Remus’s uncle by marriage, which yes, means Remus is a distant relative of yours as well as a godparent.”

Nizar tries not to roll his eyes. “A pre-existing legal claim and a familial relation, if only by marriage. Lupin thought my living with the Dursley family was better than living with a werewolf, didn’t he?”

Sirius nods. “Unfortunately, yes. He’s a stubborn shit about that, and Albus assured him that you were being taken care of.”

“Let’s go back to family details,” Nizar says, if only so he won’t say a lot of angry words about how foul that house in Little Whinging felt when he saw it in December. He knows from Severus that his childhood was likely unpleasant. A werewolf would have been far preferable, even though such a living arrangement would have driven Severus mad with concern before the first year was out.

“Euphemia, then,” Sirius agrees, though he gives Nizar a searching look. “She and Fleamont married and lived in Godric’s Hollow, where James’s family lived for generations. They really wanted to fill a house with children, but James was all they had. It was pretty easy to become an unofficial adoptee of the Potters. They claimed Lily, Lily’s parents, me—I think they would have snatched up Regulus if Regulus hadn’t been off…well, he turned against Voldemort in the end. I’m happy with that.”

That reminds him of something he’s wanted to ask again since the debacle with Marion’s locket. “Sirius, why do you stay in that fucking house in London?”

Black frowns. “I told you before. I’m still wanted by the Ministry.”

“Yes, but you said you lived off of rats for a year. I’m assuming that didn’t happen in the townhouse.”

“No, it didn’t,” Black admits. “That was your third year in Hogwarts. Er—two years ago. I didn’t get into the house until spring of last year.”
“So…you survived on your own, if not well-fed, for over a year.” Nizar lifts both eyebrows. “I’m still waiting to hear why you truly live in that house.”

Black shifts in the chair. “I’m really not sure what you’re getting at.”

“I’m trying to figure out why you so firmly believe you are trapped in that house, especially when you are not.”

Black scowls. “Why does it matter?”

“Oh, for—” Nizar pinches the bridge of his nose. “You’re family, you complete idiot, so I am concerned. Also, people who are unhappy and trapped tend to make very unfortunate tactical decisions that get themselves or others killed. I repeat: why are you insistent upon the idea that you are trapped in that house in London? You have access to a Gringotts Vault that could see you set up like royalty anywhere else in the entire fucking world.”

“Albus asked me to open the house so that the Order of the Phoenix would have a safe place to meet, since it’s one of the few buildings we have access to that is Unplottable,” Black finally says. “Someone needs to stay in the house to secure it, and to make certain no Death Eater ever figures out a way to get inside.”

“Then why does it have to be you who lives there?” Nizar asks, hoping he’s making progress. “Why can’t it be any other member of the Order? Why can’t you lot take turns? Forcing you to stay there is detrimental to your health, and enforces the notion that you’re not safe elsewhere. Bullshit. You’re an Animagus, a trained magician, and a Black. You don’t need that house, even if the Order does. There are other solutions. Why does it have to be you?”

“I was about to say ‘Because it’s my house,’ but you’re right,” Black says, brow furrowed. “I know Tonks has a shit flat. She’d probably jump at the chance to live in the townhouse, and an Auror is definitely an effective guardian. Remus could be there when she’s not.”

“Tonks would probably like him to be there at all times.”

Black snorts. “She would, yes. Remus has no idea how to handle the idea that someone is interested in shagging him rotten. I keep telling him to accept reality, and that reality is my cousin’s complete adoration. Remus’s current excuse, aside from his werewolf whinging, is that he’s too old for her. I laughed at him. Might have gotten myself hexed for that, but worth it.”

“He’ll get there,” Nizar says. “Or she’ll be persistent enough—he does actually like her.”

“I see what you’re getting at, though.” Black shakes his head. “You think Dumbledore is making the wrong decision about me and what I should be doing, and I just went along with it.”

“You did just go along with it,” Nizar says flatly.

“All right, yes. I did.” Black sighs. “I can learn to recognize that Dumbledore can be wrong. I’ll think on…living elsewhere.”

“That isn’t my entire point.” Nizar mentally braces himself. “Based on Trelawney’s prophecy, Dumbledore was going to feed your son to Voldemort to end the war.”

Black’s expression morphs into one of complete, unmitigated fury. “HE WAS GOING TO DO WHAT?”

“The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches. Born to those who have thrice
defied him, born as the seventh month dies. The Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not. Either must die at the hand of the other, for neither can live while the other survives. The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies. That’s the full prophecy, Sirius. Dumbledore was going to let them face each other to weaken or destroy Voldemort. I’m disgusted that this was the only solution he planned for in regards to that prophecy, by the way.”

Black’s shoulders heave as he takes in a deep breath. “But it doesn’t—the soul shard. That was your scar?” Nizar nods. “That’s gone, though, so that prophecy doesn’t…it’s not right any longer.”

“No, but I’m not telling Albus Dumbledore that. I’m not telling him about me, either, and you’re going to pretend you’re still oblivious about the whole of the prophecy.” Nizar leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees as he regards Black. “Dumbledore is a good strategist, and most of his ideas have merit, but he does not understand how to use his allies to their best effectiveness. Lupin among the werewolf packs as a spy? Ludicrous. That man is not spy material, no matter how unassuming he can appear, and the toll it takes on his health might well fucking kill him. Unmedicated werewolves develop terrible health problems, Sirius.

“We have good allies among the Aurors, but too few of them. The only reason Dumbledore allowed Severus to cease being a spy is because he had no choice. Voldemort tried to kill Severus, and I pulled the Dark Mark out of his skin so that would never again be a threat. Dumbledore is happy to use me against Voldemort with his prophecy child absent. He literally fucking bribed me, Sirius, hoping to keep an ancient Slytherin as an ally.

“The same problem exists in the Order that exists in Wizarding Britain’s government: one man holds sway over all. One man makes all the decisions, and while the Order meets to discuss events, Dumbledore’s decisions are always final, aren’t they?”

Black nods, still looking furious. “They are.”

Nizar resists the urge to sigh in relief. Finally; progress. “A good leader knows to listen to their people, to take all of their strengths and weaknesses into account when planning to defend against an enemy. Dumbledore is plotting in regards to the Order’s strengths while ignoring their weaknesses. That is not only dangerous, it’s a disaster waiting to happen.”

* * *

Nizar catches the scrap of paper from the air and reads the single sentence before he sends his Patronus back in response. Severus Apparates into Nizar’s sitting room the moment he receives it, immediately glancing around.

“Black’s gone for the evening,” Nizar says, feeling tired. “You don’t have to worry about tripping over him, Severus.”

Severus frowns in concern. “Was Black being difficult?”

“No, he was being stubborn, but I haven’t met a Black yet who wasn’t,” Nizar replies, rubbing his temples. “I hate politics. I hate feeling like a pessimistic reflection of Dumbledore.”

“You are nothing of the sort.” Severus sits down next to him. “To begin with, you are sensible. I consider Albus to be an ally, if not necessarily a friend. You are only correcting flaws in his plans
“No, I’m trying to undermine him, which is far more nefarious,” Nizar says. “Getting Black to see that his presence in that house was unnecessary was—I had to pull out the bloody prophecy and tell him what Dumbledore intended in regards to his son. Black is smart enough not to…” Nizar waves his hand vaguely in the air. “He didn’t run off to kill Dumbledore, and he’s not going to speak of it to anyone, not even Lupin, but at least now he’s going to think on what the Order is doing instead of just accepting whatever words fall out of Dumbledore’s mouth.”

“That’s still not undermining Albus. Unless you plan to take control of the Order.” Severus eyes him in a way that suggests he doesn’t think that a bad idea.

“No, not that. I stand by what I said about revolutions being messy.” Nizar slumps down so that he can rest his head on Severus’s shoulder. “I’m just having such a moment of disconnect right now. I’m older than my father, Severus. If my parents were alive, I’d be far older than they. I don’t know what to do about that.”

“Considering that it’s after midnight? I strongly advise sleep,” Severus emphasizes. “You are yourself, and you do not have to be what others expect. I believe you know better than that.”

“Usually. Bad habits, set patterns of the brain,” Nizar mutters. “Can I convince you to stay in my bed tonight to be mercilessly held by a clingy Slytherin?”

Severus takes Nizar’s hand and traces his thumb over the silver ring with the family crest carved into it. “As long as you do not mind that I am a Slytherin intent on doing the same.”
“You look far less grim than I recall.”

“Whereas your hair finally looks as if someone introduced you to the concept of a comb.”

Chapter Notes

Otherwise known as the chapter where Salazar starts being especially nosy.

All hail cheerleaders and betas @mrsstanley, @sanerontheinside, @jabberwockypie, & @norcumi!

Waking in his own bedchamber after so long is still odd. Salazar will often just lie there without opening his eyes, listening for sounds that are out of place until the ancient familiarity of lilac and beeswax filters into his perception. The modern mattress helps, as does the addition of newer means of storage and furniture, but otherwise this room is exactly the way he left it.

It’s exactly the way Marion arranged it, the way she preferred it to be until the day she died.

Salazar didn’t bring much of his own clothing to the castle, but after discovering that what remained behind in 1039 was intact, that became far less of a concern. He did have to deal with a house-elf who was insistent upon modernizing half of his wardrobe. He doesn’t mind; it’s worth it to have bloody pockets. He was in no mood to go back to belt pouches.

He dresses in a t-shirt and denims, as it annoys certain teachers in the school, but wears one of his finely retailed black robes over them. The gold embroidery that edges his sleeves and follows the collar to the bottom hem brings back memories that are more often fond than sad.

Salazar always goes into his study first of a morning, where he is exploring books he’d forgotten existed as the copies he carried with him were lost over the centuries. Thank the gods for Rowena’s creation of the updating duplication spell, or he would have a number of illegible books on his shelves. Instead, it’s a treasure trove. He’d forgotten many spells contained within them, which he supposes is to be expected at his age.

“You know, I still can barely stand the idea of anyone coming into these rooms,” Salazar says to the portrait on the wall.

Nizar’s portrait, the one that belongs with the 995 set, cracks open one eye. “No one has come down this hall, even though you invited the others inside. I can’t actually see myself to be in a hurry to enter these rooms after being away from them for nearly ten centuries.”
Salazar nods. “I can scarcely fathom it myself, little brother. You know, the other portraits tell me they never see you about the castle.”

Nizar smirks. “Because I was sensible enough to tell myself not to wander. Given what I was told happened to the 1017 crafting, that was probably a wise idea. Someone might have attempted far worse to me.”

“Like the copies in the Entrance Hall.” Salazar feels prickling unease dance across his skin. “I know it’s unrelated to Voldemort—that it’s a separate concern, someone who wished to create and then enforce blood purist views and rivalry. I just hate that it ties so well into what Voldemort wishes to accomplish.”

The portrait is silent while Salazar sorts through the pile of potions texts he left behind. He once created a lot more than he remembered; it’s a good thing he always took careful notes. He doesn’t want to share these with Severus during the school term, not when the poor man is already overwhelmed by both the workload of this school—pure insanity, that—and his relationship with Nizar. At the end of term, perhaps. The man is a genius, and there are things in these books that a modern Hogwarts student might find useful to learn. Severus will recognize that faster than Salazar, who has taught no one but grown adults for the last few centuries.

“You’re not the only one with Sight, Salazar Deslizarse,” Nizar’s portrait says at last. “If this culprit had visions of the future and saw what Voldemort meant to accomplish, goals that aligned with their own…”

Salazar glares at the portrait. “You and your bloody logic.” It makes a great deal of sense, an option he really hadn’t wished to dwell on. If he could see Tom Riddle in 990, why could someone else not do the same after Godric’s death? “Where is your 1015 portrait, hermanito?”

“It used to be in this castle, and like myself, was not doing any wandering that would attract attention, but the others, the 995 portraits in my home—they claim to have not been able to find the frame for the 1015 portrait in centuries. It was possibly hidden, like your 1015 portrait that now properly resides in the Slytherin Common Room. Or some fool destroyed it.” Nizar tilts his head. “I know you took the 992 portrait with you. Did it survive?”

“It’s intact, though frameless.” Salazar smiles. “For some reason, it also now speaks naught but Parseltongue.”

“Better than than nothing at all. Given the others’ talk of what I’ve forgotten, you should perhaps show it to him,” the portrait suggests.

“That’s bloody sensible. I’ll do that.”

“Good. You’re never sensible unless you have tea in the morning, anyway,” the portrait reminds him.

“That’s still your fault!”

Salazar sends a note to Nizar that is returned with a sleepy, angry scrawl of: Why can’t you wait until the school’s breakfast hour, pendejo?

He frowns and checks his watch, realizing he’s stirred Nizar at a quarter of five. Damn. He doesn’t sleep much anymore, but he forgot that his brother’s insomnia is an erratic creature. My apologies, he sends back. Send for me when you awaken. I wanted to show you something.

It’s too fucking late for that. Just give me five minutes to find clothes and drown myself in a sink,
Nizar replies.

Salazar gives his brother ten minutes to be polite before he Apparates directly from his sitting room and its sleeping portraits to Nizar’s, where Brice and Elfric are already awake and having an animated conversation in Parseltongue. “Good morning, little brother.”

Nizar lifts his head from his table and then flips him off with the classical gesture of two raised fingers. “Teaaaaa,” he croaks, and a tea tray pops into existence courtesy of the elves. A great deal of them are used to the requirement of not being seen, and are truly shy creatures after centuries of enslavement. “Thank you.”

Salazar waits until they’ve both drained two cups of tea. “Your portrait, painted in 995, is hanging in my study.”

Nizar makes a face. “Oh. Well. It’s good that there is one, I suppose. How long did it take you to update one of your portraits, Sal?”

“Three bloody hours for each one,” Salazar replies. “No one knows where your 1015 portrait is.”

Nizar gives him a blank look. “I’m in with that set? I didn’t recall that at all. I know I’m not in the 1005 set because I told you to fuck off, you already had…” He trails off. “You already had two. I just realized I’ve never seen a hint of the 1005 set. What was the other one you have of me?”

Salazar frowns; he’d forgotten the 1005 set existed. “I took this with me when I left the castle.” He reaches into his pocket and removes the carefully folded canvas, which feels soft in his hands after so many years. Nizar frowns and moves the tea tray aside so that Salazar can spread the portrait out on the table. “The year 992, Nizar. Painted in celebration of your attaining your first three masteries.”

“Hello, old face,” the portrait hisses at Nizar, lips quirked up in a smile. “You look quite a bit older than I recall.”

“It’s been a while, but I suspect I looked like this the last time we spoke.” Nizar stares down at the portrait and swallows. The 992 painting has fair skin just beginning to take on a brown hue from the sun. His hair is the same deep, dark brown as Salazar’s, hanging to his shoulders in odd, spike-like curls as Nizar’s hair fought against a learning Metamorphmagi’s magic. His eyes are full of greens, golds, bronzes, and browns, not the more intense jeweled emerald green.

“That…I still looked quite a bit like that child at the time, though our features are the same,” Nizar finally says in a cracking voice. “Salazar, I don’t know if I was ready to see this yet.”

“Maybe you needed to, anyway,” Salazar replies. “Those memories will return one day, hermanito. Should you not be used to the idea of embracing all of yourself?”

“I don’t know.” Nizar hesitates before he carefully refolds the canvas and gives it back to Salazar. “I do know that it can’t be hung in a public area of this castle. It would be like hanging a bloody banner announcing my identity.”

“No, it can’t,” Salazar agrees, while thinking Not yet, anyway. One day, people will know. He has seen such, even if his scrying hasn’t been able to tell him why. When that time comes, he thinks it will help certain students come to terms with what happened to young Harry Potter. Those who were truly Nizar’s faithful friends will be glad to know that he is happy. “You’ll need to perform the updating spell on this after I find a frame to hang it within my quarters. I think that might repair its difficulty in speaking only Parseltongue.”

“All right. Just let me know when.” Nizar yawns and pours another cup of tea. Then he tells Salazar...
about the long conversation he had with Sirius Black the night before.

“That’s progress, at least,” Salazar says. “Black has potential that I’d like to see him fulfill, and you deserve…you deserve a family, little brother.”

Nizar reaches out and swats him in the head. “I have one. He’s sitting next to me, and he’s daft. How did Severus react to your informing him of the Entrance Hall portraits?”

“He became very quiet. I do believe he was thinking on the implications, none of which are good. Severus and Minerva both are cheered by the idea that the portraits are being corrected by their uncorrupted younger selves. Once that’s done, I’m going to permanently spell those frames to prevent tampering. If they can be found, I’d like to move the entirety of the 1005 set downstairs to be placed across the hall from the 1035 set, as well,” Salazar tells him. “I think everyone who visits this castle should be reminded of the fact that we weren’t born old and wizened.”

Nizar glances over at him in surprise. “The entirety of the 1005 set isn’t just the Founders. It’s every teacher in the school who came here and remained.”

“Is it? I might have forgotten such a pertinent detail,” Salazar says dryly. It is recognition that is long overdue. “Perhaps we should be more specific about our youth during the Founding, and it should be the 995 portraits placed downstairs. We’ve only accounted for five, hermanito. There are more.”

“Joder de mierda,” Nizar mutters in dismay, and puts his head back down on the table.

Salazar does take breakfast with the rest of the staff, which delights Minerva, Nizar, Severus, Filius, Aurora, and potentially the artist, Sasha. Albus Dumbledore hides his true opinion of the matter with smiles and twinkling that Salazar finds vastly irritating. He dislikes false kindness, and he remembers too much of what Nizar was like in 990 to feel overly charitable. He is polite, but polite is all that blasted twinkling will ever rate.

He does converse with those who are willing, but he spends much of the time watching the students. Some of them adjusted to his presence rather well, and to his amusement, the fastest to adjust were those born in non-magical households. That lot comes with built-in flexibility that children from magical households often do not have, immersed as they are in televised stories, songs on the radio, and a vast access to varieties of the written word. The Slytherins are delighted—at least those who have no wish to join Voldemort. Those who have the Dark Mark, or those from families that are firmly blood-prejudiced…those, Salazar almost despairs of.

“What cloak?” Nizar asks Salazar as he follows his brother up to the seventh floor. Nizar has already consented to Salazar’s presence in his first class that day, provided Salazar uses the Invisibility Charm so as not to distract the lot of them. “Lupin said I had a cloak. What is he talking about, Sal?”

“You came to us with a Cloak of Invisibility in your possession,” Salazar says. “A finely crafted one, like nothing we’d seen before. When you agreed to the painting, you gave that cloak to me for safekeeping, and if need be, to keep myself safe. The Underground is currently making use of it.”

“Then I’m glad it’s still keeping others safe. It’s not like I need an invisibility cloak,” Nizar says. “Charm, Sal.”

Salazar casts the Invisibility Charm on himself before the turn into corridor that leads to the classroom. Nizar greets a batch of mixed-House students waiting by the tapestry, ones who are close to adulthood but don’t have the feel of having crossed that threshold—sixth-years, then. It’s a disappointingly small batch of ten. Salazar frowns; that means so many of this age group receive no useful lessons in defence at all.
“Something different today then, sir?” the sole female student in Helga’s colors asks.

“A bit. This entire week is going to be different, by necessity.” Nizar paces in front of the wall three times until that blackened door appears. He pushes it open and gestures for everyone to step inside.

“Bloody hell,” the only girl in Slytherin colors whispers.

“Is this a museum or a rubbish pile?” a boy with Gryffindor colors asks, picking up the abandoned robe from the floor and gazing at it curiously.

“It might well be both,” Nizar answers. “Listen. When I first discovered that someone had created this space, I thought immediately of dueling practice.”

A young man in Rowena’s colors glances around. “Hide-and-go-seek. This certainly would be a right challenge.”

“Yes, but…” Nizar hesitates. “The house-elves. Their original contract with the school was found hidden in this room. This place is called The Room Where Everything Is Hidden. I’m sure you can discern the implications of that.”

Miss Chang of Ravenclaw, who hadn’t been afraid to approach Salazar and speak with him, makes an unhappy face. “If one important document was hidden in this place, then many important things might be hidden in here. If we duel first, we chance destroying something irreplaceable.”

“Exactly.” Nizar crosses his arms and glances around the room. “This place is also gigantic. Every class, for the rest of the week, is going to help me search through this disaster. Fifth-years and up have the ability to check closed containers for traps waiting to harm, so you lot will be the lucky ones who will be pointing your wands at closed wardrobes, boxes, trunks, or whatever else you find. Don’t try to open it if you discover a trap you feel is beyond your means; send a Patronus to me and I’ll come assist you. There are many things missing from Hogwarts that should not be, and this is one of the places they’re most likely to be found—if they weren’t destroyed. Before you whinge about being a clean-up detail, bear in mind that I’m going to be doing the exact same thing you are.”

“Wasn’t going to whinge, Professor,” their lone Slytherin girl says, frowning. “I was going to suggest that Professor Willowood should be involved, too. The robe that Jack picked up—that’s old. A lot of this might need to be considered for a museum.”

Nizar looks intrigued. “We have a museum in Wizarding Britain, Miss Bhatia?”

“No,” Miss Bhatia says, “but we should.”

His brother’s intrigue has become utter disappointment. “Hogwarts is the closest thing in Wizarding Britain to a museum, isn’t she?”

“Uh, yes sir,” another in Rowena’s colors answers.

Salazar bites his lip to keep from laughing at the Parseltongue that Nizar indulges in. “All right, then. I’ll talk to Professor Willowood at lunch, as you raise a valid point, and if I have to open the blasted museum myself, then I will. Gods, it’s no bloody wonder everyone’s history grades are so abysmal!”

Abysmal? Salazar tries not to scowl. He hasn’t yet met the one teaching history to students here. That will need to be something he rectifies, but he’ll give them a week to adjust to the idea. They’re never at meals; that instructor might well be bloody terrified of him.

Salazar leaves when the students are sufficiently distracted. Nizar’s idea is a good one; he’ll dig
through this rubbish pile himself at a later time. Right now he’d rather Nizar’s students have the
opportunity to make their own decisions over what they find.

He spends his entire morning slipping into and out of classrooms using the Invisibility Charm and
Hogwarts’ politeness in allowing him to slip through small openings she creates in the walls. He
doesn’t prefer to spy on those who are ostensibly allies, but people who are aware of being observed
are people who alter their behavior. He wants to see what Hogwarts’ teachers are like when they feel
unchallenged in their own domain.

Well. Beyond the challenge that students provide, anyway.

Minerva is a glory to behold in Transfiguration. He’d never realized she was an Animagus, and finds
her cat form quite appropriate for a Lioness. Filius is a cheerful bundle, and an excellent teacher of
Charms. Barnaby Harper is far too sour for a class of music; Salazar suspects the man is all but done
with teaching. The repertoire offered is also truly fucking dull, and mentions nothing of non-magical
tunes.

Rubeus Hagrid’s teaching methods are entertaining, the students pay attention, and the man knows
his creatures. Excellent. Nizar says Hagrid is even progressing on levitation lessons, which is difficult
magic to learn once you’ve left childhood behind. If that racist tripe of a play Peter and Wendy got
anything right, it was childhood flexibility and belief.

Pomona Sprout is a good teacher, but her curriculum covers barely anything at all, which Salazar
finds exceedingly frustrating. It’s ideal to know how to survive exposure to deadly plants, or to care
for others just as deadly but which have true uses in magic, but there is so much more to Herbology
than that.

Eustas Viridian has a tiny Alchemy following. Viridian is a wizened old prick, but he does know his
subject. Quintinus Stirling for Ghoul Studies has his own devoted following, as does Cassandra
Shafiq for her intriguing lessons on Magical Theory. The history teacher has no classes that day, so
Salazar moves on to Ancient Runes. It takes him about five minutes to decide that Bathsheba
Babbling’s family name must be some sort of curse. The woman is quite informative, but Salazar has
never seen someone employ circular breathing just so they need never cease talking before.

Sasha Willowood is a bit stern, but delightful among those students who’ve grown out of childhood
antics and now pay attention. She teaches art and its history without concern for an artist’s magical or
non-magical status, which is rare in Britain.

Salazar wants to strangle the life out of Charity Burbage. Why is a woman who has never once lived
in the non-magical world teaching a class called Muggle Studies? She has absolutely no bloody idea
what she’s discussing. He leaves that room before he gives into the urge to bash his head against the
wall.

Salazar goes to lunch in a foul mood. That is an entirely sabotaged class, and one that doesn’t seem
to host many students, besides. It’s no wonder, given how nonsensical the lessons are. He has no
idea how to address that terrible lack with Albus Dumbledore without losing his temper.

Nizar waits until the end of the meal before addressing him in Parseltongue. “Spying on the rest of
the staff, brother?”

“Yes. I’m pleased with everything so far except Muggle Studies. Charity Burbage seems like a nice
sort, but she has no idea what she’s speaking of.”

Nizar nods. “I’ve heard that from several students. Who is left?”
“Arithmancy and Septima Vector, Aurora Sinistra and Astronomy, Rolanda Hooch and her Flight classes, the history teacher, Cuthbert Binns, Divination and Trelawney, and your Severus.”

That earns him a glare. “I don’t own the man, Sal.”

Salazar smiles. “I’ve always thought it was a bit of a mutual thing, myself.”

“Speaking of problems with actual, thankfully former ownership…the elves. Miss Granger brought up an interesting point,” Nizar says, catching Salazar’s attention before he can decide if he’s going to leave the table first, or be polite and wait until most of the others have departed already.

“And what is the most brilliant of Gryffindors suggesting?” Salazar asks.

Nizar opens his mouth and pauses, looking at him. “You know her.”

“I know of her,” Salazar clarifies. “But what I recall has been dulled by a thousand years, little brother. I’m more familiar with that young woman by what the past few days have wrought.”

“Fair enough.” Nizar still seems disturbed by that ancient familiarity. “The elves have stopped vetting our school’s guests. She suggested that, per the terms of the contract, it might be a wise idea for them to do so again.”

Salazar resists the urge to swear in any language, as it would doubtless be loud. “I hadn’t realized they’d stopped. I’ll visit with the elves myself this afternoon. I know exactly what sorts I’d prefer to keep out of these walls.”

Nizar smiles. “I thought you might currently be the best man to ask, yes.”

He sees to Rolanda and Septima’s classes after lunch. Rolanda Hooch is exacting and fair. Salazar wonders why she teaches only the mechanics of flight and broom care, but nothing of the wood itself, or why certain trees are better for flight than others. Another curriculum gap; irritating.

Salazar almost hexes Vector for her treatment of the Slytherin students in her classes, which Nizar has said is possibly an improvement over what came before. He is not above putting the fear of the gods into this woman if she does not begin offering all of her students the same level of fairness and patience she grants to the other three Houses.

He sees to the elves, all of whom are beyond willing to resume the security they used to provide to the school. That is possibly the least stressful thing he does that day.

He judged wrong with Severus; it seems the man doesn’t have classes at all on Tuesday afternoon. Salazar takes the time to wander the classroom Severus uses, which has good lighting crafted by charms on false windows that reflect the daylight outside. The damaged workbenches have been repaired or replaced, though he sees empty places on the shelves that must have held potions ingredients before the second-years decided to have themselves a dueling war mid-lesson over a perceived insult. He can’t visit Aurora Sinistra’s Astronomy class until midnight Wednesday, and worries as to what sort of teaching he’ll find.

Salazar is immediately displeased by the Divination Tower, as it requires climbing a bloody rope ladder for students to access it. He watches under cover of the Invisibility Charm as a fourth-year class of Gryffindors ascend the ladder, one grumbling student at a time. Then he frowns and uses a bit of magic to make the bloody ladder hang straight when he notices Miss Condor’s difficulty in ascending a rope ladder with a non-magical prosthetic leg that looks to have been poorly made. He wonders if he can ask the young Gryffindor questions about her circumstances without insulting or terrifying her.
He places his hand on the castle wall, asking Hogwarts to show him the inside of that upper tower so that he can Apparate in without landing on anyone or anything. Then he appears in the very back of the room and immediately tries not to choke on a cloud of horrific incense.

Salazar looks around, scowling. It’s dim in the room, with clouds of incense smoke literally trailing through the air. He gives up and casts a Breathing Charm to cover his nose and mouth, filtering out the incense in the air before his lungs rebel against the noxiousness. It’s far too hot in the room, instigating an immediate sense of drowsiness that the incense likely makes worse. He wonders how often the atmosphere in this enclosed space makes others ill.

Instead of desks, the room holds cheap replicas of a non-magical fortuneteller’s trappings: round tables covers in Eastern-patterned tablecloths, each with crystal balls set in the center. Perforated lamps of Moroccan styling hang over each table, barely illuminating a student’s workspace. No child looks pleased to be in this room…except for Ginny Weasley, who has a smile on her face that barely masks the anger underneath. Interesting.

The Gryffindors are waiting with muttered conversations and a sense of resignation before Sybill Trelawney finally enters the room from behind a curtain in the back. If Salazar had not been granted prior knowledge that she really does have Divinatory spark, he would immediately consider this class even more of a joke than bloody Muggle Studies.

Trelawney has glasses so large and thick they almost obscure her face. A scarf wraps her hair, she wears at least three shawls too many, and the sheer amount of jewelry on her person looks to literally be weighing her down. She dresses like one who has only ever seen a Gypsy on a telly rather than seeking out the true Romani, those who would despise both the derogatory term and Sybil’s ludicrousness in copying that stereotyped appearance.

“Today, my dears, we will continue our study of gazing upon the truths that lurk within the crystal ball.” Trelawney has the soft vocal inflections of one who has been drugged. “We have a guest in the castle, of course. I daresay his presence will alter what you might normally See. Death is on the horizon, and one of you shall die before the rise of summer.”

Miss Weasley raises her hand at once. Trelawney’s face turns pinched before she points at her to speak.

“One of us, then? You’ve been saying Harry’s been dead since term started, Professor,” Miss Weasley says, wide-eyed and in a tone of perfect innocence. “Has he come back to us from beyond the veil?”

Trelawney huffs and tosses the end of one of her glittering shawls over her shoulder. “I never specified that he was dead, Miss Weasley. I said he had passed beyond my sight, which often does imply the veil.”

“Funny, I thought she said he was dead at least fifteen times by now,” Miss Holmes mutters under her breath.

Trelawney narrows her eyes. “One with Sight must always be careful not to look too deeply into Fate, my dears. I warned Mister Potter for the previous two years of our acquaintance that terrible things awaited him in his future, and he did not heed my warnings. I do pray that you all do otherwise.”

Salazar frowns. That is stirring a memory from ages ago.

“And Divination is rubbish, is it? How many types of divination are there?” he’d once asked his
brother.

“Uh—probably more than the four I know of?”

“I suspect you had a terrible teacher.”

Nizar, in frustrated anger: “She’s dramatic, awful, and predicted my death in every lesson.”

“And that would be how often?”

“Three times a week.”

Unlike the other classes, Salazar remains for the entire time. He witnesses an utterly useless lesson in crystal-gazing, which is not a good tool unless one actually has a talent for bloody Scrying! Trelawney is displeased with those students who honestly say they see nothing, and full of praise for those who are obviously making up the most dramatic nonsense they can speak of. One young man’s is especially gruesome, foretelling his own death while witnessing it through the lens of a camera.

The other lad at his table leans over when Trelawney is distracted by Miss Weasley cheerfully filling the air with Quidditch statistics for future games that are so well-stated they must have been memorized from previous games. “Didn’t you just repeat what happened to you with being Petrified in our first year?”

The blond boy shrugs. “It’s not as if she bloody well remembers, is it?”

Salazar waits for the last student to struggle their way down the rope ladder, closing the trap door behind them, before he drops the charm. “Sybill Trelawney. I do believe it’s time we’ve spoken.”

Trelawney jumps and twirls about in the air, revealing she is a bit more spry than she pretends at. “You!” Her voice is sharper, losing some of its whispery edge. “It’s quite rude to spy on another, you know!”

“I only consider it rude when it is not a necessity.” Salazar wanders around the room, as if only just now taking in its unusual, ridiculous décor. “I know you’ve some gift of Sight, Sybill Trelawney. I wonder why you do so much to choke the life out of both it and any talent you might find among your students.”

Trelawney bears herself up haughtily. “I’ve already listened to one cruel woman denigrate my talents this term, Slytherin! I shan’t listen to it again from you.”

Salazar eyes her. “Did you not just hear my recognition that you do have a gift? You’re quite good at hearing and seeing only what you wish to see, aren’t you?”

Trelawney stares at him from behind the rims of her thick glasses. “How would you know of my gifts?”

“I’ve a Mastery in Divination, Sybill Trelawney. It was my first magical talent to reveal itself after I spoke in Parseltongue and proved it was still following my bloodline true. I’ve seen images on the water from my earliest memories. I was a teacher of Divination in this school at its Founding until another joined Hogwarts and could take on part of that teaching burden, as I was also teaching Astronomy, Potions—which then included Herbology—Earth-Speaking to those with the means to hear the earth beneath their feet, languages, sciences, and weather-reading. My schedule was quite full; the only saving grace we had in those early days was that our students were still few in number, not in the hundreds as they are today. Those numbers came after Hogwarts’ first decade was concluded.”
“An understanding of plants, the element of earth, and the reading of the stars,” Trelawney mutters. “You taught only scrying, then?”

“I taught all of the tools, Sybill Trelawney, which is all any teacher can do until the student finds the means of Divination that works for them. You teach that part correctly, at least, but then you castigate those who cannot use every tool you provide. How does that encourage a student to find their own means?” Salazar asks, sitting down at one of the round tables to gaze up at her.

Trelawney scowls, visibly unhappy. “They do not believe I have any of the talents I do. Those of us with True Sight are always persecuted, always lambasted and taken for fools—”

“Rubbish,” Salazar interrupts her. “Complete and utter rubbish. It isn’t your talent they feel is false, but all of the trappings you surround yourself with. None of these are necessary for your gift to be of use.”

Trelawney looks affronted. “How dare you! My Inner Eye only functions if I’ve provided it the proper atmosphere!”

“Stifling, dark, and choking on fumes?” Salazar shakes his head. “I’ve never needed such. No true master of Divination needs this nonsense.” He gives her another searching look. “You’ve never been properly trained to master your gift, have you?”

“I went through seven years of Hogwarts’ schooling, the latter four of which were all devoted to Divination!” Trelawney retorts in a sharp voice. “Professor Thorn—”

“Was an actual charlatan and a fraud. It’s a wonder you learned anything at all. Fortunately, you do have a real spark, else you would have been wasting your time,” Salazar interrupts her, gentling his voice. “You’ve given at least three true prophecies since 1980, Sybill Trelawney, and because of the nature of your primary gift, you recall them not at all.”

Trelawney abruptly sits down across from him. “I have?” she asks. Now he is hearing her proper, a smooth-voiced accent from the southwest of England rather than whispery nonsense or biting sharpness.

“You have. Those prophecies are of such dangerous nature that none dare tell you what you’ve said, or reveal that it was you who said them lest your life be in danger,” Salazar tells her. “You are even correct in the matter of Harry Potter but for all of the times you predicted his death in foolish ways. You said he had passed beyond your sight, and that is quite true—there is magic that would prevent you from seeing anything of him at all.”

Trelawney takes off her glasses, squinting as she cleans them with the edge of her shawl. The metallic threads of that fabric are probably doing the lenses no favors at all. Then she places them back on her face. “I believe you are the first person aside from Albus who has ever said anything kind about my gift.”

“I’d like to have spoken to you sooner, but you were noticeably absent at that staff meeting Lucius Malfoy called last month.”

She lets out a ladylike snort. “He never notices if I am present or not. Why should I bestir myself for no reason?”

“In Lucius Malfoy’s case, that is quite the correct attitude to have.” Salazar leans back in the chair, the better to see more of her face than those horrific glasses. “I have the power to expel you from this castle, Sybill Trelawney, as you have not been true in your role as a teacher to children. I’d rather not...
do that, as I see you have the potential to be a grand instructor of Divination rather than an accused fraud in a charlatan’s trappings.”

Trelawney cringes back. “Hogwarts is my home,” she whispers, but that is not the ethereal-attempting nonsense. That is fear in her voice.

“I do not believe in making others homeless. If you were to be retired from your post, you would be provided for,” Salazar replies, his voice calm and even. “Why do you have no other home to go to aside from this castle?”

She sniffs and draws out a handkerchief with crystals sewn around the edges. “A divorce. A terrible one. I refused to give up the power of my family’s name, and Hieronymus Higglebottom could not tolerate the idea that a woman would not utterly subsume herself to his male authority. I knew at once I’d made a dreadful mistake, but our divorce was through Muggle courts, and—” She wipes her eyes. “The judge declared that he was in the right, and I was wrong not to be willing to perform what he proclaimed to be my wifely duties. I lost everything.”

Salazar thinks idly about killing this Higglebottom, and perhaps the non-magical judge in question. “I am very sorry. However, as I said, I believe you have potential. Filky?” he calls, and the female elf appears a moment later. “I’ve very sorry to have bothered you, dear, but I have a request.”

“It is being no bother at all, Professor Salazar,” Filky says with a smile. She has not given up on the idea of an elf’s tea towel, but instead of the standard Hogwarts white, it is a soft sky blue that complements her appearance very well. “What is the Professor Salazar needing?”

“Name my magical masteries if you would, please.”

Filky nods. “The Professor Salazar Slytherin is of the Ancient House of Serpents in Gipuzkoa, called the Emerald Flame of the West. He is the Preeminent Potions Master recognized by Spain and Great Britain, holding the magical masteries of Divination, Astrological Magics, Mind Magic, Earth-Speaking, and Herbology. He is being a Hogewáþ Founder and is a Keeper of Hogwarts’ Western Magic.” Then she frowns. “The Professor Salazar should also be holding mastery of Transfiguration and Charms, but he does not.”

Salazar raises an eyebrow. Transfiguration and Charms are not surprising, but he’s never heard an elf declare that he should have them. It is typically a matter of having them or not having them in elf eyes. “Thank you. Please tell me of Sybill Trelawney’s magical masteries, Filky.”

Filky looks nervous. “The Professor Trelawney be having magical masteries in Arithmancy and Thread Magic, but that being all.”

“That is not possible!” Trelawney shouts. Filky flinches, immediately putting her hands over her head to ward off potential blows.

“Filky, you may go. You are not at fault,” Salazar says, glaring at Trelawney. “Do shut up. You’ve never been properly trained in Divination. It’s no surprise to me that you have no mastery in it. Arithmancy and Thread Magic are useful magics, also. Do not discount their value in Divination.”

Trelawney begins weeping like a sieve, removing her glasses so she can plaster the bejeweled handkerchief to her face. “What would you suggest I do, then? I cannot continue to teach if I’ve no rightful means to do so!”

Salazar rolls his eyes while her face is covered by cloth. “Learn it. You’ve one who can teach it sitting right in front of you, Sybill Trelawney. You can learn to be better than this, and if you do, you
will earn the respect you are so desperate for."

Trelawney puts her glasses back on. “You will teach me?” She frowns. “A house-elf’s natterings is one thing. How do I even know you have true Sight?”

Salazar shakes his head and gets out his wand. He does not like working with glass, but it isn’t impossible. He strikes the crystal globe on the table three times with his wand, feeling the drain from his energy as he calls upon the past rather than the future. “Take a look, Sybill Trelawney. And please do consider getting globes made of proper quartz. Glass is very, very difficult to work with at any skill level.”

Trelawney gives him a suspicious look before bending her head to peer at the globe. “But—that is —” She puts her hand over her mouth.

“The past, yes. That is much harder to scry upon. What do you see?” Salazar asks curiously. “I only asked the globe to show you something you needed to recall.”

“It’s my…my interview for the post of Divination after Professor Thorn retired. With Albus. Except I’m…” Sibyl leans back from the globe. “That is true prophecy being spoken. I can’t hear what is being said, but my face, that expression—I was once able to witness a portrait of my ancestor Cassandra demonstrate what those moments are like. You’re telling me the truth.”

“I certainly had no reason to lie.” Salazar taps the globe to dismiss that bit of scrying before it drains him further. “My offer still stands, but only today, Sybill Trelawney.”

Trelawney bites her lip. “Would it be secret? I wish no one to know that I was so…so unready.”

Salazar realizes at that moment that Trelawney is younger than he’d thought, not even yet forty. “I won’t tell anyone, but as you improve, others are going to notice,” he says. “At that point, it is up to you as to what you wish to tell them in regards to that improvement. But for fuck’s sake, give these students access to this tower in a way that does not involve climbing a rope! Did you know one of your students is doing so with a bloody prosthetic leg?”

Trelawney blinks a few times like a wide-eyed cricket. “Er…no. It’s…the rope has always been that way. The only other entrance to this tower is through my office.”

Salazar resists the urge to bury his face in his hands. “Of course it is. Would you allow me to fix such, Sybill Trelawney? I can do so without violating the sanctity of your office by adding a stairwell beneath this tower.”

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“Who did such a thing?”

Salazar asks, but he hears only regret. He isn’t being specific enough; time is not a concept that an ancient magical castle understands. Who did such a thing?
The castle shows him a hand on the wall, with not even a ring to help identify whose hand is creating that old change. He only knows this was done by someone who was still tied into the magic properly as one of the Heads of House—no doubt someone foolish.

“Did you not offer Sybill Trelawney your remade Sana Visio, as you did everyone else in this castle?” Salazar asks his brother during a time when Nizar is waiting out in the corridor for his next batch of students to arrive.

“Oh, I did. There are several that refused it, but it was hard not to laugh in Sibyl’s face when she said she could take no such potion, as it would interfere with her ‘Inner Sight,’” Nizar replies. “Idiot. Oh, Dumbledore refused, also. Perhaps he feared I was attempting to poison him.”

“Or it was a potion meant to control others,” Salazar says in a musing voice. “One who uses words for manipulation might fear being manipulated in return.”

Nizar smiles. “I don’t need a fucking potion for that. Though that does make me wonder…”

“What?” Salazar asks as Nizar ceases speaking to stare at the hideous tapestry on the wall. If they were Norse trolls, it would be so much more pleasant to look upon that scene.

“You can do a lot of things with a Magical Mastery of the Spoken Word,” Nizar finally says. “Estefania always used her mastery to the family and Castile’s greatest benefit, but ethics have not been taught in this school in any official capacity in centuries, hermano. I wonder if Dumbledore has such a mastery.”

Salazar scowls and swears under his breath. “Gods, but I hope not. He’s annoying enough to deal with as it is.” Only those who are exceptionally stubborn, or properly trained in Mind Magic, can resist the words of someone with that mastery if they’re choosing to use it. Even then, it often requires the awareness that such a mastery of the magical word is possible.

“The elves can only answer that question if in Dumbledore’s presence, and I’d rather not tip that hand if it’s true,” Nizar murmurs, noticing the first of his students approaching—young ones in Gryffindor and Slytherin colors. “Have fun with the rest of your spying, Sal.”

“Have fun digging through that rubbish pile,” Salazar replies, and wanders past the giggling students. At least that is the proper full number for a class of young ones.

Except for his explorations of Potions and History, he is actually done with his spying for the day. What he’s seen are the only subjects of study Hogwarts now offers, and such limitations are completely ludicrous. Nothing of other languages. Nothing of the sciences, which are important no matter if one can use magic. No other history class, which is a terrible lapse that fits in nicely with the Ministry’s blasted ideas about secrecy. No offered apprenticeships, a lack he knew of already. No accommodations for non-magical-raised children entering the school, no lessons on how to use quill and ink when all of them grew up on pencils and ball-points. No Squib—technically themselves still magical, just unable to use that magic—allowed to have an education within these walls, something they did not deny a thousand years ago. That one particularly angers him; his mother would have been titled a Squib, and she was an insightful, intelligent woman who used her education to her utmost advantage.

The allowances made for those with physical disabilities not repairable by magical or non-magical means are rare enough to be infuriating. He imagines he sees so few mobility issues because the parents of those students have no choice but to school their children in magic at home. Adding stairs for the Divination classroom, as well as true stairs and a door for the Hufflepuff entrance, barely scratches the surface of what needs to be done.
Those from magical households learn nothing about the non-magical world aside from the rubbish provided by that Muggle Studies class. Nothing on health or healing, the latter of which is now supposed to be an adult apprenticeship or university education. No practical maths, those lessons necessary to truly understand finances no matter what world these students choose to reside in. Not even bloody geometry, which has its place in magic! Nothing on culture, geography, literature, or information on how the Ministry functions, let alone other governments of the world. There aren’t even any creative outlets offered beyond Sasha’s art and Barnaby’s music, which means thread magic and magical weaving, writing to create—another form of magic, that. Even performances are missing from the school.

Salazar goes back to the fourth floor, still grinding his teeth over the lack of what is being taught. Even if it could be put back, these children would never have time to attend to even half of it given their current schedules. He hasn’t yet thought on all of the magical classes that are missing!

He stops at his quarters and then changes his mind. The doors for many of the original greenhouses were on the fourth and fifth floors. He finds the first one, which is not only devoid of life, but barren of soil and water. Odd, but repairable. The second one still has water running through it, piped up from the old spring beneath the castle, but there are no plants in the earth. He can tell it was prepared for growth, but then no seeds were ever again planted.

The third greenhouse, its door hidden behind a sleeping portrait of golden-haired Alicia, is full of humidity and growing plants. It’s also where he finds Severus, who looks surprised to see him.

“My apologies,” Salazar says. “I was looking for you earlier, but this time I was only searching for the greenhouses. I see you found this one first.”

“No apologies are necessary,” Severus replies after a long moment in which he seemed to be struggling to find the appropriate words. “It would be more accurate to say that I had need, and Hogwarts provided me with a door for this particular greenhouse. You found the others?”

“There are three on the fourth floor. Aside from this, one is ready to be used; the other is a disaster that needs repairing. There are two on the fifth floor and two others on the highest levels, but I haven’t yet recalled where. I can depart,” he offers. “It’s quite clear that this space is your own.”

“I don’t mind.” Severus resumes collecting leaves from a stretch of vinca, which is supporting the growth of several tall varieties of mint plants. “It isn’t a private space, but I’m not used to anyone knowing of this room outside of myself and Nizar. I had to show him where it was, but I have no idea how to access it from the fourth floor.”

“The door is behind a portrait of Alicia, Rowena’s elder daughter. I can show you—” Salazar stops talking in surprise, staring at a plant in a solitary box. Its spikey green leaves with yellow and gold veining have grown out enough to reveal the thorns at their points. “Where in the entire pantheon of all the gods did you find that?”

“Your brother found a single, Preservation Charm-laden seed in his quarters, and he gifted it to me.”

Salazar blinks a few times as he tries to understand that statement. “Did he fucking well ask you to marry him at the same time?”

Severus rolls his eyes. “No. He called it a courting gift, among others.”

“My little brother gave you the last remaining seed to Dragon’s Breath of Life, an extinct magical plant that happens to be one of the most powerful herbs in the entire fucking world, and he dubbed it a courting gift.” Salazar puts his hands over his face. “Gods know I love him, but those sorts of gifts
are meant to be of ascending importance. How he’ll ever top that is beyond my comprehension.”

“If such an event were to come to pass—and please note that I am stressing if—then of course Nizar has the means to ‘top’ such a gift,” Severus says.

Salazar lowers his hands to look at Severus. The man has an expression on his face that is borderline disapproval, but also veering towards true concern. “What, then?”

“Killing Voldemort without dying in the process.”

It’s been a very long time since another has said something that makes Salazar feel as if he’s been punched too hard in the chest. “Yes, that would definitely qualify,” he murmurs. “Wise man.”

“Pessimist,” Severus counters.

“Pessimism has its own wisdom to offer. It’s just not meant to rule all.” Salazar tilts his head at the door. “Are you done in here? I’d like to show you something.”

Out in the corridor, Severus stares at the painting of sleeping Alicia after Salazar closes the door. “I see; the handle is part of the painting.”

“It is.” Salazar frowns, wondering if there is anything that might convince Alicia to wake. There are a number of portraits in Hogwarts who seem to have no intention of doing so at all, but he senses no enchantments causing their sleep.

The elf Filky Apparates into the corridor before he makes it back to Fortunata’s painting. “Filky be finding a frame in the Room Where Everything Is Hidden,” she announces, and then lowers her voice. “Professor Slytherin be saying that they have found eighteen portraits hidden away so far, Professor Salazar.”

“Bloody—eighteen? They’ve just started looking!” Salazar responds in outrage.

Filky hands him the empty portrait frame. “It is being a very, very large room, Professor Salazar.”

“That it is. Thank you, Filky.” She bobs her head at him and Disapparates while Salazar gives the frame a quick inspection. It’s very old, but like everything else in that rubbish pile, perfectly preserved.

Severus waits until Fortunata’s portrait has shut the door to Salazar’s quarters behind them. “Eighteen missing portraits?”

“And I’d wager there are far more than that.” Salazar gets out the folded canvas from his robe pocket, unfolding it and placing it facedown on the table before resting the frame over it. The fit is perfect, but elves have a good eye for measurements when crafted items are involved. “There were many other teachers in this school those first two decades aside from we Founders and Nizar, Severus. I know the location of only one of two of those portraits, and they both hang upon this wall.”

“Which means the others were misplaced so they could not correct the false portraits’ views on blood purity or history,” Severus surmises. “Orellana and Marion?”

“Good insight, though Marion didn’t begin teaching until our first two children were older. Then we unexpectedly had a third child, and it became a bit of a shuffle.” Salazar retrieves his wand, makes certain he’s recalling the correct repairing and remounting spells, and then casts them upon the frame
and the portrait about to be set within its confines. “As to deliberate misplacement? I do believe so. There have been too many instances of that discovered of late for me to think it accidental folly.”

He picks up the frame, glad to see the magic has bound the two back together properly. “Excellent.” The wall opposite his windows is crowded enough, but there is a nice blank space on the wall whose edges touch the window, itself directly opposing the fireplace. He places the frame and then sticks it temporarily; he can’t leave it there, not if a Lioness is to revisit his sitting room.

The portrait glances around. “Oh, so I’m back on a wall again. It’s been a long time. I’m not so certain I’m used to it any longer.”

“You’ll adjust,” Salazar replies. “I’ve someone for you to meet—well, re-meet, I suppose.”

“That isn’t a fucking word,” Nizar hisses back, and then his eyes alight on Severus. “Oh, hello—and hello! Finally, English again!”

Salazar lifts an eyebrow. “I didn’t think that magic would repair itself without Nizar updating your portrait.”

“It’s Hogwarts. That is part of her job,” Nizar drawls back, before returning his attention to Severus, who hasn’t budged. “You look far less grim than I recall.”

Severus crosses his arms. “Whereas your hair finally looks as if someone introduced you to the concept of a comb.”

Nizar’s portrait laughs. “Oh, there’s the ire. I actually missed that. It’s no fun when no one will poke back.”

“Salazar?” Severus asks.

“Summer of 992,” Salazar explains, to the portrait’s amusement. “Seventeen years old and three masteries completed—because he’s insane.”

“Yes, but I’m all but certain everyone in this room was already aware of that,” Nizar says. “I’m very curious as to why he’s staring at me that way.”

Severus frowns. “I am staring, in part, because you still look very much like the child who left Hogwarts in June of last year at the conclusion of the Triwizard Tournament.”

“Oh, that bloody disaster.”

“And also because you remember this, whereas Nizar does not,” Severus adds.

“Because some twit moved the painting. That, I heard about. Myself didn’t ask about my recollection this morning, either,” Nizar says to Salazar.

“Oh, I imagine it crossed your mind just fine, and was promptly shoved off into a corner with all due haste,” Salazar replies. “You aren’t taking it well.”

“Better or worse than being dumped one thousand years in the past?”

“Oh, far better than that,” Salazar says. “Depression over dissociative panic.”

Nizar’s portrait scowls at him. “How is depression supposed to be better? That’s my default setting as it is!” Nizar tilts his head. “He’s still staring at me, Sal. What are you not telling me?”
“You do recall where the 1017 working was left, yes?” Salazar asks dryly.

“Well, yes—oh.” Nizar’s amusement dries up like a raindrop fallen onto desert soil. “I didn’t remember you. Salazar said that you were friends. That would have been…yes, I can certainly see why that would be a—a displeasing revelation.” Nizar glances at Salazar. “Brother, you put me back into a frame on a wall in Hogwarts.”

Salazar frowns. “And?”

“And.” Nizar waves at him and vanishes from the frame.

“Oh, you complete shit. I’m so used to the limitations of frameless canvas that I forgot that would happen,” Salazar mutters.

“That was disconcertingly like dealing with the fallout from that damned scroll all over again,” Severus says.

Salazar glances over to see a pensive frown on Severus’s face. “Despite his youthful appearance, that portrait was last updated by Nizar in 1017. You’re not dealing with a child, but a man who will get over it…even if that portrait still remembers when you hated him.”

Severus nods and looks away. “I’m aware. Why did you want me to see that?”

“Because one day, Nizar will remember. He won’t react in dramatics, but it will be something he has to adjust to yet again. Better to see the worst sort of reaction and be prepared for something far less dire, especially when our lives are often composed of the complete opposite.”

“And the other reason?” Severus asks.

Salazar smiles, pleased that Severus was capable of realizing such. “Perhaps I wanted you to see him as an adult, before all of the hardships that came after. Come.”

He leads Severus back to his study to show him the 995 painting. “This belongs with part of the set that Nizar has in his home, but Nizar refuses to keep a portrait of himself inside his quarters. I don’t blame him; I don’t have any of myself in these rooms, either.”

Severus studies the portrait’s sleeping occupant. By 995, Nizar’s skin was gaining color; his dark brown hair had lost any hint of its original wild nature, but it was beginning to lighten at the edges. “You’re both correct. Even before the sun darkened his skin to such an extent, you and Nizar look very much alike—especially if one compares this portrait to yours done in the same year.”

“I’ve studied the new science of genetics since the concept was first announced,” Salazar says. “Sometimes it’s really intriguing to see how chromosomes and genetic material with a gap of a thousand years can still make themselves known.”

“What excuse does Voldemort have, then?”

Salazar makes an amused sound. “Everyone tends to think he looks like his Muggle father, but that’s superficial. If you’d ever known a Gaunt magician back when the family was still powerful, that is where the true resemblance lies.”

“Nizar’s portrait wandering among the Hogwarts portraits—is that wise?” Severus asks.

Salazar smiles. “He knows the Invisibility Charm, just as Orellana uses it when she wishes to explore without being observed. Besides, he is aware of why it’s important that he not be seen, Severus.” He
hesitates before asking, not certain that it’s his place. “You’re still all right with this?”

“I’m far more concerned with the idea that I was so convincing in my role as a spy that a one-
thousand-year-old portrait is still certain that I’d hate him,” Severus says bluntly. “I’m not fond of
what that says about me.”

Salazar shakes his head. “Don’t doubt that skill, not now. Such kept yourself and my brother alive
and safe for long years, Severus. Besides,” he adds, grinning. “I might’ve neglected to tell the 992
portrait that the two of you were dating.”

Severus stares at him in blank shock. Then he says, “You complete fucking wanker.”

Salazar laughs. “Now, there, see? You can’t truly view someone as family until you’re ready to
strangle the life out of them!”

“Please. I do not strangle people. I use a wand or I poison them,” Severus retorts, rolling his eyes.

“Oh, my mistake.” Salazar thinks on it before he decides that yes, such a shock deserves
recompense. “Dragon’s Breath of Life, Severus.”

“What of it?”

“It takes a great deal of skill to coax its seed to sprout,” Salazar tells him. “If you convince it to
bloom, you won’t need an elf to tell you that you’ve earned your mastery in Herbology.”

* * *

Minerva has no sooner entered her quarters that evening when there is a knock on the door. She rolls
her eyes, wondering what terror Ron Weasley has now encountered that he doesn’t know how to
handle as a Prefect. She’d truly hoped the task would serve as a distraction from Harry’s
disappearance, but some days she despair of him becoming brave enough to solve problems among
other, older students without fetching Miss Granger or asking Minerva for assistance. Nizar says he
has no such trouble in class; perhaps Mister Weasley is simply one of those types who need
companionship to lead rather than being forced to do so on their own.

To her surprise and pleasure, it is Salazar waiting in front of her door, not a half-panicked Prefect.
“Salazar,” she greets him, opening the door wider so that he may enter. “Won’t you come in?”

He smiles, making the lines of kindness around his eyes become more pronounced. “I’d hoped to
receive such an invitation, yes.”

Minerva glances at the corridor, sees that yes, he was sensible enough to wait for the students to
absent themselves, and shuts the door. She is just starting to hear the first bit of rumor, but this is her
business, and she’ll keep it that way as long as possible. She removes her hat and then gladly unpins
her hair from its confines. “And how was your day, Salazar?”

“It was both less and more frustrating than I’d expected.” Salazar glances around her quarters, as he
always does, as if committing it to memory anew every time. Perhaps he does; perhaps it’s a war-
born habit she herself never quite developed. Minerva fought in the first war, but never found herself
in circumstances where she had to be so cautious about her surroundings. She was either in safety or
she was not; there was no in between.
“I take it you met Sibyl after lunch?” Minerva asks, hanging up her robe next to her hat. Then she removes her boots and slides her feet into thick slippers to ward off the castle’s winter chill.

“Oh. Yes. Thought I might develop a spontaneous allergy to incense.” Salazar adjusts a pillow before sitting down on Minerva’s sofa before the hearth and its cheerful fire. “I feel quite badly for her. She was not prepared for this job by her schooling or by her employer. I think it’s been a source of constant stress.”

Minerva pauses in the midst of unbuttoning her high collar. That would explain quite a bit about Sibyl’s behavior, and it shames her to think she never quite considered it that way. “I’ve never understood why Albus hired her when there were other options available.”

“To safeguard someone with a rare talent. Unfortunately, nothing was then done to hone or encourage it in any way.” Salazar glances up at her and smiles. “Professor Burbage and that fucking Muggle Studies class is still my greatest grievance with the school’s existing curriculum.”

“And not my own?” Minerva asks, settling down on the sofa next to him after she has undone the line of buttons down to the gentle hollow between her collarbones.

“Oh, absolutely not, Lioness. You’ve such a mastery of your subject and your classes. Sedemai would be pleased with her latest successor.”

“Godric’s wife was this school’s first teacher of Transfiguration?” Minerva asks, surprised.

Salazar nods. “She was. It was not all Sedemai taught in those first years, but that was one of her masteries. But…that is not what I came here to speak of.”

“Oh?” Minerva smiles. “Have you realized that you are too handsome a specimen for the likes of me?”

Salazar reaches out and takes her hand, turning it upside down so that he can trace the lines marking fingers and palm. It’s such a gentle touch that it makes her breath catch. “Every single mark upon a hand is experience gained,” he murmurs. “A child’s hands are all but blank, but as we grow older, we add to this map until there is so much experience it is difficult to tell one event from another. Even the scars can become lost to sight, though we can find them if we look hard enough.”

He looks up at her, his green eyes somber in the dim light, and somehow also full of adoration. “Experience is beauty, Lioness. Every single silver strand that passes through your glorious black hair, every mark and line, are all the signs that tell others where we’ve been, and what the journey was like along the way. I may have long years of experience on you, but this body saw seventy-three years before I made my foolishly worded deal. I’m not certain what the marks of experience would say of me if they were still capable of forming. All I know, Lioness, is that I truly regret that I will not live to see how the rest of your life’s experience make you ever more beautiful.”

Minerva blinks a few times, on the verge of weeping. No one has ever spoken to her with such depth of feeling, such poetry in their words. “No,” she manages to say. “Don’t you dare regret. In fact, I’ll not hear of it.”

Salazar’s other hand clasps hers, so her hand is gently cradled by his callused palms. “Why?”

“Because there is nothing to regret. I am old, Salazar. I’ve learned to take what I can get, to enjoy the moments I’ve been given and treasure them for what they are.” Minerva sighs. “I will not lie and say that I do not want you to linger on my behalf…but I do not wish to dwell on what has yet to pass. Not at all.”
“Then I won’t speak of it, and you’ve my word.” His eyes brighten with sudden mischief. “However, I’m a dirty cheat, and I discovered a certain truth that no one else seems to be aware of.”

Minerva arches a brow. “Oh? And what, pray tell, is that?”

“Your birthday isn’t in the spring. It’s today. Welcome to your seventieth year in this world, darling Lioness.”

When Salazar takes his hands away, a silver wristband, perhaps an inch wide, is resting in her palm. “Salazar, you completely terrible man!” she declares, smiling as she picks it up. It’s most certainly Goblin-minted silver, with a clasp that will allow her to latch it into place around her arm. Carved directly into the outer face on one side is a watch. She watches it, entranced, as its background is a perfectly realistic representation of the night sky. Even the moon in its current phase is visible, right in its proper place in the sky if she were to look outside at this moment. The numbers shine like rubies; tiny dots of gold mark the seconds. Each little mark lights up briefly as the watch ticks through time without using arms, and the numbers nine and three are also brighter than the others to denote the time.

“It’s…” Minerva swallows. “It’s absolutely beautiful.”

“I’d noticed you wore no timepiece, and while I trust your sense of time is excellent, sometimes it’s best to have something exact to hand.” Salazar reaches out to take it, unlatching the clasp. Minerva, feeling oddly shy, holds out her arm so that he can place it on her left wrist. As proper magical jewelry is wont to do, it immediately resizes to fit her wrist without being too tight. “But sometimes other functions are useful.” He touches the only button emerging from its side; the moon, ruby, and gold disappears. Instead, there is only a central gold spot set before the night sky.

“What does this do?”

Salazar rests his thumb over the pulse point on her wrist, his eyes still on the watch face. “This is a bit of magic you will need to add yourself. If you hold down the button and speak a name, the watch will add a hand with that name upon it. That name will then point at one of three appearing options: Safe and Well, Unavailable, or In Danger. You may add as many as you’d like for those you wish to watch over.”

Minerva presses her lips together. “Salazar.”

“I’ll not be apologizing for that pun. The opportunity presented itself at the perfect time.”

“Salazar!”

He laughs and releases her hand again. “Forgive me for the second one, then.”

“Of course.” Minerva gazes at the watch again before using the button to switch it back to its timekeeping function. “Salazar—it’s been only days since we decided to act young and reckless. This is quite the gift for such a short time.”

“It’s a birthday, and they come only once a year. Besides.” Salazar reaches up to sweep her cheek with his fingers, resting his warm hand on the side of her neck. “You forget that I’ve been an unknown presence in your life for a very long time now. I’ve often watched and loved from afar, knowing there would be no chance of it. Compitalia showed me that it might be possible. I had this commissioned the very next day.”

“You know there might have been a chance that this never happened at all,” Minerva says.
“There is always a chance of things not working out the way we hope for,” Salazar replies. “If it had not come to pass, I’ve a will, Lioness. You simply would have had to endure the indignity of receiving a shining token of my affection from beyond the grave.”

“That isn’t nearly as undignified as the puns you are indulging in this evening,” Minerva retorts, leaning forward so their foreheads are resting together. “Have you spent too much time with the Weasley twins already?”

“Oh, no. This is entirely my brother’s fault, Lioness.”

Minerva smiles. “Remind me to hit him later,” she says, kissing a foolish, ancient Slytherin.

“Much later,” Salazar agrees, and then steals his arm around her waist before stealing her from the sofa entirely.
What Grand Purpose

Chapter Summary

"Perhaps I’ve not the logic of Rowena, but I’d like to think that I’d be able to discern the method behind this madness."

Chapter Notes

Happy (sort-of) early Solstice gift!

Nizar wakes up far too early on Wednesday morning when the sound of several voices raised in Parseltongue rouses him. He trudges out to the sitting room, foul-tempered, and discovers that his children have found the 992 portrait Salazar showed him yesterday, and somehow dug up the 995 one, besides. Two versions of himself with wildly different life experiences are conversing with his children.

“I do not even want to fucking know,” he says, and goes back to bed.

“What was that about?” Severus asks, still half-asleep.

“I’m out there talking to myself, and I refuse to compound the difficulty,” Nizar replies, pulling his pillow over his head.

*   *   *   *

When Severus awakens at a much more reasonable hour that actually involves daylight, Nizar hisses at him in Parseltongue instead of getting up. Severus still isn't sure if it’s possible for those without the gift to learn Parseltongue, but he’s almost certain Nizar just told him to fuck off for ten more minutes. Given that it’s a quarter of seven o’clock, he might actually be correct.

When Severus goes out to the sitting room, he finds both tea and the cause of what awoke Nizar earlier. The 995 portrait of Nizar is lingering in the children’s frames. “That,” Severus says, “is a prime example of why I never want a fucking portrait.”

That younger version of Nizar glances up from whatever Elfric is showing him and smirks. “You hold the Western Seat of this school’s magic. It’ll happen automatically.”

“GOD DAMMIT!”

“And my brother thinks he and I are a tetchy pair in the morning,” Nizar observes. “Relax, Bloody Bat. You’ve only held it since November. It will take a while for the magic to gather the appropriate impressions. Much faster to do it with an artist, but then you have to actually sit still for the impatient
Severus glares at the portrait. “If Nizar updates your portrait, will you forget knowing of your pre-adoption self?”

“No such luck. I’ll still be a complete arsehole.”

“Not remembering that hasn’t stopped you,” Severus growls back, turning away from the portraits. Tea. Caffeine. No bloody wonder Nizar was muttering about not wanting to talk to himself.

“At least no one’s found the 1015 portrait,” Nizar says as he comes out of the bedroom ten minutes later. “Granted, that one means we’ll be dealing with both myself and Kanza, and I’m not sure I want to know what that’s going to be like.”

Severus glances over at the basilisk, who seems to want nothing to do with anything that isn’t the hearthstones and a burning fire of late. “Somehow, I doubt she’ll notice.”

“Oh, that’s just winter doldrums,” Nizar says, giving the basilisk a fond look. “Infant basilisks hate the cold more than Salazar does. She’ll handle it better as she grows older.”

“Not quite brumation, then?”

“No. Just sulking.”

Severus gets through his seventh-year N.E.W.T. class without wanting to kill a student. That has been happening more often of late, but he isn’t sure it’s a result of the Dark Mark no longer stirring his anger, if the blighters are too cowed by his dating Nizar Slytherin, or if it’s Salazar himself that now has the lot of them on what passes for their best behavior.

He decides immediately that it can’t be one thing alone. He knows these children; it would take all three detriments to make them think twice about being idiots. He imagines the tale of Salazar hosting that Potions detention traveled through the entirety of Hogwarts in less than a day.

Severus feels a tingle between his shoulder blades and turns around in his empty classroom, wand drawn, before he realizes it’s just Salazar lounging at one of the student workbenches. He draws in an irritated breath and lowers his wand. “Can I help you?” he asks through gritted teeth.

Salazar smiles. “No, thank you. I’m already done.”

Severus glares at him. “Spying?”

“Something I’ve done to every instructor here now but Aurora Sinistra and Cuthbert Binns. Not even Nizar was an exception, but then, he and I became used to traipsing in and out of each other’s classrooms a long time ago. You and the lovely Sibyl Trelawney are the only people outside of Nizar who know I was present during a lesson. The others wouldn’t take kindly to it.”

“A wand is kinder than panicked clucking, then?” Severus asks, wondering what Salazar made of Trelawney’s...idiosyncrasies.

“Politically? Far better,” Salazar replies as Severus puts his wand away.

“Fine. If you’re observing, do you have criticisms?”

“Of you? No. You’re blunt, snappish, and demanding, but no one walked out of this classroom in tears, traumatized, or suffering from terrible and avoidable accidents,” Salazar informs him.
“That has happened in the past,” Severus says.

“Yes, but I’d rather judge you based on who you are now, not who you had to be,” Salazar counters. “You taught well, even with five marked Death Eaters in with that lot.”

“If they’re here in this classroom, they’re not out there committing atrocities.”

Salazar nods. “For now.”

Severus hopes to keep it that way, but Voldemort has a tendency to craft circumstances that draw his followers to his side in ways that don’t allow for other obligations.

*          *          *          *

Salazar lurks in the shadows for an Astronomy lesson that night meant for fifth-years and considers screaming into the darkness. Sinistra’s teaching is composed of flawless patience, but these children are learning of things that should have been known and mastered by the age of thirteen. He doesn’t know if his ancient heart can take finding out what the N.E.W.T. curriculum for this class is like.

Salazar thinks on taking his grievances regarding Hogwarts to the Headmaster and again decides not to do so. Instead, he goes back to his quarters and asks the castle for several items: the school’s own ledger detailing scheduling and curriculum in each subject by class; the book that lists every employed staff member, including notes regarding when they were hired and for what reasons; and the copy of the governing board’s red ledger that the castle made for Salazar at his silent request. Setting the original on fire had been beyond satisfying, but those were records he needed.

He quickly discovers things that disturb him. Dumbledore wouldn’t be the first Head of any school to stack the deck in their favor, and nothing about these postings should be alarming…but they are.

Every single staff member in this school was hired by Albus Dumbledore, either before or after he became Headmaster in 1971. Rubeus Hagrid, Barnaby Harper, Poppy Pomfrey, Irma Pince, Eustas Viridian, Quintinus Stirling, Cuthbert Binns, and Argus Filch (with a notation for that poor mangy cat, Mrs. Norris) all predate Dumbledore’s posting as Headmaster. Everyone else but for Nizar, who technically never left the school’s employ, are listed as being hired afterwards—Minerva and Filius were granted their posts that very same year.

The others came in as others retired, or in some cases, Salazar thinks, voiced dissent regarding the first war against Voldemort one time too many. It’s a suspicion he cannot prove, but he feels it nonetheless.

Such does fit in very well with the theory that Dumbledore was more concerned with creating a magical population capable of winning a war, but again, the logic falls apart when it’s compared to the Defence postings. Two attempts at hiring decent teachers in fifteen years—one a Death Eater, alas—doesn’t fit that hypothesis at all.

Salazar trusts his brother’s instincts. Nizar does not trust Dumbledore, but none of them can discern why.

“What are you doing, Albus Dumbledore?” Salazar murmurs aloud, tapping a quill against one of the ledgers. “What grand purpose are you hoping to achieve? Perhaps I’ve not the logic of Rowena, but I’d like to think that I’d be able to discern the method behind this madness.”
Salazar closes all of the books, lets the castle collect them to be stored safely, and then rubs his eyes with both hands. He doesn’t know, and he can only do so much. He’s still in the midst of charming the life out of every person in this castle who’s not yet charmed already. It’s like being returned to the Court of his childhood.

On Thursday afternoon, Salazar finally dares to set about discovering what became of the original burial ground. He should have known better to ask any of the staff if they knew the current condition of the school’s cemetery. The answer is most often looks of polite bafflement or gasps of horror—as if the buried dead are somehow a threat to teenagers.

He’s beyond pleased that non-magical medicines have been effective at wiping out or treating diseases that plagued mankind for most of his long life, but there has been an odd trade-off in how people in the latter half of this century cope with death. Mostly, they don’t seem to be coping at all. Death used to be considered a blessing to those in need; now they fear it. The angel of mercy has become a grim reaper.

Salazar puts on a woolen cloak and goes outside, shoving his hands into his pockets against the chill. There are a few students in the Entrance Hall courtyard braving the weather for the chance to be outside. Some of them wave or greet him. Others simply stare. It’s been almost a full week since his return, and still they act as if he’s a new ghost in the castle.

Salazar bites back a smile. Perhaps he is. He’s surely haunted her halls well enough in the past few days.

Once he’s clear of the courtyard stones, he stands on the ground, letting his sense of the earth beneath his feet come to him. The spring that once fed the castle moat is still present, supplying the school’s water for drinking, bathing, and watering the greenhouses. There is more than enough for it to fill a deep trench around the castle once more, giving Hogwarts protection by water from all sides, but the old paths are blocked off, the moat filled in. The courtyard covers the place where the drawbridge once crossed over.

There is no sense of the dead in the soil, not after so many centuries, but foreign stone is another matter entirely.

Salazar turns and walks west across the grounds, blowing flakes of snow away from his face. This valley has always been an odd one for weather. Inverness is likely to be bright and clear right now, but Hogwarts is overcast and insistent on a bit of ice.

There is the lake, lapping against the shore. The wall that surrounds the school, built from stone that was placed before Myrddin’s death. Salazar walks straight towards the wall and feels the ground rise as he finds the hill, grown tall with grass, wild herb, weed, and vines—vines wrapping what they grow upon so thickly that what is underneath can’t be seen.

Salazar gets out his wand and sighs. “This will take a bit of work, won’t it?”

His hands are numb with cold by the time he’s cleared away years upon years of ground cover and clinging vine. There isn’t a thing wrong with the stones themselves, spelled as they are to withstand sun, rain, wind, and ice. Some have fallen as the earth shifted and moved with the seasons, but none are broken, and—he thinks—look to be in their proper places. He rightens them and places markers back into the earth by sense and instinct, which is often stronger than memory.

“Well,” he says, speaking to no one but the stones of the buried dead. “Now it’s a proper burial ground again, isn’t it?”
Myrddin’s stone is grey English rock from the south. His name is carved in runes that were being forgotten in the non-magical world when he was young. Myrddin himself wrote them down in his final year with his shaking, frail hand as his health failed him at last. He allowed them to place his years upon the stone in easily readable manner, at least—399 until the third of Martius, 1010. Two prime numbers, two square numbers, and two ten-base numbers. The old goat did like his Arithmancy.

“Hello, you old wanker,” he says to the stone. “You were right. I lived to be older than you. Thanks for cursing me, you bastard.”

Godric and Sedemai’s names are on two stones, side by side. “Nineteenth Iunius 963 to the twenty-first of Iunius in 1138. You made it to one hundred seventy-five and left rather promptly afterwards, didn’t you?” he murmurs of Godric. Sedemai’s stone reads nineteenth Maius of 966, but she decided to out-stubborn her husband one more time; her death is listed as twenty-first Iunius in 1166, twenty-eight years later.

Alicia was laid to rest in Bavaria when an illness felled her unexpectedly, and the stone there bears both hers and Helena’s names. Rowena was also entombed in her home duchy. He’s been to that tomb in the old duchy often over the years; it’s a peaceful bit of land.

Salazar spies two stones standing together and eyes them in surprise. Vanora deSlizarse is buried here. He’d have thought she would have chosen to be buried with her parents in Winchester. Granted, Vanora held the post of Head of Slytherin House for ninety-two years, so perhaps this felt right to her. Vanora’s wife, Ankharet of Gall-ghàidhil, lies next to her, and only outlived Vanora by a single year.

Helga and everyone Norse or Danish chose a pyre on the lake, leaving not even markers behind. Helena and Edvard died somewhere in the Mediterranean, their bodies never recovered even if their souls returned to the castle. Zuri died in battle while defending Castile’s borders. He was buried in the magical crypts of Burgos in 1034. Imeyna followed her brother into death the next year. If Salazar felt as if his heart were broken by those losses…such literally broke Marion.

Marion Deslizarse, also called Slytherin, Lady of León and Moray

Born of Inverness in Moray on 8th Ianuarius in the year of our Lord 978

Died 17th Augustus in the year of our Lord 1,037

This world is like an anteroom of the world to come.

All go to one place: all are from the dust and all turn to dust again.

Death and life are in the power of one’s tongue.

Salazar chose those verses, flipping through Marion’s treasured illuminated copy of a Latin Bible that Galiena made for her. Grief had been a thick storm cloud around him; he chose only lines that spoke to him from blurring pages.

“You know, love, your loss haunts me far more than anyone else’s. We’d such plans of traveling the world together after leaving this place.

“I still hate that I saw so much of it without you.”
Nizar unrolls his borrowed copy of the *Daily Prophet* on Friday morning at breakfast and has an actual attack of vertigo when confronted by the front page. He hands it off to Salazar so that he can recover. Minerva is glad to get her paper back in a prompt fashion; she and Salazar peer over it together to read.

Severus glances at him. “You look ill. Do I want to read this newspaper, or set it on fire?”

“Read it,” Nizar replies, and glances out at the student tables. Miss Granger always goes for the paper before she’ll touch her breakfast, and has a look of wide-eyed shock on her face. Miss Lovegood, Ginny Weasley, Draco, and Pansy are all reading over her shoulder with similar expressions.

“He did it. Minister Fudge printed the retraction.” Even Salazar sounds surprised. “It was getting to the point where I was considering the idea of reminding him that it was to be done.”

“Could have done without the front page bloody photo,” Nizar hisses, shaking off the last of the disorientation. That’s the clearest photograph he’s ever seen of that child. Not even the 992 portrait looks the same as he did at age fourteen, when those photographs had to have been taken. The choice is a deliberate nod towards credibility, too—he’s all but certain that is the Triwizard Tournament’s uniform, not merely an odd Quidditch robe.

“Salazar must have terrified Fudge. The paper is practically waxing poetic about Mister Potter,” Severus says, just loud enough for the words to carry to the nearest ears at the Slytherin table. Then he lowers his voice. “Are you all right?”

Nizar nods. “I wasn’t expecting an eyeful of that child’s face in large, moving color, but I’m fine. Did they really print a full retraction?”

“Not only of the slander of this school term and the past summer, but a great deal of the Tournament’s gossip-mongering, as well,” Salazar answers. “I’m pleased. I’d have thought it would take bribery to get this level of cooperation.”

“You wanted a bloodless coup,” Severus says. “You have your start.”

“That will depend entirely on what happens tomorrow,” Nizar responds, watching as the crowd around Granger grows. Fred and George get just enough of a summary to slap hands over everyone else’s heads.

Nizar doesn’t have classes to teach on Friday. He spends the first half of the day under the Invisibility Charm, lurking in doorways, on stair landings, in public halls and in corridors to do nothing more than listen. The whole of Gryffindor House is cheered by the *Prophet’s* article, minus the few Marked idiots who are too stupid to realize they’re giving themselves away by not bothering to even pretend at delight. The retraction puts the majority of the other three Houses into a thoughtful mood, and when they’re not in class, they’re out in droves to discuss it.

Just as Salazar knew they would, the intelligent ones are already realizing that the retraction means that the *Prophet* has been lying about Voldemort. If the child wasn’t lying, after all, then all of it has to be true—Voldemort included. Those in Nizar’s classes who were still stubbornly holding out against believing in the noseless idiot’s return spend the day unhappy, or blanched and shaken as reality comes crashing down on their heads.
Nizar rests his hands over his knees. “You know, even if tomorrow goes badly...I no longer think it will matter.”

“Maybe not,” Kanza agrees, and tightens in place around his neck as she tries to find a new warm spot. “I do not have to travel outside with you, do I?”

“I doubt I’ll encounter anything that needs Petrifying, dearest. One cannot Petrify politics.”

Nizar goes back to his quarters for lunch, done for now with spying and observing. If anything intriguing happens at lunch, Salazar will be there to see it.

Nizar glances over to discover that the 995 portrait of himself from Salazar’s study is still lingering in the children’s frames, though he’s in Brice and Galiena’s company; Elfric is elsewhere again, possibly off pestering his uncle’s portrait in the Slytherin Common Room. “Didn’t I once issue a rule that my own portraits weren’t allowed to be in here?”

“You did, but others have been filling me in on what the Preservation Charms for the 1017 working failed to preserve,” the portrait replies. “Like, oh, a certain someone’s ability to speak and understand Cumbric.”

Nizar stares at the portrait. “You haven’t forgotten.”

His portrait snorts in response. “No. Why would I have? You’re the amnesiac—who does need to get around to updating this canvas, by the way. At least one of us should have their memories intact.”

Nizar nods. “It’s really inconvenient that the updating spell can’t be performed in reverse. Stay there.” He goes to retrieve the Cumbric-written Potions text from his study. A sheaf of paper from the storage room gets converted into a bound book, though a proper cover will have to wait.

He returns to the sitting room, props open the Cumbric text on the owl stand in front of the portrait, and digs one of the twins’ Self-inking Quills out of his pocket. “Line by line, literal translation of each word,” Nizar requests. “If I have that...”

“So then you’ll be getting somewhere,” the portrait replies, smirking.

* * * *

Severus enters Nizar’s quarters intent on finding the man, who has missed two meals and hasn’t been seen all day. He glances at the portraits and nearly leaps back in shock before his thoughts catch up with him. “Dammit! Don’t do that!”

The 995 portrait of Nizar grins at him. He’s sporting that horrific bird’s nest of unruly black hair, and his eyes are the same emerald green as Kanza’s. “I just wanted to see how you would react.”

Severus rolls his eyes. “And now you know.” Even with his two altered features restored, Nizar doesn’t look like his father but for the superficial resemblance. By age twenty, he looked far more like Salazar.

“Well, one has to find out these things somehow,” the portrait says. “The real me doesn’t remember how to replicate this disastrous mess that liked being my hair. I think there is something from the Lohat bloodline that just enjoys presenting itself.”
Black must have told Nizar something useful about his family for the portrait to be referencing an ancestor. “I see Nizar finally updated one of you.”

The portrait’s eyes and hair shift back to the color and style he bore at the time of the painting’s creation. “He did. A bloody hour, that took. I’m glad he doesn’t recall all of those centuries, or it would have been like Salazar trying to update his portraits. Three hours is a long time to have a staring contest with a painting, Severus.”

“Indeed,” Severus says, when in truth he has no idea how one even updates a portrait at all. There hasn’t been anyone in the castle still alive who found it necessary, and the Headmasters’ portraits don’t appear until the current Head retires or dies.

“You would have had to make your decision much earlier, you know.”

Severus glances back at the portrait of Nizar, who has been joined by Elfric. It still seems completely normal to be discussing things with a portrait of Nizar, even now that he’s speaking with a portrait in truth, not a complicated magical working meant to preserve the real person. It’s the portrait’s obvious youth that helps keep things from being odd. “What decision is that?”

“I know how much you value your House and the students within it, even if you’ve often had to be harsh as circumstances demanded. If I’d been Sorted the way the Hat wanted, would you have been able to create that same sort of animosity between us? Could you have done it, given what you once promised?”

Severus has to look away. “I would have treated you the same as I treat every other Slytherin in my House.”

“Hmm. That sounds very much like a ‘No’ to me,” Nizar’s portrait says, amused. “Perhaps we wouldn’t have killed each other, after all.”

Severus glares at the portrait. “Your brother is a terrible influence.”

The portrait smirks. “Vice versa, really.”

“I am so fucking glad you argued with that damned Sorting Hat!”

“Speaking of things to be glad about, this will probably be the complete opposite.” The portrait tilts his head in the direction of the hallway. “Please go retrieve myself before sodden is achieved. If I’m drinking alone, it’s never for a good reason.”

Severus lifts both eyebrows and goes to the hall, discovering that the storage room door is the only one shut, and thus the only one occupied. He knocks rather than barging in. “Nizar?”

“Come in.”

He opens the door and finds Nizar seated in the room’s sole green armchair, a book in his lap, his bare feet resting on the oak trunk. The smell of potent alcohol is in the air; a stoppered bottle of Death in a Bottle, now down to only two or three shots remaining, is sitting on the trunk next to Nizar’s feet. The portrait frames for the Founders are empty; they’ve been trading off with the 1015 portraits, working in the Entrance Hall to correct the worldviews and opinions of the 1035 copies. 1015 Rowena and Helga still have no idea where their actual frames are located, but that hasn’t stopped them from wandering.

Asking if Nizar is all right seems like a stupid question. “And what, may I ask, is the occasion?”
“For drinking?” Nizar props his elbow on the arm of the chair and rests his chin on his hand. “The portraits hadn’t forgotten Cumbric.”

“Then you’re—”

“Finally making real progress, yes,” Nizar says with a faint smile. “As to the other…” He picks up the book and holds it out. Severus recognizes it as the print-ready blank edition the students gifted him for the Winter Solstice. “I finished it. The last thing needed was to write the author’s biography. That was…that was very difficult.”

“I’d imagine so,” Severus murmurs, turning the book onto its side so he can read the lettering on the spine. “Standards of Defence for the Exceptional Student. Tell me that you used the opportunity given to mock the O.W.L. grading system.”

“Of course I did. Brice’s portrait approves.”

Severus turns through the pages, which are filled with print so precise it’s difficult to tell that it’s Nizar’s handwriting at all. It’s easily legible, and like the original text, utterly logical—if also insanely creative. “It’s very well done.”

Nizar’s smile is still too vague to be true happiness. “It’s Brice’s work, not mine. I just organized it.” He lifts one finger and points at the book. “Brice wrote that to finalize his mastery under Godric. He was seventeen.”

Severus closes the book. “He took after his father.”

Nizar nods. “Maybe too much.”

Severus puts the book down on the trunk to join the bottle and then straightens, crossing his arms. “Do please go and tell Brice’s portrait that. The fallout would be entertaining.”

Nizar glares at him. “I see your point, and fuck you.”

He picks up the bottle and resettles the stopper before pocketing it. “You have a meeting with royalty in the morning, Lord Nizar. Time to sober up.”

“What the fu—you—complete—”

Severus smiles. “Your becoming a distillery does not improve your way with words.”

“I can still hex you,” Nizar mutters, scowling.

“Please. I doubt you could lift either wand right now.”

Nizar’s expression brightens. “Is that a challenge?”

“Not until you’re sober.”

“Fucking spoilsport,” Nizar replies.

Severus resists the urge to plaster his hand over his face. “There really should be an allowance to take points from staff for horrendous puns.”

“Every single one of those stupid gemstone counters would be in the negative on the first day of term, and it would be entirely your doing.”
Severus ignores that truth and holds out his hand in invitation. Nizar takes them; Severus lifts him to his feet. Nizar promptly leans forward and rests his head against Severus’s chest. “Thank you.”

He swallows and rests his hand in Nizar’s hair, wondering at how he can hear *I love you* in two words which don’t say that at all. “You’re welcome.”
“I look like a James Bond villain.”

“Who the fuck is James Bond?”

Putting up a new Friday chapter for people to whinge about. Happy holidays and things!

Note the Second: This chapter and the next two chapters involve real places and real people who have been used respectfully and put back politely afterwards.

“You don’t have to do this, you know.”

Severus frowns and finishes buttoning the dark violet shirt. It has no collar, and an additional panel of fabric hides the buttons from view. He will admit that it is well-tailored, even if he’s still not decided on whether it is preferable. “I am aware of that. I take it by your arrival in my quarters that you’re ready to depart?”

“Whenever you are. You look like you’re going to be tortured, by the way. You’ve gone out chancing actual torture and put on more pleasant expressions than this,” Nizar says.

“I am not fond of the idea of this outing, but it’s important to you, and to those who are now accompanying you.” Severus tries not to scowl at his own reflection after he puts on the black jacket. “I look like a James Bond villain.”

“Who the fuck is James Bond?”

Severus tries not to smile. “Your lack of non-magical culture simply must be rectified, Nizar.”

“You don’t look like a villain. You look fantastic,” Nizar says.

“I do not,” Severus mutters. “Are you already prepared for this impending disaster?” he asks, turning around. Then he simply stares.

Nizar grimaces. “I know I look ridiculous. Please don’t compound it.”

Severus shakes his head. “I wasn’t going to say you looked ridiculous. Quite the opposite.”

Nizar is wearing solid black trousers and shirt with the jacket that terrifying woman, Bernice, found in her shop. It’s made of raw silk with a varying weave, dyed a deep forest green with metallic thread.
added that makes the light illuminate the color, even under torchlight. It falls to mid-thigh and is slitted up the sides, mindful of Nizar’s favored vests. His curling hair is loose; a flat-hammered and tri-braided silver circlet rests on his head. There are bits of twinkling green at the braided corners that suggests tiny emeralds have been set against the silver.

Severus has to swallow. “That circlet should not work with that outfit, given the thousand years I would imagine separates their creation…but it really does. I didn’t think you had anything like that circlet remaining.”

“Properly, this is a coronet, but of Pictish styling rather than Iberian. We were of a mood to point out to Court that while we paid tribute and favor to León, we were most assuredly living in the north of Briton.” Nizar touches the cornet pinning his hair in place and makes a face. “Salazar kept mine in his quarters. I’d rather not wear it at all, but I don’t care what the traditions of this century have become—if you’re titled nobility, you do not meet royalty for the first time bare-headed!”

“It hasn’t been a proper day unless you’ve ranted about either bad manners or the twentieth century’s magical failings.” It amuses Severus quite a bit that Nizar has almost nothing bad to say about the non-magical world, and Severus hasn’t even taken the man into a proper bookstore yet—mostly out of concern that he’d never be able to pry Nizar away from the shelves.

Severus reaches out to touch a pin on Nizar’s jacket lapel, a silver, hollowed-out version of the Deslizarse crest. The blossoms and branches of the rowan tree, fronted by the guardian basilisk, are solid shapes resting within a circle. Hanging from the bottom of that circle, suspended on delicate silver chains, are multiple colored gemstones cut to resemble faceted teardrops. “And this?”

“In the old days, this would have been a broach for a cloak. I don’t know what happened to the original, and Salazar only has his own. I asked the elves to remake this.” Nizar points to each gemstone in turn. “Dark red garnet symbolizes a mastery of Blood Magic. Mind Magic is symbolized by white moonstone. Transfiguration, my Metamorphmagus Mastery, is an opal from Eastern Europe. My Defence Mastery is marked by sphalerite, called zinc blende. The black diamond is worn only by war mages. The smoky quartz denotes the Pictish magical mastery.”

Severus studies the stones, which are flawless, their facets catching and reflecting the light. “I had been wondering why Pictish Magic has its own distinction.”

“Their magic was unique to their culture. The Picts weren’t the only ones whose magic had its own distinct mastery. Their people were dying out, and Gedeloc knew it, so he was glad to pass on his knowledge to me when I showed aptitude and interest. Yes, I remember who he was, now—Gedeloc was one of my teachers,” Nizar says when Severus glances up.

“Then I suppose he’d definitely forgive you the barrow borrowing,” Severus says.

“He would, yes. Speaking of masteries…” Nizar reaches into his coat pocket and pulls out another jacket pin. Inside the hollow silver circle is a iaculus with its wings spread; its tail is coiled around the curve of a shofar. “Did you know your family had a heraldic crest?”

“Yes, but I’ve never seen it before.” Severus tilts the pin in his hand to allow light to catch on the details. “That would explain the iaculus Patronus, wouldn’t it?”

“If there is a strong family association, it does tend to put in an appearance from time to time,” Nizar says.

Severus lifts the emerald on its chain. “And this would be?”
“You hold Hogwarts’ Western Seat, and the emerald represents that in honor of the original Founders. Minerva would have a scarlet ruby for the Southern Seat; the Eastern Seat is a blue sapphire; the Northern Seat is golden apatite. Next to the emerald is Mind Magic’s white moonstone. A Potions mastery is a bloodstone. At some point soon, I imagine the malachite for Herbology will be added.” Nizar takes back the pin. “Hold still, or I’ll stab you with this.”

“On accident, or on purpose?”

Nizar frowns as he pins the silver circle to Severus’s jacket lapel. “On purpose, obviously. There.”

“Not that I am unappreciative, but why did you give me this?” Severus asks. “I’m assuming politics, but I would like to know the details.”

Nizar raises an eyebrow as the corner of his mouth turns up. “You’re going to meet a Queen. I think it’s high time that certain traditions were acknowledged again. A cloak broach, or a jacket pin like these, were a useful way of identifying another magician’s strengths. It meant that, no matter the culture, we all had a starting point on which to converse. This color representation was all but universal from one end of the continent to the other, though some cultures had different magical masteries than we do. Also, if you were already aware of someone’s strengths, you had a better idea of how to kill them.”

“I love it when you’re practical,” Severus drawls, which earns him a kiss that he would really like to pursue.

“Not on this timetable,” Nizar says against his mouth, as if sensing Severus’s intent. “You are also not late if you’re to see royalty.”

Severus runs his fingers down Nizar’s freshly shaven cheek and watches as Nizar practically melts into the touch. “I’ll maintain a sense of decorum, then.”

“Of course you will.” Nizar gets out his wand long enough to tap the circlet, hiding it with the Invisibility Charm. “I’d rather not advertise that until it’s the proper time.”

“Where did you find the crest for the iaculus?” Severus asks before they leave his quarters.

“I asked a house-elf. If they don’t know, they’re often aware of the best means to find out. Besides, most of them were here when your ancestors in the Prince line were attending this school, and elves have long memories.”

* * * * *

Draco refuses to fidget in place, even though it’s been almost five minutes. “Well? Please hurry this along!”

Granger doesn’t stop frowning at him. “You don’t rush perfection. You do want to make a good impression, don’t you?”

Draco notices Daphne rolling her eyes. “Granger, you never make good impressions unless you’re hitting Draco.”

“Hey!” Draco protests, but the joke makes Adele smile, and she’s been panicking over this trip for
the entire week. It also prompts Granger into finally making a bloody decision.

“Greengrass, I don’t bother to make a good impression here—it’s school,” Granger says in a too-patient voice. “Or did you think a fairy godmother came along with my dress for the Yule Ball last year?”

Daphne opens her mouth and then hesitates. “All right. That…I didn’t think of that.”

Granger is busy pointing her wand at Draco’s hair, which fluffs up in response. “What are you doing?” he asks in alarm.

“I know you like your hair slicked back, but that was Muggle style in the 1950s, not right now.” Granger lowers her wand, pleased. “There. That haircut you have right now is perfectly fashionable without being informal.”

Draco pats at his hair, which is dry and lying obediently flat, though it now hangs almost into his eyes. “Er—thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Granger eyes Daphne and Adele. “Malfoy’s suit and trousers are fine, but then, men’s fashion in regards to formalities hasn’t changed overly much for a while.” She tilts her head. “Witches’ robes, on the other hand…”

“I really don’t want to wear what you’re wearing,” Daphne says, eying Granger’s denims with distaste. “That really isn’t…proper.”

“No, it isn’t,” Granger agrees. “But this is informal. You want what we’d call business formal, and denims with hooded jumpers most definitely do not qualify. What?” she snaps when Adele and Daphne stare at her. “Just because I refuse to plaster my hair to my skull and like comfortable clothing doesn’t mean I’m ignorant! Why do you think Malfoy asked me to double-check the lot of you before you went out to your important meeting today?”

“You told her?” Adele asks, mouth ajar.

“No!” Draco retorts. “Granger guessed. Merlin knows how.” Granger hadn’t guessed the most important aspect, like their visiting an actual Queen, but she’d discerned the Muggle-based nature of the visit without a word being said.

Granger rolls her eyes. “We figured out someone was trying to steal the Philosopher’s Stone halfway through the term. When we were eleven. Honestly, this is not all that difficult in comparison. Slacks or skirt?” she asks Adele.

Adele blinks a few times at the sudden question. “Skirt. Please. I can Transfigure it back later.”

“Good, because unfortunately, Muggle ladies’ business formal is not really meant for ease of movement right now.” Granger points her wand at Adele, who winces and closes her eyes as Granger Transfigures her short robe and long skirt into a knee-length skirt that seems designed to imprison one’s legs. It and a buttoned jacket with long sleeves are charcoal grey with thin, lighter grey stripes; a blouse underneath is stark white in contrast. Then Adele’s hair is swept up into a hairstyle that Granger apparently sticks in place with magic, as Draco sees no pins involved at all.

Adele wiggles in place. “I feel trapped. Muggle women willingly dress like this?”

“Mum says it’s less about willingness to wear the clothes and more that they want to keep their jobs. Fashion design in the Muggle world is male-dominated, and there are…unpleasant side effects to that,” Granger explains.
“Like not being able to get away?” Draco asks, horrified.

Granger glances at him and nods. “Exactly like that, yes. Why do you think I left Adele’s slippers alone? She can rip the skirt and still run, but high heels are terrible inventions.”

“Slacks, if that’s another word for trousers,” Daphne says in a growl before Granger can ask. “Adele looks very pretty, but I don’t want to have to rip my clothing if it comes down to a fight!”

“And that is exactly why I like robes and denims,” Granger replies, lifting her wand. Daphne gets solid grey trousers that fit loose, a white blouse, and a matching grey jacket that isn’t buttoned so it can show off what Draco thinks is a ludicrously wide black belt at Daphne’s waist. Daphne’s long hair is tied back and braided with another few movements of Granger’s wand.

“Do Muggle businesswomen not believe in color?” Daphne asks, sounding offended as she checks out her clothes.

“Yessss…” Granger draws out in a way that means there is probably a long explanation, “but I know you’re meeting someone who is important. Therefore, you let them wear the colors while you present as neutral. That means you don’t clash with their clothes, or anything else in the room, and you’re immediately that much more agreeable to be around.”

Daphne stops plucking at the grey trousers and stares at Granger. “That was positively Slytherin.”

“I told you I was asking her opinion for a reason,” Draco says smugly.

“I thought it was just because she’s the only Muggle-born we knew who knows how to dress for London, and can keep her mouth shut,” Daphne mutters.

Granger doesn’t look impressed. “I wouldn’t let Shah, Bhatia, or Parangyo hear you assume that they don’t know how to dress for Muggle London, since they’re Muggle-borns in your own bloody House.”

“To be fair, Parangyo is from Nairobi?” Daphne tries.

Granger scowls at her. “And that means uncivilized backwater, does it? Please, please pick up books on history, culture, and geography that weren’t written by bigoted white wizards!”

Adele sighs. “You usually have to send outside of Britain for those.”

“Not in a Muggle bookstore, you don’t,” Granger replies, and then slams her mouth shut so fast Draco hears her teeth click together.

Draco glances over his shoulder to find that Professor Slytherin and Professor Snape have arrived, and look exceedingly normal. Well-dressed, yes, and not a hint of a robe or a bit of magic, but normal. Then he looks at Granger again and realizes—crush. She has a terrible crush on Professor Slytherin, one she has to know is impossible given their teacher’s attachment to Draco’s Head of House.

Well…he sympathizes. Draco is also dealing with a completely impossible, annoying crush. He had three reasons for asking Granger’s opinion, but he isn’t going to confess that last one even under threat and pain of death.

“I see most of you are prompt,” Professor Slytherin says in approval. “Draco, who is flying for you in today’s Quidditch match?”
“Astoria Greengrass, sir,” Draco replies, and Daphne all but preens without any praise mentioned at all. It only gets worse when Draco adds, “She’s an excellent flyer. I won’t be surprised if she replaces me as Seeker when I graduate, sir.”

“Where is Mister Zabini?” Professor Snape asks, glancing at the three of them in swift, silent approval before he eyes Granger.

“Here!” Blaise literally slides into the room, panting for breath. “Sorry, I got cornered by Greg, Vince, and bloody Pucey. First time in my life I’ve ever been grateful for Peeves turning up. Meant I could escape while they were distracted.”

Granger is glaring at Blaise’s trim violet jacket, trousers, and blue shirt. “Absolutely not!” she declares, and Transfigures his clothing to white slacks and jacket over a black shirt before Blaise can stop her.

“Wha—why the bloody—why did you do that?” Blaise asks, gaping at his clothes. “I look fit in those colors, Granger!”

“Politics, you twit!” Granger retorts. “Honestly, you’re all hopeless!”

“It can be Transfigured back, idiot,” Professor Snape says in a dry voice.

Blaise points at their teachers. “Why are they wearing color, then?”

“They’re wearing muted color with a lot of black, and they’re adults,” Granger emphasizes, sighing. “If you’re really going to get into politics, please be less hopeless than this.” Then Granger lets out a startled noise as she catches the book that Professor Slytherin tosses at her. “Sir?” she asks, scrambling to hold it properly. Draco notes that it’s the printer’s-ready blank book they gave the professor on the Solstice.

“Proofread that, notes on a different sheet of paper noted by page number, and you’ll earn your first editor’s credit,” Professor Slytherin says.

“Y-yes, sir!” Granger stutters out while smiling and blushing an intense red-violet.

“Why her?” Daphne asks, frowning.

“Because, out of the two hundred fourteen essays I received, Miss Granger proved to be literally the only one who understood the use of a paragraph, the idea of a hypothesis and how to write in support of it, proper grammar, punctuation, and had literally no misspelled words whatsoever. That’s why,” Professor Slytherin replies. He slides back his sleeve to view a wristwatch, definitely the work of All About Time’s master clocksmith in Diagon Alley, not one of his apprentice’s cheaper watches. “Sal, if you’re late, I’ll break you in half.”

“Miss Granger!” Professor Snape barks. “If you don’t mind, I do believe you can take that book and leave.”

Granger looks up, startled. “Oh! Right, yes, sorry,” she says, and puts her nose right back into Brice deSlizarse’s book as she wanders out of the room.

The moment she’s gone, Salazar Slytherin Apparates into the room. Draco jumps back, looking for the house-elf that must have assisted him, and doesn’t find one. Then he takes a second look; he’s only ever seen Salazar dressed either entirely wizard formal, like Professor Slytherin, or so Muggle casual his clothes look ready for the rubbish bin. Today he’s dressed almost in a mirror to Professor Slytherin, but his shirt is green and his jacket is black. They all three have those odd pins, which
Draco belatedly realizes are family crests. He has no idea what the colored gemstones mean, but Salazar has the most.

“How?” Adele asks, wide-eyed. Her fingers are twitching in a way that suggests she desperately wants to know so she can try it. “Oh! Because you’re tied into the castle’s magic properly, yes?”

Salazar nods at her. “Exactly that. Did you lot know that Peeves is throwing some truly horrendous dung bombs at a few of our less ethically sound students?”

Professor Snape glares at Blaise. “Mister Zabini?”

“I told you I needed a distraction. You said I had to come here unobserved!” Blaise points out. “Dung bombs were all I had.”

“I’m concerned that you had them with you in the first place,” Professor Slytherin says. “No contraband. If you have anything else, it stays here—and that includes knives.”

Draco sighs and reaches into his jacket pockets. “Why are knives contraband?”

“You have wands capable of killing people, and they’re letting us keep them. After that, a knife is considered impolite overkill,” Professor Slytherin explains.

Salazar whistles at the small pile of fireworks, illicit candies, tricks, Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes prototypes, and the five knives on the table when Draco, Adele, Blaise, and Daphne are done emptying their pockets. “I’m impressed, and not only because Miss Greenwood was carrying four of those five knives.”

Adele blushes. “My mother wishes for me to be prepared, sir.”

“Well, you’re definitely prepared to stab someone,” Salazar replies, holding out his arm. “At least we will not be experiencing today’s rain while visiting London. Ladies?” He waits until Daphne and Adele have gingerly taken hold of his arm before Disapparating. Professor Snape gestures with his wand and secures the door to the empty classroom, which will keep anyone from making off with their belongings.

Draco is surprised when Professor Slytherin grasps Professor Snape’s arm, not the other way around. “Er—”

“He’s the one who knows where we’re going, Draco,” Professor Slytherin says as Blaise puts his hand on Professor Snape’s arm. “Hurry up. We’re running a bit behind.”

“Yes, but—” Draco begins to say just as they Apparate. He lets go of Professor Snape’s arm in the alleyway, dizzy from a Side-Along Apparition for the first time in years. Apparating out of Hogwarts feels a little off, but he supposes that must be the Anti-Apparition wards…that somehow don’t apply to his Head of House or the two Slytherins.

Then he nearly trips over his own feet while trying to draw his wand.

Sirius Black is standing in the hidden alleyway for the Ministry of Magic.

“Please stop,” Professor Snape says in irritation, which makes Draco realize he isn’t the only one acting justifiably paranoid. “If anyone gets to hex them first, it’s me.”

Them? Draco belatedly realizes that Professor Lupin is standing behind Sirius Black. He might be taller than everyone, but that man knows how to blend in.
“Nice to know that everyone is still completely terrified of me.” Black puts his hands into the pockets of the black jacket he’s wearing and sighs. “Nizar, Salazar, Snape, ladies, Zabini. Hello, cousin,” he says to Draco.

“Hello,” Draco squeaks, not sure what etiquette is involved for addressing a mass murderer who is also family. Blaise is unabashedly hiding behind Professor Slytherin; Daphne and Adele are doing the same to Salazar. “Uh—”

“As much as I would prefer to make Black suffer, I don’t wish to share a car with four terrified idiots,” Professor Snape says. “Of the crime of betraying the Potter family and killing twelve Muggles, plus Pettigrew, Sirius Black is, unfortunately, innocent.”

Blaise gets it first, but Blaise’s family seems to thrive on odd twists, especially if it’s properly dramatic. “Pettigrew. Right?”

Professor Lupin nods at Blaise. “Exactly so. You might remember the fiasco that was the end of your third year?”

“That’s when you lot would have found out.” Blaise frowns. “How did he hide? I mean, if he was the murderer, the Dementors would have been flocking to him!”

“When they weren’t trying to eat Potter, anyway,” Adele says. Draco cringes; he used to think that was funny, too. Then Mother took him on a tour of Azkaban during the summer between his third and fourth years. He didn’t realize what she was trying to say then, but he certainly understands her intent now that Voldemort has returned.

“Dementors ignore animals. Pettigrew is an Animagus,” Professor Snape says in a flat voice.

“Isn’t that when Weasley’s rat disappeared—oh.” Draco tries not to make face. “Oh. That…oh.”

“That rat spent all his time with the Weasley kids?” Adele looks pale. “That is entirely creepy.”

“We’ll discuss Pettigrew’s flaws later,” Professor Slytherin says, glancing at his watch again. “If we go now, we’ll be perfectly on time.”

“Excellent.” Salazar unpins the silver crest from his jacket lapel as they walk to the mouth of the alley. “If they’re as punctual as claimed, we won’t have to wait but a few moments.”

* * * *

Severus always needs a moment to adjust from the silence of the hidden alleyway reserved for Ministry Apparitions when stepping into the sudden noise of Downing Street. The walkway is busy, full of pedestrians who are irritated at having to skirt a cluster of adults and children clogging part of the walk.

Salazar steps to the kerb, holding up the silver lapel pin and its dangling collection of teardrop-shaped stones. Severus could literally count it by five ticks of a pocket watch before a long black car pulls up next to them. It’s too short for a limousine, but too long not to have additional seating in the rear.

A pale-skinned man with thinning grey hair steps out of the passenger side door. He has on black-
tinted sunglasses, which look odd when combined with his precisely tailored navy blue suit. “That
was prompt,” Salazar says to him as the man skirts the hood of the car.

“This isn’t the sort of job for those with bad timing, sir,” the man replies, opening the rear door.
“Inside, please. Adults in the rear, children to the front. It will be close confines, I’m afraid, but this is
a bit less conspicuous.”

The car still smells of new leather and vinyl, which is not a pleasing combination. The wide bench
seats are black leather, one placed right behind the glass panel that separates them from the front of
the car, and the other at the rear. The front seat is shorter than the rear, and barely seats all four
children.

“If we weren’t all twigs, we really wouldn’t fit on this seat.” Black sounds uncomfortable. Severus is
just glad that he is closest to the other door, and there are two Slytherins to his right. They’re literally
pressed arm to arm, and he does not want to ever share that kind of proximity with Black or Lupin.

From what Severus can see of the driver, he’s younger than the other man, but is wearing an
identical blue suit while also hiding his eyes behind black sunglasses. The older man gets into the car
and shuts the door. “Good to go, Bob.”

“All right, Bob,” the younger one replies, pulling the car back out into London traffic with the sort of
smooth, quiet acceleration Severus never experienced in a Muggle vehicle as a child. It almost makes
him curious about driving, but he can Apparate, he owns a broom, Floo travel exists, and if all else
fails, he can bloody well fly.

“Bob and Bob,” Salazar repeats in amusement. “Let me guess—neither of you could agree to choose
a different fake name for the day?”

“How long of a ride?” Salazar asks, as if he does this every day. Severus doesn’t wish to dwell on
that idea, since he doesn’t want to be doing this at all.

“How long of a ride?” Salazar asks, as if he does this every day. Severus doesn’t wish to dwell on
that idea, since he doesn’t want to be doing this at all.

“About an hour, sir. Oh, and discretion is key.” Elder Bob does something in the front that darkens
all of the windows and the glass panel separating them from the front. Without overcast daylight
filtering in, the car is a dim box.

Severus feels his shoulders tighten. Instinct wants him to get the hell out of this dark car. Considering
the sudden, bone-crushing grip Nizar has on Severus’s hand, he knows he isn’t the only one
struggling against that reaction. It isn’t until Severus’s eyes adjust to the change in light that the
tension in his shoulders eases.

“This is standard procedure,” Salazar says, probably for the benefit of Nizar and the students. One
doesn’t remember cars, and the latter four have most certainly never been in one before. “Not for
every car trip, mind, but the family’s been paranoid ever since certain Irish groups got tetchy in the
1970s. Being in a vehicle doesn’t stop you from magical Desplazarse,” Salazar adds.

“My apologies,” Nizar grits out. “It’s my first fucking car ride. Thank you for that useful
information.” Severus tries wiggling his fingers, but Nizar’s grip on his hand hasn’t lessened at all.

Draco, Zabini, Miss Greenwood, and Miss Greengrass all look exceptionally nervous, more
pronounced now that they’re in a moving, darkened car. “I’m so blasted nervous,” Miss Greenwood
whispers, as if to prove his point.

“Not every day you go out to claim…well, reclaim a title,” Zabini says. “I hope she’s as nice as the
“What are you wearing on your jackets?” Miss Greengrass asks. “I mean—that’s the Black family crest, isn’t it?” she asks Black nervously.

“It is. Hideous, right?” Black unpins his and holds it out, waiting patiently until Miss Greengrass finally musters the courage to take it.

“More like they were really, really overdoing it,” Blaise comments, leaning over with Draco to get a better look. The laurel leaf rides the upper edge of the silver circle; the crown is set above the leaf, guarded by the shapes of two greyhounds. The crest’s chevron is entirely within the circle, picked out with an ornate letter B, edging to denote the stripes, and has three detailed ravens at the bottom. The fleur-de-lis is etched directly onto the circle instead of adding to the mess.

“It’s old. They had plenty of time to tack on a lot of nonsense. I did have them leave off with the bloody family motto. *Always Pure*, my arse.”

Lupin sighs. “Sirius.”

“They’re fifteen. They’ve heard that word before, Remus.”

“I didn’t know you had any sort of heraldic crest, Professor,” Miss Greenwood says to Severus.

“I’m not nobility, but I can trace my family line back to the days when Judea was still an independent kingdom,” Severus says while trying to find a comfortable spot to rest his elbow that doesn’t drive his hand back into his side.

“So that would be…?” Miss Greenwood prompts politely.

“63 BC,” Severus replies, and tries not to smirk when all four of his Slytherins stare at him. “When Rome conquered Jerusalem.”

“Our family can track back to Rome, also,” Black says. “Not quite that far, though. The records dry up around Emperor Constantine’s time in the early 300s.”

“Same here,” Zabini adds, which draws incredulous looks from Malfoy, Miss Greengrass, and Miss Greenwood. “Don’t be daft, you three. My family is from bloody Italy!”

Salazar decides to join in the fun. “We can track our lineage to a time before Athens became a city-state. We don’t actually know the birth years for the first names on the list.”

“To make this sound a bit more normal, my mother’s family line were mere baronets of Old Wizarding Powys in Wales before the Statute,” Lupin says dryly.

“Can any of us track our lines beyond the Holy Roman Empire?” Miss Greengrass asks.

Malfoy frowns. “I can’t even claim beyond the Norman invasion, Daphne.”

Miss Greenwood hands the silver crest back to Black. “Er, thank you. For letting me look at it, sir.”

“Thank you for not being panicked about being stuck in this stupid box with a criminal,” Black replies cheerfully.

“Professor Slytherin swore in front of us,” Zabini finally dares to point out, grinning. “You said you’d never do that, sir.”
“Yes, I did.” Nizar pinches the bridge of his nose. “It’s a bit different when you’re all currently acting as adults on behalf of your respective families.” Then he grits his teeth. “I also do not like being confined in small spaces. I was fine until they darkened the bloody windows.”

Severus looks at Nizar in concern. That explains why he’s losing sensation in his fingers. “Why are small, dark spaces a problem?”

Nizar shakes his head. “I don’t recall.”

Severus leans back in the seat so that he can glance at Salazar. Given the expression on his face, Salazar is well aware of the cause of the difficulty.

“What are the stones on the crests, then?” Draco asks. “I was wondering about them before we left Hogwarts.”

“Apparently, they represent magical masteries. I didn’t even know that this sort of thing existed until a house-elf brought two of these to the house for myself and Sirius,” Lupin says. “I didn’t know there was a mastery for Geomancy, or that it even had a name.”

“That’s the amber. You and Sirius Black both have that,” Zabini says. “How’d you earn it?”

“We made a very expansive map while at Hogwarts, one with special properties. We earned our first magical mastery and didn’t even know it. Sirius here earned a Transfiguration Mastery that same year—that’s the opal he’s sporting. Animagus,” Lupin says.

“You have an opal, too, sir,” Draco says to Nizar.

Nizar nods. “Transfiguration, Animagi, and Metamorphmagi are all granted the opal because of the many forms opal can take. It’s considered an elemental representation of Transfiguration magic.”

Salazar takes over the explanation. He discusses the Deslizarse family crest, identifies every stone on his silver pin and what mastery it’s for: Astronomy, Mind Magic, Divination, Earth-Speaking, Potions, and Herbology. He holds up the emerald for the Western Seat of Hogwarts and makes a point of telling the others that Severus holds the same honor.

“That’s right brill,” Zabini says. “How is it that you can both hold that Western Seat for Slytherin House at the same time?”

It’s Nizar who answers Zabini, but he sounds tense. “The Founders will always be tied to the school as keepers of its magic, but that doesn’t mean the Western Seat can’t be granted to others. Since Professor McGonagall agreed to be tied into the magic of Hogwarts properly as Gryffindor Head of House, she would now wear a scarlet ruby for the Southern Seat.”

“I’m with Zabini. That’s brilliant,” Daphne says.

Salazar then identifies the stones on the other crests that he doesn’t have, mentioning the war mage’s black diamond, Pictish Magic, and garnet’s Blood Magic; Black somehow picked up an Alchemy mastery and its spectrolite stone, but beyond the two years of Alchemy he took at Hogwarts, Black has no idea why he’d be considered a master. Lupin doesn’t have a Defence mastery, which Severus finds amusing, but he does have the alexandrite color-changing teardrop for Charms to accompany Geomancy’s amber. It’s the pearl that looks to have naturally formed in a teardrop shape that he finds intriguing, at least until Salazar explains why.

“They grant you a mastery for being a werewolf?” Draco bleats in shock.
Lupin sounds unhappy. “Apparently so.”

Nizar scowls. “That is because in our day, a magician who could remain civilized and law-abiding, despite bearing a zoikóthropic curse, was considered to be a master of the self and thus was honored for it.”

“It’s a pearl because of its association with the ocean and its tides, which are controlled by the moon,” Salazar adds.

Salazar continues the impromptu lecture, listing out every single magical mastery he can recall and its associated gemstone, markers that used to be recognized by magical communities throughout Europe, Asia, and Africa. It’s a surprise to find that there are groups who still use the gemstone markers, but they tend to be the areas where British Imperialism held the least foothold, or no hold at all. Severus had no idea some of those magical concepts existed, let alone that one could master them.

It would all do an excellent job of making the ride seem less tedious, but Severus is concerned about Nizar, who has resorted to closing his eyes as he concentrates on breathing normally. “I should have brought a Calming Draught,” Severus mutters.

Nizar shakes his head. “It wouldn’t help.”

Miss Greengrass bites her lip. “Salazar Slytherin, sir, uh—what do I call you?”

“I’m not your teacher, so you may feel free to call me by my given name,” Salazar says. “Or do as the house-elves insist and call me Professor Salazar. Stubborn buggers. You will, however, hear others we’re about to visit refer to me as ‘My Lord Salazar’ as that is the proper form of address for a Marqués. Nizar has to put up with the same, though he is a Lord in truth for being my younger brother.”

“All right. Salazar.” Miss Greengrass looks as if she is attempting to swallow a frog. “Why does Professor Slytherin have trouble with small spaces like this automobile?”

“I don’t mind, Sal,” Nizar says before Salazar can ask.

“Long-term confinement in unpleasant circumstances,” Salazar answers. “And please do not pry beyond that. I like it when my brother is not panicking. It means nothing around us is being broken.”

Draco’s eyes widen. “Absolutely not asking. Not at all.”

“I don’t think any of us want to know what happens when you break a Muggle car,” Miss Greenwood adds.

“But Professor Slytherin said he doesn’t remember it. How can it still be a difficulty?” Zabini asks.

“That sort of thing leaves its mark, even if we’d much prefer it did not,” Salazar says after a moment. “Non-magical beings call it trauma, or post-traumatic stress. It means that the scars run so deep that it matters not if you have conscious memory of it. Circumstances similar to what created those mental scars will still cause the mind to recall the feeling of it, if not the events.”

“That sounds like a right pain in the backside,” Zabini says.

“It really, really is,” Nizar says, cracking a brief smile.

Miss Greengrass looks thoughtful. “My father has something like that, then. From the wizarding war.
He’ll deny it until the family is putting him in his crypt, of course, but he has…he doesn’t handle loud noises very well. Astoria and I learned to be quiet around him.”

“Do—do you have any sort of difficulty like that, sir?” Draco asks Severus. “From the war?”

“Sometimes,” Severus admits in a voice that does not invite further questions. He does not want to explain those incidents, especially not bloody Sybill Trelawney and her damned prophecies.

“Azkaban leaves scars,” Black says in a flat voice. “Not pleasant ones.”

“So do werewolf attacks,” Lupin adds, pointing to his face. The students look baffled by that idea. “Just because I am now a werewolf does not mean that being attacked by Fenrir Greyback at age five is a pleasant memory.”

“Er. Right,” Draco says, swallowing. “Good point, sir.”

“I have such difficulties, also. I saw war at age twelve,” Salazar tells them. “I still can’t hear a horse scream without having terrible flashbacks. If not to those battles, then…well, there have been many since that time. I’m not all that fond of gunfire, either.”

“Gunfire?” Miss Greenwood makes a face. “Like Muggle pistols, sir?”

“Exactly like.”

Nizar’s death grip on Severus’s hand eases when the windows brighten, revealing that they’re now being driven through a wooded area. “Finally,” Nizar whispers.

Zabini tilts his head to peer out the window. “Wonder where we are.”

“Somewhere private,” Salazar says. “One of the royal estates, I imagine.”

The wooded lane becomes a circular drive surrounding a green stretch of lawn. The car stops in front of a massive stone manor, which has a long portico that completely covers the drive so passengers can exit a car in the rain without getting wet.

When they park, Bob the Elder and Bob the Younger both get out of the car to open their doors and free them from confinement. There are more men and women in suits roaming the grounds, which have been shaped and trimmed within an inch of its green life. Two more suited men are standing before the front door beneath the portico with bulges beneath their coats—probably pistols.

While Nizar makes certain the students—not to mention Black and Lupin—behave themselves, Severus leans in close to Salazar. “Imprisonment?”

Salazar shakes his head. “Not today, Severus. Concentrate on what’s happening now, as I don’t think we can afford to fuck this up.”

“Any advice, then?” Severus asks, straightening his coat.

“Those manners you used among the Death Eaters will do nicely.” Salazar reaches up to touch his head. An Invisibility Charm drops away, revealing another braided circlet. This one is larger, and the two lines of hammered silver are joined by a line of hammered gold; the emeralds used by Salazar’s House are also larger and easier to find.

Severus looks over to find that Nizar has done the same, which is causing their Slytherins to gape at him. Then they notice Salazar, which just makes their expressions become even more entertaining.
Lupin is wide-eyed at the sight of the coronets, but Black is clenching his jaw. Severus has no idea what the man is thinking, but at least he’s not staring at Nizar in a way that would be…obvious.

The heavy wooden door to the manor opens as they approach, and a woman with a beachgoer’s tan steps out. She’s wearing a suit similar to Miss Greenwood’s, though hers is definitely of finer quality, and her blonde-streaked brown hair is twisted up in an artful knot. If she’s wearing makeup, she did so in natural tones that subtly emphasize her features rather than obvious additions of color.

She glances around at all of them, a polite smile on her face. When her brown eyes meet Severus’s, he senses not magic or Legilimency, but trained instinct and keen awareness, something he’s only found in people like Nizar and Salazar—those who’ve fought hard and often to survive. If this woman didn’t serve in a Muggle military, he’ll eat his own shoes.

“Lords, gentlemen, and ladies, I’m Amelia Tyler. Welcome to the Frogmore House.”
Frogmore

Chapter Summary

Five visitors to Frogmore get more than they bargained for. Literally.

Chapter Notes

Note the First: Betas & cheer-readers are awesome and badass.

Note the Second: This chapter and the next chapter involve real places and real people who have been used respectfully and put back politely afterwards.

Amelia introduces them to the pair guarding the door, though the introduction is less about names and more about a search for weapons. Their wands are examined, frowned over, and returned with scowls meant to mask befuddlement. These guards were briefed to expect wands, but probably have no idea what they are.

Adele stomps on the foot of the second guard when he puts his hand on her waist to continue his search. “Absolutely not! You will keep your hands to yourself and mind your manners!”

“But—”

“I’ll do it, Rufus,” Amelia cuts in smoothly. “Do you mind if it’s a lady’s hand who finishes the inspection? I assure you, it’s not invasive.” Adele bites her lip before nodding.

Nizar is busy seething and making mental notes—he has to find someone and kill them. He knows when someone has been assaulted, and he has no mercy in his heart for the guilty party. No wonder Adele carries four knives on her person in addition to her wand. He hates that he never noticed while he was in the portrait. Then he realizes that it must have happened before Hogwarts, and it takes the focus of his Mind Magic to put aside that rage.

Finally, they’re allowed into the manor. It has a quiet stillness to it, a comforting feeling that wants to settle onto his skin and into his bones. This was a building that was constructed well, crafted by those who understood how to create a sanctuary.

“The Frogmore House was built in the seventeenth century.” Amelia Tyler doesn’t have the chipper smile and tone of a tour guide leader he passed by in London over the winter holiday, but instead speaks with an air of brisk efficiency. “The royal family is in residence here again due to the fire in Windsor Castle in 1992.”

“They’re still repairing that disaster?” Salazar asks in a voice of polite concern.

Amelia nods. “They are, I’m afraid. The current estimate puts the completion of repairs sometime during the next year. However, Frogmore was home to the Queen’s family when her family was young, and it is a home again now. This way, please.”
“We’re west of London, in Berkshire,” Salazar tells them in a low murmur. “South of Windsor Castle.”

“I’m not sure I needed to know that, Salazar,” Severus replies.

“You might need to come back.” Nizar gets Adele’s attention when her eyes want to linger on the paintings instead of following their guide. “Art later. Business first, Miss Greenwood.”

Amelia leads them to a colonnade that would be overwhelmingly red but for the full bank of windows along the outer wall, letting in light. Seated on an odd-shaped, circular series of chairs in the center of the colonnade is an elderly woman—late middle age, Nizar thinks—with grey-streaked, curling brown hair and blue eyes. She’s wearing a purple skirt with a matching ladies jacket that has rounded edges, unlike the girls’ sharper, square-edged versions.

“Gentlemen, ladies, and titled lords, I present to you Elizabeth Alexandra Mary of the House of Windsor, Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Head of the Commonwealth of Nations,” Amelia says.

Nizar snorts. “Good. Someone taught you lot how to do this properly. No, she isn’t,” he says to the others.

“I beg your pardon, young Lord Nizar!” The seated woman is frowning. “Of course I am—”

“No, you’re not.” Nizar glances at Amelia and the two guards. “The magic of this land is attached to the Crown. When one is crowned during a recognized coronation ceremony, the magic of that land is then tied to the new king or queen. You don’t have that magic. You’re not the Queen.”

“You also have a distinct lack of corgis,” Salazar adds with a charming smile.

The woman who is meant to be impersonating the Queen laughs. “Of course there is a lack. If I have only one flaw when I perform these necessary occasional bits of subterfuge, it’s that I’m allergic to dogs. Take them on, Amelia.”

Amelia’s expression hasn’t changed at all. “Of course, ma’am. This way, please.”

“It was a nice attempt,” Salazar tells Amelia, though she doesn’t turn to listen. “My brother doesn’t actually know what the Queen looks like.”

“Oh?” Amelia says in invitation.

“I’ve been largely unavailable, and I don’t own a television,” Nizar replies.

Amelia takes them to a grand room with a high ceiling. The windows let in light while revealing an extensive lawn, though Nizar could do without the flower-covered chairs and sofas that make up the room’s furniture. The walls are predominantly white with patterned wallpaper; the chandelier, mirrors, doorframes, and the upper edges of the ceiling are gilded to reflect yet more light. The red and gold rug sinks in with every step Nizar takes like proper, thick-piled wool.

A woman who is a perfect match for the one in the colonnade is seated in a chair on the far side of the room. The furniture is arranged so that it puts her at the head of a nonexistent table. Unlike the false Queen, this one is wearing a blue ladies’ suit that is almost too bright for Nizar’s eyes. She has two squat, fox-eared, tawny-colored dogs sitting on either side of her chair. Nizar supposes those must be what corgis are, and wonders what humans have done to dogs in the last thousand years.

Nizar doesn’t wait for Amelia’s introduction. “Your Majesty,” he greets her, offering the proper bow
of a titled war mage to royalty. Salazar is doing the same perfectly in time, as if they’ve never stopped performing this dance together. He hears some of the others repeat the greeting, but whether they’re doing it properly is not currently his concern. He coached them at Hogwarts; if they muck it up now, it’s their own chances they destroy.

“Lord Nizar Hariwalt,” the Queen replies with a smile. She seems like a personable sort, and Salazar told him that Elizabeth has maintained a good reputation throughout her reign. Both of these things point to a woman of sensible bearing. “Lord of León and Castile in the Kingdom of Spain, Ancient House of Serpents in Castile, Gipuzkoa, and the old kingdom of Moray. Protector of Britain’s magical school of Hogwarts, and Britanni Bellum dux Magum, Defender ex Britanni Insulis.”

“I’ve said two words to you, and you’re recognizing me already?” Nizar asks, amused.

Elizabeth tilts her head, a smile lurking at the corner of her mouth. “I said nothing of the United Kingdom yet, did I?”

“Of course.” Nizar likes her already; she’s played this game long enough to have fun with it. “Your Majesty, this is my brother, Salazar Fernan, Marqués of León and Castile in the Kingdom of Spain, Ancient House of Serpents in Castile, Gipuzkoa, and the old kingdom of Moray. He is known as the Emerald Flame of the West, one of the four Founders of Hogwarts, and is the first and foremost Keeper of Hogwarts’ Western Seat.”

“His Majesty Juan Carlos might have mentioned you once or twice when I asked him about you, Lord Salazar,” Elizabeth says, a hint of a smirk not on her lips, but dancing in her eyes. “I do believe he said to, quote, ‘Please make him your problem, as we’ve dealt with him for a thousand years, and that is quite long enough.’”

Salazar grimaces and lowers his head in an abbreviated second bow. “He’s been in a bit of a temper with me when I told him his last choice for a magical staff-bearer in his Court was a complete imbecile, ma’am.”

“Wasn’t listening, was he?” Elizabeth’s smile blooms as she looks to those waiting behind them. “Please, introduce me to all who’ve come with you. I’ve a desperate desire for tea.”

“Tea should not be delayed, then,” Nizar agrees, hating that it is currently his job to introduce everyone, not Salazar’s. “Your Majesty, I present Sirius Orion Black, a direct descendent of the first Duke of Cornwall, Edward IV, the Black Prince of Wales. Before the Statute of Secrecy was passed by the British Wizarding Ministry, the firstborn sons of the Ancient and Noble House of Black were titled Dukes of Wizarding London.

“Mister Blaise Fiore Zabini, whose family were landed gentry in the Kingdom of Naples as Conte over Magical Bari. His family immigrated to Britain during the Napoleonic wars to avoid fighting against cousins among the French, and due to the Statute, immediately lost their noble standing.

“Miss Daphne Sophia Greengrass, whose family were titled Viscounts over Magical Northumberland until the Statute of Secrecy was passed.

“Mister Draco Lucius Malfoy, whose family were Barons over Magical Wiltshire before the Statute.

“Miss Adele Ursa Greenwood, whose family represented the Magical Barony of Greenwood in the Yorkshire Dales.”

“Remus John Lupin, a former Professor of Hogwarts; his mother’s family of Ap Rhys, now called Pryce, were Baronets over Old Magical Powys in Wales until the Statute passed.
“Severus Prince Snape, current Professor of Hogwarts, and Keeper of the school’s Western Magic.”

“And not a title mentioned, dear?” the Queen asks Severus.

Severus’s expression is impassive. “My family was Jewish, ma’am. The English crown has a history of not tolerating our presence on this isle.”

“Unfortunately yes, that is true, but I didn’t serve in the second European war for that attitude to continue.” Elizabeth frowns. “Was, Professor?”

Severus’s eyes narrow. “I’m the last of my mother’s line, ma’am.”

“I’m so very sorry.” Elizabeth turns to Amelia. “Do tell them to bring in the tea now, dear. I think we should all have a very long talk about what the Britannii Bellum dux Magum intends.”

Amelia’s bow is utter precision. “Very good, ma’am.”

*          *          *          *

Salazar’s role in this is simple. He merely confirms that he’s been living in the United Kingdom under an assumed name since the 1600s, agrees to resume the use of his real name and transfer his title to this land—to Juan Carlos’s great relief—and see to it that as many of these young ones reclaim their titles as possible. Once Nizar decides upon a goal, the best course of action usually involves helping him attain it. In this case, Salazar is happy to do so.

“So. He’s truly returned,” Elizabeth says, sipping at her tea as it cools. “The one the Ministry dubs You-Know-Who. Ridiculous. We didn’t call Hitler that. Granted, we called Hitler names that are unfit for young ears,” she adds, smiling at the students with a twinkle in her eye that does not read false at all.

“Voldemort,” Nizar says, glancing down into his teacup. “Or Tom Marvolo Riddle, born in a London orphanage in 1926.”

“His parents are the magician Merope Gaunt, who died shortly after birthing him, and Tom Riddle, a non-magical man from a village called Little Hangleton,” Salazar adds, gaining the others’ rapt attention. “I do my research, and I’ve had the time for it. Merope Gaunt’s brother was charged with murdering Tom Riddle and his parents in their own home, and confessed to such, but I firmly believe it was Voldemort who performed those murders.”

Elizabeth lifts an eyebrow. “Then memory modification magics are real.”

“They are, but we aren’t going to be using them on you. Or on your dogs,” Nizar adds, which draws another smile from the Queen. One of the corgis has claimed Blaise; the other is gazing up in fawning adoration at Adele, who is absently scratching her ears with one hand and holding her teacup in the other.

“The Prime Minister has informed me that he has been told by the Minister for your Ministry of Magic that tales of Voldemort’s return are false,” Elizabeth says.

Severus reaches into his jacket pocket, eying Amelia in amusement when she steps closer, and retrieves a copy of yesterday’s newspaper. “I believe Your Majesty is intelligent enough to discern
Elizabeth nods, putting on a pair of reading glasses before taking the *Daily Prophet* from Severus.

“Oh, the moving pictures! I always thought those were so lovely—and such a handsome young lad,” she comments. “Though he looks rather distressed.”

“For a multitude of reasons,” Salazar comments before Nizar can say anything.

“Yes. So I see,” the Queen says as she reads. “Ran his name through the mud from July until yesterday, even though the boy is missing. It is both reassuring and horrible to know that some things are universal, whether magic is involved or not. Bloody red tops. And—I understand your stake in this a bit better, Your Grace.” Black looks startled; the Queen peers at him over her glasses. “You’d best get used to hearing that title. Mister Potter is legally your son and Heir to the Black family estate, yes?”

Salazar frowns at Nizar. His brother hadn’t told them that he was informing the Queen of Black’s true relationship with Harry James Potter. Nizar just eyes him with an unrepentant quirk of his lips, the utter shit.

Black looks confused. “I wasn’t aware that simply being in your presence meant a confirmation of nobility, ma’am.”

Elizabeth makes an amused sound. “Let’s just say that the Lord Nizar and I have been corresponding. Consider this meeting the final step, not the first. My question?”

“Very well.” Black presses his lips together before nodding. “Yes, Harry is my son by marriage. I’m aware that triad marriages are not a done thing in most of the United Kingdom, but they are legally recognized by the Ministry of Magic.”

Draco lets out an undignified squeak. “Wait. I’m related to Potter?”

Nizar glances over at Draco, a half-smile on his face that is always trouble. “First cousins once removed, if I’m recalling the family tree correctly. Right, Sirius?”

Black grins at Malfoy. “Exactly that.”

Draco looks entertainingly flabbergasted. “Er. Right. I see.”

Elizabeth rolls the newspaper back up. “Might I keep this?”

Severus inclines his head. “There are other copies available. That one is yours, ma’am.”

“Good.” Elizabeth turns to Nizar. “Now then. What are your intentions regarding my kingdom, Lord Nizar?”

“Your Majesty, that is two-fold. The first is the true intent of placing myself back under the crown’s service, as you hold the magical authority over all of Britain, the land I was entitled to protect. That means becoming a citizen of your kingdom, of course, and obeying its rules. If the worst happens and Voldemort is fool enough to declare war against the United Kingdom, my title and your approval would allow me to deal with him in a very swift and unpleasant fashion.”

Elizabeth gives Nizar a piercing look. “Have you ever done so before?”

“It was the early eleventh century, ma’am,” Nizar says, though his lips thin as he speaks. “Yes, I have. On multiple occasions. I’d prefer to not have to do so now, as the magicians capable of
repairing the damage that a war mage’s magic can cause if the land is called upon…Britain no longer has any of those with that particular magical mastery. I’m not even certain where a proper necromancer could be found.”

“Because a necromancer has less to do with raising the dead and more to do with restoring life to those things which require it,” Elizabeth murmurs.

“You Majesty has been well-educated in a war mage’s function,” Nizar says, but Salazar knows the flicker in his brother’s eyes is one of surprise. Nizar hadn’t mentioned that part, then.

Elizabeth puts down an empty teacup. Salazar is doing his best to finish his first cup of tea to show his acceptance of her hospitality, but the Queen’s favorite brew is Earl Grey, and he absolutely loathes bergamot. “There is a legend that has been passed down with the crown since the time of King Harold I, son of Cnut the Great. It has been said to every monarch to rule this land that when he is most needed, England’s last war mage would return. Much like the legend of King Arthur, most thought this nonsense, but when there was a magical war that coincided with World War II, my father told me that the legend of the war mage was most serious. He was less certain about King Arthur, though I do confess, my father thought the last war mage to be Merlin himself, not an immigrant Spaniard.”

Salazar refuses to react, even though he is internally swearing.

His brother cannot lie to the sitting monarch of the land he protects. The magic involved won’t allow it.

“Merlin was born in the year 399, and died in the year 1010,” Nizar says in a neutral voice. “Given how pleased he was to pass on the role of Britain’s war mage to myself, I doubt he would bother returning, no matter how great the need. As for Arthwys—my predecessor never confessed if there was any truth to the myth of King Arthur’s return. For the last: I’m not an immigrant, Your Majesty. I was born on English soil.”

Elizabeth raises an eyebrow while Severus gives Nizar a look of cool appraisal that works well at hiding his concern. “And yet, you bear a Spanish title.”

“Of course I do. My place of birth does not change the fact that I am Salazar Deslizarse’s younger brother, ma’am,” Nizar replies.

Salazar lets out the breath he’d been holding. His brother might have forgotten much, but has not lost his magnificent skills in wordplay.

“I can read between the lines quite well.” At first, Salazar thinks she is going to continue asking of Nizar’s birth, but Elizabeth has something else in mind. “They’re expecting Your Grace’s son, a fifteen-year-old boy, to be the one to defeat Tom Marvolo Riddle. Is that true?”

“There is a prophecy about it.” Black looks discomfited. “It’s the reason my son and my spouses were targeted by Voldemort on Hallowe’en of 1981.”

Elizabeth purses her lips as she removes her glasses, folding them up to set aside. “If there is a prophecy, and it’s meant to be your son to defeat this Voldemort, why is the Lord Nizar talking of dealing with him? It sounds very much as if he intends to do so, whether or not Voldemort acts against the throne.”

Nizar snorts. “Would you and your allies during the second war have sent a fifteen-year-old boy off to assassinate Hitler alone?”
“Certainly not!” Elizabeth responds. “There were of course the lads who lied about their age to go off and fight anyway, but no, never would that have been a deliberate plan.”

“I feel similarly,” Nizar says. “I don’t think destroying Voldemort should fall to a child. Others, meanwhile, think the prophecy should be adhered to.”

“I’m happy to hear you say that. Children should be allowed to grow in their own time.” The Queen smiles and leans forward. “And what was Merlin actually like? I’ve been dying to know.”

Nizar looks at Salazar. “Oh, you’re fielding this one, brother.”

“Very well.” Salazar smiles at Elizabeth. “Myrddin Wyllt, as we knew him, was a great magician, and that should never be doubted. My brother was his successor for the war mage title, yes, but I was Myrddin’s last apprentice for a period of three years. That is when I earned the first of my magical masteries. Myrddin was brilliant, but he was also a stubborn old goat who had no concern left to him regarding laws of nature that you or I would consider to be sacrosanct. He had faith and hope for the future even as the past left him bitter and weary. I truly loathed that man, and yet I still find myself missing his presence.”

Elizabeth covers her mouth with one hand, smothering a laugh. “I often find myself thinking similarly of Winston Churchill, Lord Salazar.”

“I met him once, during the war. I was a bit of a spy, and kept Churchill informed of the European magical war coinciding with the non-magical one,” Salazar tells her. “He was…lively.”

“That may be putting it mildly,” Elizabeth replies. “Lord Nizar: your second intention?”

“The gradual dissolution of the Ministry of Magic and the return of magicians to being citizens of the United Kingdom in which they dwell, subject to its rules and laws.” Nizar looks grim. “Granted, that will involve the continuing practice of keeping magic secret from the public at large, as I don’t think the majority will handle its reveal very well. Not yet. The mindset that the non-magical once held in regards to magicians is nonexistent.”

“Bloody Church of Rome,” Salazar mutters. “There was no separation at all until the idea of magicians being evil decided to lodge itself into far too many minds.”

“As Head of the Church of England, I share in your sentiment,” Elizabeth says, another hint of a smirk in her eyes before she turns serious again. “I agree; magic is not something the general public is ready for. What purpose does it solve to dissolve the Ministry, Lord Nizar?”

“The Ministry of Magic facilitates a separation from non-magical society that cultivates the idea that magicians can do whatever they please to the non-magical without consequence. Unless the threat is dire, such as the case with Voldemort, the lack of consequence is often proven true, and magicians get away with crimes that regular citizens would immediately be held accountable for. That is…” Nizar’s eyes narrow as his brow furrowed in anger. “That, to me, is completely unacceptable.”

“Protector,” Elizabeth murmurs, pouring a second cup of cream-laden tea. “You’ve mentioned the retitling of magicians who are willing to accept formal citizenship within the United Kingdom, be bound by its laws, and answer to the Crown if called upon. Why?”

“In the Ministry of Magic, most of the political power is held by Pure-blooded families such as my own,” Black answers her. “Granted, I’m currently a wanted criminal for murders I did not commit, but the point stands. If those who have the most political power agree to rejoin the United Kingdom by regained titles, then they will have the influence needed to push forth the small changes that will
lead to the gradual dissolution of a governing body that is no longer necessary.”

Severus rolls his eyes. “Why could you not be that intelligent when we were in school, Black?”

Lupin snorts. “Because he was lazy.”

Black shrugs. “True.”

“And what about you, children?” Elizabeth asks, turning to face the four students.

Draco stares down at his tea, but he’s the first to speak. “I used to believe as my father does. He said that wizards are better than Muggles—non-magical people—and that Pure-blooded wizards like us were better than wizards who came from Muggle families. I listened to—to other points of view, and learned to look beyond my father’s words. I realized that I don’t agree with some of the things he’s done. Then my father allied himself with the Dark Lord Voldemort, without thought or concern as to what that might mean for our family’s safety and future. That alliance saw him arrested and placed in Azkaban, a wizarding prison off the coast of England.”

Draco lifts his head and looks at the Queen. “My father’s ideology is the ultimate expression of the cultural divide that Lord Nizar is speaking of. I don’t want to be like my father. I don’t want to die for a hypocrite. My responsibility is to my family, my estate and its affairs, and to our world. I’d never given thought to that also including the Muggle world until Nizar and Salazar talked of it, but…but they’re right. Wizards get away with doing terrible things to non-magical people because they don’t think of them as real people. I think—I think that shouldn’t…that it should stop.”

“It also helps that he’s got a terrible crush on a Muggle-born girl.” Daphne gives Draco a smug smile. “Such a scandal.”

“Shut up,” Draco mumbles, blushing. “I was thinking about most of that before the—the crush. That no one in this room knows anything about!”

“The most fascinating part of this is that you didn’t deny it,” Blaise drawls. “That’s excellent. I won’t say a word to anyone else, but I’m going to hang this over your head until we’re old and balding, Malfoy. Ma’am, what Draco just said is pretty much how we all feel. Myself, Daphne, and Adele, here, we’re not considered good enough to other Pure-blooded families to have a proper say in our own government, and that’s just complete rubbish. The Zabini family came to the United Kingdom to escape a war, but we stayed because we liked it here. I didn’t have to get over any Pure-blooded bigotry, though; I always thought it nonsense, and so did my parents.”

“They’re deceased?” Elizabeth asks with genuine concern.

Blaise nods. “My father has been for years now, ma’am. My mother remarried, but she doesn’t seem to have much luck in keeping her spouses before they manage to die, too. We suspect someone cursed her, and I’m not saying that in jest. I live with my mother and grandmother. My gran doesn’t put up with any nonsense, either.”

“We’re poor,” Adele says bluntly. “I’ve been focusing on academic studies in order to earn a scholarship to any university that would take me, whether it’s a wizarding uni or a Muggle one, though I have to get my grades converted to A-level equivalents by our Ministry for that. I want to be able to do more with my life. I want to be able to help people to be better.”

Daphne wrinkles her nose. “Adele, if you consider yourself poor, then my family is absolutely impoverished in comparison. My parents expect nothing more of myself and my two sisters than for us to make good marriages to Pure-blooded wizards with money. My elder sister went along with
that plan, though she died during the first Wizarding War without Heirs, as did her spouse. I am looking for someone I find suitable. I have to consider blood status and money, but only in regards to making concessions that means my parents will find my marriage suitable. I don’t mind doing this, especially as it would put me in a greater position in our society to enact change that would mean other girls like me would never have to deal with this complete—this mad, bollocking shit! Ma’am,” she adds, ducking her head. “Sorry, ma’am. I just don’t want my sister to face the same difficulty. Astoria wants…she wants to be free to choose. I’d like to be in the position to offer her a home and status that she’d otherwise not have if our parents disapproved of her choices.”

“You need not apologize to me, young lady,” Elizabeth says. “I feared I would be forced to marry someone I didn’t love. I’m extremely fortunate that I met a suitable husband, and that we love each other very much. And what of you, Professor Lupin?” she asks, glancing at Lupin. “I haven’t heard you speak yet.”

Lupin inclines his head. “Well, ma’am, to be honest, I thought I was here to be the voice of reason. However…” He looks over at Black, then at Draco, Daphne, Blaise, and Adele. “Everything I’ve heard sounds quite reasonable to me.”

“It does to me, as well,” Elizabeth replies. “I’ve never been fond of the idea of a separate government within the bounds of Britain, beholden to none but themselves—not for any Imperialistic reason, none of that old nonsense—but because of the very problems you have all spoken of today.”

The Queen’s words are swift and precise, as if she does this every day: Adele Greenwood regains her family’s title and becomes the Lady Adele, Magical Baroness of Greenwood in the Yorkshire Dales; Blaise Zabini becomes the Viscount of Magical Worcester, which held no title for magical nobility in the past; Draco Malfoy regains the Wiltshire title of Baron, becoming Lord Draco of Magical Wiltshire; Daphne Greengrass is named Vidame Daphne of Magical Northumberland, accompanied by a restoration of some of the family’s original land that had been swept up by the creation of the national park. Astoria automatically earns the title of Lady Astoria as Daphne’s younger sister, which causes Daphne’s eyes to widen in surprise. The title of Remus Lupin’s mother’s line is granted back to him, naming him Baronet over Magical Powys in Wales.

“You are now officially Sir Remus,” Black says, laughing at his friend. Lupin glares at him.

Sirius Black is granted royal amnesty from the Ministry of Magic’s charges of murder the moment the Queen hears that Black went to prison without due process of law. “None stopped to think on your actions that night? None?” Elizabeth asks, a deeply troubled expression on her face.

“I don’t know if anyone ever did.” Black rests his chin on his clasped hands. “I brought my son out of that house myself and placed him into a friend’s arms for safekeeping. You’d think that would have spoken of my intent regarding James and Lily. If I was willing to see them dead, why not Harry, too?”

“Indeed,” Elizabeth murmurs. “And with no trial, that question was never properly asked. I still wish to see the true culprit caught, this Peter Wilbur Pettigrew, but in the meantime, your amnesty is granted, Your Grace,” she says, and names Black as Wizarding Duke over Magical London. Black is flabbergasted to realize that the title refers the whole of London County, not merely Diagon Alley’s limited real estate.

“I’m fairly certain there is not supposed to be a sitting duke of London, as it’s the royal seat,” Lupin says.

“Yes, but exceptions are granted for the magical titles,” Elizabeth responds. “I did have to research the old laws to be certain. A magical duke can hold a seat in London because they are usually in the
line of succession to the British Crown, but a magician cannot inherit the throne. Not a bias, you understand,” she adds. “It’s long been considered a conflict of interest—since the days of Rome, I believe.”

Black sighs in relief. “Thank God for that.” Then the rest of her statement seems to catch up to him. “Wait. I was in the line of succession before the title?”

“Yes.” Elizabeth has a look of mischief in her eyes again. “You were number sixty-seventh, I believe.”

“If you ever become next in line for the throne, I’m assassinating you,” Severus tells Black, which causes Amelia Tyler to let out a brief, quickly curtailed noise that Salazar suspects was choked laughter.

“Snape, I’d thank you,” Black replies fervently. “No offence to Your Majesty.”

“None taken.” Elizabeth smiles. “As long as you are willing to perform your duties as Magical Duke over London.”

“I’ve done my research, too. Being a Magical Duke and ruling this kingdom are two very different things, ma’am,” Black says. “I have no problem doing as you’ve asked.”

“Wise man. And what to do about you, I wonder?” Elizabeth muses as she looks at Severus.

Severus grimaces. ‘I’m already a citizen of the United Kingdom, ma’am. I was born in a Muggle hospital and raised in a Muggle household, for all that I’m a Half-blood wizard from my mother’s line. I have no need of any sort of…of title.”

“I do so enjoy the fact that you talk of noble titles as if they’re distasteful,” Elizabeth responds, her eyes full of repressed laughter. “Very well, then.”

“Besides, he’s going to marry my brother, so he’ll have a title whether he likes it or not,” Salazar says, grinning.

“Sal!” Nizar punches him in the shoulder hard enough for Salazar’s arm to go temporarily numb as Nizar’s fist strikes the correct nerve cluster. “Do not pull that nonsense right now. There is absolutely nothing stopping me from beating you senseless in front of royalty!”

Salazar chuckles. “Not like it would be the first time, now would it?”

“Gentlemen.” Elizabeth’s voice is mild, but it still calls their attention back to the matter at hand. They both get to their feet; Salazar thinks that there were many, many rulers he met during his long life who could have stood to emulate her example.

“Salazar Fernan, Emerald Flame of the West.” Salazar feels his skin crawl at her words as the magic behind the crown recognizes what is to occur. “You are hereby recognized by the British crown, sovereign over the island of Britain and its United Kingdom. I name you Magical Marquess of the Highland Council in the north, with your primary seat to be in Inverness. This excludes the lands belonging to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, the Heights of Brae, and the villages within that region. You are now a recognized citizen and defender of this kingdom, and so shall all your descendants be recognized after you.”

Well, it’s a good thing I won’t die until Voldemort is defeated. I’d hate for that rotten bastard to become Marquess over the whole of the Highlands, Salazar thinks, a bit startled by being named as British titled and landed gentry. He hadn’t expected that to come of this meeting—a citizenship under
his real name, perhaps, but not a continuance of title. “I’m not so certain that Scotland would be thrilled by that declaration, ma’am.”

“I’m aware, Marquess, but thanks to the 1707 Acts of Union, there is no one I can ask in regards to this matter but for myself. Besides, your brother assures me that you’re dating a Scottish woman of the Highland Council. That will be a fine alliance to make,” Elizabeth says, smiling.

Salazar takes a moment to scowl at his brother, who gives him a sublimely innocent look. “Very well,” he says with as much dignity as he can muster. “Her Majesty should then know that I’ve owned a home and property in Sherwood-on-the-Marsh since the 1600s.”

Elizabeth merely nods. “That’s a bit distant from Inverness, but consider such property as part of the magical title for the Highlands. Calling it a summer residence will do nicely in regards to the paperwork that appeases bureaucracy.”

She then looks at Nizar. “I excluded the school, the Heights, and the villages in that region for a purpose. I discovered during my research that the Kingdom of Moray once named those lands one of its own earldoms, and an earl watched over those lands.”

“Oh, no,” Nizar mutters under his breath. Salazar smiles and thinks his brother is about to be served revenge, and Salazar didn’t need do a thing to arrange it.

“Britanni Bellum dux Magum. You are hereby recognized by the British crown, sovereign over the island of Britain and its United Kingdom, as Defender ex Britanni Insulis. You are a recognized protector and citizen of this land, once titled as Magical Earl of old Castlevie over Hogwarts and its associated villages, from now on to be called Magical Earl over the Heights of Brae, and so shall all your descendants be recognized after you.”

Salazar reaches out and catches Nizar by the shoulder when Nizar wobbles in place. “You lost that much of your sense of it all, did you?”

Nizar’s eyes are too wide and unfocused. “Apparently, yes, but what did you expect? There were seven kingdoms in our day, not one! Things have changed too much, Sal.”

“I have to admit, I wasn’t expecting that sort of reaction,” Elizabeth says in surprise.

“Apologies, Your Majesty.” Nizar shakes his head, trying to throw off the dizziness. “Quite a number of magics come into play when a war mage is recognized by the seated monarch. Oh—there are a lot more people involved. I need to—” Nizar abruptly takes two steps to the side and drops back down onto the vacant sofa.

“Shit,” Salazar whispers. “I recalled the magic involved in the land, but it isn’t just the land. It’s the people.”

Nizar plasters his hands over his face. “Oh, for fuck’s sake, stop breeding long enough for me to count you!”

“I think that statement was counterproductive,” Tyler says, drawing a glare from Salazar. “Believe me, the pun was unintentional. Should I fetch a medic, Lord Salazar?”

“No. There isn’t…it wouldn’t help.” Gods. “Sometimes I truly think I’ve forgotten too much.”

Severus, Black, and Lupin are all on their feet. “Someone please tell me what’s happening,” Black demands.
“In 992, there were only a million people living in Great Britain,” Salazar says.

Elizabeth’s eyes widen. “There are fifty-eight million, one hundred seventy thousand souls as of this year—and that’s merely in England.”

“And Myrddin is a dirty bloody cheat,” Nizar mutters through his hands.

Salazar pinches the bridge of his nose. “What my brother means is that when Myrddin passed on the war mage title, he used his magic to space out the new war mage’s awareness of the land and people under his protection so that it was an integration of several days, not all at once. It doesn’t take long to adjust, for that awareness to become background noise that is easy to ignore, but you do have to adjust to it first.”

“So, to expect a million people, and instead get something approaching…” Draco Malfoy looks a bit green.

“Sixty-eight million, six hundred ninety thousand-odd souls,” Amelia Tyler supplies after glancing at a PDA retrieved from her jacket pocket.

“Oh,” Adele whispers. “That’s…that’s quite a bit more than one million.”

“Fuck,” Nizar says in a muffled voice. Then he scrambles for a pocket and presses a handkerchief to his nose. “Oh, I didn’t need that migraine.”

“That isn’t a migraine, that’s a burst blood vessel, idiota,” Salazar says, keeping his voice calm. He has to stay calm. Neither of them remembered this aspect of a war mage’s awareness, and if Nizar dies from sheer fucking stupidity, Salazar is never going to forgive himself.

“Is there any way to mitigate such an unexpected and desperately unwanted side effect?” Elizabeth asks in a tone of gentle dignity. “I do not wish to reclaim Britain’s last war mage only to be the cause of tragedy.”

“Certainly,” Salazar answers absently. “Name more war mages to serve the Crown. It spreads out the burden.” He kneels down next to Nizar without waiting for her to speak. “Nizar. Your Mind Magic focus, little brother.”

Nizar cracks open his eyes and nods. “Desperately using it. Still feel like I’m going deaf.”

“I had actually already considered the necessity,” Elizabeth says.

Salazar glances up. “Had you?” he asks in surprise.

The Queen nods. “I had. It has never been fair that one man be responsible for the whole of the British Isles, Lord Salazar. I know why it was your brother alone, and it was not only because none of the seven rulers of these isles one thousand years ago could agree to peacefully name neutral war mages to serve all rather than only themselves.”

“Myrddin,” Nizar says, blinking several times as he looks at her. “He had over four hundred years to name others, and he didn’t.”

“Quite. Lord Salazar?”

Salazar grips Nizar’s hand before answering. “Ma’am, I’m one thousand twenty-six years old, and I can honestly say I’ve never given it a moment’s thought. Not once I escaped the burden of being such to my own throne as a child.”
Elizabeth gazes down at him, the full authority of the crown and its magic making her eyes take on an extra shine. “To serve this land as a war mage requires selflessness, which I’ve seen you demonstrate on behalf of this kingdom and on behalf of your brother. A war mage must remember that all of the kingdom’s citizens and its land come before them, not out of a desire to sacrifice their life, but out of recognition that it may become necessary to do so. I strongly suggest you think on all of that right now.”

“I’ll do it.”

Salazar isn’t the only one turning to stare at Severus. His face is expressionless, but Salazar can tell that the man meant his offer.

“A title after all, hmm?” Elizabeth lifts an eyebrow.

Severus grimaces at the reminder. “You speak of the need of utter selflessness. I’ve been performing such a role since 1980. To me, there would be no difference between what was, and what might be.”


Salazar gives Black a sharp glare that is almost accompanied by a growl. “Sirius Black, Severus has done exactly as he’s just said, for as long as he’s just stated. I’ve witnessed it more than once. Yes. Selfless.”

Adele Greenwood steps forward, her lips almost bloodless. “And me. I’m seventeen, of legal age, and I can—I can be what is needed, ma’am.”

“You’re a student,” Lupin protests, but Nizar reaches out and puts his hand on Salazar’s arm.

“Sal. She can,” he says in a bubbling voice. The handkerchief is beginning to turn red. “I’ve been overseeing her dueling practice in the Common Room at night since she came to the school—look at her fucking wand.”

Adele retrieves an aspen wand from her sleeve, revealing the delicate carvings that help disguise its sharp tip. “I’m descended from two Silver Spears, ma’am. They were famous duelists in the 1700s. Our family never gave up their tradition. Besides, if I’m a Baroness, is it not my job to protect this land?”

“It is, Lady Adele. And you cannot, Your Grace,” the Queen adds, glancing at Black when he opens his mouth. “Whether you are eligible for the crown or not, you are still in the line of succession, and thus you cannot enter into a conflict of interest by also taking on a war mage’s title.”

“Then I will,” Lupin says quietly. “My entire life has been about keeping others safe from myself. I don’t know if that is a form of selflessness or selfishness, but I fought to protect this land and all of the people in it once before. I’m doing so again as this second war begins. At this point, I don’t think my original intent really matters, ma’am.”

Salazar releases Nizar’s hand as he stands back up. “We should’ve brought Minerva. She would be well-suited to this,” he says, and then bows at the waist. “Your Majesty. I’ve spent a great deal of my life doing my best not to attract attention, to live in peace while waiting for the time of this war to arrive. I will gladly put that aside to fight for the safety of the land that my family loved.”

“Then we should—” Blaise starts to say, but Severus glares at him.

“You will not. You’re underage, Mister Zabini,” Severus eyes the other three students until they gingerly sit back down again.
“You four will step forward,” Elizabeth instructs. “Severus Prince Snape, Marquess Salazar Fernan Slytherin, Baroness Adele of the Greenwood, and Sir Remus Lupin: you are each hereby named by the British crown, sovereign over the island of Britain and its United Kingdom, as Britannia Bellum dux Magum, Defender ex Britannia Insulis. You are recognized protectors of this land, and so shall it be from this breath until your very last.”

Salazar realizes his head is spinning and drops down onto the chair next to Nizar. “Dear gods, you’re right, little brother. That is a lot of people.”

“I told you.” Nizar leans his head back and closes his eyes. Salazar is relieved to see that the handkerchief is no longer needed. “My head doesn’t hurt nearly as much as it did, though.”

“If this isn’t ‘nearly as much’ then you’re out of your bloody mind,” Severus growls, pressing both hands to his forehead as he leans over in his chair. “Miss Greenwood?”

“I’m not regretting it, sir, but I also would not regret it if someone snuck a pain potion through royal security,” Adele replies as Blaise helps her to sit down.

“Remus?” Black asks Lupin.

Lupin blinks a few times. “I actually just feel stoned, Sirius.”

“That’s good, because I only brought four,” Nizar says, fetching his wand and holding it over his jacket pocket. “Arcesso quattuor potio in dolore.”

Tyler makes a displeased noise when Nizar pulls four phials from his pocket. “How in the bloody hell did you get that past the security pat-downs?”

Nizar gives her an innocent smile. “Infinite pocket space,” he says, and hands three of the four corked phials to Salazar for distribution.

Tyler frowns. “I want T.A.R.D.I.S. pockets. I’ll forgive you bringing that into Her Majesty’s presence if I also get to have T.A.R.D.I.S. pockets.”

Nizar swallows the pain potion, emptying the phial, and then stares at her. “What’s tardis?”

Elizabeth puts her hand to her breast. “That question was actually physically painful to hear.”

“It’s from an old Muggle show on the telly,” Severus tells Nizar. “There is a similar concept involving infinite space.”

“How do you know that, sir?” Daphne Greengrass asks.

Severus drops his hand from his brow and gives his students a look of subdued disdain. “Did you somehow not hear the part where I said that I am a Half-blood who grew up in a Muggle home?”

Salazar smiles at the boggled expression on four students’ faces—and interestingly enough, Black and Lupin, as well. Then he glances at Tyler. “When my head is no longer spinning, you’ll have extended pockets. You cannot have infinite pockets because you don’t have a wand to retrieve anything you might put there. It would be a shame to lose your PDA to infinite space.”

Tyler’s mouth twists in agreement. “It would be, yes. I suppose expanded pockets are better than what I deal with now.”

“Which bloodline?” Draco asks Severus. “I’m just curious. I already knew you were a Half-blood,
sir. My mother told me. She just wouldn’t say which bloodline."

“As my second name implies: Prince.” Severus’s tone of voice doesn’t invite further questions. “Your mother wouldn’t have told you because your father has…an opposing viewpoint.”

“Because he’s anti-Semitic.” Lupin scowls at the realization. “Has Lucius Malfoy ever done anything decent in his entire life?”

Severus tilts his head at Draco. “Yes. He fathered a child who is not a fool.”

“Good point,” Lupin agrees as Draco blushes.

“Now what?” Adele ventures, when Salazar’s head feels less like it’s going to fall off his neck. “I think I could actually walk around without being sick now. Oh, and I think I could count every single living being in northern Scotland, but I’m trying to Occlude rather than focus on…well, everyone.”

Elizabeth gives Adele a smile that is both reassuring and charming. “Once all are up to a short walk, we’ll have dinner with my family. I will then take the opportunity to get to know the newly titled magical nobility in my kingdom.”
Outrage

Chapter Summary

In which Cornelius Fudge has a displeasing afternoon.

Chapter Notes

All hail magnificent beta-readers and cheer-readers! @norcumi, @mrs_stanley, @sanerontheinside, @jabberwockypie!

Also hailing Bollywood crack which is the only reason I'm awake and HYPER right now...which means chapter-posting.

Nizar isn’t ashamed of the fact that he sleeps the entire way back to London that afternoon. However, he is not proud of the fact that he awakes flailing from a dream and slaps Severus across his chest.

Severus jerks his head up from where he’d been resting it against the window. “What? What’s wrong?” he asks, and then winces against the sunlight pouring in through the car window.

“Sorry.” Nizar is glad to find he isn’t the only one who fell asleep. Lupin and Salazar are still out; Adele is sleeping with her head pillowed on Blaise’s shoulder. “I was dreaming.”

“And hissing, sir,” Blaise informs him. “You didn’t sound happy, either.”

“What were you dreaming about?” Salazar asks without opening his eyes.

“Him,” Nizar emphasizes, eying the pair of Bobs in the front of the car. Both of them flinch, which means that aside from knowing they no longer have to keep the windows dark, they’ve also been informed as to Voldemort’s continued existence. “It has to have been back-reading, though.” He definitely doesn’t want to admit it’s a memory, and that has nothing to do with the fact that there are four students in this vehicle who don’t need to know.

“Back-reading?” Black asks, and then nudges Lupin. “Wake up. You’re getting werewolf drool cooties all over my jacket, Remus.”

Lupin sits bolt upright and then glares at Black. “Arsehole,” he mutters. “Where are we?”

“Nearly to Downing Street, sir. Number Ten is where we’ll need to disembark,” the Bob who isn’t driving answers him.

“And yes, back-reading,” Nizar says. “Unless the walking corpse has found himself another pit viper and decided to name it Nagini, while also murdering a woman with the exact same name as one who already disappeared. Bertha Jorkins’s death was last year, wasn’t it?”

Black sighs. “Yes, that was definitely last year. Last summer, actually.”
“Early July was the closest we could determine after finding where Pettigrew hid the body,” Salazar says. “Sent word to the family, but I don’t know if they ever acted on the information. I certainly never saw the Prophet mention it.”

“And have to deal with the infamy of going back on their word regarding everything involving Voldemort? Perish the thought,” Severus says in a dry voice.

“Wow. You’ll…you actually said his name.” Daphne stares at Severus. “You never did before.”

Severus scowls at the light that is still offensively shining into the car. “The reasons why I did not previously do so should be obvious.”

“Forgive me being nosy, but what reasons are those, sir?” Blaise asks. “For saying it, I mean.”

Severus turns away from the window to regard their Slytherins. “I say it because I no longer have to maintain certain…habits, and because I do not fear him.” Then he adds in a chilling whisper, “And because I hate him.”

Draco makes a startled noise, but Blaise seems thoughtful. “Yeah, those are good reasons.”

“Did you honestly expect Professor Snape to have bad reasons, Blaise?” Adele asks, sitting up and favoring them all with a bleary-eyed look.

They get out of the car when it pulls up to the kerb. Nizar waits for the students to rush the door on the walkway’s side before he follows Severus out into the sunshine. The cool breeze across his skin is wonderful, and he’s so fucking glad it’s the last time he’ll be confined to a car for the day. Twice is enough. Never again would be to his preference, even if the windows haven’t been blackened.

His head aches less with the weight of the coronet gone, too. Salazar was sensible enough to shrink them both down after they left Frogmore; they can spend the rest of the afternoon in a pocket.

“And now we’ll be leaving you lords and ladies in Madam Tyler’s company,” the elder Bob says, gesturing towards Amelia. She’s approaching from further up the walk, flanked by two more men in suits just as obvious as the Bobs’ pair. “Have fun passing on Her Majesty’s ruling, Your Grace.”

“I just want someone to take photos of the occasion,” Black replies, shaking Elder Bob’s hand when he offers it. “You two behave, and tell Bob the Younger he’s not allowed to use a trick coin anymore.”

“I bloody well knew it!” Bob the Elder stalks back to the car, probably ready to have it out with Bob the Younger.

“Greetings again, lords and ladies. Do stop making that face, Professor Snape. A war mage has a courtesy title,” she adds. Nizar bites back a grin at the mulish expression on Severus’s face. “Your party is waiting to meet us in the lobby at Number Ten.”

Once they’re inside, Draco immediately bursts out with, “Mother!” He catches himself and then strolls over to her as if he expects to find Narcissa Malfoy in non-magical houses of government every day.

Narcissa gives Draco an embrace that looks to be practiced for the public, one of minimal touch, and then holds out her hand to Salazar. “Marquess. A pleasure still.”

Salazar smiles over her hand. “Completely.”
Nizar smiles at Narcissa. “Thank you for being prompt, Madam Malfoy.”

“It’s still Narcissa, Lord Nizar.”

“Then don’t you resume using my title, either,” Nizar replies, happily willing to not tell anyone that the Queen granted him a higher rank than what was granted by the war mage’s courtesy title. “We should actually forestall most other greetings until afterwards. We’re running a bit late.”

“Understood.” Narcissa gestures for a pair to step forward. “This is John Dervish, photographer for the Daily Prophet. This delightful young lady is—”

“You’re bloody Sirius Black!” the woman squeaks over Narcissa’s introduction, her hand faltering in the midst of holding it out.

“Oh, hell, not again,” Black mutters.

Narcissa gives the reporter a cold look before facing Black. “Is it true, cousin? That you are innocent of the crimes you were sent to Azkaban for?”

Black glances at the reporter, whose eyes have gone wide and greedy as she realizes exactly what she’s about to be involved in. “It is true, cousin. I’d no sooner kill my own spouses than I would have killed my son by marriage. Everyone seems to miss the part where I had ample opportunity to do the latter, and yet I didn’t.”

“Absolutely fascinating I’m Joyous Spencer,” the reporter says in a speedy rush. She takes a steadying breath. “Are you willing to be interviewed, Mister Black?”

“We’re ready for you, Your Grace.” The smile on Amelia’s face is composed of pure mischief.

“That would be me,” Black says, which causes Joyous Spencer’s eyes to try and take over her entire face. “After we’re done, Madam Spencer, but you only get five questions. I hope you think of entertaining ones!”

“Are they trustworthy?” Nizar hears Severus ask Narcissa as Amelia leads them through a house that is decorated not like Frogmore, which tended towards Victorian or Edwardian whimsy. This looks very much like the whole of it is a non-magical office.

I have no idea how I know what a non-magical office looks like, Nizar thinks, keeping his displeasure from his face. He was just involved in strong magic, yes, but this is not an opportune time for the Preservation Charm to try to do its stupid job. Besides, his head still fucking hurts, even with the pain potion, a meal, tea, rest, and Mind Magic. He wonders if the others are aware of the earth beneath their feet as he is, like an electrical sensation crawling up the legs.

Salazar is an Earth-Speaker. He’s probably used to it.

“Spencer and Dervish both owe me debts that this little event will scarcely begin to repay,” Narcissa tells Severus. “I’ve already ensured that they will keep mention of the students out of the affair. I won’t see the names of our good Slytherins associated with him.”

They arrive in a room that’s set up for meetings among many, given that it hosts a large table surrounded by chairs. A tea service and a second platter for serving water sit in the middle, and there is a fireplace large enough for Floo Travel at the far end of the room.

They have no chance to contemplate sitting as another small group enters the room. They’re fronted by a middle-aged man, one with oversized glasses and hair that is many shades of grey topped with
golden-tinged white. “Ladies and lords, this is The Right Honourable John Major, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and Leader of the Conservative Party.”

“Charmed, I’m certain,” Major says, looking decidedly the opposite. He turns to his escort. “Outside, please. Guard the doors. This is an affair of great delicacy and requires the utmost security.”

“Yes, Prime Minister. We’ll trust your safety to Madam Tyler,” one of the two suited men replies, taking his companion out and shutting the double doors behind them.

Major takes off his glasses and polishes them with a bit of cloth. “Her Majesty telephoned while you were all on your way here. She had quite a number of interesting things to tell me. The first: that the horrific, murderous criminal that Minister Fudge has been bleating about every time I’ve met the man is not actually a horrific, murderous criminal after all, but titled magical nobility, in the line of succession, and—oh yes, parent to that missing child Fudge has also been lambasting and whinging about. Am I correct so far?”

“Prime Minister, I would be the not-so-horrific criminal the Queen would be speaking of,” Black says, introducing himself with a tight smile and a nod of his head. “Pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

Major gives Black a brief, up-and-down glance. “You look a great deal better than that terrible wanted poster Fudge had me plaster all over the telly. How much of that was sensationalized?”

“The image? Most of it,” Black replies. “They take a photograph of the inmates in Azkaban every year, but most of us are too busy slumping in despair to show off for the cameras.”

“I thought as much, Your Grace.” Major puts his glasses back on. “And then there is the matter of our kingdom gaining what she referred to as…war mages. Five of you.”

“Well, I did the job alone for years. I appreciate having company.” Nizar smiles politely when Major looks in his direction. “It’s been nearly fifteen hundred years since there was more than one of us. Long overdue, wouldn’t you say?”

“That depends. I’m not quite certain what it is a war mage does,” Major says in exasperation. “I normally hold no truck with your world unless Minister Fudge comes to my office to complain and then demand I do things on his behalf.”

“Merlin was my predecessor as war mage over Britain, if that helps,” Nizar says. The reporter is scribbling for all she’s worth with a Self-inking Quill on a yellow notepad.

“It’s certainly informative, yes. Then a war mage is a consult?” Major asks politely, though he seems a bit baffled by Nizar’s stature. As if it’s Nizar’s fault that he’s shorter than everyone except Spencer, Daphne, Narcissa, and Salazar.

“We can be, if asked,” Nizar replies. “In blunt terms, a war mage defends the kingdom to whom they’ve given their loyalty, be it by wand, word, or deed. If an enemy declares war against the throne, then it doesn’t matter if that enemy is magical or not—a war mage is bound to defend the kingdom from the idiot who issued the threat.”

It was so much easier when Myrddin had been able to pass the title to Nizar directly, even if he’d been a complete prick about not asking first. Nizar hadn’t needed to pledge himself to anyone sitting on the many thrones of Britain in his time. To a certain extent, he still does not, but the support of the royal throne gives him a heightened awareness of what he is meant to protect.

He really shouldn’t have forgotten that it included awareness of the kingdom’s people. He would
Major frowns. “It sounds as if the Queen has granted an exceptional amount of power to very few.”

“Yes and no. A war mage’s true strength is only called into play if an enemy is threatening the throne and the kingdom directly, or they are directly threatening the land. Otherwise, we’re no more powerful than anyone else.”

“You are wizards and witches!” Major retorts. “You are more powerful than myself.”

“Horseshit.” Salazar sounds tired, but his eyes are bright and alert. “You’re Prime Minister of a kingdom that holds lands that make up nearly nineteen million square kilometers. Yes, I’m aware that much of that is held by the Commonwealth nations, but the monarch whom you serve is head over all. Who in this room has more power, Prime Minister?”

“Well spoken. I assume you would be the Marquess that His Majesty Juan Carlos was so eager for us to take ownership of?” Major asks.

“Some men just don’t like discovering that they’re wrong about anything, Prime Minister.” Salazar’s smile reveals a hint of teeth. When the gentle fire burning in the hearth turns green, his smile widens. “And speaking of such…”

“I won’t lie and say there isn’t a part of me looking forward to this,” Major says as Cornelius Fudge tumbles out of the fireplace. He doesn’t land on his face because Kingsley Shacklebolt is just behind him, latching onto the Minister’s arm as if this is a normal, expected part of his day.

Fudge resettles his hideous hat. “Good day, Prime Minister. I must say that it is highly unusual for you to ask for my presence! I’m a very busy man, you know.”

Major is unimpressed. “So am I, Minister Fudge. We have a royal extension of amnesty to discuss, as it involves one of your citizens, who is now a co-citizen of both Wizarding Britain and the United Kingdom.”

“Yes, well? Who is it—you!” Fudge shouts the moment he spies Black. “Kingsley Shacklebolt, you will arrest that man at once—”

“Do be quiet!” Major snaps. Kingsley, Nizar notes with amusement, hadn’t moved at all to respond to Fudge’s order. “That would be the man we’re here to discuss.”

“That man is a wanted felon, a dangerous murderer and a lunatic!” Fudge blusters. “I’ve warned you of him several times. You can’t trust a word he says!”

“Are you calling Her Majesty a liar, then?” Major asks, giving Fudge a bland stare.

“What—but—what is this amnesty, then?” Fudge asks after he’s done sputtering.

“The Queen has granted His Grace, Sirius Black, Duke over Wizarding London, amnesty against all attempts at imprisonment or the laying of new charges for the crime he is accused of, based upon vocal testimony by trusted individuals to Her Majesty,” Major says, his voice still flat. “She was especially displeased to hear a man was imprisoned for life without due process of law—namely, the lack of a criminal trial.”

“Well, a criminal trial is certainly an action we can perform once Black is back in custody!” Fudge responds. “And what is this duke nonsense? He is nothing of the sort!”
“His Grace is descended directly from Edward IV, the Black Prince of Wales, Duke of Cornwall, and is sixty-seventh in the line of succession for the Crown.” Major smiles at Fudge as Fudge begins to turn a tomato-like red. “Before your Statute of Secrecy, his family was titled, and by royal decree, he and several others are magical titled nobility once more. Now, shall we sit down and have a civil discussion on the matter, Minister?”

“Discussion? There is absolutely nothing to discuss!” Fudge declares, starting to sound a bit shrill. “This man is a criminal, and we’ll humor Her Majesty by holding a trial for a man the whole of Wizarding Britain knows is guilty!”

“Not the whole of it.” Nizar glances over when Severus steps forward—conveniently blocking their students from Fudge’s line of sight. “Tell me, Minister Fudge: when Sirius Black was temporarily apprehended on Hogwarts grounds in June of 1994, what were your plans for his fate?”

“Professor Snape!” Fudge resettles his hat again so that it rests on top of his thick eyebrows. “What is it that you’re doing here?”

“My reasons for being here are my own,” Severus replies in his quiet, deadly voice. “I do believe you should answer my question. The Prime Minister of the United Kingdom will find it enlightening.”

“Well?” Major prompts when Fudge does nothing but stare at Severus in complete outrage.

“I—that is—we were going to—”

Severus rolls his eyes and looks at Major. “Fudge was at my side that evening, though I would much preferred to have been elsewhere. He was going to execute Sirius Black by giving him to the Dementors. Those same Dementors, you may have been told, that normally guard Azkaban. Fudge had ordered them to surround the school that term instead. It was to be an on-site execution, Prime Minister, without the authorization of the Wizengamot.”

“How dare you!” Fudge roars.

“How dare you, sir?” Major counters in disgust. “Instead of remanding an escaped felon who had a life sentence back to prison, you were going to perform an onsite, unauthorized execution on the grounds of a school.”

“Well, it was necessary for public safety—” Fudge tries.

“Didn’t he execute another escaped convict, one who only had a life sentence?” Salazar asks Severus, as if it’s only just occurred to him. “Bartemius Crouch Junior, I believe was his name.”

“Oh, yes,” Narcissa chimes in, sounding amused. “That was just this past summer, on twenty-fourth June. Fudge had Crouch executed on school grounds without any sort of due process at all. He didn’t even have a representative of the Magical Law Enforcement division in his presence. Just Dementors—which are formally banned from those very same school grounds.”

“So that is the sort of Minister you are?” Major asks Fudge, who is starting to resemble an eggplant again. “You decide who lives and who dies? I was given to understand there was a court who was meant to make those sorts of decisions. Or is their presence a sham, and instead of a Ministry within the bounds of the United Kingdom, I’m forced to confront a dictatorship?” Major looks at Fudge in disdain. “Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, and this United Kingdom, have a very dim view of dictatorships, Minister Fudge.”

“Now see here! That isn’t what occurred at all!” Fudge shouts.
“You mean that Barty Crouch Junior was not subjected to a Dementor’s Kiss on Hogwarts grounds?” Spencer asks in excitement.

Fudge gives Spencer a wide-eyed look of shock when he realizes she’s present. “Well—yes, he was, but that was due to his imminent danger to—”

“He was bound, physically and magically, and also drugged into a stupor at the time,” Severus says in a tone of false indifference.

“And you weren’t planning on doing the same to Sirius Black on Hogwarts Grounds?” Spencer presses gleefully.

“Yes, of course I was!” Fudge blurts out, and then looks enraged. “He’d been attempting to kill Harry Potter all year—”

“Harry Potter is my son by marriage. Do tell me why I’d want him dead, Minister,” Black finally says, staring at Fudge with warm grey eyes turned to chips of ice.

“All three of you, married—that is revolting and immoral!” Fudge takes a step back in apparent disgust.

“Excuse me?” Nizar asks. He can hear the promise of death in the whisper of his voice, and it appears Fudge can as well, given how quickly his skin goes from eggplant to sickly greenish-grey. “Did you just declare love and marriage to be immoral, yet you have no qualms with acting as judge, jury, and executioner beyond the bounds set by the office you hold? In my day, we called that murder, Minister Fudge.”

“Oh, that sounds like fun.” Narcissa smiles. “There are none of the Crouch family remaining to lay charges of murder at the Minister for Magic’s feet, but I am a distant cousin of theirs. I’m certain their restless souls won’t mind if one of their own gets justice.”

“Madam Malfoy!” Fudge shouts, his eyes bulging out. “You cannot possibly be serious! Your husband—”

“Is supposed to be in prison, yet was somehow remanded on bail while awaiting trial,” Narcissa interrupts in a cold voice. “You witnessed Madam Bones’s declaration which put him there, and rightfully so. Or are you suggesting that my husband would support your unlawful actions, Minister?”

“There are laws on the books that state a known, active Death Eater, or anyone who has been known to act as a Death Eater, even if previously released without imprisonment no matter the reason, is not to be released on their own recognizance if imprisoned again for differing offences.” Lupin glares hard at Fudge. “You know. For safety.”

“My!” Fudge yanks his hat down so hard his eyebrows disappear. “I can see that there will be no civility to be found here! Is there anything else I need be informed of, aside from Her Majesty’s granted amnesty to a known and dangerous criminal, Major?”

“That is Prime Minister to you, Minister Fudge,” Major replies coldly. “And no. I’m certain the kingdom’s five war mages will make themselves known to you in their own time.”

Fudge’s skin loses the grey-green tinge and looks to be impersonating ghostly transparency. Nizar has never actually seen anyone do that before. “War mages? Five?”

“That would be us,” Nizar says. Severus steps to one side, putting his shoulder to Nizar, which
allows Adele Greenwood to come forward, placing herself between Severus and Salazar. Lupin just
gives the Minister a jaunty little wave.

“This will not stand! There will be no war mages within my Ministry!” Fudge yells.

Nizar loses his temper. “You have absolutely no say when it comes to the decisions of Myrddin
Wyllt or Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth, in the matter of this land’s protectors!” he shouts. “Now get
the fuck out of my sight, you craven imbecile!”

Fudge stares at Nizar in disbelief. Then he actually manages to storm out via Floo Travel. That might
be impressive if it were anyone else.

Kingsley remains behind long enough to break out in a broad grin. “That was beautiful to witness.”
Then his grin fades back to a more decorous smile. “Five war mages. That will make things
interesting, won’t it?” Then he’s gone in another belch of green flame.

There is a moment of silence. Then Amelia graces them with a charming smile. “Would anyone like
tea?”

Major covers his eyes with one hand. “Dear God, yes. Please.”

* * * * *

“That is going to be on the front page of the Daily Prophet tomorrow, yes?” Narcissa asks Dervish
while Spencer is questioning Sirius. Her younger cousin has turned on the charm, of which he has
plenty, but it does nothing to overshadow the grief in his eyes.

Married to James and Lily Potter. A Muggle-born witch attracted the romantic attention and then
wedded two of the most affluent of available Pure-bloods in Britain, if one discounted Potter’s blood
traitor status. That marriage produced young Harry Potter, powerful enough to turn the Lord
Voldemort into a disembodied spirit while still an infant. The Dark Lord became a horribly
disfigured creature until his resurrection into a true body once more…one Narcissa did not find to be
much improvement upon the deformed thing that Pettigrew had needed to carry about.

Narcissa has long given thought to the idea that a Muggle-born and a Pure-blood created the only
wizard powerful enough to give Voldemort true reason to fear. Lucius, of course, was quick to name
it a fluke, but he has made numerous foolish decisions since 1981. Narcissa did her own research
quietly, slyly, the way a true Slytherin would. What she discovered about magic’s potential flew in
the face of everything she was raised to believe.

Of course, it would be unseemly to let on to those thoughts in public. Not when she has a son who
still needs to marry in a manner most suited and pleasing to him, and when Narcissa herself has a
task to perform.

Dervish waits for Narcissa to look at him before nodding. “If Spencer doesn’t blast it on through,
Madam Malfoy, I’ll be certain to grease the wheels. After Minister Fudge’s recent retraction against
the Potter boy…well, this certainly won’t look good for the Minister, will it?”

“No. Not at all.” Narcissa smiles. “I loathe incompetence, John. Our current Minister certainly has
that in spades, doesn’t he?”
“Off the record—I’m just the photographer, after all—do you think this might stir up enough voices to call for that one’s resignation?” Dervish has good reason to want that sort of revenge. Fudge placed one of his sisters into Azkaban last fall for publicly agreeing with Harry Potter, assigning trumped-up charges of fear mongering and then ramming the trial through the court while Madam Bones was unavailable. One of Dervish’s debts to Narcissa is her effort to get Vanessa Dervish out of Azkaban. Narcissa succeeded last week (with Madam Bones’ intriguing cooperation) before the prison could destroy Vanessa’s health, but it will still be months of recovery. Azkaban takes its toll, and it is swift and harsh. The fact that Sirius survived twelve years of Azkaban, and that he is not mad or a wrecked physical shell, is nothing short of miraculous.

“I’m truly not certain.” Narcissa looks over at the Muggle Prime Minister, John Major. He’s seated at the far end of the large table, his chin resting on propped-up hands. Major is listening to Madam Amelia Tyler speak to him with a somber expression, occasionally nodding in agreement at what is being said. Narcissa has overheard enough to know that Tyler serves the Queen in some capacity, but no one seems to be interested in clarifying her position. She is powerful, though, magic or not; Narcissa knows powerful women when she meets them.

On the other side of the room, a few steps away from Spencer and Sirius, are the Lords Nizar and Salazar, Severus, a werewolf who is now Sir Remus Lupin, and four students of newly titled magical nobility—one of whom was of age to make the choice to also become a war mage. Narcissa thinks of all the times she dismissed Adele Greenwood and her family as being too poor to be worthy of her attention. She has today been proven incorrect, and not only on the matter of Lady Adele, Baroness of Greenwood.

Severus is a war mage. One who is selfless enough that the Crown would acknowledge his service. Narcissa would never have suspected such a thing to be possible a year ago…but then, much has changed since then.

Narcissa narrows her eyes. “My son has reclaimed the title of Magical Baron over Wiltshire, John. Much of my attention will be on him, as he now has little over a year before he reaches his majority and acts under that title in truth.”

“And the rest of your attention, Madam Malfoy?” Dervish asks slyly.

“Will be where it is required to be. Nothing more. Be certain the article about these new magical noble titles does not have any association with Fudge’s foolishness, John. You will not like the consequences if it does not,” Narcissa warns him, and goes to stand with those not engaged by the press.

“Does anyone else’s head still hurt?” Adele is asking. There is a frown on her face, but not a hint of simpering. Good.

“Mine,” the Marquess admits, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I think it will be a while before that fades, darling.”

“Give it another day, and the ache will be less. Only take another potion if the pain keeps you from sleeping tonight, and no Dreamless Sleep.” Nizar is looking at the books on the shelves in the room, brow furrowed, as if he finds their contents either baffling or displeasing. “Mind Magic for lucid dreaming. It helps to sort through everything.”

“Let me guess. You still feel fine,” Severus says to Lupin, his lip curling.

“If one considers ‘stoned’ to be fine, then yes.” Lupin rubs his eyes. “I’m amazed I held it together enough to speak to that imbecile.”
“I desperately want that imbecile out of office,” Nizar says, which makes them all perk up. Narcissa resists the urge to smile. She’d hoped that the Lord Nizar found Fudge to be as distasteful as she does.

“It will take quite a bit of politics to oust that man. He was Minister through the last war, and the public’s confidence in him is still high. Today will shake it, but it won’t demolish it,” Severus warns.

“He put the school in danger three bloody times!” Blaise bursts out, incensed. “Twice with the Dementors, and then again with that Umbridge woman. My mother and my gran have been in serious talks about what would be required to actually turn his guts into garters!”

Nizar turns away from the books. “Really. Tell me, Madam Malfoy: what is your opinion on the matter of the Minister for Magic willfully endangering your son’s life three years in a row?”

Narcissa takes a moment to feel genuine pleasure roll through her thoughts as Draco’s eyes widen in recognition of what Nizar is truly asking. “Why, I’m stunned, of course. Stunned that the Minister would think so little of my son’s life—of any child’s life.”

Blaise is grinning. “And I might not have much love for Potter personally, but my gran has really been sounding off on how appalling it is that the Ministry’s been too busy discrediting him instead of looking for him.”

“I know I certainly haven’t been pleased about it. Joyous and I were just speaking of that, weren’t we?” Black says as he and Spencer join them. “Fudge might have admitted to Voldemort’s return by releasing a statement saying that my son is not a liar, but he hasn’t done anything else. Not that Fudge was ever brave enough to say anything about Voldemort directly.”

“Parental outrage.” Narcissa can’t help but smile. “Joyous, darling, are you willing to help Sirius and myself lead by example? And perhaps Blaise could contact his grandmother and his mother, so that they may also speak as guardians of one being schooled at Hogwarts?”

“That would be the absolute best,” Joyous replies, grinning. “Blaise, you outrank me, dear. Would you mind terribly if you asked the Prime Minister if you could use his fireplace to gain your mother and grandmother’s presence? We might as well conduct the interviews here, while everyone’s outrage is fresh in their minds.”

“Mine isn’t going to be ended anytime soon,” Sirius murmurs.

Narcissa thinks on what Lucius did on twenty-fourth June of last year, kneeling at Voldemort’s feet and promising the loyalty of the whole of the family without once consulting Narcissa on the matter. She will never forgive Lucius for forgetting that he did not have the right to speak for her, and for endangering their son, the only one she may ever be able to bear. “Nor mine, cousin.”

* * * *

Black nearly balks at the idea of entering the Leaky Cauldron under a Disillusionment Charm. Severus hides his smile when Lupin cuffs Black on the back of his head and reminds Black that the paper hasn’t bloody printed yet, and no one will be aware of Black’s granted amnesty until tomorrow.

“Right. I knew that. Sorry. I was really excited by the idea of not having to skulk about everywhere I
Narcissa gives him a dry look. “Cousin, comport yourself and properly skulk yourself along to Tiffany’s Tea Parlor like a criminal of good breeding.”

Severus is pleased that Daphne doesn’t ask questions until they’re in a private, warded room in the tea parlor at the far end of Diagon Alley. “What are you doing here, Madam Malfoy? I mean no offence, and obviously it was a planned affair, but I’m wondering why you’re still accompanying us.”

Narcissa smiles at Daphne. “A very good question, Vidame.”

Daphne’s mouth twists into a ladylike grimace. “That is still so very odd to hear.”

“Get used to it,” Narcissa advises briskly, sipping her tea. “I am here because I am your cover for the day, ladies and gentlemen.”

“Right. There is no way Dumbledore wouldn’t find out we weren’t where we’re supposed to be,” Blaise realizes at once. “How are we getting around that, anyway?”

“Politics,” Nizar says, though he seems to be paying more attention to a steaming cup of gunpowder black. It’s a complete sham; Severus knows that Nizar is aware of everything in the room. “Specifically, Dumbledore has no idea as to where any of your loyalties lie, and practically jumped upon the opportunity for us ‘good’ Slytherins to show you the error of your ways and convince you to be happy little phoenix supporters.”

Draco scowls. “Are we, then? Are we going to be that?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Narcissa scoffs.

“Consider them allies,” Nizar stresses. “But no, you’re not in the Order of the Phoenix because you’re both students and underage. The bulk of your attention should be on passing those stupidly named O.W.L.s coming up at the end of term. Similarly, Adele has N.E.W.T.s to be concerned with, not the war. Not unless Voldemort gives us no choice but for her to act in her chosen role as a war mage on behalf of this kingdom.”

“You are still underage, but if it eases your mind, consider yourself allied to my Underground,” Salazar says. Severus glances at him, surprised that Salazar would state it so plainly, even under the cover of muffling charms and wards of secrecy around their table. “We’re technically allies of Dumbledore’s Order of the Phoenix, but we act independently. We’ve done so since the beginning of the last war. Unlike the Phoenix group, all of mine are spies, not just the three the Order boasted—well, now there are only two spies left in the Order.”

“We know that Professor Snape…er, quit spying.” Daphne gives Severus a brief, uneasy glance. Severus doesn’t react; his students are still becoming used to the idea that he was a spy acting against Voldemort from 1980 onwards. Most of them are sanguine, given his repeated references to where his first loyalty lies, but not everyone is choosing to be civil. Severus has caught the bloody Carrow twins trying to break into his office three times now that his former role in the Order has become known. If he has his way, those twits are going to be in detention with Filch until they graduate from Hogwarts.

“Mundungus Fletcher is a useful spy as long as he doesn’t feel his life will be threatened by performing the act,” Severus says. “He’s very good at remaining unnoticed, and he doesn’t need magic to do so.” Salazar glances at him from the corner of his eye, but whatever message he is trying
to convey, Severus doesn’t understand it.

“And then there is Dumbledore’s brother, Aberforth.” Four Slytherin students drop their tableware in surprise to stare at Salazar.

“Aberforth, as in the Aberforth in The Hog’s Head Inn?” Adele asks. “He’s Headmaster Dumbledore’s brother?”

“He is. He’s technically in the Order, but Albus doesn’t want him in the spotlight. Aberforth was a Slytherin,” Nizar explains with a biting smile. “Can’t let that be known, can he?”

“I’m surprised Andromeda has any role at all in the Order, then, if Dumbledore is given to keeping Slytherins out of his affairs,” Narcissa says dryly.

“Oh, I might have encouraged your eldest sister to push for acknowledgement and participation in the Order,” Salazar admits, smiling at his tea. “Not that she knows it was me, of course.”

“It sounds quite a bit like you’re trying to oust Dumbledore along with Fudge,” Draco says boldly. Nizar shakes his head. “One does not oust useful allies, even if one does not like them.”

“All right. I’ll bite. Why don’t you like Dumbledore?” Blaise asks. “Bit weird, that, seeing as he gave you your job back.”

“He ultimately wouldn’t have had much choice,” Salazar mutters under his breath.

“Dumbledore talks of grand things,” Nizar says after a moment. “For example, he speaks of championing werewolf rights, of wishing to remind people that except for the dark of a full moon, a werewolf is a person, not a beast. Dumbledore could have used Professor Lupin’s successful, completed term of teaching as an example of showing how werewolves are not dangerous, but he said nothing. Not a word. Instead, the public were stirred into hysteria over one single incident—one in which no one was harmed, I’ll remind you—and enabled the Ministry to enact legislation that ensures no werewolf can be employed anywhere in Wizarding Britain. Leaving Lupin aside for the moment, since he’s now gainfully employed by the Crown—”

“I’m what?” Lupin bleats in shock.

Nizar rolls his eyes. “You’re a baronet of Magical Powys and a war mage. You get paid for being both. The first is to maintain your estate and your family so that you can better assist the public, and the latter stipend is to maintain yourself so that you’re better able to assist the kingdom when the need arises.”

Lupin sits back in his chair, stunned. “Oh. I hadn’t actually thought of that.”

“Congratulations, you’re not penniless,” Severus drawls, amused when Lupin glares at him. It helps Severus to avoid dwelling on the idea of being paid. He didn’t know that war mages received any sort of stipend.

“Leaving Lupin aside,” Nizar continues, “the Ministry’s ruling means any werewolf who lives in the magical world can’t get a job. They have no money. They starve. The Ministry has essentially driven otherwise harmless people into joining the also-illegal werewolf packs so that they will have a place to live and food to eat. Those same packs,” Nizar reminds their students, “are the ones to whom Voldemort promised justice and the restoration of their place in society. Not that he’ll keep that promise, but when you’re starving, even the promise of a madman sounds entirely reasonable. The Ministry has thus created the greatest werewolf threat on British soil that has ever existed, something
they couldn’t have done without Albus Dumbledore’s silence.”

“Oh,” Draco says in a small voice. Severus is just irritated that Nizar has once again caused him to feel sympathy for both Lupin and werewolves in general.

“Fear is a terrible weapon.” Blaise sounds as if he’s quoting. “Yeah, I think that just started making a lot more sense.”

“Do you trust him, Nizar?” Narcissa asks.

“I trust Albus Dumbledore to be a decent Headmaster of Hogwarts, especially with Severus in place to make certain Dumbledore treats well with our Slytherins,” Nizar answers. “I trust him to do right by the school as a whole. As to the rest?” Nizar holds out his hand and tilts it back and forth. “Dumbledore is a chess player, but he is either not very good at chess, or he is aiming for results that are far, far different than anything he’s ever claimed.”

“And you, sir?” Daphne asks Salazar. “Do you trust Dumbledore?”

Salazar pauses in the midst of tearing apart a scone, though he doesn’t seem to be eating much of it. “I’ve not seen anything in the entire time I’ve known of Dumbledore’s existence that would cause me to disagree with Nizar’s assessment of the man.”

“To return to the original subject that led us down this path.” Severus waits until he has the attention of his students; the adults are already aware. “This was a day trip for means of politics, if Dumbledore pushes you on the nature of such things, but to everyone else, you four met Madam Malfoy in Diagon Alley for the purpose of discussing familial negotiations. Miss Greengrass, you are turning down the offer for Mister Malfoy’s hand.”

Daphne nearly snorts tea up her nose. Draco chokes on his. “I’m what!” they both exclaim.

“Turning down a marriage offer.” The corner of Narcissa’s mouth curls up as Draco scrubs his face dry with a napkin. “Blaise came to support Draco, and Miss Greenwood is here in support of you, Daphne. Your teachers are here in the capacity of guardians when a student is off school grounds.”

“I’m not staff. I’m just nosy,” Salazar says with a grin when Blaise glances in his direction.

Narcissa nods, amused. “You may feel free to say that it was an arranged proposal of your parents, which is true. I was contacted by your father, Daphne, in regards to your marrying Draco. Last week.”

Daphne responds with politely restrained outrage. “He never once said—how dare he? It’s one thing that he expects me to marry well, but it is not up to him to choose the groom—Mother is going to be furious!”

Narcissa’s smile blooms in full. “You may also feel free to write me the details as to what hexes your mother employs against your father.”

“There. Now none of you are lying to anyone.” Nizar sounds pleased, but he does enjoy using the truth against the foolish. He finishes his tea and stands up. “You four need to stay with Madam Malfoy, who has graciously agreed to chaperone you during your remaining time in Diagon Alley. Disobey her, and you’ll discover why students have come to fear my detentions more than they’ve ever feared Filch.”

“Where are you going, sir?” Draco asks as Salazar also stands up, putting his jacket back on.
“To Gringotts,” Nizar’s expression shifts to utter melancholy before it vanishes again. “I need to reclaim the vaults of my descendants. I’ve been putting it off, but I can’t any longer.”

Narcissa offers Nizar a grave nod. “I am very sorry for the ending of your line, Lord Nizar.”

Nizar takes her offered hand, but only says, “So am I.”

Severus decides he is utterly done with tea. “Do you wish for company, Nizar?”

Nizar looks at him before nodding. “I’m not opposed. Salazar is going to be busy trying to remember what he left inside his vault.”

“I’d forgotten it was bloody well there,” Salazar admits with a charming smile. “I’ve a vault in Burgos, but otherwise I limit my banking to the non-magical world.”

“Why would you want to do that?” Draco asks, wrinkling his nose.

“Because, young Lord Draco, non-magical banks believe in this wonderful thing called interest accrual.” Salazar smiles at him. “Ask me about it later. You four will need to learn of such things, regardless.”

“I’m going, too,” Lupin says, standing. “I need to refresh my memory of what the goblins’ policy is in regards to Muggle checks.”

Black sighs. “Fine. So am I. I didn’t even know goblins accepted Muggle checks.”

Severus takes another look at Narcissa. “I promise, I won’t let any harm come to them,” she says in response to his unspoken question. “If anyone raises a wand at our Slytherins, I will be leaving bodies in my wake.”

Severus smiles at her. “You are as lethally charming as ever, Narcissa.”
Three Brothers

Chapter Summary

“FUCK!”

“And lo, witness the lack of subtlety the Marauders are truly capable of.”

Chapter Notes

All tea and biscuits to beta-readers and beta-cheerleaders, that being the usual crew of @jabberwockypie, @norcumi, @mrsstanley, & @sanerontheinside!

Nizar waits until they’re in the upstairs hallway, with no keepers of the teahouse lurking. “I know what all three of you are doing, and you’re as subtle as...as...well, you’re not subtle,” he says when he can’t think of anything to compare them to except themselves.

“At least I bloody well asked,” Severus responds in a dry voice.

“True,” Nizar admits.

“This is what family does.” Lupin gives Nizar a vague smile that Nizar suspects is masking nervousness. “We support each other, even when it’s awkward.”

“He’s right, though. We’re not subtle,” Black admits, and then shifts down into his Animagus form of the giant black dog again.

“Thank you for proving my point,” Nizar mutters. “Why aren’t you using the Disillusionment Charm?”

“And have the goblins lose their minds when a mostly invisible wizard tries to enter the bank?” Lupin shakes his head. “An Animagus isn’t trying to hide from them, even if the Animagus is trying to hide from everyone else.”

“Then why don’t you shift into something smaller, idiot?” Nizar asks the dog, who looks up at him and whines as they exit the teashop.

Severus gives him a thoughtful look as they walk back out into the alley, but it’s Lupin and Salazar who both offer Nizar blank stares. “Smaller?” Lupin repeats, baffled. “He’s an Animagus. That’s his Animagus form.”

Nizar snorts at the expression on Salazar’s face. “That certainly explains why you don’t have a Transfiguration Mastery after a thousand years. You’d forgotten that, hadn’t you?”

Salazar growls under his breath. “I’ve probably forgotten more about that and Charms than I’d ever realized. Bloody hell.”
“Someone please enlighten me. I’m not an Animagus, but I listened to Sirius, James, and Pettigrew complain about it enough while they were learning,” Lupin says.

“An Animagus can take on any mammalian animal form. They’re not restricted to the very first form they become when learning the magic. And why aren’t you an Animagus?” Nizar asks, frowning. “Nothing was stopping you. None of the forms of zoikóthropy prevent you from learning how to be one.”

Lupin slaps his hand over his face. “FUCK!”

“And lo, witness the lack of subtlety the Marauders are truly capable of,” Severus observes snidely. “Do you think enough heads turned in our direction when you shouted that, Lupin?”

“I didn’t—none of those stupid books ever mentioned that a werewolf could be an Animagus!” Lupin hisses back. Salazar smiles charmingly at the few other magicians who are still staring until they realize their blunder and find other things to do.

“Or a Metamorphmagus,” Nizar says. Salazar narrows his eyes and starts swearing in Castellano under his breath. “This is why we write things down, Sal.”

“I might have done so, but books are fragile. I lost an entire library to a flood once, and no Preservation Charm in the world will keep the bloody mold at bay if you forgot to lay the spells to prevent it before the water came.” Salazar adjusts the collar of his jacket as they walk on to Gringotts. “I wouldn’t mind owning some of those books again, but if I do, this is the only place left on the planet where they might dwell.”

Diagon Alley is much changed since his last visit. Nizar can feel magical shielding over shop windows and sense wards over doorways. Some shops have simply boarded over their windows and repainted their slogans onto those boards. Other shops are empty with signs that speak of sabbaticals or businesses relocating elsewhere. He observed much of it on the way in, but this time, with the students now elsewhere, he decides to voice the opinion aloud. “Everyone looks as if they’re preparing for war.”

Lupin’s response is grim. “They are.”

“The Prophet might not have said outright that Voldemort has returned, but a lot of people are capable of reading between the lines, and then the rumor spreads.” Salazar looks pleased with himself. “Fudge wasn’t intelligent enough to see my request for what it truly was.”

“Please; that was not a request,” Severus says.

“Besides, I don’t think Fudge has a brain in his head at all,” Nizar adds. Severus’s smile is vicious pleasure. Even the Animagus is wagging his tail in approval.

The moment they step into the bank proper, the goblins all halt what they’re doing and turn to stare at them in dead silence. The few confused magicians who were in the midst of conducting their business turn to look as well, trying to figure out what just happened.

“Why are they all staring at us?” Lupin whispers.

Nizar glances at him. “Because four war mages and an Animagus just walked in their front door.”

“There are pub jokes that start this way,” Lupin says. “I don’t believe I’ve heard a bank version, though.”
“You get right on that. I have things to do.” Nizar walks straight to the service window on the far end. The silence becomes the sounds of rapid goblin-speech as every single one of the goblins present try to discuss their arrival all at once.

Black shifts back to human and lets out a sigh of relief. “I haven’t been out in the wizarding public to that extent since September of 1994. That was fucking nerve-wracking.”

They’re almost to the counter when the magicians recognize Sirius Black and proceed to flee the building like it’s on fire. “Well, that was an effective means of gaining immediate service,” Salazar observes.

“Wasn’t it? Hello, Griphook,” Nizar greets the goblin. The moment he realized Griphook was present, he sought him out; the goblin has already proven capable of keeping the right sorts of secrets.

Griphook looks surprised. “Professor Slytherin remembers me. How may I help you today?”

Nizar has to take a steadying breath. Voicing the words shouldn’t hurt, not when he already knows this truth, but they bring back that same terrible ache. “The family vaults were originally set up to dictate that only those of the direct line of descent from myself or Galiena deSlizarse could access them. If I have no living descendants, I have full right to claim the contents of all the deSlizarse or Slytherin vaults of my line, yes?”

“Provided you have no living, direct descendants, yes. You are willing to submit the drop of blood that will allow us to trace the direct lineage?” Griphook asks.

“I am,” Nizar replies as Salazar catches the attention of the goblin at the next counter.

“And can I help you, Master Wizard?” the goblin asks politely.

“Master Wizard,” Salazar repeats, pulling a face. “Please never refer to me that way again; it’s horrendous. My name is Salazar Fernan Deslizarse, and I’m merely here to reclaim what’s mine after forgetting it for seven hundred years.”

“I’d imagine it’s closer to eight hundred, idiota,” Nizar says while Griphook is off retrieving whatever magical trace they’re going to be using.

“I used it in the 1300s, hermanito. It’s closer to six hundred,” Salazar retorts.

Severus rolls his eyes as the goblins begin paying attention to all of them individually as they realize they’re not in one business grouping. “I need to do the exact same thing that Professor Slytherin is doing—performing the blood test for other descendants that would enable me to claim the Prince vault, which I imagine hosts more mold rather than anything truly useful.”

The goblin scowls. “We do not let mold grow inside our vaults, Professor Snape. You do realize that the wills of Silvanus and Eden Prince claim that no one after them is to have any right of access to the Prince vault.”

“And I realize that you don’t care about Ministry-filed wills unless it’s convenient,” Severus replies.

The goblin eyes him coldly for a moment before saying, “Wait here.”

“And what does the werewolf need today?” the next goblin asks Lupin.

“For you to remember that I have a name,” Lupin retorts in a flat voice. “I just wanted to know if you
lot accept Muggle checks.”

“Checks?” The goblin blinks a few times and then calls his fellows over for a consult that’s mixed goblin-speech and English.

“Checks!”

“Have we ever—”

“They draw on a bank just like Muggle paper money—”

“But then we have to have a contract with that bank!”

“Sirius Black. You don’t often come here in public,” a fourth goblin says. “And how can I assist you after you frightened off all our customers?”

“They’ll come back when they’re done being terrified. You still have their money,” Black points out, to the goblin’s immediate amusement.

“Salazar Slytherin?” the goblin attending to Salazar blurs out.

Nizar grins at his brother as the noise in the bank gets louder. At this rate, they’re going to have attracted the attention of every goblin in the building. “You forgot to ask him to not say your name aloud. Sloppy, hermano.”

Salazar sighs. “Were they this excited when you turned up the first time?”

“No, because I politely asked Griphook not to say my name,” Nizar emphasizes. “Now they’ve had time to adjust, so the goblins don’t care that I’m here at all. Have you gotten so old that you’ve forgotten how to plan?”

“Fuck you, hermanito.”

Griphook returns with an unrolled scroll that is all but glimmering with magic to Nizar’s eye. He skims its contents, discovering nothing more intimidating than it being a contract of claiming familial property. “Do you have your own blade, Professor, or shall I provide one?”

Severus reaches past Salazar to give Nizar a folding knife before Nizar can ask. “It’s sterile.”

“Thank you.” Nizar grits his teeth and firmly stabs the tip of his finger with the blade, letting a single drop of blood fall onto the contract’s signature line. When he signs it with the offered quill, his blood becomes the ink that forms his name and titles.

“Thank you, Professor,” Griphook says. “It will be just a moment.”

“What do you mean, you revoked my brother’s access to the primary family vault?” Salazar is asking while scowling at the goblin he’s dealing with. “What would possess you to do something that bloody ridiculous, Rishgeelt?”

“I wasn’t alive when that decision was made, so I’ve no idea,” Rishgeelt snaps in response. “Just sign the new contract if you wish for your relative to have access!”

Nizar returns the blade to Severus and decides to focus on the scroll instead of the entertaining show that is his brother re-learning how to deal with British goblins. The scroll lights up with name after name, tracing his descendants from Galiena and her husband, Uriel. First come Drystan, Vanora, Muriel, and Paynel, their children, alongside their spouses (Drystan never married, and Vanora had
no children) and then it continues on with the children from Paynel and Muriel’s marriages. There is a very complicated family tree by the time the document reaches those who lived during the 1470s. Ninety-eight percent of his line die in that decade alone.


Salazar reaches over and grips his hand. “I’m sorry, brother.”

“Yours, too?” Nizar asks, and Salazar nods. “Dammit. Fortunata’s line?”

“Never branched out very much, but they remained hale until the Spanish Influenza Pandemic of 1918,” Salazar replies. “After that, it was down to a single line of Gaunts.”

A single child appears on the scroll bearing Nizar’s descendants, a man named Leon Baltizahr, a surprising reversal back to Castilian. He and his wife Esmerelda produce two children, neither of whom have issue. Galiena’s line ends with their deaths in 1510 and 1512.

“Now I know why no one had touched the vaults since they were moved,” Nizar whispers.

“I apologize for bearing ill news,” Griphook says formally. “The vaults are yours to claim, Professor Slytherin.”

Salazar squeezes Nizar’s hand, which helps him to focus. “Thank you. I’ll need to see them today.”

“Of course, sir. I assume that Master Slytherin next to you will be doing the same?”

Rishgeelt glares daggers at Griphook, but Griphook pretends not to notice that he’s usurped a customer. “I’ll be doing so, yes,” Salazar answers. “I take it the vaults are close together?”

“They’re located in the same row, Master Slytherin,” Griphook says. “It will be convenient.”

“Would you like to attempt to claim one of the Gaunt vaults as well, Master Slytherin?” Rishgeelt asks after sniffing at Griphook. “If they are descendants of yours, then it should be easy to discern of which lineage.”

Severus, Lupin, and Black have joined them, though Nizar didn’t overhear the results of the Great Check Debate. “Tom Riddle never claimed his family’s vault?” Lupin asks in disbelief.

Rishgeelt peers over his spectacles, smirking. “We’re not sure he actually knows one is here.”

“We’ve certainly never informed him,” Griphook says.

“Not our job,” the goblin who’d assisted Severus chimes in, cackling. “Is it, Griphook?”

“Not at all, Gishillish.”

They all but hang over Salazar’s shoulder as a third magical scroll is brought forth. Salazar’s blood connects him to a woman named Milescenta Fawcett and their child, Nicholas Oswain Gaunt—though it also shows Milescenta’s marriage to Utredus Gaunt. There are no other children aside from Nicholas, though he proceeds to have six with his wife, Amphelice.

“Not so noble to be sleeping with another man’s wife,” Lupin comments in a mild voice.

Salazar rolls his eyes. “She wasn’t yet wed. She didn’t even tell me she was betrothed.”
The scroll ends with Marvolo Gaunt, wed to Derba Gaunt, his sister—“Oh, incest. Lovely,” Black says in distaste—producing Morfin Gaunt and his younger sister, Merope Gaunt. She marries Tom Riddle senior, fathers Tom Marvolo Riddle, and dies the same year the child is born.

“And there goes the entire Riddle family, I would imagine,” Severus murmurs when Tom Riddle senior’s date of death crops up in summer 1943. “Albus discovered years ago that Voldemort killed his father and grandparents, then did his uncle the dubious honor of framing him for the crime.”

“First Horcrux creation, too.” Salazar scowls down at the scroll. “I’ve never discovered what item he used, but I know the diary was second, and that one was made in autumn of 1943.”

The scroll’s magic then draws a harsh line through Tom Marvolo Riddle’s name and labels it thirty-first October, 1981. “It’s not calling that a death. It’s just marking him out,” Nizar says, baffled.

The goblins snatch up the scroll and stare at the results, visibly disturbed. “Well. I can’t think of the last time that has happened,” Griphook mutters.

“Not in my lifetime,” Rishgeelt says.

“Not even in mine.” Older Gishillish rolls up the scroll. “The vault in its entirety is yours to claim, Master Salazar, not only as progenitor for that particular line, but as the last living and recognized wizard of that lineage.”

“Why isn’t Tom Marvolo Riddle recognized?” Black asks. “Not that I’m complaining about it.”

Rishgeelt and Gishillish look offended by the question, but Griphook answers. “Because our magic cannot recognize him any longer.”

“The Horcruxes.” Salazar glances at Nizar. “Goblin magic can’t recognize him because on Hallowe’en of 1981, Tom Marvolo Riddle split his soul for the sixth time.”

“There isn’t enough left of him to recognize.” Nizar smirks. “Slipshod necromancy and stupidity.”

Rishgeelt and Gishillish corral Black and Lupin, taking them into a back lounge while convincing Black that they don’t need his notoriety scaring away all their custom for the remainder of the day. Nizar watches before he glances up at Severus, noticing the hard set to his features. “What happened?”

“My illustrious grandfather is quite the hypocrite. He had an affair while married to my grandmother, which resulted in a half-brother to my mother, one who is either a Squib or entirely non-magical.”

“Hopefully this prospective uncle didn’t inherit your grandfather’s interesting quirks. I take it you can’t access the vault unless they agree to sign off on it, then?”

Severus shakes his head. “I’d have to bloody find them first. All I have is a name: John R. Jones, born in 1947, and not yet deceased.”

“John Jones. What an imagination his mother had,” Nizar says dryly. “Want to come with me, then? I’d hate to come back up from the labyrinth downstairs and discover that you and Black finally gave in to the urge to kill each other.”

Severus allows Nizar to grasp his hand, biting back a smile. “I have more self-control than that.”

“I’m not certain Black does,” Nizar replies, to Severus’s obvious pleasure. “Come on.”
Salazar lets out a string of vicious swearing when the mining cart finally come screeching to a halt. “GOOD GODS, WHY?”

Nizar glances at Griphook. “Because the results are entertaining,” he guesses, and knows he’s right when Griphook hides a sharp-edged smile. “I should have remembered to challenge you for money before the ride, Sal.”

Salazar glares at him. “Are you taunting me because you don’t wish to face those vaults?”

“Yes,” Nizar replies. “Absolutely, without a doubt, yes.”

“Let me open the vaults in question for you, Professor Slytherin,” Griphook offers. “Then I’ll return to the beginning of the line and allow the loud Slytherin access to his own.” Salazar mutters something rude under his breath and then leans against the wall. “Or perhaps I’ll wait for him to be sick, first.”

“Thank you.” Nizar waits for Griphook to use the palm of his hand to cause each successive vault door to swing inward before he walks resolutely to the end of the line. “And yes, Professor Snape has my permission to be inside each vault you’ve just unlocked while in my presence.”

Griphook nods as he retreats back to the beginning of the row. “Excellent choice of words, sir.”

“Salazar has motion sickness?” Severus asks.

“I think one must be possessed of stomachs of bloody steel not to feel ill after riding in that fucking cart,” Nizar answers.

“You as well?”

“Yes, but I felt queasy before I came down here because of what I’m about to do.” Nizar looks inside the last vault in the row, the newest to be constructed before Galiena’s family line died out. He’s not surprised to find that it’s empty.

“Nizar?” Severus gives his hand a gentle squeeze.

“I imagine they spent every single coin they had left on healers when the last epidemic of the plague came,” Nizar says quietly. “Money means nothing if you’re too dead to spend it.”

“I’m sorry.”

Nizar shakes his head. “I appreciate the words, but I really didn’t expect otherwise.” He steps inside long enough to be able to cast a spell that will let him determine if the vault is truly empty, stirring up nothing more than a bill of sale for the very healing services he spoke of—with a notation of a discounted fee for services being ineffective. He folds it up and puts inside his pocket before pulling the heavy door closed.

The next vault doesn’t even have a slip of paper inside, and its twin next door is similarly empty. Galiena’s vault is the one which finally holds something other than echoing emptiness. On the floor in the center of the vault is a wooden chest made from expertly carved, closely fitted applewood planks. It’s sealed with an iron hasp; in tiny runes carved directly into the metal is not his name, but his title over Hogwarts.

Nizar hesitates a moment before he shrinks the chest unopened and puts it into the magically extended pocket of his jacket. “Later,” he says to Severus, who merely nods. Nizar casts the seeking spell one more time, ensuring that there is nothing else in the vault, and closes its door as he had all
the others. He thinks about asking the Goblins if they want those vaults back, but decides against it. Not only is he young for a magician, Salazar’s line tended to live long lives unless murder or magic-resistant disease intervened. He doesn’t see himself ever adopting another child, but he probably didn’t plan Galiena, Bryce, or Elfric’s adoptions, either.

His own vault he almost ignores until he glances at Severus. “Would it start another conversation regarding money if I pushed open the vault door that Griphook left open?”

Severus narrows his eyes. “No. I’m trying to understand all of who you are. I’m not going to pretend parts of you do not exist merely because I find them unpleasant or unnerving.”

Nizar gives Severus an odd look as he pushes the unsealed vault door open. “Are we still talking about money, or something else?”

“At the moment? Just—a bloody dragon’s hoard.” Severus finishes in surprise, glancing at the neat rows of wooden chests on the floor. “You earned all of this in twenty-five years?”

“Yes, or approximately so. No one had access to this vault once my children came of age, as they each their own vaults, so it has to all be mine.” Most of Nizar’s attention is on a few of the local stones he was either given or collected a thousand years ago. “I’m so much closer on the Cumbric. I can almost read that.”

“At least you don’t leave gold scattered underfoot from the need to show it off,” Severus mutters in disdain. “I’ve seen the Lestrange vault during an unwanted trip into the depths of Gringotts with Bellatrix Lestrange,” he adds when Nizar raises his eyebrows in a silent request for details. “Their fucking vault is piled with gold from floor to ceiling. I dislike such blatant displays of greed.”

“How the fuck do they find anything?” Nizar asks, and then suddenly reaches between two artefacts on the shelf to pull out a pair of folded modern glasses. “Now that’s a surprise.”

“I’m only surprised they survived long enough to make it into a vault,” Severus says dryly. “That child’s glasses were damaged on what seemed to be a monthly basis.”

“I think I recall you mentioning that, yes.” Nizar frowns down at the glasses before he unfolds them and puts them on. Then he yanks them right back off and tries not to dig his fingers into his eyes. “Fuck! Blind as a mole, my arse. I think you were underestimating the situation!”

“Let me see those.” Severus isn’t fool enough to put them on his face, but he does peer through the lenses about a handspan from his face. Then he leans back with a grimace. “That isn’t merely poor eyesight. That is damage.”

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“Which I’d already expected.” Nizar accepts the glasses, folds them up, and puts them back where they came from. “I wonder why I kept them. No—I know why I would have kept them.”

“Nizar?”

“It was a reminder. It was a reminder that I hadn’t always been there. I felt like I’d always been there, Severus. I felt like I belonged with them.” Nizar turns around and then kicks the chests on the ground until he finds the one with the most give and lightest weight, picking it up. “I’m done here.”

Severus lets him exit the vault without speaking further on what he admitted to. In truth, it’s a very recent recollection, and it doesn’t make his grief any less potent. Fucking malfunctioning Preservation Charms. He’s experienced a lot of strong magic today, and hopes that the vague notions and feelings he’s dealt with since the war mage title was confirmed will be the only result. He wants to remember, but gods, not this way!
Salazar is waiting for them outside, the door to his vault shut. Griphook is already inside the cart, an impatient expression marring his already dour face. “Well?” Salazar asks.

“All done. Was it empty?” Nizar asks, curious.

“No. I left more behind than I recalled, which may prove useful. If not, at least you’ve access to it again,” Salazar says. “I also have a pocket full of books. That alone makes it worth the trip.”

“Come along,” Griphook insists, glaring at them. “We still have one more vault to visit, unless you’ve changed your mind, Slytherin!”

“I almost don’t want to go, but I have to admit, I’m curious,” Salazar mutters. That earns them another backbreaking cart ride into a deeper section of the bank. Severus mentions that they’re near the Lestrange vaults, but doesn’t elaborate.

When they get out of the cart, Nizar can smell a dragon, close and unpleasant. The atmosphere reeks of anger and fear. “That is not an appropriate means of guardianship!” Nizar growls.

“It was given to us to do as we please,” Griphook responds, unimpressed.

Nizar stares at Griphook. “As your entire livelihoods were given to Britain’s magical community to do with as they wished?” he whispers in anger. “Like they’ve taken your right to carry a wand? That sort of giving?”

The goblin whirls on him, outrage turning his eyes into black pools. “The Professor Slytherin knows not of what he speaks!”

“That’s my brother, picking yet another fight,” Salazar observes in a mild voice.

Griphook takes a step back, scowling. Then he turns around without acknowledging anything else that was said. “This way.” Griphook leads them along a path that has vaults on one side and a seemingly bottomless drop on the other.

A vault with a fine covering of moss is pushed open before Nizar can get a good look at the door. Inside, invisible light flares into sudden brightness, illuminating a few damaged books on the shelves and a thick layer of dust on the floor.

“My apologies. I didn’t realize that the vault had been left in such an unprofessional state.” Griphook lifts his hand and blows across his palm, creating a draft that eliminates the dust.

Salazar gazes down at the emblem carved into the floor, revealed as the dust is cleared away. “They’re Peverell-descended.”

“The hell I don’t!” Nizar responds in the same tone. “I’ve seen wands in the hands of goblins, centaurs, elves, and others, Master Griphook! I know what’s been taken from you, and it’s fucking wrong! You’re imprisoned as surely as that dragon is, and you still dare to stand there and tell me that your imprisonment of a fellow magical creature is just?”

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“The Tale of the Three Brothers.” Severus gives Salazar a look of irritated disbelief. “That story is complete nonsense.”

“No. It’s not.” Salazar kneels down and traces the emblem on the floor; the circle is the most prominent. “Cadmus’s family. They carried the Resurrection Stone.”

“The Resurrection Stone has not been held in this vault since 1889,” Griphook informs them in a
formal voice that doesn’t hide the tension beneath. “As the owner of this vault and its contents, I can inform you that Europus Gaunt ordered the stone set into a goblin-crafted ring in the spring of that year, and that was the last time it was held by goblin hands.” He tilts his head, as if pondering whether to say more, before he does so. “It is not the Gaunt name that holds the Peverell blood, but the Fawcett lineage that the eldest Gaunt married into when claiming Master Slytherin’s offspring.”

Salazar grants Griphook a solemn nod. “Thank you for telling me.” He stands up, frowning. “I wonder if those idiots had the ring when Tom Marvolo Riddle came along to greet his family.”

“Who knows,” Nizar murmurs, picking up one of the books and immediately dropping it again. “Dammit! Sal, you’ll have to be the one who takes anything from here.” He catches Griphook giving him another snide smile. The British have done one hell of a number on this isle’s goblins if they can only take pleasure in causing minor bits of human suffering.

Severus is examining the emblem in the floor. “Why are both of you acting as if this utterly normal?”

“Because Cadmus Peverell was a Slytherin,” Nizar says. Severus glances up in surprise. “No, I don’t recall more than that, but the Peverell siblings really existed.”

“If one were to visit, oh, the Potter family vault, one would find this same emblem on the floor of their vault, except it would be the triangle emphasized,” Salazar adds in an innocent tone.

“Let me guess—it’s that fucking Cloak of Invisibility,” Severus growls. “The Potter family is descended from Ignotus.”

Salazar looks pleased. “Exactly so. Ignotus Peverell of Gryffindor. He was a wily one already, else the Sorting Hat would likely have placed him in Ravenclaw. It was Antioch who would have been better served by Slytherin or Hufflepuff.”

Severus regards Salazar with a sharp-eyed gaze. “That was your deal with an Aspect. You agreed to deliver the fucking Deathly Hallows to the Peverell brothers on Death’s behalf.”

“Yes. I held the Hallows from 1043 until 1235, when I gave them to the Peverell brothers as they visited the Kingdom of France” Salazar replies. “I have to say, I attracted much less attention when I was finally able to get rid of the original three and merely carry the cloak again. That one is most often mistaken for a normal invisibility cloak.”

Severus’s gaze hasn’t wavered. “And you never used them?”

“They were not mine to use, Severus. I could only use the cloak Nizar loaned to me, though it was quite odd carrying two of the same item for nearly two hundred years.”

“What family would have a seal in their vault where only the line of the wand was emphasized?” Nizar asks, curious.

“None of them. Antioch had no Heirs.” Salazar walks across the seal to begin retrieving the old books stacked on the shelf. “I followed him around that same day, curious about what would happen. Antioch already had a certain reputation, and he was a vicious braggart, besides. The idiot was fool enough to claim he carried a wand that made him invincible. Another magician heard those words, waited until Antioch was sodden drunk that night, slit his throat while Antioch slept, and took the wand. It’s been changing hands ever since.”

“The Elder Wand’s very first act in this world was to perform a murder,” Griphook speaks up unexpectedly. “Then another committed murder to take it. It’s one of the most cursed items on this earth, Professor Snape. It takes an exceptional wizard to master the Elder Wand.”
“Elder. Elderberry.” Severus’s brow furrows as he bares his teeth in a ferocious scowl. “Albus. Albus has the wand.”

“He does,” Salazar confirms, which makes Nizar think back on the times he’s seen Dumbledore’s wand being used. In retrospect, the elderberry carvings should have been a recognizable warning.

“I’ve seen it in his hand,” Salazar continues. “The strange thing about the Elder Wand is that it’s so bloody obvious in appearance. It’s made of unvarnished elder wood. It’s carved with elder berries. It is the most blatant wand of elder I’ve ever encountered… and yet, unless you can truly see it for what it is, you don’t notice its existence. The Elder Wand hides in plain sight. It’s most often lost when its holder brags, as Antioch did, about what sort of wand they’re truly wielding.”

Severus takes in a deep breath and lets it out, bleeding away ire until it’s a low simmer instead of potent rage. “Nizar took the Invisibility Cloak with him to Hogewáþ last July. Then, when the time came, he gave it to you for safety and safe-keeping.” Salazar nods. “Where is that cloak now?”

“Safeguarding members of the Underground, with Nizar’s blessing,” Salazar says. “Granted, he didn’t quite realize what sort of cloak I meant, but he does now.”

“It’s still put to better use keeping others alive. I don’t need it,” Nizar says. When the books are all gathered, Salazar casts the seeking spell, but nothing else reveals itself.

“And we’re to trust the goblin’s discretion on this?” Severus asks Griphook.

Griphook ignores him, addressing Salazar instead. “Does the Master Slytherin believe as his brother does? That all magical beings have a right to wands?”

Salazar nods. “I do. It was normal in my day. Griphook. It was normal for hundreds of years, and it still is in those countries that refused to embrace the International Statute of Secrecy. The magical beings of Castile still carry wands, though they do reveal themselves willingly to non-magical eyes. The only part of the Secrecy Act the rest of us respect is the truth that we cannot be open with our magic. The influence of fear is still too strong.”

“And you, Professor Snape?” Griphook asks with a toothy smile. “Does a mere goblin rate a wand?”

“A wand,” Severus replies in a soft voice, “is merely a tool of focus. You do not need it to perform magic of great strength and skill. That being said, the only reason you do not have a wand is a law drafted by idiots. However, do not let that opinion lead to the mistaken assumption that I like you.”

“I was not concerned with being liked,” Griphook returns snidely. “My discretion is absolute.” He turns to Nizar. “You do realize that you cannot access either the stipend vault for Harry James Potter, or the primary vault for the family of Potter.”

Nizar gives the goblin a blank look. “Why would I even want to?”

Griphook’s brow rises in polite interest. “Money.”

“Pfft. I have that,” Nizar responds, unimpressed. “Boring. Besides, I imagine Sirius Black is written into the family’s will. He can access those vaults all he likes.”

“That is true,” Griphook agrees, though his expression is sour when he does so. “If you gentlemen are finished here, I will take you back to the surface.”

“Severus?” Nizar gives Severus’s arm a gentle nudge with his elbow as they leave the vault. “What’s bothering you?”
“I’m merely infuriated that James bloody Potter was cavorting around Hogwarts with one of the fucking Hallows!” Severus retorts, and Nizar all but chokes on a laugh. “Go ahead,” Severus grumbles. “It’s completely ludicrous.”

“It really, really is,” Nizar agrees, biting back a smile. He’s more amused by the look on Severus’s face than his biological father’s antics with a cloak.

Salazar waits until Griphook has sealed the vault. “Griphook of Londinium,” he says, making the goblin twitch and tilt his head up in surprise. “The line of the Gaunts is no more. This vault is returned to the goblins who maintain it, to do with it as they wish.”

Griphook appears to be completely flabbergasted. “I—of course, Master Salazar. No one has returned a vault in quite a while.”

“Then you’ve had several surprises today that should keep your family entertained for some time to come,” Salazar replies.

* * * * *

“Shift before we go outside, you idiot,” Severus tells Black, who rolls his eyes before turning into the oversized black mongrel that is his Animagus form. “A glamor would not be amiss either, Lupin.”

“I imagine they’ll be looking for me, yes, if they suspect Sirius was in my company.” Lupin thinks for a moment before tapping his wand to his face. His features turn from scarred pale-skin and perpetual exhaustion to narrow and dusky brown. Lupin then blackens his hair and gives himself placid brown eyes.

When Severus turns around, Nizar is once again impersonating Ozymandias Gryffindor. Severus actually jerks back in surprise before he recognizes red-gold hair and blue eyes. “Warn me, please.”

“Sorry.” Nizar doesn’t sound apologetic in the slightest. “Hold still.”

Severus tries not to close his eyes when the tip of Nizar’s wand to his hair brings a cold feeling with it. He hates glamors; it’s as if he’s trapped in a curtain of icy water when they’re applied. Polyjuice is ever so much more preferable, and even better, Moody’s damned magical eye can’t see through it.

Salazar has used a glamor to give himself his much younger, beardless face, which is nigh unrecognizable to anyone who hasn’t been in the castle in the last few months. “Let’s go. Griphook, our apologies for leaving in a manner quite unlike the way we entered.”

“It keeps the Aurors out of our halls,” Griphook says, appeased.

In the bank’s large atrium, business is being conducted in harsh whispers by frightened witches and wizards. Severus hears more than one mention “the murderous Sirius Black!” and grinds his teeth. Black got his murderous impulses out of the way when he was a student. Some days it’s still enraging to know that it’s true. Black became a person Lily considered worth marrying.

They go outside, ignored by most of the Aurors that are lying in wait. Dawlish in particular barely even glances at them, though Moody catches Severus’s eye and nods once before he goes back to harshly interviewing a grey-eyed wizard on the street that is Sirius Black’s height. Tonks is further down the alley, cheerfully speaking with a group of witches who claim to their very bones that they
saw Sirius Black himself a mere hour ago.

*Attention-mongers*, Severus thinks in disdain. Someone claims to have seen Sirius Black at least once a week, and the Aurors are beyond disgusted with having to drop everything to run after rumor each time. Severus wonders how many of them might write to Sirius Black after tomorrow morning’s *Daily Prophet* to thank him for giving them back their valuable time and means to worry about other investigations.

“We’re still meeting everyone behind Fortescue’s?” Nizar asks once they’re beyond the Aurors’ hearing. Severus nods in affirmation, not wanting to spend any more time in Diagon Alley now that all business is concluded. It’s nearing Hogwarts’ dinner hour, and their students should be present for it.

The headache Severus gained from accepting a war mage’s title is starting to come back as the potion wears off. He’d much rather be within Hogwarts when the suspected migraine makes itself known.

He still hasn’t dwelled on the oath he took, and the full magnitude of what it might one day mean. He isn’t certain if his doing so was irony of the highest order, or complete foolishness.

Narcissa is waiting for them with their four Slytherins. “All went well. We had an enjoyable time, did we not?”

“You bought me a new gown. I feel as if I’m in your debt,” Daphne says.

“Nonsense,” Narcissa responds. “And don’t even once think that politics are involved, not for this. I know of your intentions, and you should be properly outfitted to pursue them. One should choose our lot in life, dear, not be shoved into place as if we are chess pieces.”

Adele nods. “Exactly.” She’s worn a very somber expression since agreeing to a war mage’s path. Severus wonders what thoughts and plans are hiding behind that quiet mask.

“We should go. The pain potion is wearing off, and I’d rather Apparate us back to the castle without incident.” Salazar holds out his arm. “Baroness and Vidame?”

Adele and Daphne grab hold of Salazar’s arm and vanish without any hint of Disapparition’s usual cracking sound. Nizar can do the same; Severus is grimly attempting to figure out how they’ve muted the sound of Apparition. He could ask, but it’s all but an unspoken challenge by now.

Nizar takes a moment to bow over Narcissa’s hand. “Thank you for your assistance today. I’ll hear from you in a few days, I suspect?”

“You will, Nizar. Thank you for the wonderful opportunity to create havoc for our inept Minister,” Narcissa replies. She steps back and Disapparates, the sound of it echoing off the rear of Fortescue’s building.

“We should—” Lupin says, but Nizar shakes his head.

“As certain as I am that Severus would be happy to see the back of you, one of you just accepted a war mage’s title. You might not be in pain, but you are going to be affected by it during the next few days, which includes the full moon tomorrow night,” Nizar says.

Lupin stares at him. “Bloody fucking hell,” he finally grits out. “What is that going to mean?”

“Wolfsbane in the Shrieking Shack, you idiot,” Severus says in annoyance. “You can take Black with you.”
“And stop swearing in front of my underage students!” Nizar orders Lupin, holding out his arm. “Grab on. You too, Sirius.” Sirius has barely grasped Nizar’s sleeve before they disappear.

Severus looks at Blaise and Draco. “Let’s go.”

They return to the classroom they departed from, which allows their four charges to gather up their contraband and pocket it accordingly. Severus leaves the room long enough to retrieve another set of pain potions and a round of restoratives for everyone who decided to be an idiot today, himself included.

“Last pain potion for the day—and I mean that,” Nizar says sternly once each dose has been accepted. “Now, if you feel off during dinner? Excuse yourself, return to your dorm, and sleep. Thanks to your families, you all have basic training in Mind Magic. Sleep will help you, but remember—no Dreamless Sleep Potion! That will bugger up the adjustment phase, and you don’t want to deal with this for longer than is necessary.”

Blaise’s eyes widen. “How long is that going to take? I thought it was just Adele who needed to worry about that!”

“Magical titles for nobility are different than standard. You’ll gain a bit of an awareness of what you’re responsible for, though not anything like darling Adele will need concern herself with,” Salazar explains, retrieving his wand. “As for your clothes, that requires reversing their earlier Transfiguration.” The girls’ Muggle clothes return to the robes they must have been wearing that morning, while Blaise’s suit returns to its original colors. “Now off with you. It’s nearly six. You lot can’t afford to be late, and neither can we.”

After the students file out, Nizar calls for Dobby. “Can you take these two up to my quarters and be certain they have an evening meal?” he asks, gesturing at Lupin and Black. “Oh, and don’t let them touch anything!” Black’s noise of protest is lost in the midst of an eager house-elf Apparating them at once.

“Is there an adjustment phase for a magical title?” Severus asks. “Or were you merely manipulating them into being circumspect?”

“There’s a difference?” Nizar responds, and then wobbles on his feet. “Fuck. If it we didn’t need to placate Dumbledore and ensure today’s cover story has wings…”

“I’d say to let me do the talking, but I might spit out something as nonsensical as what you just managed,” Salazar says. “And yes, there is an adjustment period to someone who is granted a magical title over land. Nizar slept for two days after the adoption.”

“I don’t remember that.” Nizar grins. “Did you panic?”

Salazar glares at Nizar as they leave the room. “Do you not recall what had happened so recently before that?”

Nizar shrugs. “Sal, I don’t even remember when the event you’re speaking of happened. Hello, Miss Parkinson. Are you putting truth to the adage of nosy parkers?”

Miss Parkinson smiles. “Someone has to, sir. What were you meeting about?”

Severus has to admire her sheer gall, if he often despairs of her lack of subtlety. “Miss Parkinson.”

“It was worth a try, sir.” Miss Parkinson isn’t bothered in the slightest by the rebuke, and latches onto Miss Bulstrode’s arm to join the flock of Slytherins heading to the Great Hall.
“There you are. We were beginning to wonder what kept you,” Minerva asks as they join the rest of the staff at the table.

Salazar grins at her as they sit down. “We made a bit of an outing of it to soothe everyone’s nerves and any potentially ruffled feathers.”

“I see.” Aurora, Filius, Albus, and Poppy are observing the Slytherin table, where Malfoy, Zabini, Miss Greengrass, and Miss Greenwood are sitting in a cluster, but conversing with the rest of their House as if everything is normal. “No hard feelings on their part, then?” Minerva asks.

Nizar shakes his head. “None at all. Daphne is far more irritated with her father for his presumptuousness.”

Albus is twinkling at the Slytherins, more so when Finnigan and Granger turn around to speak with Misses Parkinson, Greengrass, and Bulstrode. “And Madam Malfoy behaved herself?”

Severus thinks that the question is almost not subtle enough. “She acted with Draco Malfoy’s best interests in mind.” There; anyone who believes Narcissa Malfoy to be one of Voldemort’s followers can take that to mean what they will.

In truth, Narcissa is doing exactly that. She is beyond thrilled that Draco will be magically accepted as the master of the Malfoy’s Wiltshire Manor over his father, which will allow them to keep Lucius out of the home indefinitely. She may also be plotting on the matter of Draco’s marriage, but Draco is now armed with a new weapon at his disposal—no matter whom he marries, they become recognized as Lady Malfoy by right of courtesy, not of familial title. Miss Greengrass might outrank him, but she has other interests and priorities. Draco would have to marry into Muggle nobility to rise in any part of British society now.

“How’s it going?”

Nizar shakes his head. “None at all. Daphne is far more irritated with her father for his presumptuousness.”

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“Severus, are you all right?”

Severus realizes his gaze has unfocused, the student tables becoming an animated blur. He turns his head to find both Poppy and Aurora giving him concerned looks. “My apologies. It’s been a very long day.”

“It must have been! You’ve barely touched dinner. None of you have,” Poppy continues in a tone of utter disapproval.

“Late tea,” Nizar says in an absent voice, his chin resting on his hand. He is usually pretending not to be paying the student tables a whit of attention, so no one notices that for once, he isn’t paying attention at all. “I’ve only experienced three so far, but why is it the more expensive the tea house, the worse the food is in comparison to the tea? It’s offensive.”

“Is that why you murdered a scone?” Severus asks Salazar.

Salazar nods. “I’ve had bread baked with sawdust in it that tasted better. I have to wonder if they borrowed someone’s recipe from the 1600s and thought the wood to be a good addition.”

Nizar jerks in place a moment later and glances down. Severus notices that Dobby has joined him, his ears hanging under the weight of either remorse or far too many socks. “Professor Slytherin, there is being an important message waiting for you by owl upstairs, sir.”

“Buggerfuck,” Nizar mutters under his breath. “Excuse me, please.” He stands and departs using the door behind the table. Severus will bet every potential moldering Galleon in the Prince family vault that Dobby Apparates Nizar directly to his quarters the moment the door swings shut.
It’s a relief when dinner ends. Severus doesn’t feel tired, but he knows he isn’t well, either.

Salazar appears at his elbow after the students have meandered their way out of the Great Hall.
“Do you have office hours right now?”

Severus shakes his head. “There is a note on my door. My Slytherins know how to contact me if there is an emergency the castle isn’t capable of informing me of.”

“Good. Let’s go and find out what’s happened upstairs that Dobby thought required Nizar’s presence.”
“All right in there, mate?” Sirius asks.

“Piss off!” Remus shouts back, and from the sound of it is immediately ill again.

Sirius rolls his eyes. “You are such a stubborn wanker.” He crosses his arms as he leans against the wall, but still nearly draws his wand on paranoid instinct when Dobby brings his son into the room. “Sorry,” he apologizes, easing his wand back into his sleeve. “You startled me.”

Nizar merely raises an eyebrow. “I’d rather you be paranoid and alive than complacent and dead.” He makes a face at the sound of retching coming from the bathroom. “What happened to Remus?”

“Fenrir Greyback gave him lycanthropy when he was five,” Sirius says dryly, knowing Remus will never, ever accept being spoken of with pity.

Nizar frowns. “Yes, but it’s the day before the moon. Why is it bothering him now?”

Sirius feels his heart give a little double beat and has no idea why. “It always has,” he says. “About a day before, though usually not until evening, and then for up to a week afterwards without Wolfsbane. He’s in bad shape for two or three days with the potion.” When the stubborn bastard will let me buy it for him.

“Wolfsbane.” Nizar’s expression goes…odd. That’s the only way Sirius knows how to class it. “Bane of the wolf.”

“Nizar?”

Nizar shakes off whatever was bothering him. “Sorry. I was recalling something that Salazar said, and then the memory just…the memories stop. They stall out. If I get an anti-nausea potion for him, will he drink it?”

Sirius hammers on the bathroom door with his fist. “Anti-nausea potion!” he yells. “It’s your godson offering, so you’d better drink it, or I’ll plant my boot up your arse!”

“FINE!”

Nizar smiles at the method of coercion and looks to the house-elf. “Would you collect two doses of
the blue-capped anti-nausea potions in Severus’s cupboard, Dobby? The ones in the infirmary won’t be strong enough.”

“Dobby will be doing that at once!” the house-elf agrees, vanishing again.

“Snape just lets you pilfer from his personal stores?” Sirius asks in disbelief.

“Yes,” Nizar answers. “Why wouldn’t he?”

Sirius opens his mouth and closes it again. “I guess I’m still seeing what I want to see instead of…of what is.”

Nizar just shakes his head and takes the two capped phials the returning house-elf gives him. Sirius turns to his task of trying to pry Remus out of the loo, the familiar coaxing words pouring out of his mouth while his brain ponders something else.

He never would have expected Severus bloody Snape to volunteer himself as a war mage. Sirius knows he didn’t do it for power; that’s not how it works. He did it because he…cares.

God, he feels like scrubbing his mouth out with soap, and he didn’t even say that out loud.

After prying Remus out of the bathroom, it still takes a while to convince the idiot to sit down in Nizar’s armchair and drink both potions. Sirius is used to this level of stubbornness, though. He might once have taken advantage of the fact that he can out-stubborn Remus, but now it’s just convenient when the man is being too stupid to take care of himself.

“Dobby is bringing tea,” Dobby says, disapproving of Remus’s pale skin. The house-elf brings back a tea tray loaded with biscuits and different sorts of savory bites, which are far more tempting right now than any meal.

When Remus finally recovers enough that it’s doubtful he’ll spend the rest of the evening enjoying the company of a commode, he looks over his teacup at Nizar. “Was there anything left in the vaults? I heard what you and Salazar mentioned of the last major outbreak of the Black Plague.”

“There was no coin, but I didn’t expect there to be,” Nizar says. Sirius loves listening to his son talk; he sounds very much like a modern British man, but his accent is more fluid. Then there are the times his speech pattern will change, and he’ll sound like he just emerged from Nearly Headless Nick’s time, or even the Fat Friar’s era. Salazar, on the other hand, often sounds like a Scottish man who’s forgotten that Scots Gaelic and Spanish are not even remotely the same language.

“Galiena left something for me, though,” Nizar adds. “I’m so tired I’d forgotten all about it.”

Sirius grins. “Remus might be polite, but I’m a nosy bastard. Let’s see it!”

“See what?” Salazar asks as he pushes the door open; Snape is just behind him. Sirius might not like Snape, but even he thinks the man looks like hell.

“Galiena left a chest in an otherwise empty vault with my title on it, Sal,” Nizar answers. “Severus: tea. Now.”

Snape glares at Nizar, but it lacks heat, unlike the vicious gaze he’s capable of leveling at Sirius. “Fine. Am I doing worse than everyone else? Even Miss Greenwood seemed well.”

“Adele is a young woman in good health. I’ve done this before. Salazar is an idiot who also happens to be an Earth-speaker. Remus is a werewolf, and they already have an intimate connection with the
You are very much your mother’s son. Sirius feels a pang of intense grief, remembering the times Lily had fiercely looked after them—especially Remus, threatening him with food and a funnel on multiple occasions. It hurts that Sirius has barely been able to mourn at all. Sometimes he wonders if he simply can’t, if Azkaban took that from him the way it tried to take everything else.

“You’re also not yet recovered from bearing a vile curse for eighteen years, Severus,” Salazar says while pouring a cup of tea for himself. “It’s only been a month. Gaining strength back after such things takes time.”

“I suppose I just wondered if maybe being a war mage doesn’t agree with him.” Sirius pastes a bland expression onto his face when Nizar glances at him in suspicion. He’s probably not get away with it, but as he admitted last month—he’s a complete bastard who is not likely to outgrow the urge to yank Snape’s chain.

“It probably does not.” Snape sits down on the sofa and rests his face in his hands. “I cannot believe I fucking well did that.”

“I can,” Nizar says quietly. Then he smiles. “Not that it wasn’t a stupid idea, mind.”

“And how are you feeling, Duke over Magical London?” Salazar asks Sirius.

Sirius thinks on it. “I’ve just felt exceptionally…anchored, I think. Grounded.”

“That would be the magic beneath London,” Nizar explains, getting something out of his pocket. “I tied Twelve Grimmauld Place directly to the bedrock. Fortunately for you, you’ll be gaining your awareness of London County from the ground up. I don’t think you’d want to start with the population density.”

Sirius grimaces. “After what nearly happened to you? Hell, no.”

“Speaking of things that happened today…” Remus makes a face before glancing at Snape, who is leaning back against the sofa again. “When you were talking about the incident with the Dementors two years ago…not only did you defend both of us, but it sounds very much like you were running distraction.”

Snape rolls his eyes. “Your powers of observation are absolutely astounding. Of course I knew you two complete idiots weren’t guilty, not after Pettigrew’s confession in that dilapidated shack.”

“You were unconscious,” Sirius points out, annoyed.

“And I’m certain it made everyone feel so much better to believe that,” Snape drawls back. “Those were stunning hexes cast by students. I’d already dealt with Voldemort for years, Black. It takes an exceptionally strong stunning spell to do a damned thing to me.”

“So you remained on the floor, pretending to be unconscious, and listened to everything that was said.” Remus looks far too amused when Sirius is still this irritated.

Snape sounds unbearably fucking smug. “One learns very useful things if everyone else believes you to be incapable of listening.”

“Don’t they just?” Nizar unshrinks a large, expertly constructed, unvarnished wooden chest with cast iron fittings. “This is applewood,” he says as he sits down in front of the chest. “I wonder if it was
made from that stupid tree.”

“That particular apple tree was getting on in years when you were young. I wouldn’t be surprised.”

Salazar sits down next to Snape, which allows Sirius to claim the end of the sofa without needing to pretend to be nice to his seatmate.

Sirius tries not to wince when Nizar uses a boot knife to prick his finger, smearing the hasp of the chest with blood. “Well. I suppose that’s an effective form of security.”

“If you’ve stored the item in a place where you know that only the intended will find it, and the intended recipient isn’t in the habit of leaving their blood all over the place? Yes.” Nizar lifts the lid and removes a scroll stamped with a variant of the basilisk crest on the rings he and Salazar both wear. “Galiena, dearest?”

“I don’t know, Father.” Sirius cranes his head up and around to realize that the paintings are occupied by all three of Nizar’s adopted children. Galiena has pressed closest, with Elfric and Brice peering over her shoulders. “This must have been done after the last updating of my portrait.”

“I thought as much.” Nizar cracks the wax seal before he unrolls the scroll. The expression on his face can only be described as grim, as if he’s forcing himself through a task he’d rather avoid. Sirius understands that feeling so damned much.

When Nizar lowers the scroll a few minutes later, he’s quiet. “What does it say, hermanito?” Salazar asks when no one else speaks.

“Oh. Uh—in 1051, Galiena’s husband Uriel died. Everyone returned to Winchester for the funeral, and by everyone, I mean this reads as if Muriel and Paynel decided to breed like rabbits to make up for Drystan’s lack of interest and Vanora’s lack of wanting anything to do with men. Galiena spoke to my grandchildren while they were all in the family home, and they agreed that certain things should be set aside and…and left behind. For me.”

“Why?” Remus asks.

“Because they were mine in the first place.” Nizar drops the scroll into his lap, frowning. “I wish they hadn’t done so.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Salazar says. “Once you gave those items away, it then became their items to do with as they wished. If they agreed, then your lot decided practicality was more important than sentiment. Bloody Pensieves existed if they wished to view old memories.”

Nizar rolls his eyes instead of answering, leaning over to dig around in the chest. “Oh, magical space. What an excellent idea,” his muffled voice says. Then he sits back up, holding a stone bowl in his hands. It glimmers with the reflections from many tiny specks of pyrite and blue crystal, giving the otherwise grey bowl a bronze and blue sheen.

“Now you don’t need to build another Pensieve,” Salazar remarks.

“No. I suppose not.” Nizar smiles down at the bowl, looking wistful. “This was the second Pensieve I made, and I’d prefer that Galiena had kept this one instead of the other. I made this one for her, hence the Ravenclaw blue and bronze.” He tilts the bowl in the light. “It took me a very long time to find stone that held this sort of gemstone blend.”

“Wasn’t this one crafted after we spent time with the Buddhist monks in what used to be Bod Chen Po?” Salazar asks.
“Bodchen Po?” Remus repeats, frowning.

“The former Tibetan empire. At the time, they weren’t doing much more than squabbling while defending themselves as invaders attacked from all sides.” Salazar crosses his arms. “Does it still work, Nizar?”

In answer, Nizar doesn’t get out a wand. He cradles the bowl gently with his left hand and then runs his right thumb around its rim. Remus hears it first, his head cocked to one side. Then Sirius can hear the low hum of the stone reacting to Nizar’s touch.

Sirius nearly launches himself to his feet when the white mist of memory is drawn forth from Nizar’s temple, settling down into the bowl. The mist swirls around the bowl at the same speed as Nizar’s thumb before he stops the motion, allowing the gathered memory to settle.

“You made a bloody singing bowl of a Pensieve.” Snape shocks Sirius when he gives Nizar a wide, pleased smile. “That, Nizar, is ingenious.”

“I just thought it was an interesting idea, one that happened to work exactly as intended.” Nizar smiles back. “Does anyone want to go look?”

“That depends on what you put in there,” Remus says warily.

“I thought you might want to see Hogewáþ.” Nizar dips his fingers into the mist and closes his eyes. “August of 991. Salazar, you might not—”

“Is she there?” Salazar interrupts Nizar. “Is she?”

Nizar opens his eyes and looks at Salazar. “Yes.”

Salazar stands up. “Then I’m going. Put the bowl onto the table and make it easier on my ancient knees, won’t you?”

“Your knees are just as preserved as the rest of you,” Nizar says, unimpressed.

“Yes, but I was seventy-three years old when that happened!” Salazar retorts. “Stop teasing me, you little shit.”

Nizar grins and gets up, placing the glittering Pensieve on the scarred wooden table. Sirius debates for perhaps two seconds before deciding that he’s going in. He doesn’t really give a damn about history, but if this is a memory, that means his son is in it. That’s who Sirius wants to see.

The trip into the Pensieve is another surprise. It isn’t a spinning disaster followed by a jolt of a landing. Instead, Sirius finds himself placed gently on the ground. This bowl has just become his favorite Pensieve of all time.

It takes him a moment to recognize Hogwarts’ stone walls, given that there is a moat and a bloody drawbridge in front of the entrance. The double doors to the Entrance Hall are the same, and that’s what helps to calm Sirius’s nerves. He’s standing where the outdoor courtyard is in their time, but at the moment, it’s nothing but bare earth.

Remus and Snape join him a moment later, following quickly by Salazar and Nizar. “There,” Nizar says, pointing. “This is the earliest I can remember and still know when and where I am.”

Sirius looks and discovers two people walking towards them from the Black Lake. They’re wearing pants that end just below the knee, long shirts, and nothing else. Both figures are soaked to the skin,
but don’t seem to mind.

The man is much taller than his companion, probably taller than Snape, with dark red hair and ice-chips for eyes, but he still manages to appear kind. The other—

Sirius feels his heart lodge itself in his throat. This might be a memory from after the magical adoption, but that child still looks like Harry. His hair is black and wild, like James’s used to be. His eyes are the amazing emerald green that Lily passed on to him, and his skin is just as pale as hers rather than James’s middling bronze.

“Sixteen?” Sirius hears Snape murmur. Nizar shrugs, but Salazar nods.

“You’re improving!” the tall ginger says. Sirius realizes with a jolt that he’s looking at Godric Gryffindor.

“I didn’t drown. That’s not much of an improvement,” Harry/Nizar replies with a wry smile.

“The point of learning to swim is to not drown. Given our experience last year, it is still an improvement,” Godric argues. “I daresay you would have done better if you hadn’t attracted the attention of an entire pod of Grindylows, though.”

Harry/Nizar rolls his eyes. “They really do seem to like me. I’m not in any hurry to dry off, are you?”

“Given the heat of the day? No,” Godric agrees. “But Meraud will skin us both for fouling the rug in the Entrance Hall with water and dirt.”

They both take out their wands and dry off with practiced ease, which makes Sirius proud. Harry had always been good at magic, but hesitant to use it, and often handled his wand as if it was a terrifying implement.

Sirius and the others follow the pair inside, through the double doors. The Entrance Hall is almost exactly the same except for the rug…and a familiar statue parked right in the center, being prodded at by one of the most beautiful women Sirius has ever seen. She’s his son’s height, with bright golden hair and brilliant blue eyes.

“What the blazes is that, Helga?” Godric asks.

Sirius trades gaping stares with Remus. Helga Hufflepuff’s portrait in the Entrance Hall does her no damned justice at all.

“This is a…” Helga purses her lips. “Well, aside from the fact that it is obviously a gargoyle, it’s a gift.”

“A gift from whom?” Sirius watches as Salazar Slytherin, beardless and so very, very young, comes down the stairs at a pace that’s just short of neck-breaking. Then he stops and stares at the gargoyle, frowning. “That sort of gargoyle isn’t meant to be a tower guardian. That’s a door guardian.”

“Just what I was thinking.” Helga puts her wand in her sleeve, which is a disappointment. Sirius wanted to see what it looked like, but they don’t seem to be able to move any closer than Harry/Nizar’s point of view. “It’s from Æthelred, Godric.”

“Bribery,” Harry/Nizar and young Salazar both say at the same time. Snape makes an odd sound; Sirius wonders if that was amusement or derision. With Snape, it’s very difficult to tell the difference.

“Unwanted bribery.” Godric scowls. “Can we send it back to him in pieces?”
“Absolutely not! How would you like it if someone threatened to ship you off elsewhere in pieces?” the gargoyle protests.

“By the Almighty, it talks.” Godric sighs. “And Nizar has seen it before.”

Harry/Nizar frowns. “Yes, I’ve seen it before. Often.”

“Then you’ll be able to tell us where to put it!” Godric says cheerfully.

Harry/Nizar shoves at Godric. “I will not! Stop asking me to do that. It’s bloody odd.”

“What is all of the—a gargoyle?” The woman who appears from the Great Hall is a full head shorter than Harry/Nizar, with rich black hair and pale skin. She sounds like sweetness given voice. Orellana Constanza, Salazar Slytherin’s first wife. Sirius met her portrait last month. In this memory, she is very, very pregnant.

*I never got to see Lily when she was that pregnant,* Sirius thinks, and suddenly he wants out of this memory. The only thing stopping him from leaving is his son.

Salazar is drinking in the sight of Orellana, his eyes filled with guilt and sorrow. The younger Salazar is the one who answers her question. “Æthelred is attempting to bribe Godric into…not assassinating him, I suppose.”

“I have no interest in assassinating idiots.” Godric glares at the statue. “Did my former king speak to you, gargoyle?”

“I’ve a name, you know!” the statue retorts. “Go on and use it if you want me answering questions like that, Your Rudeness!”

“You have a name?” Harry/Nizar asks in surprise. “I never knew that.”

“You should’ve asked!” the gargoyle exclaims.

“I didn’t even know you could talk!”

Sirius shrugs when Remus looks at him. He didn’t know that, either.

“Does no one have manners any longer?” The woman who strides out of the Great Hall has raven’s black hair and magnificent eyes the color of an autumn sky. Rowena Ravenclaw. “Friend Gargoyle: what is your name?”

The gargoyle draws itself up a bit with pride. “I be Galfridus the Guardian, Lady Magician.”

Rowena gives Godric an exasperated look. “Do you know why the King of England would send you to our school, Galfridus?”

“Bit of an apology, like,” the gargoyle says after sticking its tongue out at Godric. “His Majesty says he can’t take the decision back, but recognizes that he made it in haste. He’s written to His Majesty,Findláech mac Ruaidrí, High King of the North, in hopes that King Findláech will restore the Eorl Godric’s titles under Moravia’s crown.”

“That still sounds like bribery.” Young Salazar crosses his arms. “Æthelred is terrified, isn’t he?”

Galfridus shrugs. “Not my place to say, Sir Magician. Politics is not my job. I’m to look after doors and guard them against intruders, not make judgement calls on a king’s ridiculous decisions.”
Young Salazar raises an eyebrow. “Godric, if you don’t want him, I’ll keep him. That was a sly answer.”

“He’s my blackmail, thus my responsibility,” Godric responds, glancing at Harry/Nizar again. “Oh, come on. Just a hint!”

Harry/Nizar grins back. “Fuck off,” he says, which makes Remus stare at Harry in shock. “Make up your own mind as to where you’re putting your talkative blackmail!”

“Gargoyles are duty-bound to protect the door they’re placed in front of,” Orellana says. “Perhaps he should be placed in front of the door that leads to the student dormitories.”

“Oh, I do like that idea,” Rowena murmurs. “Salazar?”

“Passwords can be guessed,” Salazar says.

A woman with hair the color of actual fire joins them, coming from the passage that leads to the painting of fruit hiding the kitchen stairs. “Oh, a gargoyle!” She strides right up and scratches the stone gargoyle behind its ears, which causes the gargoyle to let out a coo of delight. “What?” she asks, when she notices all of the others staring at her. “My parents had a door guardian. Best means of protection in the world as long as you avoid passwords!”

“Student tower entrance it is, then,” Godric says. “Sedemai, dearest wife, your brilliance always delights me. Galfridus, you’re going for a bit of a flight.”

As Godric and Sedemai Gryffindor use hovering charms to take the gargoyle to its new home, Sirius hears young Salazar ask Orellana, “Are you well?”

Orellana releases a sigh of frustration. “I absolutely swear, the next being who asks me if I am well before this child is born shall be beaten to death with one of Godric’s wooden swords!”

Harry/Nizar looks away from her and says, “Are you all right?”

Salazar’s wife narrows her eyes at Harry/Nizar. “What was that?”

Harry/Nizar’s expression is utterly innocent when he looks at her again. “What was what? I was merely commenting on the weather.”

“I will learn your nonsense language just to find out,” Orellana declares. “Then it will be the practice swords!”

“Godric is probably going to beat you to that,” Harry/Nizar says, which makes Orellana growl. Sirius is proud of his son for that awful pun, and so damned glad that he is seeing Harry happy, healthy, and surrounded by those who will protect him. He hasn’t felt this relieved since the news of Harry’s disappearance came after midnight on thirty-first July last year.

“Why didn’t she understand him? I understood Nizar just fine.” Remus sounds baffled.

“Translation spell. It’s built into the Pensieve,” Nizar tells him quietly. “And we’re leaving now.”
It takes a minute of scowling over the bowl for Nizar to remember how to retrieve a placed memory. He knows at once it isn’t by wand, which gives him the answer. He causes the bowl to sing again by reversing the direction in which he runs his thumb along the Pensife’s edge. A moment later, he has the memory back…though it’s different inside his own head. It’s not that the memory isn’t available, but his ability to recall it is definitely not working as it should. What had been crisp and clear, as real as standing in this room, is now as insubstantial as the mist in which a Pensife-collected memory resides.

Nizar looks up long enough to see that Black is wiping at his eyes and immediately averts his gaze. That isn’t something he wants to talk about right now. He hadn’t expected to so closely resemble that child in the Diagon Alley poster—it was like watching someone else’s memory.

“Are you all right?” Nizar chooses to ask Salazar instead.

“It’s more difficult than I thought it would be. I’d forgotten…quite a bit.” Salazar shakes his head. “Her portrait does not do her justice. Not compared to the real thing, little brother.”

Nizar glances over his shoulder at the portraits of his children, who are still intently watching the proceedings. “No, they don’t, but portraits are better than nothing at all.”

He puts the Pensife back inside the applewood chest. “Oh, there’s more in here aside from a Pensife,” Nizar answers when Severus asks. “I’m just not up to digging through it this evening.”

Nizar takes a moment to assess how he’s feeling, aside from the emotions he is happily ignoring at the moment. His head hurts, but the potion is doing its job…and he is still used to this. For him, the awareness of the land is sorting itself into the places it once dwelled. It’s the people that are taking longer to get used to. After the initial, overpowering shock of it all, the sheer number of lives on the isles is amazing.

Lupin breaks the silence that descends after Nizar closes the chest. Fortunately, the question has nothing to do with that ancient memory. “Should we tell Albus we’re lingering?”

Nizar makes a dismissive sound. “Why?”

“It would be polite,” Lupin tries.

“Are you going to be available tomorrow?” Nizar asks, giving Lupin a pointed look.

Lupin opens his mouth to argue and then looks rueful. “Full moon tomorrow night. Never mind.”

Nizar smiles. Lupin already looks like the full moon’s approach is trying to hammer him into the ground. “I thought so.”

Severus is leaning back against the sofa like his head aches, but he’ll never admit to it. “I’m so very glad tomorrow is Sunday. I can’t even contemplate the idea of teaching right now.”

“Then I suppose I’ll have to page through these moldy relics to see if there is anything interesting.” Salazar sits down on the stone floor opposite Nizar and retrieves the books from the Gaunt vault from his pocket.

“If those books were valuable enough to place in a vault, one would think they would have been considered valuable enough not to treat like rubbish from the start,” Nizar says in disapproval. Each of the four volumes, while encased in protective leather, look to have seen water more than once. The paper inside is bulging like swelling corpses. “Are they legible?” he asks when Salazar opens the oldest-looking disaster to its first page.
“They are.” Even Salazar is surprised by that. “And fortunately, they’re written in _franceis_ rather than Middle English. I never did get the hang of that one.”

Nizar snorts. “Did anyone?”

“Only Geoffrey Chaucer, and much like Shakespeare, he only used his mastery of the written tongue to pen dirty jokes,” Severus mutters.

Nizar looks up at him. “Severus. Stop Occluding and _sift_ it, don’t block it, or you’re going to make your head explode.”

Severus opens his eyes to glance at Nizar. “Literally?”

“Probably not,” Nizar says after thinking about it. “But of all the shit stubborn reasons to die, do you really want that to be what does you in?”

Severus’s jaw clenches as he argues with himself over something. “I’m not certain I know what you mean by _sifting_.”

Oh. Pride. Black would be the reason Severus didn’t want to admit to any hint of ignorance. That would also be a stupid reason to die, but at least Severus knows better. “It’s the same technique you employ to sort out memories to place either into sealed containers or into a _Pensife_. You just allow it broader focus, not individual moments.”

Nizar knows it’s working when the tense set to Severus’s shoulders eases down. “Better?”

“Yes,” Severus replies, just as Salazar lets out a startled curse in Parseltongue.

“What?” Nizar looks at his brother, who is staring down at the pages of that bloated journal with his eyebrows trying to join his hair. “Sordid exploits?”

“I’d be happier if it were exactly that. The first date I encountered is for the year 1224.”

Black is leaning against Lupin’s chair with Severus back on the sofa, but all three of them perk up in curiosity. “Why is that significant?” Black asks.

Salazar’s surprise turns to a furious scowl. “Because this is a journal written by the hand of Utredus the Gaunt of Winander Mere. The same man who was still alive in the late 1400s, calling himself Utredus Gaunt as he married Milescenta Fawcett, the locket thief.” Salazar closes the journal. “I met this man, Nizar. He seemed no older than his late thirties, though I suspect his appearance of ill health may have influenced my opinion.”

Severus goes still and quiet, as if readying himself for threat or battle. “Another Horcrux-maker?”

“Perhaps. Utredus is dead, at least. I recall hearing of such when I returned to the isle in the late 1500s,” Salazar tells them. “His wife was accused of the murder, but the Council found her innocent. As to what actually caused his death, I’ve no idea.” He opens the book again. “He speaks here of a few minor difficulties, magical notes, a mention of an entanglement tied to politics…nothing interesting yet. Who were you, Utredus?”

Black snorts. “Probably a wanker.”

“Ah, here we are. Utredus writes of accepting a post to Hogewáþ at Head Teacher Brian Gagwilde’s invitation in the year 1230.”
Nizar feels a reflection of Severus’s stillness come over him. “What post, Sal?”

“He’s been keeping the magic of his renewed title at bay with one metaphorical hand all day, trying to sift, to be certain the rest of the war mage’s awareness came to him over the next few days instead of striking in a single evening.

All it took was one crack, one chink in his armor. That waiting magic has spells ready to receive it, ones that remained underpowered for far too long.

“Nizar?”

He blinks a few times until Salazar comes back into focus. “Not Utredus. Úht Rédes,” he whispers, and then he’s somewhere else, reliving memory like it’s happening anew.

Nizar opens his eyes with a sudden intake of breath. It takes him a moment to realize that he is now lying on the floor, to recognize the faces hovering over him, marred by concern or fright. Salazar. Severus. Lupin. Black. Dobby. Filky. He isn’t then. That wasn’t then. It was just a memory, a flashback, one returned to him by a kingdom’s magic flooding his senses.

It’s a memory that certainly explains why he can’t remember anything until the very late 1200s, when Edward Longshanks was proving himself to be such a delightful English king.

Language. He needs a language. He needs to speak in a tongue Elfric never bothered to learn.

Pictish. “Galiena,” he rasps out. “Don’t let Elfric leave his portrait frame.” Then he lets his head fall back and immediately passes out.
Violets

Chapter Summary

“In the old English, Úht referred to the absence of light if used as an idea, or it refers to ‘a means to obscure’ if it’s an action. Réd means counsel, from the Latin word for planning.”

Chapter Notes

This one runs long because I'm pretty sure people would have been out for my actual blood if I'd split it in half.

(It may mean the chapter count is back down to 21, tho.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Nizar wakes before dawn with someone trying to destroy a gong inside his skull. He spies a tray of potions on the chest of drawers and lurches out of bed to grab at them. He downs three of the painkillers and a restorative at once, all the while trying not to think about what that combined taste just did to his tongue.

“Nizar is being awake?”

Nizar turns around to find Dobby perched on the end of his bed, giving Nizar a hopeful look. “Mostly,” he says. “Would you mind going out to the sitting room and building the fire back up?”

Dobby nods and vanishes without making a sound. Nizar sits back down on the edge of his bed, concentrating on breathing until his head hurts less. He needs tea. Breakfast. Maybe.

He needs not to be able to accurately count the population in Inverness right now. (Forty-five thousand one hundred two souls and possibly one in the middle of being born.) He’s so glad he already knows that this aspect of a war mage’s awareness will become near-silent background noise unless he calls upon it.

When he feels like he isn’t going to be ill, Nizar turns his attention to his bed companion. Severus fell asleep fully dressed but for his boots. Nizar bites his lip against a smile that Severus would hate before carefully pulling the quilt up over Severus’s shoulders, a guard against the faint chill in the room.

After dressing in clean clothes, he pushes open the unlatched door and goes out into the short hall. Black and Lupin claimed the couch and pull-out bed in his study. Nizar can hear by the sounds from the sitting room that Salazar must be on the sofa; his appallingly loud snoring tells Nizar that his brother is still asleep.

He seeks out Kanza on the stone in front of the hearth. The elves have already built up the fire, so she is alert rather than curled up in a sulking doze. When Nizar sits down right before the fire so she
can continue to enjoy the heat, Kanza climbs willingly into his hands. “Dearest.”

“Favorite.” Kanza curls up on his palm so she can rear up and look at him, blinking like a reptile that would prefer to go back to sleep. “You are upset. What is it?”

_Basilisks can pick up on feelings like that?_

_You are family. We are bound to the family. We know._

“You’re as wise as your mother for knowing that,” Nizar murmurs. “Kanza. In the year 1234, the Alchemy teacher of Hogwarts came to see me. Do you remember?”

Kanza ducks her head to one side, her equivalent of a shrug. “Favorite, that must depend on what you recall.”

“All of that visit. Not what came after. Not for years.” Nizar uses his fingernail to stroke her head, soothing her while also spoiling her. “How bad was it, those years afterwards?”

Kanza seems upset by the request, but she tells him of it. Nizar listens, nodding on occasion, but otherwise says nothing until she reaches the end of the 1200s, when his recollection begins again. It’s fucking spotty, but he remembers Edward I’s military campaigns and the students’ anger about them. Malcolm II united the kingdom of Alba by using peace and political alliances as his weapons. Scotland and England stabilized into the separate lands they were meant to be. The Longshanks’ claims played havoc with the magical community as well as the non-magical. He lost Slytherin students to that long, bitter, stupid war.

Filky pops into the sitting room after Nizar is done speaking with Kanza about Utredus Gaunt. “Hello, Professor Slytherin. Is the Professor Slytherin being all right?”

Nizar glances over his shoulder to find Elfric still in his portrait, asleep, as is Brice. It’s Galiena who is awake, staring at him with hooded grey eyes. “I will be. Thank you, Filky.”

“Would the Professor like breakfast?”

His stomach resolutely turns over at the thought. “Just tea, please.” When Filky gazes up at him pleadingly, he sighs. “Whatever else you add, keep it very light. I might not—if I vomit later, I’d like it not to be memorable.”

“We elves can be making certain of it,” Filky promises, and disappears.

Kanza climbs Nizar’s sleeve so she can perch on his shoulder and look at the paintings on the other side of the room. “The man who came to us in 1234 is not one I’ve ever known, not as a person or a portrait.”

“People can change,” Nizar whispers, remembering something Salazar had once said to him. “But I will need to talk to him.”

After Kanza has twined herself around his neck in her favorite place, Nizar approaches the paintings. Salazar must have been truly exhausted by gaining a war mage’s magical awareness; he normally wakes if someone approaches too close, even if they’re family.

“I’ve not unlocked his portrait yet,” Galiena says in Pictish. Nizar remembers how to be conversant in it now. He wonders what else he regained, because it certainly wasn’t much in the way of bloody events. “Please be kind, Father.”
“I’d no intention of not being so.” Nizar turns to Elfric’s portrait and switches back to Parseltongue. “Elfric. Wake, please. I need to speak to you.”

Elfric jolts awake and then gives him a smile with a puzzled air. “Good morning, Father. Why am I stuck in this frame?”

Nizar decides there is no harm in being blunt. “Do you remember what Úht Réð means, Elfric?”

Elfric frowns. “Of course. If I still know any language well aside from Parseltongue, it’s the old English. Úht Réð became the English name Uhtred, or Uchtred as the years wore on, and then they forgot it entirely. The last person I saw come through this castle with the name had the Latin version—Utredus, I think. Taught Alchemy. He wasn’t very good at it, but I don’t think that was why he was here.”

“Why not?” Nizar asks, curious.

“Well…I’m not certain,” Elfric admits. “I know Utredus was the one who chose Uncle’s original classroom for brewing as his place to teach alchemy. One day after a class, he saw Galiena and Brice in a painting together. We were watching him, you see. He was… odd. When the students called him The Gaunt, they were being very accurate.”

“What about the painting on the third floor?” Nizar prompts. “When he saw Galiena and Brice.”

“He was angry,” Elfric says after pondering it for a moment. “No; frustrated. None of us are certain why, but we always wondered…”

“Wondered what?”

“If he was responsible when portraits began to go missing, or went to sleep without waking, or seemed to not recall things as they should,” Galiena interjects. She still looks troubled, as if she didn’t sleep well. Even magical constructs such as portraits can be affected by a lack of rest.

Nizar nods. “Did he seem familiar to any of you?”

“He looked as if he might have been distant family, but if he was? I wouldn’t want to claim him,” Brice says in disgust. “There was something very foul about that man. We were all glad when he left the castle—in 1234, I believe. He finished the winter part of schooling before the spring harvest sent everyone home for a month, and then he left.”

“I see.” Nizar knows exactly why Utredus the Gaunt left Hogewáþ. He’d finished his work. “Elfric, in the old English, Úht referred to the absence of light if used as an idea, or it refers to ‘a means to obscure’ if it’s an action. Réð means counsel, from the Latin word for planning.”

“Right. Together, it means…” Elfric trails off, looking unhappy. “Obscured counsel. It wasn’t a given name, was it?”

“I don’t think so.” Nizar pauses as Salazar rolls over to resume snoring. One would think with all the modern improvements in medicine on the non-magical side, Salazar would have seen a doctor in order to fix what had been wrought by an old battle injury. “Utredus erred in choosing the Latin form of the name, and I’m still not certain why.”

Oh, he does not want to ask this next question, but it has to be done. “Elfric. If you were attempting a necromancer’s work but died in the midst of it, are there spells that would rebound on the caster?”

Galiena lets out a faint gasp; Elfric turns stark white. “Very few,” he whispers. “The most obvious, of
course, being an attempt to reanimate someone else, one who was recently dead but had injuries a healer could treat if they were reawakened. If I’d been so interrupted…yes. The magic would rebound on the caster. It’s why a necromancer is taught during their apprenticeship to take great care in casting that spell if infirm, or in grave danger.”

“Oh, God,” Brice says in alarm. “Do you think—”

“What would be the result of a spell rebounding?” Nizar asks Elfric before Brice can finish voicing the idea.

Elfric grows paler still. He was always intelligent. It’s likely he understood what Nizar was asking before Brice came to that realization. “One of two things,” he says, relying on his knowledge to forestall any sense of panic. “It would depend on how far the spell had progressed. The first half of the spell is power as well as the preservation of life—it’s crafting the magic needed to reawaken the recent dead, and that is what is dominant when casting begins. The latter half of the spell is what specifies how life returns. The reawakened dead is a living being once more, one with a soul, one who has the ability to grow old and die a natural death.”

His youngest son scrubs at his hair while Galiena and Brice stare at him in dismay. “If the spell was all but done, a spell rebounding on the dead necromancer attempting to cast it would simply reanimate the caster as a whole being, hale and healthy, just as was intended for whoever they were attempting to reawaken. But—but if it were still the early part of casting, there wouldn’t be enough magic to reawaken a whole being.”

“No soul,” Nizar says softly.

Elfric shakes his head, distressed. “No. The result would be pristine reanimation, but it would be a dead body reawakened, not a person. A dead, unchanging, and soulless body with no spark of true life to guide its path.”

“Like Inferi,” Brice murmurs.

“No, not Inferi. They’re mindless and subject to rot, though it is a very slow process,” Elfric corrects Brice.

“The second option, then. The reanimated dead. What would they be like?” Nizar asks, feeling his eyes burn. He already knows the answer.

“The first half of the spell is about the preservation of life. They would never change,” Elfric says, “and never changing is what goes so very wrong. The reanimated necromancer’s corpse would remember their life, but you’re speaking of a body that has no soul. Without it, we’re lost. That reanimated body would be driven to find a purpose. It would seek that purpose until it found it, and then fulfill it by any means necessary in an attempt to feel what they lack.”

“A purpose,” Nizar repeats. He understands Utredus’s actions much more clearly now, but it isn’t making him feel any better.

“You think Utredus the Gaunt of Winander Mere was me. A soulless wanderer,” Elfric says in a dry rasp.

Nizar clenches his jaw and nods. “Yes.”

“Oh. Oh, God.” Elfric scrubs at his hair again, an early nervous gesture from his childhood. “Are you certain? You’re certain that he was soulless?”

“Is there ever an instance when the spark can exist within the reanimated dead?” Nizar asks. “Because dead he most certainly was. Yes, I met Utredus the Gaunt before he left the castle,” he explains.

“No.” Elfric swallows. “It’s one or the other only. The magic is there to retain a soul’s spark along with the true form of life, or the magic is not. I suppose one could intentionally place a soul into a dead body, but if it’s a rebounded spell, then no. How can you be so certain it was—”

“Soulless?” Nizar tries to smile and knows it’s a miserable failure. “Elfric, youngest of my children: you came to me while I slept and dreamed. You told me yourself that you had died, and I watched you depart from this world. When your uncle tried to scry upon the water immediately afterwards, all was mist.”

Elfric’s voice wobbles. “You never told me that. You only told me of my death. I know I’m just a portrait, but…you didn’t tell me.”

“I lost you only two years after Brice. I couldn’t speak of it to any of you. It was Galiena who informed her own portrait of what had occurred,” Nizar says.

Elfric bites his lip before he musters a glare for his sister. “Why did you not tell me, then?”

“We are only portraits, but why would I wish to make our grief worse?” Galiena counters gently.

Nizar thinks on the conversations that may take place in this room today. “Exactly so. One last thing. How would one kill this reanimated dead necromancer? Someone went on trial for Utredus Gaunt’s murder at a time when the Council was already calling itself the Wizengamot, but they were acting more in line with the old ways. The one on trial was found innocent, but it still means that someone definitely figured out how to make Utredus deceased in truth.”

“Oh. Uh—” Elfric looks flustered. “If someone were able to discern the magic that bound the reanimated necromancer to life and severed that magic, that’s all it would take.”

“Like severing someone’s blood magic tie to their Horcrux.” Nizar looks at his children’s distraught faces and makes a decision. “Galiena, take Brice and Elfric with you to another part of the castle and spend the day there.”


“Because I do not want you to hear what may be spoken of today. I don’t care if you’re ‘merely’ a portrait. You do not need this burden,” Nizar tells him with quiet fierceness.

“But Father—”

“Elfric.” Galiena regards the portrait of her brother. “It’s enough to know that something ill happened. Let that be the end of it for you. You know our Father would not want you to carry on your conscience things for which you are not to blame.”

“My thoughts, Galiena!” Elfric retorts. “My body! My deeds!”

“No,” Galiena replies in a stern voice. “You said it yourself. Without a spark, what was done was not done by you. A soulless being named himself after the idea of obscured counsel, but he was not you.” She holds out both hands. “Come with me, Brice and Elfric. Father told me once that I should
not look at what was done to my parents, that I should remember them as they were before, and as they lay in their shrouds. I did not need to see what happened in between. He was correct then, and he is correct now. Come.”

“I will if Father answers one question,” Elfric insists stubbornly. “Father—did Utredus move your portrait?”

Nizar looks back at him and knows Elfric will refuse to do anything else until he hears this answer. “Yes, Elfric. He did.”

Elfric’s response is a raging combination of Parseltongue, Old English, Gaelic, and Norse. He’s still uttering oaths and obscenities under his breath when Galiena all but drags both him and Brice out of their portrait frames.

“What was all of that hissing?” Salazar slurs at him without bothering to wake up.

“Something that can keep until you rise for the day. Go back to sleep, Sal,” Nizar replies, and is grateful when Salazar does so. He’s not ready to have that conversation yet. Not at all.

“What now, Favorite?” Kanza asks after Nizar walks away from the empty portrait frames.

“Now—now I very much need to do other things. Would you like to join me? I need to go out, but I’ll wear that woolen scarf you like to hide under so much.”

“Yes! If you will wear what is warm, I will be pleased,” Kanza replies. Nizar runs his fingertips along her scales, glad she sounds so willing. Her presence has been soothing for centuries, a constant for so very long.

“Excellent. But first…” Nizar places his hands onto the wall that holds the fireplace. He needs what once was to be once more…especially if his quarters are going to keep playing host to more than just himself, Severus, and Salazar’s occasional company.

Below his ear, Kanza begins hissing out soft laughter as the sitting room grows larger. “Yes! Yes, Favorite! Be this magician again!” she chants in his ear.

“Your tongue is tickling me!” he responds indignantly. His mental image of the old sitting room from the time when it needed to host an adult, three children, and their various guests is strong in his mind, the first time he’s recalled it so clearly in literal centuries. He widens the first window and brings back the second on the eastern wall, doubling the amount of natural light entering the room. The width and span of the sitting room grows by a full third of its original size in both directions. The hallway becomes a longer passage that hosts seven doors rather than four. One of the new doors leads to a room that he’d once hidden within the magical space of the tower, feeling there was no need for it any longer. The second door goes to one of the ancient greenhouses in a different seventh storey tower. It feels unused and deadened to his senses, but that can be remedied. The last door as yet goes nowhere; that one will require permission.

Nizar drops his hands and is relieved to find that he only feels a bit dizzy, not ill. When he turns around, Nizar discovers a crowd of house-elves who are staring up at him with wide, glimmering eyes in shades of blue, green, grey, gold, copper, brows—even red and silver. “Er—hello?”

Filky and Dobby are at the front of the group, and lead the elves in an elegant bow. “Geomantia Magus,” they murmur.

Right. He would have—he would have been that, wouldn’t he? He couldn’t have made these rooms in the way he did, no matter how much the castle listened to him. This is about spatial mathematics,
not merely intent. “Thank you. I need your help, please.”

The elves all perk up. “As the Professor Slytherin asks, we will do our best,” Filky whispers, still mindful of a snoring man on the sofa, even if the sofa is now much further away from this side of the room than before.

“A rug for this room, please. One large enough to fill the space but not mask the whole of the stone.” Nizar can’t stand the idea of anything resembling the old rug. “Something in black, or perhaps grey, or a blend of those. Just not...nothing like the rug that was here before the incident with the dying Horcrux.”

The elves all nod. “There is being many rugs in the Room Where Everything is Hidden,” Dobby says thoughtfully. “Dobby will ask Tinny, Rubiny, and Kreacher to help him.”

Nizar finally notices Kreacher standing amongst the elves. “Thank you,” he says, eying Kreacher as he does so. The old elf twitches his ears, but there is respect in his eyes, not distaste. That will have to do. “The table that is in here. Please take it into the room that was not here before, as that table is now a part of that space. If there are shelves or bookcases or—or discarded tools that will suit, those as well.” That means he keeps the old table, but he’s going to need to apply protective charms to preserve it against accidents. “In here, I’m going to need a table capable of seating six, though it should be easy to expand, just in case. Nothing outlandish, please. No gilded wood. Simple. Sturdy.”

He sighs and glances at the sofa. “And another sofa. Two more chairs. A table to sit between each chair. Bloody hell, I feel like I’m stealing from a shop.”

The elves snicker. “You is stealing from the rubbish pile, which is not stealing at all. We elves will take nothing from nowhere else,” Dobby says. “If we cannot be finding what the Professor is needing, then we will tell the Professor so the Professor Slytherin can search elsewhere.”

“Good. That’s excellent. Everyone but Winky, please go begin—wait. Try not to go overboard on the green and silver, all right? It’s a bit much after living in the green light of a lake for nearly a thousand years,” Nizar adds, trying to smile. “Off with you.”

“What is the Professor Slytherin wanting Winky to do?” The elf reaches up to wipe a large tear away from her eye. “Winky is getting better, but Winky is not so useful.”

“You are useful. You exist, and that makes you amazing,” Nizar tells her, startling the elf. “I need shopping done at...well, to be honest, it might take visits to every apothecary in Britain to find everything.”

Winky perks up. “It is being too early for shopping.”

“Yes, but gold is convincing,” Nizar replies. “I’ll give you a list of ingredients that I need, and enough coin to cover all of it, no matter how outrageous the cost may be. You have my permission to Apparate into every shop you know of, seek out exactly what I’ve listed, and pay for it appropriately. Place a note on the counter to explain why, and that if there is not enough money left behind for the inconvenience, they can bill my account through Hogwarts. Can you do that?”

Winky dries her eyes and nods with a bit more enthusiasm. “Yes, Professor Slytherin! Winky can be doing that! Winky is excited! Winky has never been asked to do a bad thing for a good reason before!”

Nizar smiles. “Here’s to hoping that it becomes a continuing trend. Come with me to my office, Winky. I’ll need to write down everything in there.”
Severus awakens when it occurs to his sleeping mind that he’s no longer aware of another’s touch or body heat. He snaps open his eyes and finds the bed next to him empty, though the quilt has been thoughtfully pulled up to his shoulders.

Something else woke him. A scent in the air. Severus lifts his head. Apple blossoms?

He gets out of bed, casts a refreshing charm on his clothes, and pulls on his boots. The Restorative potion on the tray makes him feel more alert, and he no longer feels…unbalanced. The awareness of land and people is still with him, but rest helped, as Nizar said it would.

When he opens the door to the bedroom, the hallway is longer.

Severus scrubs at his eyes, wondering if he’s still exhausted, and looks again. The hallway is still twice its length. Behind him, the bedroom is the same.

Very well. It’s bloody Hogwarts, and she’s redecorating, possibly on an insane Slytherin’s request.

The first door on the left from the bedroom is further down the hall than it originally had been, and is cracked open. Severus glances inside to see that it still holds Black and the werewolf, including the couch and bed they were sleeping on, but no other sign of Nizar’s private study. Interesting. The door to his right, directly across from the study, leads into Nizar’s storage room—that remains unchanged, at least.

The first truly baffling moment is finding that the bathroom is no longer at the end of the hallway on the left, but just down from the storage room, on the right. Severus stares into it, concerned that if he puts his foot across that threshold, he’ll find himself somewhere else.

Like fucking Narnia, Severus thinks derisively. It’s a bloody magical castle, and he should be used to its changes. Just because he’s never seen Hogwarts do anything this drastic doesn’t mean he’s in danger.

The bathroom is exactly the same on the inside, familiar slate-tinged stone and tile, with the same soaps, towels, and other available toiletries. It’s a relief to use the loo, something he should have done last night before he passed out. He still hesitates at the sight of his toothbrush in a bronze-polished stand alongside Nizar’s, which looks to be one of the originals made of bristle hair. He’s always shrugged over the idiosyncrasy, given that the brush is obviously still capable of doing the same damned job the modern brushes do. For all that wizards disdain things of Muggle nature, they were happy enough to adopt nylon.

It’s Severus’s toothbrush that bothers him more, even if it’s a copy of the one he keeps in his quarters. It’s the fact that it is there. That he shares a bathroom often enough with another person that it became necessary.

He goes back out to the elongated hall. The first new door on his left doesn’t open at his touch, and doesn’t seem to have been used in a long time. The other looks like a locked replica of the door to his quarters, but it’s a door type common to this castle. The third door is open, and that is where he finds Nizar.

Severus gazes around the new room, intrigued. It’s a potions laboratory with its own oddity on the
wall; it looks like the hood that goes over a Muggle range built into the wall, but its purpose of allowing fumes to escape is obvious. The bookshelves and desk missing from Nizar’s study have been relocated here, all of it set far away from the workbench—no, table. That’s the table from the sitting room, now converted to a potions workbench.

A rack above him is covered in long stalks of drying plants and twigs; a series of shelves along the walls hold antique jars of ingredients, though many look to be local. The table hosts the bronze cauldron, which is emitting a fragrant steam into the air.

Nizar is fiddling with a positively archaic set of weights. “Are you going to gawp at the door, or are you going to come in?”

“I wasn’t done gawping,” Severus returns dryly, entering the room. “What the hell are you doing?”

Nizar stands up and tosses in the ingredient he’d been measuring by weight—a number of violets so fresh that there is still morning dew on the petals. “Have you ever done something because you truly do not wish to think?”

Severus nods. “On many occasions. Is that what this is? An attempt not to think?”

Nizar makes a face. “Well, it requires thinking, but it’s the sort of thinking that keeps me from dwelling on anything else.”

“Like last night?”

Nizar nods at him in affirmation and then retrieves a vessel that holds pomegranate seeds soaking in pomegranate oil. He pours the entire amount of liquid and seeds into the bronze cauldron, which changes the color of the steam to a faint pink. When Nizar gestures at the stirring rod—bronze, not one of the other three—it begins to stir the potion in a very slow, precise manner.

“While you are busy avoiding what happened, what are you brewing?” Severus asks.

“The scroll is on the desk,” Nizar says,” next to the book. Oh, and don’t touch the book. Irma Pince is already going to murder me for going into the library’s Restricted Section to fetch it without telling her. As long as your prints aren’t on the pages, she’ll only be trying to murder me and not the both of us.”

He frowns upon hearing three different vocal shifts in as many minutes from Nizar, but chooses not to comment. If Nizar is that desperate for a distraction, then last night’s revelations were probably not kind.

Severus recognizes the print in the book at once—it’s Cumbric. He’s seen enough of the written language over recent months as Nizar growled over translation attempts. Next to the text are two other books—one is in Nizar’s modern script, the notes he’s been taking from his own portrait in an attempt to relearn the language properly. Next to that is a dog-eared journal with handwriting that is unmistakably still the child’s, a book Severus has never seen before. He flips through a few pages, curious, and finds notes on weights, measurements, and conversions from Imperial or Metric for every conceivable thing necessary to function in a magical world that requires precise measurements—and in that era, there were many, many different types of measuring systems in use. There are also a lot of random notations regarding Old English, Norse, Latin, spells, charms, hexes, curses, combat theory, and whatever else the child must have come across that wasn’t immediately understood.

What was he trying to do that first day? Severus asks himself, feeling harsh guilt. Harry Potter had been doing what any wise student would do—taking notes. Severus had never had anyone take
notes on his opening speech for the first-years before, which is a shame. It always holds valuable information.

That he’d needed to take that moment of intelligence and use it to grind the child’s psyche into understanding that Professor Severus Snape was his enemy had…that had been one of the few moments of his life that caused him pain. Not only was that Lily’s child, but Severus knew he was about to crush any desire Potter might have to academically succeed in Potions. Lily would have put his head on a fucking pole and placed it on the castle battlements as a warning to others for doing so, and he knew it. Severus kept all of that in mind—and did it anyway, because he had no choice.

The effects had been even more far-reaching than expected. Severus spoke to the other staff and discovered that Potter had immediately stopped being a diligent student in every subject, despite what had been a discussed brilliant start.

Severus loathes himself for that. In trying to hold to Albus’s plans, he’d done terrible damage to Potter’s ability to defend himself from Voldemort in that damned cemetery. He didn’t have the education to know other ways it would have been possible to do so.

He makes himself move on past his guilt to view the scroll of new writing in Nizar’s hand, which looks to have been translated from the Cumbric book. It’s the potion’s name that makes his breath catch.

*To Brew for a Gentle Beast, Seek Truth by the Time of the Full Moon.*

Severus frowns over the ingredients. “What is truth in regards to this?”

“It’s an allegory.” Nizar adds fluid from crushed horehound leaves to the cauldron. The steam turns white again. “The truth of any zoikóthropic curse is that they aren’t really curses at all. They’re…” Nizar frowns as he fetches an entire bundle of dried rue, clean and intact from root to uppermost leaf. The knife he uses to chop the rue is bronze, not silver or steel. “It’s a magical blood-borne contaminant of potential.”

Severus frowns. “Please try to explain that in a way that makes more sense.”

“More sense.” Nizar watches the potion for a moment before he starts adding rue, a single cut at a time. What he’s brewing is so utterly alien to Severus that he can’t even gain a sense of what is happening with each ingredient’s addition.

“It was theorized that the varying types of zoikóthropy emerged from attempts to create an Animagus—not by taking the time to master inner Transfiguration, but by ingesting potions infused with the blood of the animal that the magician wanted to imitate. As in most cases when you’re abusing blood magic, it didn’t work the way any of them planned.”

Severus rolls his eyes. Of course the explanation would originate with idiots. “Then what of instances like Fenrir Greyback? Or Lupin’s less than pleasant transformations?”

“I said it was magic of potential. That potential carries the animal of each particular strain with it.” Nizar finishes dispensing with the rue and waves his hand over the cauldron, breathing in the steam in a way Severus would *never* do when brewing a potion. Nizar either knows that it’s safe, or there is an element within the steam that tells him how to proceed.

“You can choose what to do with that potential. When Greyback became a werewolf, he embraced the idea that a werewolf was an evil creature, which wasn’t much of a stretch, since he was, by all accounts, a complete rotten bastard to begin with. He embraced the whole of that potential until it
resembled a curse, as that’s what he chose for it to be.”

“And Lupin?” Severus asks.

“Werewolves are feared,” Nizar murmurs, throwing in a large portion of something that creates minor explosions over the cauldron. Severus blinks the bright sparks out of his eyes from the effects of Wolf’s Foot Club Moss spores. “Fear influences potential. The image of the terrible werewolf becomes the form the magic takes. That is also when it becomes a curse. You never hear much from those infected with feline types of zoikóthropy, nor the birds or the serpents. It’s the werewolf people fear. Without fear, those others infected with that magical potential become the animal of that strain. They might be larger, more powerful, and carry the ability to pass on that magical potential, but since they do not fear themselves, they have more self-awareness during a full moon.”

Severus stares at him. “When did you recall all of this, Nizar?”

Nizar pauses in the midst of seeding the potion with blue bindweed. “As I was translating the potion. You’re wondering what else I might be recalling?”

“That had crossed my mind, yes, given that the hallway is longer,” Severus says in irritation.

Nizar just smiles. “Geomancy. I have the training to understand what I can do with it, access to a magical castle, and a background in Pictish magic that gives me a further grasp of how to rewrite existing space. Mind you, this lab was here centuries ago. The sitting room used to be the size it is now. One of the other new doors was present, too. I reduced everything after the children moved out. I didn’t see the point in having all that unused space.”

“I take it you’ve changed your mind about unused space.”

“Well, I keep getting crowds of people in my quarters. I might as well have space for them,” Nizar says wryly. “I didn’t really get any memories beyond the one I am very much trying to avoid. I have a few more recollections of things I could do. Remembering that fucking potion, for starters.”

“And the Cumbric?” Severus asks.

“Not all of it. I know the translations are correct, but I couldn’t yet sit down and read through a book and be certain I understood it.” Dried skullcaps go into the cauldron. “That will take more time.”

Severus glances at the translated formula again as Nizar picks up the bronze knife for slicing burdock root. “I notice that aconite isn’t listed here.”

Nizar nearly shoves the bronze blade through his fingers. He ruins the next bit of burdock root but saves his skin. Then he turns around to stare at Severus. “What the hell? Why would aconite be listed?”

“It’s in modern Wolfsbane as a means to calm the wolf,” Severus says, surprised by Nizar’s reaction.

“Calm the wolf,” Nizar repeats, visibly disturbed. He finishes off the burdock root, lets it tumble into the cauldron, and then puts down both blade and cutting board. “Severus, any potion that contains aconite isn’t a cure. It’s a short-term stopgap that creates a docile werewolf—at least until it dies of slow aconite poisoning! Dear gods, did you not ever question that formula?”

“I was more concerned with the fact that it worked,” Severus retorts, but he’s busy dealing with the annoying, truly galling feeling of having been foolish. He is a Potions Master. He didn’t investigate the Wolfsbane formula other than brew and provide it to Lupin when Severus had to put up with the man as part of the school’s staff two years ago. He was more focused on grim relief that something
existed to hinder werewolves.

Nizar is correct. Severus allowed fear to overwhelm intellect. That is utterly unacceptable.

Severus makes himself sound calmer than he feels. “Do you think it was deliberate? Wolfsbane as a slow poison?”

“Aconite is fatal to werewolves, just as other plants are fatal to different strains of zoikóthropy. No matter what you blend it with, that will never change.” Nizar presses his shaking hand to his forehead. “Yes, it’s intentional. You told me that formula was about a decade old. It’s been available long enough that I imagine werewolves have already died of it.”

That makes Severus truly angry. He can’t stand Lupin’s constant spinelessness, and he is terrified of Lupin’s werewolf form, but he doesn’t want the bastard dead. If Severus kills someone, he is going to be bloody well fucking aware of it, choosing the act himself! “I have no wish to be complicit in unintentional murder.”

“Good thing we have this instead, then.” Nizar collects a bundle and gives it a quick inspection. It’s made from woven leaves of wild lettuce, filled with wood betony and apple blossoms, and tied closed with strips of dried mullein root. When Nizar adds it to the cauldron, it emits a bright white light that slowly fades. The steam it emits becomes as bronze as both cauldron and the implements Nizar used to prepare the ingredients before fading to white again, an intriguing metallic glimmer in each wispy curl. “There. That is what a proper treatment for lycanthropy looks like, Severus. The other pleasant aspect is the fact that if I somehow botched it, there is nothing in here that will kill a werewolf. They might not feel so well for a few hours, but better to be ill than dead.”

If it works as Nizar claims, it’s an amazing accomplishment, a brilliant formulation. “The ingredients listed here—most of them are dual purpose,” Severus says. “I see curse protection, curse bindings, increases of magic and free will, and multiple medicinal purposes.”

“The potion heals the transition into the wolf, or whatever strain of beast it’s given to. It also repairs damage done to the person during the transformation back to human, so there are no aftereffects once the night is over. None.” Nizar lowers his head. “I couldn’t stand to see Galiena in that much pain.”

Severus frowns and looks down at the original Cumbric text from the library, studying not the words, but the handwriting. He glances over at the dog-eared journal, and while the handwriting there is clean, it’s still the quill-printing of someone learning to do it properly. The Cumbric text, though—he can see the hints of that same handwriting there. “Nizar. Did you create this?”

Nizar lifts the stirring rod from the cauldron, studying the clear potion dripping from it with a detached gaze. “I think so. Maybe. I might simply have written it down in that book. I don’t remember. I have enough of those memories back to know how to make this potion, to—”

Severus is irritated by the fact that he flinches when Dobby Apparates into the room. “Professors of Slytherin,” Dobby greets them formally, and then holds up Nizar’s silver heraldic coat pin that bears the gemstones of his masteries. “Dobby be fixing this for you, Professor Slytherin. Oh, and the Professor Salazar is awake. He is saying bad words to the tea, and saying bad words about you making the sitting room bigger without warning him first.”

Nizar snorts in amusement. “He was making enough racket to wake the—he was being loud. He can handle a bit of a room change.” He holds up the silver crest and frowns. “Dobby? Why are there two new stones on here?”

Dobby smiles brightly up at Nizar. “Because the Professor Slytherin is being a Geomantia Magus,
and because the Professor Slytherin is being a Potions Master.”

“That is complete nonsense. I can’t be a Potions Master. I kill plants,” Nizar says flatly.

Dobby tilts his head. “Herbology and Potions are being two separate masteries, Professor Slytherin,” he informs Nizar. “Dobby will be getting the black diamond to add to Professor Snape’s family crest,” he tells Severus, and then Disapparates.

Nizar stares at the additional teardrops of Baltic amber and bloodstone hanging from the Deslizarse crest. “Fuck.”

“I suppose you’ll have to stop protesting your ability in regards to brewing,” Severus offers in a bland voice.

“Oh, fuck you, too,” Nizar grouses. “Shit. Maybe I did invent it—no. No, I remember now. I improved it. There was a version we had at first that bound the contaminant so it would take the form of a docile beast, but it wasn’t enough. It was pain and agony, days of suffering from limbs that were broken twice in one night. I didn’t think that was enough. There had to be something better.”

“One potion you improved; two potions you improved to the point of turning it into something entirely new.” Severus raises an eyebrow. “How old were you for this particular potion’s improvement?”

Nizar’s eyes lose focus as he tries to hunt for a memory that might not be there. “I hadn’t adopted Galiena yet. She was nine when that happened…but it was the year before.” To Severus’s surprise, Nizar flushes a dull red and covers his face with his hands. “Sixteen,” he says through his fingers.

“Sixteen,” Severus repeats. The child, as Severus’s student, had mastered Oculus in his second year. Despite the speed in which it can be brewed, it’s N.E.W.T.-level because it is so very easy to botch that damned potion. An alteration of the barest microgram can ruin it. Granger might have claim to Polyjuice that same year, but that potion’s primary difficulty for a brewer is the mind-numbing patience it requires. Then under Salazar, a far more patient teacher, Nizar had become someone who apparently loses his patience with ineffective potions and decides they need to be redone correctly. To be better. Flawless.

“Would it be odd if I said that I was…if I said that I was proud of you?” Severus murmurs.

“Yes,” Nizar replies immediately, but he smiles. “It’s very, very odd. But it’s nice to hear.”

Nizar bottles up three tubes’ worth of the clear potion, each tube gaining a glass stopper. Then he pours the remaining potion into several large flasks that are also stoppered by glass. He touches his wand to each one. “Preservation Charm. They’ll keep for months,” he explains.

Severus nods, pleased by that aspect of the potion. Wolfsbane has to be brewed the day before and given to the werewolf the day of the moon, and what remains afterwards is useless.

When they go out to the hallway, Nizar shuts the door behind them before leading Severus to the other two new doors. “This one goes to the greenhouse Salazar couldn’t find,” he explains. “It’s going to take a lot of work to get that one back into shape. This door…” He takes Severus to the one that looks like a twin to his own. “This will only remain if you want it here.”

“Why is it my decision?” Severus asks.

“Because if I make it an active doorway, it’s the door to your quarters,” Nizar replies, looking away from Severus. “A direct link. No Apparating required. But if you don’t want it, the door goes away.”
Severus realizes he is gaping outright and stops that at once. “You would be giving me unrestricted access to your home. I would be able to come here at any time.”

“Well, the same is true in reverse,” Nizar points out.

“Bargaining, then, as I suspect this is something you want.” Severus waits until Nizar looks up at him. “I’ll make a decision about this door after I’m told of what happened last night in regards to Utredus Gaunt.”

Nizar flinches. “I’d planned for that, anyway. I just don’t want to.”

“Is it that terrible?”

Nizar pinches the bridge of his nose before he meets Severus’s gaze again. If Severus had to identify the emotion lurking in gray-green depths, he would be forced to name it anguish. “Yes.”

Severus is glad of the warning he received. The sitting room is not literally twice the size it was before, but it certainly seems that way. The destroyed rug he and Salazar were conspiring to replace has already been usurped by another, a dark gray rug with blue, white, and black lines that are mindful of Islamic art from the Middle Ages. There are now two sofas, though the second is the same neutral grey as the one in the now-former study. Three armchairs have individual tables beside them where last night there had been only one. The new dining table for meals or tea is made of old cherrywood that has darkened with age, accompanied by six solid chairs that are well-shaped and sturdy rather than ornate.

Lupin, Black, and Salazar are sitting at the new table, and all three are glaring at Nizar.

“Cherry?” Severus observes, amused by the matching set of expressions that greet them.

Nizar rolls his eyes. “Blame the elves, but they said it was in the best condition of all the tables they could find in the rubbish room aspect.” He then ignores the others’ temperament and goes straight to Lupin. “Three doses,” he says, all but shoving the corked tubes into Lupin’s hands. “One with breakfast. One before lunch. One after dinner. That’s your replacement for the slow fucking poison that is Wolfsbane. Can you remember those instructions?”

Lupin looks startled before he examines the stoppered tubes. “Three doses on the day of the full moon. With breakfast, before lunch, after dinner. I can remember that, yes. What does it do?”

“All the benefits of Wolfsbane without the pain, recovery time, and, oh yes, the slow fucking poisoning,” Nizar replies. “If you’ve eaten something, drink the damned potion.”

“Nizar, I…” Lupin holds up the beaker. “What is this?”

“To Brew for a Gentle Beast, Seek Truth by Time of the Full Moon.” Salazar smiles. “I can recall the name for it now, if not the ingredients. It’s safe, Lupin. There is nothing in that brew that will harm you. It will only help you.”

Lupin is still dithering. “But I—”

Nizar stares down at him. “Remus. Trust me,” he says, but the way the words emerge makes it sound more like a question.

That is a challenge Lupin doesn’t seem able to avoid. He pulls the first glass stopper and downs the tube’s contents. Then his expression twists up in disbelief. “It tastes like bloody apples!”
“Good. That means I didn’t fuck it up.” Nizar sits down at the table. Severus sits next to him and raids the tea tray, which is hosting a sweet Assam this morning instead of gunpowder black.

“How did you just…change the room? All of this?” Black asks, but at least he waits until Nizar has tea.

“Geomancy and access to a castle’s magic,” Nizar answers. “This is the way it used to look. I wanted it back.”

“How?” Black whines. “I’m supposed to have a mastery in this, and I’ve no idea how you did it!”

Nizar rolls his eyes. “To have made the Marauder’s Map, you must have had an understanding of three-dimensional space and how to manipulate it. You altered it, taught it to name itself, to recognize those passing through these walls. You just have to lift those concepts from paper and apply them to what’s around you—though please do not alter my quarters. I just put them back this way.”

“Then in Twelve Grimmauld Place, I could go into a room and just…manipulate its space,” Black says slowly.

“Yes. Granted, if you wanted a larger room, you have to employ magical space. Wizarding space, you’re calling it now. Stupid name.” Nizar grabs a fistful of bacon and gnaws on it with the resentment of someone who forgot to eat for too long, but still isn’t in the mood.

“What happened last night?” Salazar asks after the bacon vanishes. “I notice there are three empty portraits where children lurked last night.”

“Last night.” Nizar puts the teacup down and wipes his hands on a napkin. “I noticed first with the Pensife. That memory I showed you was crisp, clear—as real as standing here, yes?”

“Informatively so,” Lupin says, though he glances at Black after speaking.

“Returning that memory to my own head meant that it immediately lost that clarity. It went back to being the way it was before I placed it in the Pensife,” Nizar says. “Trying to recall those events is like trying to see it through the smoke of a fire. Difficult, to say the least.”

“That makes no sense at all,” Salazar says, frowning. “Such should not be.”

“Oh, it makes perfect sense if you know why.” Nizar picks up his teacup, looks like he’s considering throwing it against the wall, and puts it down again. “The failure of the Preservation Charm is not the sole cause of my memory problems. There is also very old spell damage.”

Severus feels a chill feeling crawl down his spine and along his limbs. “Someone literally threw your portrait into a fucking fireplace, Nizar. That canvas was meant to be invulnerable.”

“But it wasn’t. Not against everything.” Nizar shakes his head. “The funny thing is that if those sorts of plans were being made in the 990s, I might have insisted upon that one forgotten protection…but it wasn’t the 990s. It had been thirty years, and I was used to certain aspects of our culture.”

“Such as?” Black asks, starting to look desperately unhappy and angry at once. It isn’t a flattering combination.

“Obliviscatur.” Salazar’s dark skin has turned shock-pale. “Your modern Obliviate. The spell was considered to be such an abuse of magic that even some of the foulest magicians of our day would have naught to do with it. We wouldn’t have built a protection against it into the canvas because…”
“You wouldn’t have felt it necessary.” Severus is starting to feel ill, and it isn’t a war mage’s heightened awareness driving the sensation. “After all, who would Obliviate a portrait?”

“Gilderoy fucking Lockhart, probably,” Lupin mutters.

“Salazar: not Obliviscatur.” Nizar seems to be bracing himself. “Obliviscaris omnia.”

“Oh, God,” Black says in a strangled voice.

“Forget everything,” Salazar whispers.

Severus stares at Nizar. That would explain...a great deal. Almost everything, in fact, but for Nizar’s last act of the previous night—asking Galiena in a foreign tongue to keep Elfric deSlizarse from traveling beyond the bounds of his portrait. “Nizar, what happened?”

Nizar swallows hard, bites his lip, and then lets out a choked laugh. “Fuck. I’m sorry, I can’t—I cannot actually do this.” He hisses under his breath; Kanza twines her way down his shirtsleeve. “But she can. Kanza will tell you what you need to know, though Salazar will have to keep his head together long enough to interpret for her.”

“Where are you going?” Black asks as Nizar abruptly shoves his chair back and stands up.

“In there.” Nizar jerks his thumb over his shoulder at his classroom door. “I have a desperate need to destroy everything in my path, and the original Defence graduation simulation will do nicely.”

Salazar doesn’t look surprised. All he says is, “Don’t turn the bloody safeties off this time.”

“I didn’t. You keep forgetting it’s just that difficult,” Nizar retorts. “Do not Apparate into that room, no matter what you think you hear. Do not open that door until it lets you.”

Lupin winces. “And what are we going to hear?”

Nizar glances at them, and though he doesn’t blink, to Severus it feels like he must have. One moment Nizar’s eyes are normal; the next, they are shining with intense emerald green fire, throwing silver sparks that are visible in the air. “I’m going in there to kill every single simulacrum that room offers. I’d rather not kill any of you. Don’t tempt me otherwise.” Then he Disapparates from the room instead of using the door.

“Oof.” Black picks up his discarded napkin and wipes his forehead. “That was intense.”

Salazar is gathering Kanza up into his hands, where the basilisk curls into a distressed bundle on his palms. “That bad, is it, dearest?” Kanza hisses out long notes of displeasure, her tail twitching. “You picked up quite a bit of foul language over the centuries, you know.”

“I didn’t realize basilisks understood English.” Lupin looks as if he’s desperately casting about for topics of conversation that are not his godson’s temper. “It’s too bad you can’t learn Parseltongue.”

“You can.” Severus leans back in his chair so that he can rest his clenched hands in his lap, out of view. He can’t hear anything from the classroom, but he can sense it. “It’s not easy.”

“You. Are learning Parseltongue,” Black says. For once he seems to have forgotten that his loathed snake enemies are supposed to speak nothing but.

“Four words only.” Severus hisses them out in succession, which makes Salazar crack a brief smile. “Kanza believes they’re the three most important things to know. I’m inclined to agree.”
Lupin looks surprised. “What are they?”

“Yes, no, and fuck you.”

Black smiles. “I agree with the basilisk. Also, I want to learn.”

“Learning it isn’t impossible, but it is very, very difficult. Without an ear for the change in pitch and the harmonics involved, you can only gain so much ground before any further grasp of the words is impossible. Speaking of…” Salazar scratches Kanza’s head with his fingernail. “She doesn’t want to be telling us of this, either. Darling beauty, we need to know. I don’t think your Chosen is going to be much in the mood for it.”

Kanza lifts her head, lets out a hiss that is decidedly swearing, before she gives vent to the longest, angriest diatribe Severus has ever witnessed from the basilisk. It’s too fast for Salazar to translate right away, but the expression on his face is beyond informative. At first, it’s contained fury that makes emerald and green sparks dance at his eyes and fingertips. Then it changes, becoming puzzled —until he suddenly lets out an anguished sound, a string of words in Castilian that barely qualify as language at all.

Salazar gets up from the table and then clutches the back of the chair, using it to keep himself upright. “Oh. Oh, gods.”

“If you’re going to be ill, do note that the bathroom has changed locations,” Severus says. He means it partly in jest, and is surprised when Salazar all but tosses an infant basilisk at him before bolting from the room. Severus catches Kanza, who constricts around his hand almost to the point of pain in response to suddenly being flung from one person to another.

“Whatever happened? I’m no longer sure that I want to know,” Lupin says.

Severus subjects Lupin to the most withering glare he knows how to muster. “Is that all it takes? The merest hint of hardship? If so, you should never have agreed to be a war mage, Lupin. You definitely should not have consented to be a godparent.”

Lupin’s jaw drops open, which is entertaining. “You’re not a parent. You don’t have the right to say anything at all.” Intriguingly, Black is not leaping to Lupin’s defence.

“No. I’m merely a teacher to an average of three hundred students per year. Every year, fifty to seventy-five of those students are solely mine to look after as their Head of House. That group of students trusts no one in this entire fucking castle but myself to have their best interests in mind, as it’s been proven to them, over and over again, that very few others do. I’ve watched hundreds of students come into this school as children and leave as adults. By the end of this term, I’ll have been doing so for fourteen years.

“You’re right; I’m not a parent. As far as I’m concerned, parents have the easier task unless they choose to also be educators themselves.”

“Well-spoken.” Salazar rejoins them, the ends of his short hair wet from washing his face in the sink. “That potion you were handed this morning, Lupin? My brother has been searching for it, for months, for you.” Salazar’s eyes narrow as he looks at the werewolf. “Make a decision, Remus Lupin. Pray you make the correct one.”

“Given that leaving will most likely end in my death? I don’t see that I have much choice,” Lupin says in a flat, defeated voice.

Salazar raises both eyebrows. “Death? Oh, there are things far worse than death. If you choose not to
be here when Nizar returns from that room, he might forgive, but he will not forget. Black?"

Black just glances up at Salazar. “You’d have to fucking make me leave, because I’m not doing it.”

Salazar stares back. “Nizar does not remember me speaking of this, as it happened this past July, but I told him I knew his parents. I’m very glad to see that they were not wrong about you, Sirius Black.”

Severus frowns. There is something about that statement that he finds odd, but they are also getting sidetracked. He’d prefer they not still be talking about this when Nizar is done completely destroying the entire contents of a magical classroom. “Salazar. What was done to that portrait?”

“Ah. That. Yes.” Salazar nods, running his hand over his beard before he takes a few steps away from the table. While facing away from them, he says, “Let me tell you what Kanza told me of what Nizar now recalls. It is in regards to one Utredus the Gaunt’s visit to the Slytherin Common Room in the year 1234.”

*          *          *          *

If ever a man earned the nickname the students gave him, Utredus certainly did. He is as gaunt as the others have claimed, with hollowed cheeks that make all of his features stand out in stark prominence. Utredus has skin that was once kissed by the sun, but it lacks the glow of health Nizar is used to seeing in other living bodies, even from the odd perspective of the portrait. He has brown hair, brown eyes, and otherwise appears to be completely unremarkable. No wonder Nizar’s darling little brats gave the alchemy instructor a name based on the most obvious part of his appearance.

Nizar watches the man prowl around the Slytherin’s sitting room, peering up at the sheets of magical glass that let in green light from the lake above. You remind me of someone, he thinks, but doesn’t say it. Those are thoughts that still hurt, no matter the magics that Rowena, Sedemai, and Helga wove into the portrait frame. The flaw in the process of Preserving what exists is that it preserves grief just as much as it preserves memory, which only serves to feed the first.

Utredus finally pauses in front of the fireplace, head cocked to one side. “What a strange place to find such a valuable painting.”

“Not so strange,” Nizar replies, and feels Kanza tighten around his neck almost to the point of discomfort. She doesn’t like him, either. He’s glad he isn’t the only one who finds himself distrusting this man. He tries not to distrust others until they’ve proven to have earned it.

In four years since becoming the school’s instructor for Alchemy, this gaunt man has never once come down here. The reasons he would come now are probably not altruistic.

“A Slytherin man in a Slytherin sitting room,” Nizar continues when Utredus doesn’t speak. “What’s your name, then? Everyone is free to come into this room as they please, but I’ve not seen your face before.”

“But you’ve heard of me,” Utredus says, making the words a question.

“Not quite the same thing, really.”

Utredus smiles, but it feels more like the action of a man who is trying to remember how to do it
proper. “I am Utredus of Winander Mere, Portrait.”

“No, you’re not.” Nizar smiles when Utredus looks insulted. He has to smile; he knows this man. “Utredus is the Latin form of the name. Those from Winander Mere are Northumbrian. Anglo-Saxon, Master Utredus. You did not do your homework.”

“And yet, you’re the first in this castle to notice any problem with my name at all,” Utredus replies.

“Well, in case it somehow escaped your notice, you’re in Scotland. We tend to speak Gaelic here—or as they’ve come to call it just to irritate those to the west, the Scots’ Gaelic.”

“They’re too backwards to learn any other language, you mean,” Utredus says in disdain.

“If you think such, why bother coming here?” Nizar gives Utredus his best mock-curious stare.

Utredus either doesn’t notice, or doesn’t care to. “I could not turn down such an opportunity. To teach in Hogewáþ, the only school of magic in Western Europe?”

“At least until Beauxbatons opens its doors next year,” Nizar points out.

Utredus dismisses them. “They speak of admitting only women, just as the whispers of a school to the north talk only of admitting men. Hogewáþ remembers the value of teaching both.”

“And that’s what you’ve been doing then? Teaching?” Nizar asks in a soft voice. He knows better; both schools will be teaching all genders, but Utredus doesn’t need that information.

“Can I confide something in you, Portrait? You remind me of someone I once considered dear.”

Nizar raises both eyebrows. “I’m trapped on this wall. I can’t stop you, can I?”

Utredus’s eyes light up. “I thought not. Still, it’s good to observe the social niceties. I wouldn’t wish to fall out of practice.”

Utredus takes a step back, but otherwise doesn’t give in to any need to pace out his thoughts. “I discovered something about myself a while ago. I found that my blood was magically pure on both sides of my family.”

“Oh, yes. Those thoughts. Do tell me more,” Nizar says dryly.

“You can mock me if you wish,” Utredus says. “Generation upon generation, and not a non-magical one among them, though I lost both of those parents at a young age. I decided to test an…an idea. A question. Is a man of such a lineage greater than a magician who has less magical history flowing through his veins?”

Nizar spreads his hands. “Oh, please do not keep me in suspense. What happened?”

“Every duel I fought. Every challenge I made. I won. I sought out all the great magicians of this age who were willing to brave a fight with me. I succeeded, time and time again. I discovered that the swiftest victories, the most decisive defeats, were offered by those of lesser magical blood, magicians easily felled. The longer a magician’s magical lineage stretched back into history, the more difficult it was to best them.”

“Did it ever once occur to you that they were simply not as well-trained as you are?” Nizar asks.

Utredus shakes his head. “No, Portrait. As I said—the greatest magicians of the age.”
Nizar regards Utredus with the faintest hint of disapproval, not yet willing to drive the other away. “You know, Brian Gagwilde has come to me often. He’s confided in me in a state of much fear every time he receives word of a great magician slaughtered. Nothing is known of who did the slaughtering. I doubt he’d be pleased to find you sheltering under this roof.”

Utredus merely smiles. The sheer malice in the expression makes it appear to be a genuine expression, not the earlier pretense. “Oh, he won’t recall. Brian never does. There are such wonderful variants of the Obliviscatur Charm at my disposal, Portrait.”

“So you’ve crafted a new philosophy—one that flies in the face of thousands of years of knowledge, by the way—with the intent of sharing it with others?”

Utredus is still smiling. “Only the like-minded. Those who are not so fond of my ideas conveniently forget them. It is interesting how many allies I’ve found in this very House, is it not?”

“Every House has their share of idiots,” Nizar responds, unimpressed. “What Slytherin House currently has over others is our tendency to attract those of noble magical blood, and King Henry doesn’t encourage intelligent thought among his nobles. He fears the sort of insurrection that brought about the last revolt of the barons against his father.”

“Thus, Henry manipulates those around him to achieve the best possible outcome. It’s an excellent strategy. I’m not certain it’s going to pay off for him, but one never knows when it comes to the House of Plantagenet.”

“Manipulate.” Nizar touches Kanza at his throat, tapping her scales gently three times. She tightens her coils once more to denote her displeasure at being told to subtly depart, but she will have to cope. She’s an infant, and while the painting was spelled to be indestructible, Nizar has suspicions. No; he has flashes off intuition, and he’s learnt to trust them. Utredus is a danger to them both.

“Not everyone is foolish,” Nizar says. “You can try to train up your own private group of magicians to share in your philosophy, but everyone else will be repulsed, or you’ll have made them forget. What can you possibly hope to achieve?”

Utredus’s eyes rise to meet his. Nizar feels utterly chilled by what he can read in those depths, as he shouldn’t be able to read anything at all.

“By altering all of the means that are used to teach the students, of course.” Utredus speaks as if it’s obvious. “I had to resort to placing copies of our beloved Founders’ portraits in the Entrance Hall, as there is no Confounding a painting of them. Too many protections in place. Copies, however, with just enough memory to look and act as they should? Those are ever so much more useful.”

Nizar feels the stir of magic in his breast, as impotent as the sudden anger he feels. “What did you do to the originals?”

“Nothing. Or perhaps I burnt them to ash. I don’t think I shall tell you. It’s more fun that way.”

“Those paintings won’t burn. They’re as protected as this one is,” Nizar says. He hopes to the gods that Godric made certain of it after Salazar’s leaving and the others’ deaths. “An excellent attempt at bluffing, though.”

“Thank you,” Utredus responds, as if Nizar paid him a genuine compliment. “Did you know that no one thought to be as thorough with other paintings’ protections? It’s been easy to Confound them, to apply memory spells to make them forget. In cases of extreme necessity, I’ve simply removed them. A portrait who is placed in storage for long enough will simply sleep away the ages.”
Nizar nods. “I’ve seen it. Without interaction with the outside world, they start to just…they’ve nothing else to do.”

“Did you know, Portrait, that there is such an interesting classroom on the seventh floor of the castle?”

Nizar stares at him. “I might have heard of it.”

“It’s like having access to endless available magical space. Of course, it’s not endless, but I used up a great deal of it to create my room,” Utredus says.

That cold feeling is back. “What room?”

“A room in which to discard that which is no longer needed in this school.” Utredus grants him another off-putting smile. “It hosts the portraits who would attempt to correct students in their ‘mistaken’ views of Pure Magical Blood’s perfection. I simply can’t have that. I highly doubt anyone will ever find my room. I hid it too well.”

“Well, as long as you’re confessing your sins to a portrait, what of the Sorting Hat?” Nizar asks with a veneer of polite interest.

“I have to admit, that one was difficult,” Utredus replies. “There is only so much one can do with a magical artefact that is perpetually lost in its cups. In the end, I convinced that ridiculous Hat to sing harmless little songs. People like songs. The most witless of tunes get trapped in one’s head so easily, especially if the verses are easy to remember. The right sort of history will be passed on anew each and every year. I didn’t even have to alter Salazar Slytherin’s views on blood purity. I simply made certain the Hat omitted the whole of that tale.”

“I see.” Nizar leans back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. “Why are you doing this? Truly: why?”

“My family was weakened,” Utredus whispers. “Weakened by sentiment. Weakened by mixing an ancient and timeless bloodline with the poorer blood of those without lineages to them at all. The magic weakened, and my family suffered and died for it. What if no one ever has to go through that pain again, Portrait? Is that not worth every sacrifice? Is that not worth keeping our blood pure?”

“Ironic, then, that you’re confessing this to me when myself and Salazar are both Half-bloods,” Nizar says derisively.

“EXACTLY MY POINT!” Utredus screams, startling Nizar. “Where is the great Salazar Slytherin, Portrait? He is lying dead somewhere in the wilds, rotten away, his bones carried off by rats and wild dogs! If his blood were pure, such would never have happened!”

Nizar has to calm the pounding of his heart. Utredus isn’t stating knowledge, but belief, and there is a difference between the two. “If you’re so concerned with blood purity, Godric and Rowena were both of Pure-blooded magical lineages.”

“Needs must,” Utredus says in a cold voice. “Besides, you’ve given me the answer I sought, what with the easy way the terms Pure-blood and Half-blood fall from your lips. I know I succeed. And now to do away with your painting, Portrait.”

Nizar stands up from his chair, knocking it over in his hurry. “Elfric. Don’t.”

Elfric pauses with his hands on both sides of the frame. “You know me, after all.”
Nizar makes himself breathe. “I’ve known from the moment you stated your name. You could never lie to me, Elfric.”

“No,” Elfric muses. “I was honest in 1015 when I said I’d be returning before summer, but that was not to be. I hope I was granted a decent funeral.”

“You broke my fucking heart,” Nizar whispers. “What are funerals in the face of that?”

Elfric seems to be debating on an idea. “No. Your portrait shall not go into that room. Even a portrait of my beloved father might find a way to access the magic in our old home.” He scowls, sudden and petulant. “The door wouldn’t let me in. I couldn’t even go into my own home.”

“You not only moved out when you gained your apprenticeship, you were dead,” Nizar retorts. “You promised you would never use those spells, Elfric Ilbertus deSlizarse! You swore an oath!”

“Needs must.” Elfric gives him that emotionless smile again. “Fear cares not a whit at all about promises when death is staring you in the face.”

“You are literally dead,” Nizar says in a flat voice. “You are an animated corpse. That’s the reason for your gauntness. Do you not see that when you look in a mirror? Corpses aren’t meant to linger, Elfric! Your own teacher told you that.”

Elfric isn’t swayed, but Nizar isn’t really surprised. His youngest was always the one with the most stubbornness, the most pride. “My teacher was wrong. I’m two hundred forty-three years old, and I’ve done quite well for myself. I can’t sire children, of course, but if I ever feel the need for a bloodline to lord over, it’s easy to find a sullied noble woman who’s had a dalliance resulting in a pregnancy. Such shame she’d bring to her family. So easy to convince one like that to marry when I’d be so willing to claim her bastard child as my own.”

“Please don’t do this, Elfric,” Nizar whispers.

“Already doing it, Portrait,” Elfric replies, and the next thing Nizar knows is dizziness and pain.

“Hmm. That was an interesting response.”

Nizar opens his eyes to find himself on the familiar wooden floor of the painted cottage, staring up at the whitewashed ceiling. He tries to speak, but all that emerges is a croak.

“There are some complicated spells and charms on this canvas and its frame.” Elfric. Slender, wiry, brilliant Elfric, twisted into a gaunt corpse with emptiness where his heart should be and delight where outrage should dwell. Oh, gods. Why him? Why?

Nizar turns his head and finds his view is now of an unfamiliar portrait hanging on the opposite wall of the large sitting room. He’s no longer above the fireplace. The emerald light from the lake is much diminished, leaving him in the shadows. The only real illumination remaining comes from the sun painted into the sky of Nizar’s portrait.

“Elfric,” he rasps. “You can’t.”

“Oh, I’ve already done it. I even know what else I’m going to be doing. Not everything is impenetrable, and those dead idiots forgot one very important protection. Gods know why they’d want to preserve the portrait of a man who died unexpectedly at such a young age. Sentiment, I suppose. Everyone seems to be rotten with it.”

“You’re the one rotting.” Nizar feels like someone has torn out his core along with his heart. “Elfric.
Traveling forward through time is not possible. Your father never died.”

For the first time, Elfric’s expression cracks. Nizar can almost—almost—see his son beneath that gaunt mask, but it’s not even truly him. It’s an echo of what once was.

Then that fleeting moment of remembering what it’s like to be human is gone. “And this was their solution? That’s delightfully naïve!”

“Elfric.” Nizar swallows. “I don’t agree with what you’re doing…but I don’t think you’re a murderer. If you leave this portrait here. If you don’t put it back. The magic of those charms has to have fuel. If you leave me here, I’ll die.” It might take a long time, given the castle’s natural tendency to preserve what lies in her halls, but it will still happen.

Elfric removes a wand from the sleeve of dark silk robes. It’s not the old black walnut, but raw hornbeam. “You’re wrong. I am a murderer,” he says. “I’m a murderer so many times over by now. Everyone was right, you know. The more you cast the Killing Curse, the easier it gets. Taking life is easy…Father.”

“Elfric.” Nizar’s head is spinning. It’s hard to win an argument when you can barely think.

“Does the castle speak to you, Protectoris?” Elfric hisses, leaning in close to the canvas. “Does she tell you what I’ve done? Can you feel it like pain in your heart? Or has it been so subtle as to be beyond your notice?”

“I’ve always known,” Nizar whispers. “I might not have known exactly what was done…but I’ve known when you’ve wrought harm within these walls.”

“Then this must be absolute torture!” Elfric grins in a mockery of delight. “To still bear the title of Protector of this school and yet be utterly helpless to do as the magic wills.

“You cannot stop me now, and you will not stop me at any point hence, Father. You will listen to this castle scream as I destroy her not with weapons, but with words.”

Nizar has to try. One more time. “Please, Elfric. Please don’t do this.”

Elfric smiles. “Begging doesn’t really appeal to anything inside me. It often makes me wish to cause further suffering.” He points his wand at the canvas. “Goodbye, Father. When the charms finally bleed out and Death comes for you, do say hi to Brice and Galiena for me. Obliviscaris omnia!”

*N * * *

“Nizar spoke to the portraits this morning.” Salazar is staring at the children’s empty portrait frames. “They’re aware that Elfric and the…the revenant, Utredus Gaunt, shared a physical being, but no more than that. Nizar didn’t wish for them to know how dire it truly was.”

“The revenant. I like that.” The classroom door swung open on silent hinges while they were all distracted and completely horrified. Severus gazes at Nizar in concern, noticing he’s either broken his arm—again—or the shoulder joint is completely out of alignment. He’s also bleeding from at least six cuts across the face, another across his neck, several more on his hands, and possibly more through his trousers, which aren’t composed from magically woven material like his robe.
“Are you all right?” Black asks, which Severus thinks is a fucking stupid question.

Nizar blinks a few times and looks at Black. The shine of his magic is no longer in his eyes, but a dull-edged sadness looks to have overtaken rage. Severus is well aware of what that expression is like; he’s seen it too often in his own mirror. “I keep forgetting that simulation never lasts nearly as long as I’d prefer it to. I’m fine. I’m taking a bath. Have fun discussing the revenant.”

“The revenant,” Salazar repeats as Nizar retreats to the hall bathroom. “That’s useful. I could use some measure of bloody fucking displacement.” He finally turns around, revealing that his eyes are red-rimmed, his face and beard soaked from weeping. “The rest is known only because Kanza was not affected by the spell. I was glad before that she was with him. Now my gratitude is measure beyond counting.”

Kanza rears up in Severus’s hands before crawling out onto the table. Then she lifts her head and begins hissing out a recitation. Severus realizes she must have already done so for Nizar that morning as Salazar translates.

“After the spell was cast, I came back to the portrait’s sitting room to find that my Chosen would not respond to his name. He did not know mine. Fortunately, the spell did not take Parseltongue from him, or…” Kanza hesitates. “I do not know what might have become of us.”

Salazar tells them the rest in halting bursts of words interrupted by choked-off breaths. “I remembered that my Chosen would fear for others, that he would have concerned our students had they found a portrait insensible. Others would have asked questions of the portrait’s nature that might have endangered us both.”

“Nizar listened to my instructions and left the sitting room in our painted home, lying down to sleep.” Severus knows he is not mistaken when even Kanza’s hissing takes on a mournful quality. “Every morning he would wake, and I would need to tell him our names. My Chosen would remember what I told him throughout the rise and setting of that day’s sun. Then he would sleep, and when he awoke again, all that he had learned the day before was gone.”

“Forget everything.” Severus idly considers violating the sanctity of Nizar’s bath just so that he can go vomit in the fucking sink basin. Black looks as if he’d fight Severus for the privilege.

“I wanted him to write it down, but Nizar did not recall how to do so.” Kanza’s tail twitches in agitation. “He forgot francis and the old English, Castellano and Leónese, Euskaran and this time’s modern English. Latin and Bavarian, Breton and Cumbric, Pictish and Gaelic, Norse and Norn, Arabic and the dialects of the East. It was many long years before he would recall any of them. Only knowledge of Latin and Castellano, along with the new English as it developed, returned before the portrait’s end. My Chosen still had books written in the old English within the painting, and gradually he learned it anew. He learned the Scots Gaelic from the students. Nizar never learned to speak or write what they call the middling English because it was still difficult to…to retain. To recall other words. Concepts.” Kanza swears again. “He forgot our family. All of us, those of the blood and those of my Nest, not merely the difficulty faced with forgetting the faces of his children.”

Salazar breaks off translating. “Kanza had to reteach him of our family, and she could only reteach what she herself had already been told. I was wondering why Nizar had forgotten that Estefania’s non-magical status was not a lack of ability, but a matter of politics and survival.”

Kanza nods. When she opens her mouth, Salazar translates for her again. “It was fifty years before my Chosen’s memory of things that came before Utrfredus the Gaunt’s visit began to return, but never as they once were. I think if Edward the Longshanks had not proved himself so memorable, Nizar would not even recall those events.”
“Major events. The Crusades. That’s what could overpower the lingering effects of the spell,” Severus murmurs. “Strong opinions.”

“Nizar repeating that bit about Scottish opinion in regards to Edward I was fairly mild, all things considered,” Salazar says. “The Preservation Charms wouldn’t have been capable of repairing that damage. That’s why it took decades to gain any sort of recovery, and why it’s a process that is so very incomplete.” He pauses. “We should probably all hope that Gilderoy Lockhart does not live long enough to heal from a complete Obliviscatur.”

“Yes, but if he recalled his past, Lockhart could go on trial for all of the magical crimes he committed,” Lupin points out.

Salazar grimaces. “Yes, true, but then we’d all have to tolerate that odious man’s presence during the process. I’d rather he simply die an amnesiac who has been long forgotten. I still believe it a just fate.”

“How is it that everyone is so certain that this Utredus is really a revenant? A soulless body?” Lupin asks.

“Because when my son died, he came to me while I was dreaming to tell me so.”

Severus glances back over his shoulder in surprise. He keeps forgetting that Nizar often takes care to make certain others are aware of his presence, as he is very good at remaining unnoticed when he wishes to be. Nizar is dressed in the same blue robe he wore to the Ministry when Voldemort tried his damned Blood Summoning trick, sturdy trousers, and boots laced at the knee that are dyed the same dark blue as the robe.

The seax is hanging in a sheath at Nizar’s waist, in full view rather than hidden away in a sleeve. He is definitely still up to something, but Severus doesn’t think it’s related to more destruction.

“I didn’t realize your Divination talents were focused in that direction,” Severus says, trying for something…innocuous. As close as is possible, given the circumstances.

“Not usually, but Elfric was a necromancer. He could make certain the dream occurred, and Mind Magic ensured that I would remember it.”

“And then Nizar rushes to my quarters directly afterwards, awakening me from a sound sleep to demand that I scry for Elfric.” Salazar shoves his hands into his denim pockets. “And there was mist. Nothing more. That’s all you’ll ever find if you scry upon the water for someone who has passed from this world.”

“All right. I’ll bite, pun intended, since no one else seems inclined to ask,” Black says when nothing but silence follows Salazar’s words. “Where the hell are you going, Nizar?”

Nizar’s smile is utterly devoid of humor. “Grave-robbing. I did tell Severus that the next time I went out to do so, I’d invite him to accompany me.”

“Grave-robbing.” Severus feels his eyebrows rise in shock. “You know where he is.”

Nizar nods. “I asked the elves to find out for me while you lot were still sleeping. I know exactly where Utredus Gaunt’s crypt is, and I’m paying it a visit.”

“He tried to fucking kill you!” Black shouts.

“No.” Nizar scowls. “A soulless revenant did that, an act borne of failing sanity in a body that was
still alive only because magic was telling it to be so. The body lying in Utredus Gaunt’s tomb is not Utredus Gaunt, because that man was never born.”

“He still tried to kill you,” Severus reiterates Black’s words. He keeps agreeing with Black lately. It’s highly irritating.

“Hence going armed, and not alone,” Nizar replies. “You can all pile along if you like, I don’t care. I don’t know what condition we’re going to find that body in.”

Salazar’s brow furrows. “Because we don’t know what caused his death.”

“Elfric says that if you sever the magical bonds tying a revenant to life, they’ll die.” Nizar rests his hands on the seax’s hilt. “Of course, we don’t know if Madam Milescenta Fawcett Gaunt severed some of them, or all of them.”

“I’ll go,” Lupin says, gaining Severus’s attention. “It was recently and accurately pointed out to me that I’ve been retreating to spinelessness. I’d really rather not visit a crypt, but I like the other idea even less.”

“Be glad it’s not a barrow,” Nizar replies in a bland voice.

“Then I’m assuming we’re all going to go break into a crypt. What about everyone here?” Black asks. “We have four titled students downstairs, one of them a war mage.”

“Oh, I’d wager they’re occupied by today’s Daily Prophet,” Nizar says, a faint but real smile appearing on his face. He retrieves the rolled-up newspaper from his robe sleeve and hands it to Severus.

Severus stands up to unroll the paper on the table as Lupin, Black, and Salazar cluster around. “Is it anyone’s birthday?” he asks the moment he spies the headline.

“It’s mine in less than a month. I’ll take it,” Nizar says dryly.

“Outraged Parents Call for Minister Cornelius Fudge’s Resignation After Tales of Child Endangerment, Willful Miscarriages of Justice, Abuses of Power and Authority, and Other Horrifying Truths are Revealed,” Black reads, smiling. “They pushed it through to the next day. A weekend publishing, too.”

“Madam Spencer went right for the throat, writing it as a call for his resignation.” Salazar looks pleased. “Oh, and here is front-page notice of your granted amnesty, Sirius.”

“I can go out in public and terrify everyone just because I’m a Black again, not because they think I’m a murderous lunat—they mentioned the marriage.” Black’s smile abruptly dies. “In full. They dug the paperwork out of the Ministry and reprinted the certificate. Oh, my God.”

“Then I suppose when we depart, I’ll be leaving one of the windows open,” Nizar says.

“Why?” Black asks, baffled.

“Because, idiot, you are going to be receiving a lot of owls.” Severus tries for derision and fails at it. Damn it, he does not want to like Sirius Black in any way, shape, or form!

“You can stay here, or you can go for the distraction,” Nizar tells Black.

“Distraction,” Black decides after a moment. “Let’s go retrieve my grandson.”
“I’m not trying to get out of this. I’m just wondering why we’re not leaving that body where it lies. It’s been in that tomb for a good four hundred years now,” Lupin says.

Nizar goes to the window, unlatching it and letting it hang open for owl access. “Firstly? I promised my daughter that if Elfric was ever found, I would bring him back. This was his home, Remus. He —” Nizar swallows, staring out at the pale blue sky. “He deserves to be with the others, remembered. Utredus deserves to be forgotten.”

Chapter End Notes

Feed me, Seymour!
Chiltern Hills

Chapter Summary

“I don’t care if the rest of these are all insults. That’s the best fucking news I’ve heard in days.”

Chapter Notes

Home stretch. (Pun not intended.)

Nizar Apparates them to a massive cemetery rife with the feel of magic. Sirius glances around and knows where they are at once. “Chiltern Hills, the wizarding cemetery north of London. I got to see dear Father put into the crypt here. Wasn’t sad to see him go.”

Sirius glances over in surprise when a house-elf appears with a quiet pop. He doesn’t know which elf he is, but he’s wearing Hogwart’s neutral white tea towel...and a brown leather belt. That’s new.

“This way, Professors and Your Grace and Sir,” the house-elf says. “The crypt is near the center.”

“Thank you, Tinny,” Nizar says, following the elf. There is a hard set to Nizar’s jaw that reminds Sirius very much of James in that moment, but the quiet determination in his eyes is all Lily.

“While we’re walking, let’s make conversation,” Remus says to Snape.

Snape glares at Remus as if he suggested they eat the first corpse they find. “Let us not.”

“I’m thinking yes, anyway,” Remus insits stubbornly.

Sirius would really rather he didn’t. They’re on neutral terms with Snape; Sirius doesn’t think that would stop Snape from hexing Remus within an inch of his life.

Snape rolls his eyes. “Very well. It’s more entertaining than counting the names of dead lineages in this stone pit.”

“That’s a point, there,” Salazar murmurs under his breath. Nizar just snorts and keeps walking.

“We were wondering why you actually joined Voldemort in the first place,” Remus says, and Sirius has to resist the urge to shift into Newfoundland so he can bite Remus. “I don’t think it was about blood purity. Not really.”

“Voldemort had more to offer than just a rallying call about blood purity, else he would never have been able to amass the following he did,” Snape replies in a grating voice.

Remus doesn’t seem to believe him. “I sure as hell heard what you called Lily.”

Sirius notices Nizar tense up and resists the urge to groan in frustration. This is so very much not the
time for this.

Snape treats Remus to a glare that promises dire retribution. “As did others, many of whom mocked me, often, for apologizing to her afterwards.”

Remus blinks, startled. “I didn’t know that. Then you what—didn’t mean it?”

“How much stupidity have you heard pour forth from Black’s mouth when he loses his temper? How much of it did you think he really meant, and how much of it was anger and frustration speaking?”

Right. Sirius keeps forgetting that Snape is not only terrifying, he’s terrifyingly intelligent and brutal with his words, especially when he can use honesty as a weapon.

Sirius tilts his head to the side so he can see Nizar. His son has a grim, pleased smile on his face. At least someone finds this entertaining.

“A lot,” Remus admits, sounding very much like he’d rather not say so. “Then why join Voldemort?”

“It is not actually your business or your concern,” Snape growls. “However, I am currently in a position where I have no choice but to deal with both of you idiots. I do not hate those who are non-magical. I did firmly believe that anyone born magical, whether it was a Muggle bloodline or a magical one, should stay the hell away from those who were non-magical. My father was a sublime example of reasons why that seemed an excellent philosophy. Lily’s sister delighted in being another example, joined later by her lovely spouse. That was one of Voldemort’s driving philosophies. Extinction of Muggles was more often spouted by his Pure-blooded followers, those too stupid to realize that maintaining their current inbred circles meant that Half-bloods and Muggle-borns were often far more powerful than they…those like Tom Marvolo Riddle.”

“A Half-blood,” Salazar says, glaring at a tomb as they pass by. Sirius wonders what that particular Malfoy did that causes Salazar Slytherin to still remember him with distaste three hundred years later.

“It also,” Snape pauses; the smile that blooms on his face is complete malevolence. “It also gave me full opportunity and impunity to raise a wand against anyone fighting under Dumbledore’s orders.”

“Right.” Sirius tries not to wince. “I can see why that would be appealing.”

“Of course you would, given that you were doing the exact same thing,” Snape says in a withering tone.

“Yeah.” Sirius shoves his hands into his robe pockets. “Not going to deny that one. Let’s hear it for being young and stupid, hey?”

“That’s not all we were doing,” Remus protests.

Snape ignores Remus, giving Sirius a long, searching look with narrowed eyes. “Had you matured to this point before the wedding, or did it require beatings administered at wand-point?”

Sirius lets out an amused bark of laughter. “Before. Lily’d never have married me if I was still acting like a complete jackass, let alone introduce me to her parents as fiancé number two.”

“You met them.” Snape’s tone is suddenly devoid of anything except cautious neutrality. “Jane and Malcolm.”
“Yeah.” Sirius reminds himself that Snape would have known them as a child, too. Even though Lily had told him and James both, it had still been bloody unbelievable at the time. “We met in November of 1978. Lily’s father, he wasn’t doing so well. We knew that Malcolm wasn’t going to live to see the wedding. Offered to march right down to a Muggle courthouse or into the Ministry and marry right then and there so Malcolm would be around to see it.”

“What did he say?” Nizar asks.

Sirius glances at Nizar, who is regarding them from over his shoulder. The expression on his face is a pretty good representation of Snape’s neutral voice. “Malcolm told us that we’d do no such thing. He didn’t want us rushing the marriage on his account. You know, just in case we all woke up six months later and realized we were complete idiots who had no business marrying each other. Jane agreed with him. She said it was enough that the three of us were happy and that Malcolm got to see us that way, so…that’s what we did. He died that spring; we got married in June, and Jane was still alive to see it. I think that’s what she was waiting around for, since she died in August. By November, Lily was pregnant.”

Sirius looks up at the sky, which is a cloudless dull grey. Right now, that seems beyond fitting. “We knew right away that it was James’s kid, and I was so damned happy.” He continues to speak for Nizar’s benefit. “We’d talked about how much trouble James’s parents had with trying to conceive. It was nice, seeing that maybe that same problem wasn’t going to follow the Potter bloodline. There was one of me, Regulus was still off being an annoying twit somewhere…I could wait for my turn, I said.

“Lily told me I was being ridiculous. I was going to be as much a father to their son as James, and if I ever shirked my duty, she’d hand me my arse.” Sirius tries to smile and knows he doesn’t succeed. “She’d be well within her rights to do so, wouldn’t she?”

Snape looks away, his focus on Nizar’s shoulders. “Malcolm and Jane Evans were two of the kindest individuals I’ve ever encountered. No. I don’t think Lily would have been so inclined.”

“Well, this just got awkward,” Remus says.

“Shut up, werewolf.”

Remus smiles at Sirius. “Ah, back to normal already.”

“This being it,” Tinny the house-elf says, startling Sirius. He’d gotten so lost in thinking of those last years that he forgot their entire purpose for wandering around this stupid cemetery.

Tinny is pointing at a large stone edifice, a proper crypt instead of a smaller tomb or ground burial. GAUNT is carved across the front face in large, obnoxious script from Middle English’s last hurrah. The door is made of iron, with no door handle, lock, or even visible hinges to be seen.

Remus sniffs the air and then sneezes. “Mold. Lovely. Am I the only one who thinks that building is creepy?”

“No.” Nizar looks to Salazar, who gets out the wand that is almost a twin to Nizar’s own. They aim together, a silent spell that does away with the iron door entirely. “I hope no one wants that back. I’ve no idea where we sent it.”

“I suspect there is only one individual in this crypt.” Salazar lights his wand. “Shall we?”

The inside is far larger than the outside. “Magical space,” Nizar mutters under his breath. “They could have fit the entire Fawcett-Gaunt lineage in this one crypt, but there is no one else.”
Sirius lifts his wand and looks at the smooth granite walls, which don’t even have depressions carved in them for shrouded bodies or coffins. “Selfish of him, wasn’t it?”

“Oh he was going to fucking live in it. Why not?” Nizar asks derisively, and draws the short sword from his belt. He proceeds down the corridor, wand in hand and sword in the other. It’s far too easy to see him doing the same to lead an army, especially with Salazar at his side.

“No traps. I doubt we’re dealing with an active revenant,” Snape says.

“I’m taking no damned chances. I’d rather not experience Obliviscaris omnia for a second time.”

The passage ends in a large stone room. Torches in sconces on the walls flare to life with green flame when they enter, painting the granite the same color as the Black Lake.

In the center, on a raised stone bier, is a corpse lying in repose. He isn’t even wearing a shroud. He has dark hair, pale skin, and clothing that is quite proper for the 1500s—definitely wealthy. The outfit even includes the ridiculous starched lace cuff-collar that some of Sirius’s relatives were still insistent upon wearing in the bloody 1900s.

The corpse is also perfectly preserved. Sirius would be ready to start cursing if there was any sign of life at all. That level of preservation in a tomb this old…those magics only last so long. “Nizar?”

“There isn’t any danger. Just a few lingering threads that were never severed. I imagine he intended to fake his death and live in this crypt until enough time had passed to emerge again, or it was safe to move on,” Nizar replies, gazing down at the corpse. The man has the gauntness that earned him his name, but his features—the dark brown hair and brows, pale skin, and the shape of his mouth—in death he looks far more like the portrait of Elfric than the insane revenant bastard that Nizar encountered.

“Hermanito?” Salazar says in a gentle voice.

“Truly, he’s not—Milescenta or someone else, they severed the threads that would have given him any sort of remaining life. All that’s left is a few links to the preservation magic that fueled the initial spell.” Nizar reaches down and brushes his fingers along the corpse’s face. “They truly do look different, you know.”

“I know. I met the man, and I never even had a passing thought that he resembled Elfric,” Salazar responds. “Sever the threads, Nizar. Let’s take him home.”

Nizar nods and swings the seax, not the wand. Sirius winces as his sensitive ears pick up on something. It sounds like the strings of a harp wound too tightly, throwing discord into the air as they snap.

Snape steps forward, conjuring a dark green burial shroud to cover the body, but it’s Nizar who picks up Elfric deSlizarse, cradling a body that is stiff with death in his arms. Snape looks at him, one eyebrow raised; Nizar nods in response to the unspoken question.

Sirius understands this moment so well it makes his fucking chest ache. If things were not as they are, if his son had actually died last summer and was found…Sirius would want to be the one to carry him home.

Salazar and Severus have another odd silent conversation, but the result is impressive. After they exit the crypt, the two of them use their wands to absolutely demolish it. When they’re done, none of the original stones are larger than a pebble; most of it is immediately scattered with great sweeping wand-movements to litter the rest of the massive cemetery. It would require someone with a hell of a
lot of patience and determination to put that mess back together.

They return to Hogwarts, not to Nizar’s quarters, but a bloody cemetery out on the grounds that Sirius didn’t even know existed. It’s close to the lake, on a hill near the school’s outer wall.

“Did you know this was here?” Sirius asks Remus, who shakes his head. His eyes are wide with awe as they read the names gracing the restored stones. Godric of Griffon’s Door. Sedemai of Griffon’s Door, who seemed intent on outliving her husband. Vanora deSlizarse, Head of Slytherin House—Sirius hadn’t known that his great-granddaughter held the post, and right after Salazar, no less. She’s buried next to a woman, Ankharet of Gall-ghàidhil, a Briton whom Salazar names as Vanora’s wife. Imeyna Slytherin, buried next to her husband Martin Vimaro; one died in childbirth, the other of grief, given the close dates of death on the stones. Marion Slytherin of Inverness, Salazar’s second wife.

“This world is like an anteroom of the world to come. All go to one place: all are from the dust and all turn to dust again. Death and life are in the power of one’s tongue,” Nizar reads the inscription on her stone. “It’s lovely.”

“It’s from the T’nakh. The Old Testament,” Snape says. “Not all in the same place, but…the sentiment. Yes.”

Then there is bloody Merlin’s tomb, the old spelling of his name inscribed with runes instead of Latin lettering. “Six hundred eleven years old.”

“Six hundred ten. He didn’t make it to his date of birth. He liked round numbers, prime numbers—Arithmancy. Absolute fiend for it.” Salazar is giving the stone a look of displeasure mingled with grief and fondness. “Damned old goat.”

The students that were outside in the courtyard are starting to drift over, bundled up against the chill in the air. “What’s going on, Professor?” a girl asks Snape while eying Sirius as if he’s going to pounce and eat her at any moment. Oh, well; that’s still a step up from screaming in terror.

“A much-delayed funeral,” Snape replies. “Gather those of our House, Astoria. He was one of us.”

Astoria’s blue eyes widen. “Oh.” She bolts over to the first Slytherin student she can find. Sirius watches, curious, as they converse in a quick burst of words before separating, off on an efficient search to round up Slytherins.

“Where, Nizar?” Salazar asks.

Nizar is staring at the matched set of markers for Vanora and Ankharet. “Do you think Vanora would mind, Sal?”

Salazar shakes his head, tears beginning to slip from his eyes. “No, little brother. I don’t think Vanora would mind at all that her uncle was placed beside her.” Sirius glances at his son to find that Nizar is weeping too, but he doesn’t seem to be aware of it. He looks like a man who has seen and done too much, overwhelmed and exhausted.

We have done too much, Sirius thinks, realizing that he’s skating the edge of exhaustion. He has been keyed up and tense since second January, when Remus literally sniffed out the truth. Yesterday they met the Queen, Sirius claimed a title, and then they infuriated Cornelius Fudge by humiliating him in front of the Muggle Prime Minister. (That part had been fun; no regrets at all.) Then interviews, Gringotts, last night’s sudden emergency, and finally…this.

Dear God, he’s going to oversee his grandson’s funeral. The very idea hurts, but the expression on
Nizar’s face may well break his heart.

To Sirius’s surprise, it isn’t just the majority of Slytherin House’s students that turn up. There are also the Weasleys and other Gryffindors, Ravenclaws, and Hufflepuffs in the mix, not to mention Minerva, Filius, Aurora, Sasha Willowood—whom Sirius barely knows—Rolanda, old Quintinus, Professor Babbling, Hagrid, and finally Albus, wandering over in his stately way that is completely ruined by the eyesores he chooses to wear as robes.

“I’ve heard that we’re to host a funeral today,” Albus says in a musing voice, as if it’s a curiosity rather than a burial.

“We are.” Nizar glances around, one eyebrow lifted. “I suppose I just wasn’t expecting such a crowd.”

“Bit of curiosity drew out most of us, I think,” Fred says, standing next to his twin with a somber look on his face. “Half of us still had no idea the cemetery was even here.”

“The rune readers keep claiming that stone is Merlin’s grave marker,” one of the Ravenclaw boys says, pointing at the massive stone in question.

“That’s because it is, young Ravenclaw,” Salazar replies in a dry voice.

“No bloody way,” another of the young Hufflepuffs whispers.

“Well, considering that myself and Salazar both helped to put the man in that particular grave? Yes, way,” Nizar retorts.

“And Sirius—I am surprised to find you out in such a public manner so soon,” Aurora says, but she looks pleased.

Sirius shrugs. “Politics,” he replies, which makes Albus beam and for Snape to emit a snort of derision. Amazingly, Sirius doesn’t think the derision is meant for him.

“Who are we burying?” Cho Chang asks. “It seems odd to be burying someone now. Most of these dates are—well, Founders era, or just after.”

Sirius turns around to find that at some point, the shroud was removed so that Elfric could be viewed. He’s not certain he’s fond of the idea, though someone transfigured the corpse’s clothing into something more time-appropriate to the Founders’ era. With that done, the ancient corpse’s resemblance to Elfric is even more obvious.

Nizar did say he wanted Utredus Gaunt to be forgotten.

“Hey. You know…he looks a lot like…” Malfoy trails off, eyes widening.

“Oh,” Hermione whispers, and then covers her mouth with both hands. Minerva takes in the sight of the body and then mimics Hermione before her eyes become riveted to Nizar.

“I don’t remember what year it was,” Nizar begins, and absolute silence descends over the crowd. “I remember that it was in the spring, and that Elfric was twenty-three. The last conversation we had with each other was…we argued. I didn’t want him to travel south by himself, not with the change in rule over England. It wasn’t a safe time to be an Englishman. Elfric disagreed; he preferred traveling by himself, especially if he was searching for magical students to bring back to the safety of Hogwarts. He was always an independent soul, more so after Brice died. They were—they were very close. Our words weren’t the worst parting that could have been had, but it wasn’t…I’d like
very much for it to have been better.

“He died in Wessex, and that’s all we know. Something, somewhere, went very wrong, and it cost my son his life. Searchers went out, non-magical and magical alike, but we couldn’t find him. We only knew he was gone, and when the searchers gave up, we held a funeral…and that was that.”

Nizar is temporarily distracted by Kanza, who peeks up from beneath his shirt collar to peer around. He scratches her head with one finger and before continuing.

“Circumstances changed recently. With the help of the elves, and preservation charms laid upon a tomb, I was given the means to do what I once promised his sister—bring him home.”

Nizar is weeping again, and either doesn’t mind or is still unaware. “Elfric Ilbertus deSlizarse was a master of Mind Magic and of Necromancy, a man who worked to save lives and repair the damaged magical nodes of this land, and of those there were many. A war mage was called upon often in those days, and the results are usually not kind to the earth and the magic that flows within it. That’s what a Necromancer is for—restoration.

“Elfric lived in this school. He taught here, laughed here, and loved this place with all his heart. He’ll go into the ground next to his niece, Vanora, my granddaughter, and I’ll hex the blazes out of anyone who ever says an unkind word about it.”

“No. No unkind words.” Minerva raises her wand, lighting it so the glow is a pale, soft emerald.

“We raise our wands to a teacher of Hogwarts in the House of Slytherin, apprentice of Salazar Slytherin, son of Nizar Slytherin.”

Albus looks like he might try to speak, but Rolanda beats him to it. “We honor a man who died in service to this school,” she says as she raises her wand. “May he rest in the soil of the land he loved, and be at peace.”

Sirius has no idea when he raised his wand, but he did and it’s lit. Habit, perhaps. This is a wizard’s funeral, and he learned the traditions early as members of his family insisted upon dying off in droves. Remus is doing the same. So is Snape, though his black eyes are locked on Nizar even as he holds his wand aloft.

The body is lowered into a carved-out section of earth next to Vanora deSlizarse’s grave. The shroud follows after, blanketing the corpse in the deep emerald green that seems to have been Slytherin preference from the very beginning.

Sirius has no idea when he raised his wand, but by the magic of an Earth-Speaker as Salazar asks the dirt to return to the place it was taken from. “The stone, Nizar?” he asks quietly.

“Elfric—he wasn’t a Briton, but he always loved the ancient interwoven crosses,” Nizar says in a cracking voice. Salazar nods and holds out his hand, the green flame of his magic glimmering at his fingertips. A stone of comparative size to Vanora’s rises from the earth, forming into one of the famous Celtic crosses that litter Britain and Ireland. Sirius is close enough to read the inscription that’s intertwined within the stone’s woven lines:

Elfric Ilbertus

Casa de Deslizarse de Moravia

Born in Wessex 23rd September 991

Honored Teacher in the House of Slytherin
When the stonework is complete, Nizar lets out a single, harsh sob before Salazar hauls him into his arms, wrapping Nizar in a hug that looks as if Salazar is afraid to ever let go. For some reason, that sets several of the students off in fits of weeping, tears, or in some cases, outright sobbing.

“Seems so odd to grieve for a man they’ve never known,” Sirius murmurs.

“They’ve not grieving Elfric, you idiot,” Snape mutters back. “They’re grieving with Nizar and Salazar. For them.”

Sirius reaches up and wipes his face dry before looking down at his wet fingertips. “Huh. So am I.”

* * * * *

The students disperse in slow, thoughtful groups after the stone is complete. Severus watches them go, particularly his Slytherins. Two of his Marked Death Eater idiots were present. Warrington and Peebles look particularly affected. He wonders if it will make any sort of difference at all.

“One usually does give more notice for a funeral than this,” Albus says to him.

Severus turns his head just enough to look at his employer. “The body’s original preservation charms had to be ended so the body could be removed from its burial crypt. There was not necessarily time for such things when dealing with an ancient corpse, Albus.”

Albus sighs. “True enough,” he says, gazing at Nizar and Salazar. They’re both standing in front of the fresh grave; Salazar has his arm slung over Nizar’s shoulders. “A thousand years, and still the loss of a loved one causes such pain. I find a mere century of it to be difficult enough, Severus.”

“Parents?” Severus asks, keeping his tone utterly neutral. From Aberforth he knows that the Dumbledore patriarch died just before Albus began school. Aberforth has never been specific about the details, which makes Severus wonder if he simply doesn’t know. Their mother died before either of them finished Hogwarts.

“Yes, they as well, but I find myself pained by my sister’s loss most of all.” Albus turns to make his slow way back to the castle. Severus stares after him, disconcerted. Albus has never mentioned a sister before, and neither has Aberforth.

“Snape, if you keep staring at him like that, you’ll probably set Albus on fire faster than you will me.”

Severus turns around to face Black, a man who has recently gained enough damned sense to not simply roll over and accept Albus Dumbledore’s word. “Did you know that Albus had a sister?”

Black looks surprised and then leans over so he can glance at Albus’s spangled, departing form. “No, can’t say I did. Finding out about Aberforth was a surprise during the first war, too. Why? Is she off hidden away somewhere in another dingy pub?”

Severus shakes his head. “I was given the impression that she died young.”
“Like their parents, then.” Black frowns. “All right, let’s have it. Why is this bothering you?”

“Because that man makes no fucking sense, and I’m not discussing his irritating wardrobe!”

“I don’t think those robes make much sense, either.” Black tilts his head to gesture backwards. “Let’s go see if we can pry those two away from that gravestone.”

The only thing saving Black from a snide response is the fact that Severus thinks he’s correct. Prying two Slytherins away from a deSlizarse grave marker may be a very wise decision, if a difficult one.

For fuck’s sake, he does not want to keep agreeing with Sirius Black!

“What else did a funeral a thousand years ago comprise, anyway?” Black asks them when they’re in speaking range. He doesn’t sound inanely cheerful or morose; it’s a curious and strangely diplomatic neutral. Perhaps Lupin was right about Black choosing to neglect his own intelligence while in school.

“Heavy drinking,” Nizar replies. He’s no longer weeping, but his eyes and the snubbed end of his nose are an angry red.

“It was not merely that,” Salazar counters, rolling his eyes. “After burial rites, no matter the religion, we would celebrate their life once the sun had set.”

“By partying,” Lupin says. “That sounds a lot less dull than I would have expected from the time period.”

“The self-castigation and dullness came later.” Salazar drops his arm. “Come on, hermanito. We should go inside. We can always return after sunset with a bottle of something potentially lethal.”

“Certainly.” Nizar wipes at his face with his sleeves one more time and then scrubs his hands through his hair. “We can place wagers as to how many owls are going to be waiting for us.”

“I still say you’re all daft about the owls,” Black mutters, but allows Nizar to Disapparate them directly upstairs, skipping any students or staff that might waylay them. Salazar does the same for Lupin, to Severus’s intense relief. The full moon rises at six-thirteen in the evening, a few minutes before the sun sets. It’s only eleven in the morning now, but he can’t forget what day it is.

The door to Nizar’s quarters is still standing open when he Apparates upstairs to the classroom. “I told you,” Nizar is saying.

“Pay up, Remus,” Salazar tells Lupin, who swears aloud before there is the musical chime of sickles exchanging hands.

Severus goes inside and stops short when he is confronted by an actual roomful of owls. He sees Narcissa’s eagle owl in with the menagerie, and even that feathery bastard Nygell has somehow gotten involved. “How many remain if there are no Howlers attached?”

“Oh, Howlers can’t get in. I warded my quarters against those fucking things.” Nizar removes correspondence from a stark black owl that looks vaguely familiar before pointing sternly at the window. The owl looks highly offended as it flies off. “Waking up to early owls is bad enough. I’m not letting anyone compound the problem with exceptionally loud rude messages.” He hands the message to Black. “Ministry Seal.”

“Oh. Well, shit,” Black croaks, taking the scroll.
“What does it say?” Lupin prompts Black when he just stares at it letter. “Is it from Fudge?”


“You have my sincerest apologies for the way you’ve been treated by the very government that professes to protect all wizards and witches from persecution, and yet persecution is what you received. I was never aware that you were sent to Azkaban without trial, and I make it my business to know these things. I find this as upsetting as our recent examples of incarceration without trial. The plight of your son by marriage, yourself, and the entire situation has convinced me to make a decision I’d been hesitating over. As of tomorrow morning’s paper, I am announcing my intentions to run as Minister for Magic at the first available opportunity, whether by Cornelius Fudge sensibly removing himself from office before the M.L.E. presses charges against him, or the next election cycle. My kindest regards to you and your continued good health—fuck.” Black’s eyes widen.

“Madam Amelia Bones, Head of the Magical Law Enforcement Division of the Ministry over Wizarding Britain.”

“Now that was unexpected.” Salazar’s smile is sharp and pleased.

“I don’t care if the rest of these are all insults. That’s the best fucking news I’ve heard in days,” Nizar adds.

“And she’s publicly placing herself opposite Fudge.” Lupin grins.

Severus hates that he immediately takes a reflexive step back. If the others noticed, they pretend not to have seen it. Severus glances at Galiena’s portrait, but she doesn’t seem upset. She only gives him a brief smile of understanding before returning her attention to the owls.

* * * * *

“Lunch here, or in the Great Hall?” Salazar asks when the last owl departs, leaving an actual trail of feathers behind.

“We just finished covering my bloody table in letters, Sal,” Nizar retorts. “Great Hall. I’m not going to hide from our students just because—I’m not doing it.”

Downstairs, Lupin is kidnapped by a cluster of Gryffindors the moment they enter the hall. He accepts the kidnapping with a bemused smile on his face and is promptly seated and surrounded by a crowd of Gryffindors, a few Ravenclaws, Hufflepuffs, and even some of Severus’s blasted Slytherins.

Astoria Greengrass marches over, grabs Nizar’s hand, and drags him over to the Slytherin table to sit with the Slytherins. Nizar doesn’t seem to mind the kidnapping any more than Lupin did, though Severus thinks it may be difficult to eat with Astoria leaning against him in a partial hug and refusing to let go.

Severus notes that a few members of the staff look entirely disapproving of a teacher and a former teacher sitting with their students. The sensible ones remember that it is Saturday, and that Nizar lived with those same Slytherins in the Common Room until Hallowe’en of last year; they merely note the situation before ignoring it.
“That one is a darling,” Black says as they approach the staff table after Dumbledore gestures for Black to join them on the riser. “Greengrass, isn’t she?”

“The youngest of the three Greengrass sisters, yes,” Severus replies in a curt voice.

“Right. It’s…too bad about Guinevere, and her mother Madlyn. Not sure I remember much about Geronimus Greengrass’s first wife, but Nizar tells me that Guinevere was more like Regulus.”

Severus hesitates with his hand on his chair. “She was, yes.” He sits down and tries to convince Black with his expression that he would rather not talk about that. Daphne Greengrass is very much like the pragmatic woman who would have been her older half-sister, though Astoria seems to be a family aberration in terms of publicly displayed kindness.

“It is good to see you able to join us openly, rather than in more clandestine forms,” Minerva says to Black after he sits down between herself and Aurora. Salazar sits down between Severus and Minerva, still with that same sharp-edged smile on his face.

“I wonder how many colors the Minister turned when he read the paper this morning?” Salazar wonders aloud, which causes Filius to let out a high-pitched giggle before he quickly stifles the sound with a napkin.

“I’m voting for coronary purple,” Black says. Minerva covers her mouth with a napkin to hide a smile. Aurora doesn’t even bother to hide her own, which is wide and gleeful.

Severus stares down the Gryffindor table, waiting to see if Lupin can remember to follow simple instructions. To his relief, Lupin ingests the second phial of potion before he eats anything.

“What’s that?” Miss Johnson asks, intrigued. Severus noticed that her brewing has been more precise since she was dosed with Sana Visio, and wonders if her sight prescription for lenses was no longer accurate before the potion.

“Did your Defence instructor tell you that he’s been searching for a very old potion for lycanthropy that is not the current, extremely distasteful one?” Lupin asks them.

Granger claps her hands together like an overexcited seal. “He found it! He did, didn’t he?”

Lupin smiles at her. “He did, yes. Three doses the day of the full moon, and to my intense relief, it does not taste like trying to drink acidic chalk with an undertone of rotting meat and the frost of liquid nitrogen.”

“Does it work?” Miss Edgecombe asks. Severus notes that she might have joined the table, but she is still out of Lupin’s reach. He wants to applaud her sensibility as much as he wants to mock her for avoiding Lupin when it’s daylight.

Severus would very much like to cease being a hypocrite.

“Well, it’s my first time,” Lupin replies. “I’ll find out tonight, I suppose.”

“How?” Edward Black asks, staring at Lupin with his eyes nearly protruding from his head.

“Oh, by taking the usual precautions,” Lupin says in an easy, unconcerned voice meant to put the nervous at ease. He’s good at that, but then, it’s nearly a match for his spineless tone. “I’ll be locked away, so if something goes wrong, I’m still out of everyone’s hair.”

“But it’s still the day of the full moon. Aren’t you dangerous now?” Macnair of Hufflepuff asks, his
expression remarkably similar to Black of Gryffindor.

Lupin shakes his head. “I know you were my class, Mister Macnair, and I know that both myself and Professor Snape discussed werewolves.”

“Yes, but—you might have been lying. Because you are one,” Macnair ventures.

“I might have been,” Lupin allows. “One never knows. But you have a new Defence teacher who isn’t a werewolf. What did he have to say on the matter?”

“That you can only pass on lycanthropy in wolf form during the full moon,” Miss Weasley says, eying Macnair in displeasure.

“Or if you let the curse consume you,” Miss Brown says, frowning. “But that’s supposed to be obvious.”

“And someone being that ridiculous still can’t pass on the whole of lycanthropy unless it’s the full moon,” Miss Chang adds, watching the proceedings with her chin propped on her hand. “You only get aspects of the curse, not its entirety.”

Lupin smiles at her. “Exactly so,” he says, but there are shadows in his eyes.

Fucking Fenrir Greyback. Severus decides he’s had enough of spying on the werewolf and turns his attention to his Slytherins.

“You’re all right, yeah?” Zabini is asking.

“For the eighth time—yes,” Nizar replies, but smiles to take the sting out of the words. “I would be hiding under my bed if it were otherwise.”

“What did you think of the paper today, sir?” Malfoy asks.

“I’m keeping my copy,” Nizar says. “What about you?”

“I’m framing it.” Malfoy has a grim smile on his face. “My father used money or bullying to get people to do what he wanted. Today’s paper, though—that’s an example of what real politics can gain you.”

Severus is temporarily distracted by Salazar getting his attention and shoving a cup of tea into his hands. “Eat something before you miss the lunch hour entirely.”

Severus glares back and stabs at something on his plate. He does not need another bloody nursemaid. He has Poppy fretting over his weight—which is fine, thank you—Minerva to exclaim over his apparent newfound ability to sleep at night, and Albus pestering him about any potential aftereffects remaining from the Dark Mark’s removal.

Potentially he should have discovered what he was stabbing before he ate it. He really has no love for imported lima beans.

Severus notes Malfoy signaling for his attention after lunch and nods his acceptance. He steals another swift look at Nizar, who is being distracted by their Slytherins, before he gets up and leaves the hall five minutes before the meal is over. By the time Malfoy, Greengrass, Zabini, and Greenwood arrive, he’s been in his office for at least ten minutes.

“Is this related to yesterday, or to today?” Severus asks them after Zabini shuts the door.
“Bit of both, really,” Zabini replies, and Miss Greengrass nods her agreement.

“Most of us feel all right today except for Adele,” Malfoy reports.

“Is this true, Miss Greenwood?”

Miss Greenwood glares at Malfoy before drawing herself up. “I wasn’t going to mention it, as it didn’t seem troublesome enough to bother, sir, but—yes, I feel worse than the others. I suspect that it’s both a war mage’s magical adjustment as well as getting used to a magical nobility title. I don’t have any means of articulating it beyond that.”

“You would most likely be correct. The only one of us who does not feel some form of physical distress today is Lupin,” Severus says. “Is it distracting you, Miss Greenwood?”

Miss Greenwood frowns as she thinks about it. “I have no classes or schoolwork today, sir, so it’s tolerable. I’m not certain about tomorrow.”

“Then stop by my office in the morning, and we’ll review the matter again after breakfast.” Severus glances at the others. “Any difficulties?”

“Odd dreams,” Malfoy says after a moment. “Oh, and when I woke up, I could smell home. That part was quite nice, sir.”

Miss Greengrass smiles. “I could as well.”

“I could smell Hogwarts, England, and the old family estate in Italy. I woke up trying to figure out where I was.” Zabini looks apologetic. “I might’ve hexed Gregory until I could stop mixing up Hogwarts with the other two.”

“He didn’t complain about it, so it can’t have bothered Mister Goyle overly much.” Severus meets their eyes in turn. “If anything—anything—bothers you in the coming days, no matter how trivial you believe it to be, make certain myself, Salazar, or Professor Slytherin are informed. It could be the need to let this magic continue to settle, or it could be a side effect that must be treated. I don’t care if it’s merely a feeling of unhappiness. If it isn’t a usual presence in your daily life, tell us.”

“Yes, sir,” he receives in a polite chorus.

“And what about you, Professor?” Miss Greengrass asks. “Are you all right?”

“This morning has been busy enough that I have not actually had time to dwell on much beyond the fact that I do not like being able to count the individuals in every single settlement on this island,” Severus returns. “It’s been similarly for everyone else involved.”

“Because of—of Elfric,” Zabini says, swallowing. “You know, the professor has never once lied about his kids being young when they died, but it’s one thing to hear it and another to see it.”

“It is quite different, yes, but Elfric deSlizarse was twenty-three. Standing over the dead who are underage is far, far worse.”

“Is that why you were a spy, Professor?” Malfoy asks.

Severus eyes him, wondering if Narcissa confessed to her son the exact nature of her plans. Draco Malfoy, like the other three students present in his office, is well-trained in Occlumency. “One of many. Is there anything else?” he asks in blatant dismissal.
“No, sir.” Miss Greenwood gives the others a significant glare that removes them all from his office in record time.

Severus discovers that he is gazing as his closed door with both eyebrows raised. He’s never seen that sort of intensity from Miss Adele Greenwood before. He wonders if it’s some aspect of a war mage’s abilities that Nizar never mentioned, or if choosing as she did yesterday granted Miss Greenwood full access to her spine.
Chapter Summary

It only had to be them, didn’t it? And Harry was supposed to be able to stop him, wasn’t he? And he did. Wasn’t nobody’s fault that the Dark Lord didn’t go after the baby first—

When Severus goes back upstairs, it’s to discover that the pile of correspondence on Nizar’s table has been subjected to sorting. There are five different piles instead of the expected two. “Are you sorting out death wishes by degree of threat and surfeit of language?”

Black drops the scroll he was holding and rubs his eyes. “No. That small pile on the far side of the table is poisoned, so I’m going to wrap them up and ship them off for the Ministry to deal with.”

“How sensible,” Severus drawls. It’s very annoying that Black keeps proving he isn’t entirely foolish. That is a measure which might see more of Voldemort’s followers sent to Azkaban, or at least rid Wizarding Britain of a few idiots.

“Yes,” Black says, not noticing the potential insult. “Not as many death threats as I expected, to be honest. There are more kind letters than bullshit, though much of the bullshit is from those who are trying to blow smoke up my arse. Most of the death threats are attached to the poisoned ones. But some of these are for Remus.”

“And yours are poisoned, too?” Severus asks.

“No, just irritating.” Lupin scowls at what he’s holding. “A few of them are letters revising their opinion of werewolves, given that ‘Wizarding Britain’s Great Sacrificing Heroes’ had me witness their wedding. A lot of them look to be tirades against a werewolf daring to stand witness at a wedding for those same heroes. It’s certainly quite the horror that my best friends asked me to witness their marriage. We should have told Madam Spencer to tell everyone that I’m Harry James Potter’s godfather. That would really stir the bastards up.”

“You’re not done sorting through this mess yet. The count for these letters might even out,” Black suggests, but Lupin’s scowl only deepens.

“Where is Salazar?” Severus decides to ask. He does not want to watch these two bicker over death threat counts. He’s earned far more than they’ll see for the rest of their lives.

“No idea.” Black picks up the next bound scroll. “Lost track of him after lunch. How are our Slytherins from last night?”

“Not suffering from any inconveniences we weren’t already told to expect. Nizar?”

“Whatever that new room is, there,” Lupin answers, pointing at closed door to the restored study and brewing room.

“Thank you.” Severus pauses after taking only two steps in that direction. “Did either of you smell anything unusual this morning?”
“Aside from apple blossoms?” Lupin nods without looking up. “My grandmother’s house in Powys, just north of Brecon. Specifically, her flowers. She used magic to keep them blooming year-round.”

“I thought your mother was a Muggle?” Black asks before Severus can.

“No, just born non-magical in a magical bloodline,” Lupin replies absently. “Sometimes it skips a generation. She would never have been so blasé about my father’s magic if she hadn’t grown up with it, Sirius.”

“Good point.” Black shakes his head. “Lucky wanker. I woke up smelling London, clear as if I was actually there. No one wants to wake up with their nose full of what it’s like to stand in one of the abandoned Underground tunnels.” He lowers the scroll. “Wait, is this something expected?”

“I’m not certain if Salazar would have recalled, but the others experienced similar scent-memories of the homes they now protect.” Severus crosses the room to knock on Nizar’s closed door. After hearing a faint invitation to enter, he does so, closing the door behind him.

“I’m surprised you’re not helping them sort through that interesting batch of correspondence,” Severus says.

“No, the most ground-breaking bit came from Madam Bones. Besides, they’re adults. They can read their own fucking mail.” Nizar puts last night’s singing Pensieve on the table.

Severus walks over to discover that Nizar has reopened the applewood chest he retrieved from Gringotts. “Unpacking?”

“Mm. Seemed like a good time.” Nizar frowns. “It would be difficult to be more miserably depressed at the moment.”

“So you’ve decided to take it as a challenge and make it worse, regardless.” Severus gives him a dry look. “Nizar.”

“Well, I can give myself time, recover, and then become a sodden heap all over again, or I can suffer it all at once.”

Severus narrows his eyes. “That was not meant to be advice.” He spies another stack of ancient-bound books, like the child’s journal that is still laid out on the desk next to the Cumbric text. “You have more of those?”

“Many.” Nizar picks them up, revealing that it’s only the first stack of four, with others waiting below. He turns the books onto their sides to peer at the runes that grace the spine. “These are all from 990. I remember really liking Futhorc for dating things. It often confounded those who read the sides of books expecting them to have letters, not numbers.”

“It seems as if you had a lot to say.”

Nizar places the bound journals on the table next to the Pensieve. “I wrote down everything. I couldn’t speak to anyone. There are eight from that year alone, and eight again for the next.”

“You recall that?” Severus asks in surprise.

“Well, I was just holding them. Trigger objects.” Nizar pulls out the next three sets, which hold the rest of 990 and all of 991. “Once I realized I was writing an entire library of nattering, I asked Rowena if it were possible to create magical space within a book so that it held exactly as much room as you needed. Rowena actually shrieked in outrage. She was so displeased that the idea never
occurred to her. I only have one journal per year from that point onward.”

“That sounds suspiciously like the lemon balm incident,” Severus says, amused.

“Mm.” Nizar retrieves the next five journals, which are no bigger than the previous books, but each one bears only a single year in runes on the side rather than a set of dates. “Salazar would tell others that he was the man who would ask ‘Why?’ and I was the man who would ask ‘Why not?’”

Nizar removes another bound set of journals with dates ranging into the beginning of the new millennium. “Galiena returned them all. In the letter she left in the trunk for me, she writes that I’d given almost everything to the family. I wanted my grandchildren to know where they came from—our branch of the family, anyway. Galiena decided that while her children had known me and thus deserved certain truths, those who came after them shouldn’t. She was probably right.”

Severus picks up a stack of the bound journals. “Then you have your first years written down. You’ll know what happened.”

“Which is not quite the same thing as remembering it, but it’s useful. Oh, hello…” Nizar lifts a wide, shallow box out of the chest that looks alarmingly similar to the box that held the diadem.

“Nizar—”

“It’s not a diadem or a coronet. Salazar still had that,” Nizar says in displeasure. “You saw me wearing the fucking thing yesterday. I suspect that this is everything else.”

Severus peers into the box when Nizar removes the lid, spying multiple pouches that look to be made from linen and silk. “Everything else being what, exactly?”

“Uh—culture, really.” Nizar picks up one of the larger silk bags. “In those days, it was common for everyone to wear jewelry, no matter your gender or status. The value of it varied depending on your station, but it was considered very odd if you had none at all. It marked you as lacking both loved ones and money. I was not very fond of it, though.”

“I see. So Kanza is a cheat.”

Nizar smiles. “She does actually like being around my neck, but…yes, I suppose she was also an excellent way to escape wearing jewelry. Even Godric wore more than I did, and you’ve witnessed that man’s preferred dress by way of his portraits.” Nizar pours the contents of one pouch out onto his hand, revealing many strands of thin silver chain. When Nizar holds it up with both hands by each end of its simple hook-and-eye clasp, he reveals tiered silver loops decorated with bits of green and blue beryl, green quartz, and blue zircon suspended in bezels or attached with delicate silver wire.

“Burgos,” Nizar says quietly. “The Burgos elves gave this to me. This was the first jewelry I ever owned aside from the ring on my finger.”

“This is what you and Salazar mean by their crafting abilities, then.” Severus picks up the pouch when he realizes there is still something in it and pulls out a bit of silver, oddly shaped, meant to resemble climbing vines with graceful curls of leaves at one end. “What is this?”

“A clan’s jewelry varied in value and style. And that…” Nizar puts down the tiered necklace and puts the silver over his ear, revealing its use as a cuff that wraps his ear from top to bottom. “I was not fond of the idea of hot needles being stabbed through my ears, and believe me, they offered. This was an excellent compromise.”
Severus reaches out and runs his finger down the silver over Nizar’s ear. “As I said during the winter holiday, Nizar: you had an amazing life.”

Nizar stares at him. “Are you implying that my life is worse for being here? That it’s worse because you’re standing here?”

Severus tries not to grimace. “Nizar, I’m not—”

“Not what? Not good enough, brave enough, stubborn enough, brilliant enough?” Nizar sighs. “Are you impugning my sense of taste again? Today of all days?”

“You would be Slytherin enough to use that as a weapon against me,” Severus mutters. “No. Not today. Not after that funeral, Nizar.”

Nizar gives him a long, searching look. “One day you’ll believe me,” he says, and turns back to the jewelry pouches before Severus can respond. Nizar puts both cuff and necklace into the empty pouch, but when he puts it back in the box with the others, Severus hears the rustle of paper.

“That doesn’t belong.” Nizar retrieves the suspect linen bag, which is of a different weave than the others. He retrieves a short scroll bound with a sapphire blue ribbon from its confines, and then tilts the pouch until a silver ring drops onto his palm.

Nizar holds the ring up at eye level, giving it a curious stare. “And who do you belong to? You certainly don’t belong to me; I’m wearing mine.”

He hands it to Severus, who studies the silver ring, curious. It’s not an exact replica of the silver band that both Nizar and Salazar wear, though it’s similar enough. The horned basilisk is still rearing up in front of a blooming rowan tree, but the shape of the serpent is more stylized, closer to resembling the letter S.

“Oh, Galiena,” Nizar murmurs, his voice cracking. “I miss you.”

Severus glances up just in time to trade the ring for the scroll. “Read it,” Nizar says. “I must have taught her modern English at some point, as that’s how she wrote it.”

19th September 1,051

Galiena Aenor deSlizarse, Master Scribe and Renowned Magical Artist of Winchester

The Kingdom of England under the reign of King Edward of the House of Wessex

To my Dearest Father,

Uriel wore the ring of our family with pride from the day I slipped it on his finger until the day of his death. After your painting was completed, Uriel told me that it was silly to bury such a treasure of our family with his body in the earth. He made it clear to me, and to our children, where the ring should go when he dies.

I found it very hard to comply with my husband’s wishes when he passed. It seemed wrong to take that symbol away, so I replaced it with my cloak pin and its collection of stones speaking of my Masteries. What is my magic compared to this loss?
When I held the ring in my hand, though, I recognized at once why Uriel insisted. He never told me it was Sight telling him so, but I can feel it, too. This ring’s task is not done. Another hand will wear it. I’ve Seen it.

I’ve also seen this one elsewhere before. I do pray that it does not make things odd.

I hope he will make you happy, Father. You deserve one who will bring you joy.

—Galiena

“Bloody matchmaking from a thousand years in the past,” Nizar is saying when Severus lowers the scroll. His heart is beating far too fast, and he has no idea why. “I wonder if she means Recordari.”

“What?” Severus asks. His voice sounds hollow.

Nizar looks up and his eyes widen in alarm. He makes a curious gesture with one finger, Summoning the chair at his desk to the workbench without using his wand. “Sit down before you fall down. Please.”

Severus gives the chair a look that his students usually reserve for new potions ingredients before the instruction catches up to him. Then he sits down and remembers to start breathing again.

“It’s a very good thing that is Goblin silver and not standard silver, else you’d have crushed it into a metal blob by now,” Nizar says.

He grimaces and makes himself unclench his fist. The ring left red indentations in his skin, even capturing the curve of the basilisk, if not the detail. “My apologies.”

“Nonsense.” Nizar plucks the ring from his hand and drops it back into the pouch it came from. “I suppose I know what question I will not be asking you at any point in the near future.”

Severus reaches out to grasp Nizar’s hand once the pouch is put back into the box. “It isn’t about—it isn’t you.”

“I know.” Nizar turns Severus’s hand around so he can hold it with both of his own. “You can be committed to someone and still utterly lose your fucking mind at the idea of marriage. There is a lot of cultural ideology that is tangled up with one idea but not the other.”

“You’re being insanely reasonable again,” Severus complains, glad that he now sounds more or less normal. That was a ridiculous response to have. He isn’t even—he isn’t even entirely opposed.

“I don’t have that cultural baggage. Or if I do, I don’t remember it,” Nizar replies, smiling. “It’s easier to see from that perspective. You’re not panicking about the idea of being with me. Just about marriage. I’m truly not offended, and to be honest, I don’t care about marriage.”

“Do you not?” Severus asks, curious. This is not a conversation they’ve ever had before, though at least they’re only discussing preferences, not bloody predicted foregone conclusions!

“I saw many marriages, but there were also many who never bothered. Helga was utterly devoted to her lady…whose name I can’t recall at all at the moment.” Nizar looks frustrated before he shakes it off. “They never needed a priest from any religion tell them what they already knew.”

“GOD FUCKING DAMN IT!”
Severus and Nizar both slowly turn their heads in the direction of the sitting room. “Oh, that sounds promising,” Nizar says.

Severus bemusedly allows Nizar to pull him to his feet. “I thought they were adults who could read their own fucking mail?”

“Yes, but I want to know what caused Black to shout loudly enough that the walls may still be echoing with it,” Nizar counters.

When they open the door and return to the sitting room, Black is stalking back and forth along the rug, swearing under his breath and growling. Lupin is still at the table, clutching a tattered bit of paper in both hands and staring at it with his teeth bared. His eyes are bright gold.

Severus doesn’t realize he’s retreating until the stone wall at his back stops him. No, he does not blame Miss Edgecombe. Not at all.

“REMUS!” Nizar shouts, gaining everyone’s attention. “Calm down. Right now!”

For a few seconds, Severus wonders if Lupin will actually snarl at them. Then Lupin takes a deep breath, drops the paper to the table, and buries his face in his hands. “I’m sorry,” his muffled voice says. “I haven’t—I haven’t been that angry in quite some time.”

Black strides over to the table, snatches up the paper, and gives it to Nizar. “That’s why.”

Severus still can’t make himself step away from the wall. Fortunately, no one seems to be noticing. No, he’s certain Nizar is aware; Nizar is merely polite enough not to point it out.

Severus watches as Nizar raises an eyebrow as he reads what seems to be a short message. “You find this infuriating?” Nizar asks.

“You don’t—you don’t remember why it’s infuriating,” Black says, his jaw clenching.

“I don’t need to. What you’re reading and reacting to with anger? All I see is a desperate coward begging for you not to kill him.”

“He certainly went about it the wrong way, then!” Black yells.

Nizar rolls his eyes. “Make up your mind—do you want him dead, or do you want to present him to the Wizengamot after Fudge is removed from office so that the whole of Wizarding Britain can observe and admire?”

Black scowls. “Fuck, why are you sensible?”

“There are so many ways I could answer that.” Nizar takes a few steps back so he can give Severus the paper. “I know how you feel as well, but it’s not your call if he lives or dies.”

Severus has a very good idea by now who this particular owl-sent message is from. “If there is an encounter during a battle, I make no promises.”

Sirius,

*Congratulations on your pardon. You deserve it. You shouldn’t have come after me. It wouldn’t have been necessary and nothing would have gone wrong if you hadn’t! Everything would be fine, and I wouldn’t be living like this.*
Severus lowers the letter, scowling. “Is there a more emphatic term for coward?”

“Fucking useless waste of flesh?” Black suggests.

“I think that might be an insult to flesh,” Severus mutters.

*It only had to be them, didn’t it? And Harry was supposed to be able to stop him, wasn’t he? And he did. Wasn’t nobody’s fault that the Dark Lord didn’t go after the baby first—*

“Holy shit,” Black says.

“What?” Severus barks out, distracted from the letter again.

Black is staring at him. “You’re doing the magical sparkling shit I’ve seen Slytherin pull off.”

“Silver flame. Pretty. Please don’t set that missive on fire,” Nizar adds. “We might need it. If someone is willing to authenticate it with magic, that’s a fucking confession.”

“It is, isn’t it?” Severus feels a moment of pleasure tempering the rage, and the magical flames dancing along his fingertips reduce themselves to mere sparks.

*If I were you, I’d be blaming the tyke for not being able to make the Dark Lord stay dead. That is what that prophecy was talking about, right? Then maybe our friends would still be alive.*

*I had to do it, Sirius. I had to, or he’d have tortured me, killed me! You know what it’s like to live with that kind of fear. I know you’ll understand.*

—Peter

“I’m surprised you didn’t break something after reading a letter from a rat trying to shift blame to an infant,” Severus says to Black.

Black shrugs. “Not my furniture to break. I can go home and break my own.”

Severus hands the paper back to Nizar, who he thinks is the least likely of the four of them to utterly destroy it. “I’m not certain if I would call this a galling lack of empathy, insanity, or the aforementioned cowardice.”

“Oh, there’s no reason why it can’t be all three.” Nizar is looking at the letter again. “It’s too bad we don’t have any of his blood. I know how to do a Summoning with blood magic, too.”

Lupin looks intrigued. “Does it need to be fresh blood?”

“Not necessarily,” Nizar replies.

“Now I’m disappointed I burnt those clothes. We could ask Crookshanks if he knows where any
bloodstains might linger. Maybe if no one has cleaned out the Shack…” Black trails off. “Then again, we might accidentally just Summon you, Remus.”

Lupin sighs and rubs at his forehead. “Well, I do need to go there anyway.”

“Who is Crookshanks?” Nizar asks.

“Granger’s cat, a half-Kneazle mongrel. He caught Pettigrew,” Severus answers. “He’s an absolutely loathsome excuse for a cat who is more efficient at catching the enemy than we are.”

“Oh, I sense jealousy.” Nizar smirks and then folds the letter along its original crease. “Did this have an envelope?”

Lupin holds it up. “Here. Are you serious about that Blood Summons?”

“It’s very tempting, but I wouldn’t have that same sort of nonsensical, stupid trap waiting on the other end.” Nizar slides the letter back into the envelope, gives Lupin a brief look, and then reclaims both. “Spectacle or death, Sirius?”

“Spectacle,” Black says in a flat voice. “But I hope someone else finds Peter before I do, or he’ll be too dead to be useful.”

“Hmm.” Nizar taps the envelope against his hand. “If I didn’t think we’d also inadvertently Summon Voldemort along with this fucking idiot simply due to mere proximity, I’d be asking the cat about bloodstains. Cats always know the difference.”

Black frowns. “Why would that be a problem? We’d definitely suspect that he was coming.”

“Yes, but he would still have the advantage.” Nizar pockets the letter. “I don’t want him to have any advantages. I want Voldemort to think he’s utterly in control of everything right before I erase him from existence.”

“He’s a distant relation,” Lupin says. “Why not use your own blood to Summon him?”

Nizar gives Lupin a disbelieving look. “Why yes, I’m certain Salazar would be so thrilled to experience that for a second time in less than a year. No. That’s almost as stupid as a fucking platypus.”

Severus is about to make a comment about Australia’s quirks when he realizes that Black has turned white and Lupin looks as if he’s just been slapped with a sack full of bricks. “Platypi are venomous, not terrifying,” he says scathingly.

“Why the problem with the platypus?” Black asks Nizar in a strangled voice.

Nizar glares at him. “Because I don’t know what the fuck they are, and I’m pretty certain platypi don’t know, either.”

Black’s expression twists up into something unfathomable before he looks at Lupin. “I told you he hated that fucking thing.”

“It was a useful teaching tool!” Lupin protests.

“Like hell it was! Who explains the five categories of animals to a baby and then never bothers to explain where a platypus fits into all that nonsense?” Black retorts.

Lupin lifts his hands into the air in a dramatic shrug. “Well, it’s a moot point, anyway. Accidental
magic and poof goes the fucking platypus.”

Nizar looks at Severus. “Are they both having brainstorms? Because they just stopped making sense.”

“I’m concerned by the fact that you believe they’ve ever made any sense at all,” Severus returns dryly.

“More than this, at least,” Nizar says.

Black points at Lupin. “This idiot godparent gave my son a stuffed platypus. However, the only times I ever saw you holding that platypus, you were actively trying to get rid of it.”

“Good!” Nizar sounds offended. “Who the hell baffles a baby with a fucking platypus?”

Black keeps pointing at Lupin.

Nizar glances back and forth at them. “All right, that was a stupid question.”

Salazar chooses that moment to Apparate into the room, though at least he’s sensible enough to arrive near the door. “Oh, this looks fascinating,” Salazar drawls. “What did I miss, then?”

“Peter Pettigrew and a fucking platypus,” Nizar says.

Salazar looks revolted. “That sounds like the name of a horrific series of children’s tales.”

“They’d have to be tales of morality.” Lupin shakes his head. “Don’t be like Pettigrew, kids.”

“I’m more concerned that there would be actual platypus fucking involved, myself,” Salazar says.

Severus clenches his jaw shut, possibly cracking his teeth as he absolutely refuses to laugh the way Black and Lupin are doing. What nearly breaks his composure is Nizar looking in Severus’s direction, his face perfectly composed as he mouths, “Platypus fucking.”

Severus glares at him. “Please stop saying that!”

Nizar grins and doesn’t say a word. Instead, he projects the thought: Platypus fucking!

*You and your fucking loopholes!*

“You said it, not me,” Nizar replies in a mild voice. Severus resolves that he is going to spend the rest of this day trying to figure out ways to retaliate that would not result in an ended relationship.

* * * *

Severus has to spend most of Sunday afternoon in his office, seeing to his Slytherins as well as to the homework that is beginning to pile up. He marks his way through a great deal of the stack, scowling and wondering if a seventh-year would be willing to grade all of this rubbish in exchange for an apprenticeship. He is not above using bribery to gain a secretary, and he would actually teach them—as long as they aren’t stupid, that is.

Nizar Apparates into his office after six-thirty. Severus has just finished eating a very sparse dinner
after convincing the house-elves that he truly did not need to eat an entire banquet. Nizar’s timing makes him suspect yet again that one of the two ancient Slytherins is spying on him via elf.

“Did you want to join us?” Nizar holds up a bottle of Death in a Bottle that’s only one-third full. “It won’t be much more than drinking, reminiscing, and depressing sadness, but you’re still welcome.”

“Is that the last of the old stash of Death in a Bottle?” Severus asks while he considers the question.

Nizar nods. “After I poured the remainder of one bottle into this one, yes.”

Severus makes a decision and stands. “If you don’t mind.”

“I wouldn’t have asked otherwise.” Nizar hesitates. “They’re both in the Shrieking Shack, you know. In case I really did get it wrong.”

“Do you suspect that you did?” Severus asks, retrieving his cloak.

“No, but it’s been a while…and it’s possible that after a thousand years, the lycanthropy strain has changed. It shouldn’t make the potion ineffective given the way it was crafted, but Lupin is right that we won’t know until after he’s done transforming.”

“I have a wand and the ability to Apparate,” Severus says, understanding what Nizar is telling him. He is not going to hide like a terrified imbecile. He’s still seething at himself for trying to retreat through a wall just because Lupin’s eyes were the wrong color.

Nizar Apparates them directly to the school’s cemetery, where Salazar is already waiting, not much more than a silhouette in the darkness. Salazar glances at the bottle Nizar holds and asks, “You’re certain you wish to use the last of it for this?”

“It seems appropriate enough, Sal,” Nizar replies.

Salazar nods. “That it does.” He calls up a small, flickering green flame in the palm of his hands, placing it on the stone for Elfric deSlizarse’s grave. It burns steadily and grants them just enough light to see by. Salazar then sits down on one of the tree stumps arranged around the grave. Those same stumps often act as seats for Hagrid’s Care of Magical Creatures students.

Severus waits until he has a single shot of the liquor, the only one he plans to accept for the evening. His constitution is not Spanish, and he refuses to become utterly pissed on a school night, no matter the reason. “How can there not be more? The ingredients Nizar mentioned are simple enough.”

“The ingredients themselves? Oh, yes,” Salazar agrees, pouring a shot for himself. “It’s the matter of how the ingredients are made that is the trouble, Severus.”

Severus frowns, recalling what Nizar once mentioned of certain plants within his portrait’s confines. “None of them are extinct.”

“No, but the weather patterns changed over the centuries.” Salazar glances up at the clear night sky over their heads, blowing a steaming breath into the air. “The bees that provided the honey feasted upon a specific type of flower. That flower only grows in the south of Britain now. The soil is not the same, the weather different—the plant itself has changed as the centuries passed. The flavor of honey produced by bees using that flower is not the same. Thus, yes, we could recreate this liquor, and it would be similar, but not an exact replica. I’ve tried, and the difference in flavor is just enough to…it isn’t unpalatable, but it isn’t Death in a Bottle. Others might not mind, but I do.”

“I would mind. I’d want to change the recipe further to avoid being angry at a drink for trying to
impersonate something we can’t recreate.” Nizar holds up his glass. “The only toast I am making tonight: to my son, who is home at last.”

“Home,” Salazar repeats, his voice cracking before he chimes their glasses together. “I’ll drink to that.”

Severus has no idea what to say. He merely completes the motion of the toast and consumes a single swallow of the liquor. It feels odd, yet entirely appropriate to end the existence of Death in a Bottle over freshly turned earth in a cemetery.

They talk about random things, mundane things. Some of it Severus can’t follow when Nizar and Salazar lapse into Castilian out of habit, though Salazar expresses surprise that Severus never learned it.

“We tried so hard,” Nizar says, laughing. “Truly. I think Severus only retained please, thank you, yes, no, you’re welcome, basic greetings, and how to find a few things.”

“The bathroom, the library, and alcohol,” Severus confirms, and Salazar chuckles. The green light and his wide smile both serve to highlight the lines on his face. “Latin was much easier.”

“Oh, you’d have endeared yourself to Rowena with that statement,” Salazar says. “She refused to learn Castellano beyond the very basics of the language. She said it and Catalan were just corrupted forms of Latin, and she’d rather speak the language directly. I dared to point out that franceis was also a Latin cousin, and Rowena spent a good three hours informing me of all the ways in which franceis was furthering itself from its Latin roots. The irritating part is that she was correct.”

Nizar suddenly straightens in place. “I remember where that stupid scar came from. The one on my shoulder.”

“Where?” Severus asks, intrigued.

Salazar just looks irritated. “Even with the painting being moved, I’m not certain how you could ever have forgotten that bloody disaster, and I don’t mean that as a pun.”

“Elfric and Brice were still very young…six and seven, perhaps?” Nizar shrugs. “I don’t exactly recall. Elfric and Brice were both very curious about battles, but Elfric is the one who always liked to find things out for himself rather than rely on someone’s secondhand accounting. He somehow eluded his minder and his siblings during an attack on the castle, and escaped outside.”

Severus finishes off the liquor in his glass. “So he immediately decided to take after his father.”

Nizar grants him a smile. “Somewhat. Brice definitely more so, but they each had their quirks. Elfric’s was his intense and nigh-untamable curiosity.”

“The castle’s magic alerted us that there was suddenly a student in mortal peril. That was a hell of a distraction at the time,” Salazar picks up the tale. “Seven magicians against an army with its own magicians who’d granted their soldiers the means to see the castle. We were bloody well overrun, and suddenly amidst all of that, we had to find a child.”

“I didn’t know who. I only knew where. I nearly had fucking heart failure when I realized it was tiny Elfric trying to hide behind a boulder, utterly unaware of the danger creeping up behind him.” Nizar holds out his glass for Salazar to refill. “I swept him out of the way, killed the bastard who was about to murder a child, and then another soldier took advantage of my distraction to plant a battle ax in my shoulder.”
“A battle ax.” Severus stares at Nizar. There are small versions, but the size of that scar—he’s seen larger, ancient versions of those monstrosities in a Muggle museum. “It’s a wonder you weren’t split in two.”

Nizar tilts his head. “I can’t remember much of the actual strike. Adrenaline is a wonderful thing. Salazar told me I obliterated the fool with the ax and fell over.”

“Scared the bloody life out of me,” Salazar adds. “Poor Elfric never did anything that reckless again. It took encouragement from many before he would participate in any sort of defence training when it came time to learn it proper.” Salazar looks at the nearly empty bottle, sighs, and then pours the last of Death in a Bottle into his own glass.

Severus turns to glare at the black Newfoundland mutt that is nosing his way through the grass up to the cemetery. “What are you doing here?”

Nizar holds up his empty glass. “I hope you’re not here for the alcohol, as we drank it already.”

The dog barks, sits down, and wags his tail. Severus has his wand out and pointed, spell on his lips, the moment he hears the second large animal coming towards them.

Nizar puts his hand on Severus’s arm. “It’s all right.”

“If one is here, so is the other,” Severus snarls back. Black whines and thumps his tail again.

“Trust me,” Nizar murmurs under his breath.

A wolf comes out of the grass and enters the circle of green firelight, sitting down next to Black’s Animagus form. It isn’t a werewolf—it is, but it is not. That is not the distorted bipedal creature that haunts Severus’s nightmares. This beast has Lupin’s black werewolf coat, but is akin to a Russian timber wolf in size and appearance from his ears to his long, bushy tail. The only thing marking him as a werewolf is the golden cast to his eyes.

Severus breathes out and lowers his wand, trying to ignore his trembling hands. “You didn’t say the potion would do that.”

“I wasn’t sure if I was remembering correctly, and I didn’t want to accidentally mislead you into believing something that wasn’t true.” Nizar makes a clicking noise with his tongue, which summons Black at once. The werewolf waits patiently while Black nuzzles both of Nizar’s hands and then shoves his nose into the empty glass. When he sneezes and looks up at them, ears laid back in offence, Nizar smiles.

Then the wolf stands up and makes his slow, cautious way towards Nizar. Severus’s hand clamps around his wand as his jaw clenches. His every instinct is to either kill the wolf or escape, but if Nizar and Salazar are standing their ground, then dammit, so will he.

Nizar reaches out and pats the wolf’s head before scratching his ears. “There, I bet that’s much better than the Wolfsbane nonsense. Are you convinced now?”

The wolf lets out an odd yip and then licks Nizar’s hands.

Severus might actually break his own unbreakable fucking wand if this keeps up. “Nizar—a werewolf has…teeth.”

“Don’t they?” Nizar runs his hands along the wolf’s face. “How many curse-binding elements were in that potion, Severus?”
Severus blinks a few times, startled by the question, before he can recall the listed ingredients. “There were many, but—”

His breath catches in his throat as his heart rate picks up, but it isn’t only fear this time. It’s elation, pleasure, pride, and complete, utter relief. “The potion binds the lycanthropy aspect to the point where one who consumes it cannot pass on the curse.”

“No, they can’t.” Nizar smiles again as Black starts competing for ear-scratching. “We didn’t know that at first. Elfric might have been fascinated by battles until he learned his lesson, but Brice had a small boy’s fascination with being a werewolf. He’d never seen Galiena without the potion, so he didn’t really understand the true nature of lycanthropy. He begged Galiena to bite him so he could be a werewolf, too. When that didn’t work, he taunted her on full moons until Galiena finally lost her temper, turned around, and bit him.”

“Brice was devastated when he did not, in fact, get to be a werewolf.” Salazar laughs. “He did learn better as to why he was not to pull his sister’s tail, and eventually learned to understand the nature of both potion and curse…but until that moment? I’d no idea my brother had created a potion that meant the various forms of zoikóthropie cannot be passed on by any with a zoikóthropic curse during the full moon.”

“It would be more of an accomplishment to dose a human with a potion that would mean they could not be infected by a rogue zoikóthrope’s bite,” Nizar responds, frowning. “Still, it was nice to know.”

Severus can’t help it; he laughs. “Did you just impugn your own skill?”

Nizar glances up at him. “Shut up.”

“About this? Not ever,” Severus replies.

His heart still tries to hammer away in his chest when the wolf lets out a whine and approaches Severus, one cautious step at a time. He’s still a very large beast, as tall as Severus if he were to stand on his hind legs. His paws are wide and large enough to pace over snow without difficulty.

Black barks at him. Severus glares at the dog, who is on his feet and glaring right back at him. “What?”

The wolf whines again. Severus realizes he’s still clenching his wand. “I’m not going to hex you, you idiot.” Most likely. If Lupin bites him, all bets are off.

The wolf barks, disappears into the darkness, and returns with a large stick in his mouth. He drops it at Severus’s feet and then sits back on his haunches expectantly.

Severus eyes the wolf in irritated dismay. “You’ve got to be fucking joking.”

Nizar grins at him. “Just throw the stick, Severus. Wolves are playful, and this is the only way he knows to try and make friends.”

“I do not want to be friends with bloody Remus Lupin!”

Severus is saved from making any sort of decision—he would probably have set something on fire—when Black leaps forward and steals the stick, running off with it. The wolf lets out a startled bark and chases after him.

Somehow, that progresses to Nizar off in the dead grass with dog and wolf, tossing a stick or playing
tug-of-war with one or the other. It’s strange to see Nizar doing so, spending time with the men who were his father and godfather before a magical adoption changed everything.

“They’re reminding him of Galiena and Brice.” Salazar is standing next to Severus with his hands shoved into his coat pockets, watching the three play with a wistful look on his face. “Nizar would stay awake for the entire night on the full moon for Galiena’s sake.”

“And Brice?” Severus asks, though he suspects.

“When he didn’t get to be a werewolf, he insisted upon learning to be an Animagus before he was even ready for an apprenticeship. Nizar was the one who knew the magic, so he indulged Brice. None of us were very surprised when we suddenly had a wolf pup Animagus prancing about. He wanted it too much.”

Severus doesn’t understand why he feels a sharp pang at Salazar’s words. “Brice’s portrait said that time is a circle.” A werewolf and an Animagus wolf then; a very large dog Animagus and a werewolf now.

Salazar nods, the barest hint of a grief-laden smile on his lips. “It truly is.”
Narcissa Malfoy waits for Aquila to cease his impatient afternoon shuffling on the owl perch. Then he utters a very polite and refined call for attention. She rewards him with one of the overpriced owl treats instead of the standard, helping to enforce the good manners she has worked to instill in the owl in regards to herself and Draco. She suspects Aquila was simply terrified of Lucius and thus behaved in his presence, as did most of the house-elves before their sudden…departure.

As far as she is concerned, everyone else is welcome to suffer Aquila’s less tolerable behaviors. They are especially deserving of those behaviors if they make fun of the name her much younger child gave to the owl, even if said name is redundant.

The letter she removes from the owl’s leg is a bit longer than expected; she is not expecting much correspondence from her son at the moment. It is part of their mutual ploy, and to her great pleasure, Draco is playing his part with far more subtlety than Lucius contains in his smallest toe.

Lucius is still not allowed to return to the Manor. Narcissa does not even need to tell falsehoods to Voldemort regarding Lucius’s banishment; the Manor itself will not allow Lucius to return unless the charges against him—which tie him to Azkaban—are dismissed.

To Narcissa Theia Black Malfoy

Malfoy Manor, Wiltshire

Sunday, 4th February 1996

Dearest Mother,

I realize that we are politically divided at the moment, but I would be remiss in my duties as your son if I did not continue to correspond with you in a civil manner. I do hope you are well, and that you are pleased with your efforts to unseat a fool from the office of Minister for Magic. While I realize that we favor two different candidates as his replacement. I take heart in the fact that we both believe
Cornelius Fudge to be an imbecile who does not have the slightest understanding in how to enrich one’s standing in society without making a complete and unfortunate spectacle of themselves.

That was a nicely worded strike against your father, dear one, Narcissa thinks, pleased.

As for myself, things have been quiet since the fortunate dismissal of Geronimus Greengrass’s unfortunate and ill-thought attempt at a marriage alliance. (He does me no insult in the offering, but he insults Miss Greengrass in not taking her cares and concerns into account. If our unfortunate disagreement is resolved before the Spring Equinox, I strongly suggest that we “forget” to add his name to the Greengrass family invitation regarding our usual festivities.)

Narcissa raises both eyebrows. Draco is sensible, with good breeding and excellent manners, but there is no doubt that he has picked up a restrained and proper dose of Lucius Malfoy’s ruthlessness. When her son takes up his rightful seat in the Wizengamot upon attaining his majority, it will be a joy to behold.

I have found myself waking with thoughts of home, so strong it’s as if I were actually present in the Manor. How very odd. Perhaps it is due to my long absence.

A side effect of the Magical Title, perhaps? Narcissa resolves to speak to Nizar Slytherin regarding the matter at their earliest mutual convenience.

There is one event that has just occurred as of this morning. I believe you may soon hear of through other circles, though I am not certain who might stumble over such gossip first. Professor Nizar Slytherin became aware of the final resting place of his youngest child, Elfric Ilbertus deSlizarse, whose body has been lost since his death in April of 1015. It is not being shared how the professor came by this information. However, whoever placed deSlizarse into his original resting place performed excellent work with the Preservation magics all good witches and wizards employ. He was easily recognizable. It was a stark reminder that Professor deSlizarse (He taught here! I’d no idea at all) died while still very young.

That line makes Narcissa’s heart clench, though she is very careful to keep the emotion from expressing itself in bodily tension or in her expression. She does not want that sort of fate for Draco, and it is not merely a lack of further Heirs that concerns her.

Thus, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft & Wizardry had the first funeral seen on its grounds since the days of the Founders. Our Defence Teacher announced that Elfric deSlizarse, if located, was always meant to be returned to Hogwarts for burial here. It was a brief yet surprisingly sentimental and demonstrative service, but not in a way that could be considered ruinous of one’s dignity. I believe
you will understand me when I say that it was too honest for that to be a concern. I find I preferred this honesty to the rather grim and displeasing funeral that was held for Great Aunt Cassiopeia upon her passing in 1992.

I like to think of myself as observant, but even I had not realized that our other recent Slytherin addition had restored Hogwarts' original cemetery, removing vine and repairing stone. (Whether he is a pretender or not is immaterial to the fact that his magic is indeed Earth-inclined.) This cemetery is in a quiet corner of the school grounds, so perhaps I simply need to widen my gaze and my horizons.

Excellent. Narcissa does indeed hope Draco continues to do so.

Elfric deSlizarse is now interred here, but long ago, so were Earl Godric Gryffindor and his wife Sedemai, Countess of Gryffindor; Myrddin of the Britons; Salazar Slytherin’s first successor to the noble House of Slytherin, the Lady Vanora deSlizarse—Professor Slytherin’s granddaughter. Her spouse, a woman of the North Britons, was the second successor for teaching Defence after Professor Slytherin. (Forgive me, but without returning to the grounds, I do not trust myself capable of spelling her name properly, and I will not insult an ancient member of our House in such a fashion.) Salazar Slytherin’s second wife, the Lady Marion of Inverness, is buried here, as well as their daughter Imeyna, accompanied by her husband, both of whom also died young and childless. (My understanding is that Salazar Slytherin’s first wife is entombed in Burgos within the bounds of Castile in Spain.)

The Daily Prophet’s morning edition held interesting news that I am certain you must have seen by now, as I do not expect Aquila to reach you until sometime Monday. Cousin Sirius Orion Black III was exonerated by the Queen of England in regards to the infamous betrayal and murder of the Potter family in Hallowe’en of 1981. I find myself concerned as to what this may mean for my family. Our Cousin’s proclivities are well known, after all.

Yes, I’m worried about the idiot, too, Narcissa thinks with a touch of wryness. Her cousin survived twelve years of Azkaban; her only concern is those blasted Dementors should Fudge choose to release them before he is conveniently ejected from office.

However, his tri-marriage to James Potter and Lily Evans—shocking! If I am recalling our own copy of the family tree properly, that means Harry Potter is now a part of our family by two differing marriages. Perhaps I should make a more effective attempt at gaining his allegiance upon my established cousin’s return to Hogwarts.

Narcissa has to lower the letter and direct a baffled stare at the wall. She has to admit, in all her concerns regarding Draco, her son gaining the Wiltshire Magical Title, their unexpected new War Mages, conniving with Spencer and Dervish, and dealing with the Dark Lord’s temperament, she had not even given a thought to what Sirius Black’s marriage would mean in regards to the absent Mister Potter. Draco is brilliant for considering this when she failed to do so. Even if the two never manage to be friends (Narcissa has long maintained that Pure-bloods find such things in rare, nigh-
impossible circumstances) then an alliance with Sirius Black’s Heir would not be amiss.

_I fear I have nothing to add for now, but rest assured I will keep you apprised of events during my time in Hogwarts, even if we must disagree on the political courses of our lives._

_Your loving son,_

_Draco Lucius Malfoy_

As if the conclusion of her son’s letter was a prearranged signal, Narcissa feels the Dark Mark on her arm flare with brief pain as the Dark Lord sends out a Summons to his Death Eaters. Botheration. He has been quite erratic of late, and while Narcissa is adept at avoiding his favored tortures, most of these meetings have been an absolute waste of time. It is hard to pass on intelligence when it is made quite clear that the Dark Lord wishes for none of them to speak at all.

Still. She said she would play this role until it became untenable, so that she will do. Perhaps tonight will be different. One never knows when the best sorts of opportunities will present themselves.

Narcissa dresses properly for her status, though she has charmed all of her clothing to reject the scents and dinge of the Riddle Manor. She puts on the robe of a Death Eater and then retrieves the glittering silver mask. Nizar Slytherin taught her a very small variant of the Bubblehead Charm that covers only the nose and mouth of the mask on the inside; the charm’s presence is hidden by the protective magics built into the mask. It is nice to attend to Voldemort without feeling as if she is breathing in decay and mold.

Upon her arrival via Floo, Narcissa drops into a proper curtsey before the Dark Lord and rises only when bidden. “Good evening, my Lord.”

“Good evening, Madam Malfoy,” the Dark Lord replies. The half-mask he wears over his face to hide the damage from basilisk venom is set in place, a wrought working of blood-stained iron. His split pupils flare and contract in the varying light from the fireplace and candelabra, but if he means it to be an intimidating effect, it is a failed effort. Narcissa became accustomed to red eyes and serpentine pupils after his first week in this new body. It is his corpse-like pallor that is still off-putting, if only because it immediately brings to mind Nizar Slytherin’s mockery of the Dark Lord’s slipshod necromancy.

The point of the meeting becomes obvious at once. The Dark Lord is fascinated by yet another member of his family being located, even if they are deceased and newly buried on Hogwarts grounds. Narcissa was already aware of Elfric deSlizarse’s status as a famed Necromancer and tunes out most of the Dark Lord’s droning words in favor of surreptitious glances at other Death Eaters. The absences are as fascinating as the inclusions. Urith Avery, John Avery Senior’s daughter, is not present, nor is Gamelin Rowle or Florentia Selwyn. Narcissa believes all three switched their allegiances to the Slytherin brothers on Christmas Day. They simply had to wait for Nizar Slytherin to perform the Blood Magic that would alter or remove Urith and Gamelin’s Dark Marks; Florentia was fortunate enough never to have accepted it. She suspects that Florentia and Gamelin are courting, which would explain why Florentia lingered until it was safe for Gamelin to depart.

Phillip and Nicola Macnair, great-uncle and great-aunt to young Xavier Macnair at Hogwarts, were
also never Marked. They have not returned since they became guardians to their grandnephew upon Walden Macnair’s incarceration.

There are an absolutely appalling number of Pure-bloods standing before the Dark Lord, pleased and proud to be counted as loyal to a man who will use and execute them when the whim strikes—just as he did during the First War.

Some idiots have very short memories. She does not.

Narcissa also has a son who is not yet a man. She does not wish to fall prey to the Dark Lord’s temper on a day that it cannot be avoided.

Decision made, she lingers in the decaying parlor when the Dark Lord finally signals for the others to depart. Lucius gives her a look, half-curious, half-accusatory. She ignores him until he gives up on fruitless discussion and leaves the parlor.

“Narcissa, my dear: you normally do not choose to remain in my home.”

She inclines her head. “I do not, my Lord. While my son and I are having a…disagreement at the moment, that does not mean I am not without eyes and ears within Hogwarts.”

“Oh?” The Dark Lord sits up in the beaten armchair, removing his wand from his sleeve. She tenses beneath the cover of her cloak, but he only uses it to send a familiar, silver-pawed rat scurrying from the room. “You must believe your spies to have sent you word of value.”

“That will be for my Lord to determine, as always.” Narcissa bows her head. Severus is so much better at this dance. His performance was flawless skill, whereas hers as is learned self-defence in regards to dealing with her grandfather Pollux, great-aunt Cassiopeia, great-aunt Walburga, and her parents, Cygnus and Druella Rosier Black. Andromeda, Sirius, and great-uncle Orion might be the only Blacks in three generations who are not horrific individuals.

“Polite, as always. Tell me of your discovery, Narcissa. I trust you not to waste my time.”

For others, his words would be a warning. For Narcissa, it’s a reminder of how much more effort a witch has to exert in order to be granted Voldemort’s consideration. Bellatrix is the only exception Narcissa knows of, but her sister earned that distinction in ways that should not be dwelled upon.

“If my Lord’s goal is still to access a certain object within the Department of Mysteries, Nizar Slytherin was overheard to be discussing it with others among the Order. I was not present, of course,” Narcissa adds demurely. “They say that the Unspeakables within that particular department of the Ministry employ an inconvenient security measure regarding the prophecies they are charged with storing and protecting.”

“A security measure.” The Dark Lord sounds thoughtful, which is often a dangerous state of affairs. “The strange curse that felled our Imperiused Broderick Bole, then.”

“I believe so, my Lord. The Order believes that each prophecy is enchanted so that only those to whom each prophecy refers can safely handle these vessels. In regards to the prophecy my Lord wishes to behold, that would be yourself or Harry James Potter. However, Nizar Slytherin believes that he knows of a way to circumvent that security measure. If he could be convinced to assist us, then it is possible he really can retrieve the prophecy that my Lord seeks.”

“Interesting.” The Dark Lord shifts in his chair, as if restless. “Do you think he is truthful in this matter, Narcissa?”
“Nizar Slytherin has yet to lie about any of his capabilities, my Lord,” Narcissa dares. “I believe he is speaking truly.”

“A trap, perhaps?” the Dark Lord muses aloud.

“I would never discount such a possibility, my Lord…but Nizar Slytherin was also overheard to be mocking the Ministry’s storage of the prophecy globes. It seems that even once all those to whom a prophecy refers to are deceased, the globes are still retained within the Ministry.”

“Thousands of cursed untouchable globes taking up valuable space.” The Dark Lord makes an amused sound. “Bureaucracy has always been such a source of entertainment. They would be wiser to think of those untouchable globes as weapons to be placed in the paths of the unwary, wizards who would pick them up and be felled by the attached curse.”

“My Lord is most creative to think of such things,” Narcissa says. The Dark Lord has often pondered taking the Ministry since his physical resurrection. If he ever succeeds, she will be advising Draco not to touch any crystal balls, no matter how innocuous they seem.

“I simply prefer to see things used to their fullest potential,” the Dark Lord replies. “Thank you for this information, Madam Malfoy. I do believe it will be most beneficial for my plans.”

“Is there a plan, my Lord?” Narcissa wills herself to sound excited. It does not take much effort. She would like for this chosen role as spy to wield some tangible, useful result.

“Not yet, not yet,” the Dark Lord murmurs. He is smiling, his eyes gleaming like rubies in the firelight. “But there soon will be.”

Chapter End Notes

And that’s it for Part IV. Part V, Part VI, Part VII, and Part IX are all in progress (some being more done than others) but it will probably be a few weeks before I’m ready to start posting again. Thanks for reading!

Works inspired by this one

An inexperienced author writes scenes almost verbatim + a conversation by MagicShay (ShayLikesToRead)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!