Of a Linear Circle - Part VI

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/13968978.

| Rating:            | Mature                      |
| Archive Warning:  | Graphic Depictions Of Violence |
| Category:         | F/F, F/M, M/M, Multi, Other |
| Fandom:           | Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling |
| Relationship:     | Severus Snape/Nizar Slytherin, Salazar Slytherin/Minerva McGonagall, Hermione Granger/Draco Malfoy, Nymphadora Tonks/Remus Lupin, Sirius Black/James Potter/Lily Evans Potter, Aberforth Dumbledore/Chao Li, Molly Weasley/Arthur Weasley, Bill Weasley/Fleur Delacour |
| Additional Tags:  | Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Post-Goblet of Fire, Time Travel, Odd Methods of Time Travel, GFY, non-canon relationships, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, Past Child Abuse, Lily Evans Potter & Severus Snape Friendship, You will never take that tag from me, Good Slytherins, Jewish Character, poc characters, Character of Color, Lewis Carrol Absolutely was a Ravenclaw, Adoption, Magical Adoption, portraits with vital roles, Politics, government shenanigans, Ministry of Magic, Cornelius Fudge is a bag of dicks, Unexpected pairings, unexpected and ill timed crushes, Identity Reveal, Identity Issues, Family Secrets, Loving Marriage, Triad Marriage, Abusive Dursley Family, Lavender Brown is NOT WHITE, Every House in Hogwarts has its share of assholes, Full Death Eater Cast, Peter Pettigrew - Freeform, Lucius Malfoy - Freeform, among others, The Order, The Underground, Basilisk - Freeform |

Series: Part 8 of Of a Linear Circle

Stats: Published: 2018-03-14 Completed: 2018-09-26 Chapters: 42/42 Words: 290569

Of a Linear Circle - Part VI

by flamethrower
Summary

You can do a lot in two months. An ex-portrait and the man who made a deal with Death both excel at this...possibly to the regret of everyone swept up in their wake.

Notes

The whole of Part VI is probably about halfway done and proceeding nicely, and is publishing concurrently with Part V because certain characters in that era are refusing to bloody well cooperate. For anyone concerned about series order: Everything in the varying sections of Part V is meant to come before Part VI, but there is nothing happening in Part V that is a spoiler for Part VI and vice versa. (I think.)

All hail cheerreaders @norcumi and @jabberwockypie, and betas @sanerontheinside and @mrsstanley!
Reflection

Salazar can’t sleep. This is a usual occurrence, something he once considered a curse of old age. It’s been centuries since he had a wife who grew old by his side, but in those days sleep still came easily.

Now that he has spent time with Minerva, who seems to have little trouble sleeping at all but for nights when the weather brings pain to joints that are just beginning to ache, he reevaluates that long-held belief. It isn’t the body keeping him awake, frozen as it is at the age of seventy-three years. It’s the mind, and all of which crowds his thoughts.

That, and the magic. He’d forgotten the feel of a kingdom that came with a war mage’s title, for all that was not the name of the title when he wore it last. The sense of the earth and the land has always been with him, an innate magical instinct since birth, but the people—gods, there are so many. They’re uncountable if he tries to consider them all at once, a stark reminder that he has shouldered yet another heavy responsibility. It’s easier to consider the magic of the title tied to Inverness and A’ Ghàidhealtachd with its mere two hundred thousand-odd people.

How Findláech would be laughing now to see his kingdom under Salazar’s care. The old High King of the North would say he deserved it, and Salazar wouldn’t be able to disagree.

He strokes Minerva’s bare arm in her sleep, then pulls the long black braid from her shoulder and kisses its silvered end. He promised her that he would not regret…but he does.

Orellana’s loss was sudden and unexpected, gouging holes in his heart that he never expected to heal. Marion helped those wounds to become mere scars, as he would never remove his first and best friend from his heart. Then he watched, helpless to prevent it, as Marion succumbed to despair after two of their children were lost to them. She hadn’t birthed Zuri, but she’d loved him just the same.

His marriage with Katalin in Gipuzkoa had been childless, though they’d both hoped otherwise. Much like dear Helga, she’d been lost to a cancer that would be beaten back only to surge forth again like the unstoppable tide. Salazar had gone to Athens afterwards, unable to bear Western Europe.

He met Ismene when she was still a child, had the pleasure of watching her grow to adulthood, and thought nothing of romance. Ismene, however, was definitely a creature after his own heart and plotted accordingly, announcing her intentions by stealing into his home and disrobing right before his shocked eyes. He wasn’t fool enough to turn down the invitation, or the love she offered, though it had left her family wailing in despair at her marriage to such an older man who “would not live long enough to see their children grown.”

Instead, Salazar had seen his and Ismene’s children to adulthood, and witnessed their children bear little ones of their own. He held Ismene’s hand as she slipped from the world at the age of one hundred three. He witnessed his children’s deaths as his grandchildren became adults, married, and began their own families. He left when he couldn’t stand to watch any longer.

The very last time he’d opened his heart to that pain, he’d just returned to Britain. Salazar was standing in a wooden stadium, applauding with the others as one of Shakespeare’s plays came to an end, when he found himself locking eyes with an African-born woman whose braided black hair was threaded and bound with gold. She was an Egyptian magician, called Isis after the goddess herself, and Salazar fully believed she deserved the name. He lived with her in Sherwood-on-the-Marsh, sharing a full fifty years with her, until Death claimed Isis in her sleep.
His last marriage had also been childless. Salazar has never been able to decide if that was heartbreak or relief.

Salazar regrets, and he cannot help it. He will regret every moment he will never have with his Lioness, even as he cherishes what is between them now. He can only plan for what is to come—including the future of the Highlands.

“You’re thinking much too hard on things that cannot be changed,” Minerva murmurs, her voice still rough from sleep.

Salazar glances down to find her blue eyes gazing up at him. “It’s a terrible habit of mine.” He drops a kiss onto her lips and then lies down to pull her close. “Go back to sleep. It’s early yet.”

“Such a convenient excuse to cling.” Minerva's soft laughter vibrates against his chest and invades his scarred, ancient heart.

“Yes,” Salazar agrees, smiling. “I suppose it is.”

*          *          *          *

Sirius Black doesn’t really pay attention to the passage of time the night of a full moon—especially not this full moon. For the first time, he is not being submissive to a werewolf or snapping at him to make certain Remus behaves himself while transformed. They’re playing together, and it’s glorious. He has never enjoyed keep-away or fetch or tug-stick to this extent. James was a great mate and an amazing spouse, but Animagus deer do not play fetch.

He’s aware of when Snape and Salazar depart from the cemetery. Nizar doesn’t leave with them. He stays, joining in the fun in a way Sirius never expected of this older, educated man who used to bear the name Harry James Potter.

Sirius once dreamed about getting to play with his children, Harry and those who were meant to come after him. He never, ever got to do that…but he is now. He’s running through the dead winter grass as a dog, his son is with him, Remus is simply a large, playful wolf…

God, but the only thing that would make this better is if James, Lily, and their lost second child were to step out of the Forbidden Forest at that very moment.

It doesn’t happen, of course. Sirius is so disappointed that he stalls out, staring at the trees in dismay. He wanted it to be. It should be.

Life is not fucking fair.

Then Nizar bounces a stick off Sirius’s head to get his attention. Sirius barks in disapproval, grabs the stick, and trots back to his son. He has Nizar. This isn’t the life he wanted in 1980 when he married Lily and James, but he can enjoy what he has now.

Before he knows it, the night sky is getting lighter in the east as dawn tries to break the horizon. Remus abruptly transforms the moment sunlight’s first rays streak across the sky.

“BUGGER!” Remus shouts, clapping both hands over his groin. An Animagus can master the magic to retain their clothing. Werewolves are not so fortunate. “I didn’t notice it was so close to dawn!”
Sirius noticed. He just didn’t want to say anything. It’s more fun this way.

Nizar is no help to Remus at all; he’s lying on the ground, giving vent to hysterical-edged laughter. Sirius shifts back to human and takes off his robe. “Might as well wear it tied around your waist, mate. My robe on you might reach the end of your rib cage.”

Remus sighs and takes the robe, along with Sirius’s advice on how to wear it. “Let’s go fetch my clothes and wand from the Shack while he giggles like a lunatic.”

They’re nearer to the Shrieking Shack than Sirius expected, making him wonder if Nizar had been subtly herding them in that direction. The moment he feels the restriction of Hogwarts’ Anti-Apparition wards fade, he grasps Remus’s arm and Apparates them directly into the Shack. Then he goes outside, leaving Remus to get dressed in dingy privacy.

When Remus comes back out, sliding his wand into his coat pocket, Sirius grabs him and Apparates them back to the place they’d just come from. Remus glares at him as he shoves the borrowed robe back into Sirius’s hands. “Can you please stop doing that? I can Apparate on my own just fine.”

“Not normally, you can’t,” Sirius retorts as they cross back onto warded Hogwarts property. “Not after a full moon.”

“Yes, but Sirius—I feel fine.” Remus suddenly stops walking. “Oh, God. I feel fine, Sirius!”

“You said that already,” Sirius tries to say, but then his very tall and insane werewolf mate has picked Sirius up to swing him around. “Hey, watch it!”

“I feel fine, you utter fucking wanker!” Remus shouts. Sirius gives up and dares to smile.

Nizar is waiting for them when the forest gives way to the open area of the castle grounds. There is no sign of the giggling man they’d left behind in the grass but for a few dried bits of it clinging to his robes. “Good morning.”

“It is!” Remus replies, grinning. “Oh my God, it really is! My godson is a fucking genius!”

Nizar ducks his head. “Not so much. We should get the two of you into my fireplace and gone through the Floo, though. It’s a school morning, and some of our overachieving academics wake early.”

“Not so much, my entire arse,” Sirius says during their short walk back to the castle. “I saw the gemstones the house-elves added to your crest yesterday afternoon before you shoved it into your pocket. Geomancy and Potions.”

Nizar glares at him. “Can you conveniently forget that?”

“Nope,” Sirius replies cheerfully, knowing Nizar hasn’t forgotten about Sirius’s eidetic memory. “Granted, the house-elves happened to Remus’s crest, too. He has no idea how to cope with the idea of wearing a black diamond on his person. It’s adorable.”

“Fuck off, Sirius.” Remus is still smiling, radiating such joy that Sirius would suspect Cheering Charms if he didn’t know better. “I’ll get used to it eventually. I’m trying to make myself think of it as yet one more bit of rank to lord over types like Lucius Malfoy.”

“I wonder if I can convince Narcissa to host another ball,” Nizar muses aloud. “Then we can reintroduce everyone properly. I imagine the elves added the black diamond to the family crests Salazar, Severus, and Adele are carrying, too.”
Mention of Snape is only a mild damper. Remus is too fucking happy for Sirius to muster up any measure of the old loathing. “When?”

“The next appropriate time…perhaps the Spring Equinox? I’m not certain. The idea of such limited holidays is not something I’ve ever really gotten used to.” Nizar tilts his head. “I was adopted on the Spring Equinox. I just recalled that. No other real details, though.”

Sirius refuses to let those words hurt him. It wasn’t said to cause him pain; it’s simply an event in his son’s life. “Did you manage to tame your hair for the occasion?”

“Oh, I doubt it, given what I’ve seen of those old photos. I wasn’t a Metamorphmagus yet.” Nizar holds up his hand in warning. Remus and Sirius halt in place, sensing the way things have shifted. “Some are already up and about. We’ll simply Apparate upstairs, and Dumbledore can choke on the feel of a morning vibration on the wards.”

“That sounds like a harmless bit of fun.” Remus is the first to hold out his hand to grasp Nizar’s arm. Sirius has just enough time to do the same before Nizar Apparates them not to the corridor or classroom, but directly into his quarters.

“Good morning, children,” Nizar says to the portraits. Elfric and Galiena are slumped together, still asleep, though Brice is awake and waving. The sight of them always gives Sirius a sharp pang of regret for those he’ll never know. A portrait is not a person, though at least Nizar’s children were sensible enough to update their portraits every year. If this is the best relationship he’ll have with his grandchildren, he’ll take that, too.

“I have to clean up for the day. I’m kicking you out.” Nizar smiles to take any potential sting out of his words. Sirius has no idea how Nizar wards his Floo, but the first pinch of Floo Powder has already turned the flames green. “Go on. Back to London. Take a nap and then wander about the city to feel the magic beneath your feet, Your Grace.”

Sirius rolls his eyes. “Her Majesty gave you a title too, Lord Nizar, Earl over the Heights.”

Nizar sighs. “I know, and it was completely unnecessary. A war mage is already of equal rank with a marqués.”

Remus pauses with one leg already in the fire. “It’s equal to WHAT?”

“Just get in the damned Floo!” Sirius orders, giving Remus a shove to send him off. “Nizar, you broke my werewolf.”

“He’ll get over it. I did,” Nizar says. “Go home, Sirius. Rent a flat, or do something to clean up that awful fucking house.”

“Right.” Sirius frowns in consternation. “Er, see you later.”

“You will,” Nizar replies.

Something about those two words eases Sirius’s heart. He steps into the Floo, allowing it to take him back to London. It feels like they’ve had a proper parting this time. Nothing like last summer, when it felt more like being ripped asunder—and that was before Harry disappeared on thirty-first July.

Remus is already sitting down in the kitchen. “I’m still fine,” he says before Sirius can ask. “I’m tired enough from being awake all day and all night that the Floo made me dizzy, that’s all.”

Sirius can’t blame Remus for that. He puts the kettle on for tea and digs in the pantry for an arse-
kicking black loose leaf. He isn’t in the mood to nap. This is the basement of Twelve Grimmauld Place, and Sirius already knows he won’t need to walk around London to feel the city beneath his feet. It’s an odd fucking sensation, but it isn’t unpleasant.

“I think the more important question is: how are you?” Remus asks when Sirius emerges from the pantry with the tea.

“I’m fine.” Sirius glances at the stairs. “Do you think Tonks would like a cup, or should we wait for her to tumble down here and ask for one?”

Remus does his best to hide his smile, but he always fails at it. No poker face at all, the poor bastard. “Best wait for the tumbling. At least she was taught to fall properly during Auror training. Answer my question, Sirius.”

Sirius ignores Remus long enough to finish brewing up tea, rinsing dead spiders out of the teacups before pouring one for each of them. If Remus wants cream and sugar, he can go hunting for it. Kreacher liked to hide both, the little bastard, and Sirius still hasn’t located them. He thought the smell of dairy rotting in its pitcher would be a tip, but no luck so far.

That’s still a bright spot. No more Kreacher in Sirius’s house, and he didn’t have to strangle the house-elf to death for it to happen. Nizar’s finding of that house-elf contract has made Sirius’s life much bloody easier. He’s been living on Muggle takeaway since Kreacher returned to Hogwarts, which has made Sirius feel so improved that he caught himself wondering if Kreacher was attempting to poison him.

Without Kreacher’s unpleasant screeching and threats, Sirius can pay a magical cleaning service out of Brighton to come and fix the damned house. They’re the sort of cleaning service who cares more about Sirius’s money instead of his fugitive status, and now they no longer have to concern themselves about his being a fugitive at all. With their help, Twelve Grimmauld Place is starting to look habitable, though the Squibs who run the cleaning service disapprove of Buckbeak’s room.

Sirius finds himself pondering the idea of asking Narcissa to suggest someone capable to begin redecorating his outdated travesty of a house. Maybe one of those decorator types will know how to remove the load-bearing wall his blasted mother’s portrait is stuck on. Then he can get rid of both the wall and her unwanted portrait.

Then again, he is supposed to be a master of Geomancy. Nothing is keeping Sirius from getting rid of that fucking wall and its painting except for nerves and the desperate need to practice on something less critical.

He could change the entire house. All of it.

Maybe not Regulus’s bedroom. Sirius would like to have that reminder now. The rest of it, though—if he’s a Geomancer, why not? He could make this shitheap feel like a home instead of a drab fucking prison.

Sirius nearly drops his teaspoon when he realizes he is not trapped in this house anymore. No matter what Dumbledore might have intended, Sirius does not have to hide in this place. Just the idea of it makes him hate Twelve Grimmauld Place a bit less. Maybe changing the rest of it will enable Sirius to deal with a hell of a lot of his childhood misery when he’s no longer staring at all of the reminders.

Good God, he can actually hire a housekeeper. Neither he nor Remus can cook to save their lives, and Tonks should never be allowed near a range at all. They go through too much burn cream when she tries.
Sirius feels his lips twitch as he retrieves his spoon. When Nizar called Sirius and Remus to Hogwarts last week to tell them of Narcissa’s true allegiance, it took all the willpower Sirius possessed not to laugh in his son’s face. Then Nizar told them of how he was able to alter her Dark Mark, throwing cold water over Sirius’s humor. At the last Order meeting on second January, Nizar informed them that the Dark Mark couldn’t be altered or removed without consent. If someone was loyal to Voldemort, they couldn’t truly give consent, and the Mark would remain.

That same day, Remus took Sirius upstairs and made a huge bloody stink of pointing that out in regards to Snape’s lack of a Dark Mark, an idea to which Sirius had eventually given his sulking agreement. Then Remus reminded Sirius of what a werewolf’s nose is capable of in the days before the full moon…and told Sirius exactly who Nizar had to be.

The evening had been a complete disaster from that point onwards.

“It’s not the life I thought I’d have,” Sirius finally says. “Actually, once I realized I was sitting in a prison cell in Azkaban, I didn’t think I’d ever have a life at all, but I do. I have one.” He thinks about what he was considering last night. “It’s not everything I once wanted…but it’s not that bad, either.”

“And you’re a magical duke,” Remus decides to point out.

Sirius is nice enough not to throw the Marquess-ranking bit right back at him. “That is going to involve so much politics.”

“Are you up for it?” Remus asks.

Sirius snorts. “Remus, my entire childhood was full of the sort of politics required to survive this household. Those puffed-up, poncy, Pure-blooded pricks don’t frighten me at all.”

Remus smiles. “Nice alliteration.”

“I’m rather proud of it, too.”

Sirius sees Remus off to bed a few minutes later. His friend shoves his face into a pillow and is asleep before he’s settled. Sirius puts a quilt over Moony that he’ll probably kick off in the next hour before he leaves the bedroom, pulling the door closed behind him.

That same settling won’t come to him. He never quite lost the habit of being awake the whole of the full moon and all through the next day, trying to pretend he wasn’t about to drop and snore on his desk or onto his plate in the Great Hall, or onto the tabletop during an Order meeting years later—or over breakfast while Lily laughed at them, especially if Sirius or James still had grass or twigs in their hair.

He stands at the largest window on the second storey that faces the street, feeling the glass beneath his hand warm up as the sun gains height. Some of his restlessness is definitely coming from sensing London as the entire city awakens for the day. He hopes he can get used to that, or he’ll never have a late morning again.

Full moons are the worst because that is when he misses them all the most. Sirius would watch the full moon cross the sky from the high window of his cell in Azkaban with his head resting on his paws. He didn’t dare watch it when human, knowing the Dementors would try to take even that from him…but he had to watch. He had to witness that rise and fall every time it was visible.

Sirius turns away from the window and goes downstairs to the parlor, picking up a box that’s taken up residence on a shelf. Among all of the other Black family nonsense, it’s unobtrusive, something no one ever notices—well, Moody probably has, but Moody is a lot more circumspect than the old
bastard is usually given credit for.

Remus gave him the box’s contents after the Triwizard Tournament’s painful conclusion, just after Sirius returned to the townhouse to make certain it wouldn’t be a death trap when Harry arrived in August. The idea of the Order using it as an Unplottable location for meetings hadn’t yet occurred to him, though Sirius imagines it had already bloody well occurred to Albus.

Harry never got to see it, not as it was last summer. Sirius spent months in fear, months trying to figure out if he should grieve, and when his son finally came to Twelve Grimmauld Place the first time, they hadn’t known each other at all.

Then again, maybe he had. Sirius holds grudges like nobody’s damned business, which Remus and Lily both chided him about—often. The entirety of Slytherin House had been the subject of his spite before he’d even stepped through Hogwarts’ doors. He’d learned of a new Slytherin, a literal Slytherin, and fully prepared himself to joyfully hate yet another bastard in green. Instead of hatred, he’d felt…comfortable. Sirius had never felt comfortable around a blasted Slytherin in his entire life, Andromeda included. Yet there Sirius had stood, conversing with Sir Portrait and feeling like he was speaking to a man who not only was not an enemy, but someone who understood.

Sirius takes the lid off the box and looks inside. He thinks maybe…maybe this time he can sort through what it holds without shattering.

*When I first heard you were arrested, I didn’t know why,* Remus said when presenting Sirius with a cardboard Muggle box that had definitely taken a beating over the years. *But I knew what the Aurors would do. If they cleared your flat for evidence, I knew you’d never get them back.*

Sirius had looked inside that day, saw the photograph of tiny Harry on a toddler-safe broom with James’s legs chasing after him, and that was all he could take. The only thing he’s done with those items since then was to ask Moony to put everything he’d rescued from Sirius’s old flat into the wooden box he now holds.

The back of the photograph is graced with Lily’s signature and her expressed love. The very first thing beneath the photo is the letter that accompanied it, the envelope torn in Sirius’s haste to see what Lily had to say. James only wrote to him twice the entire time their family lived under the Fidelius Charm, but that was because James Potter was the worst sad sack at writing letters Sirius had ever encountered among Pure-blooded wizards. Lily was the letter-writer, the one who kept Sirius from going out of his mind with concern from August of 1980 until—until the end.

*Magicians,* Sirius reminds himself. *Try to remember to use the Latin, idiot.* It’s one more way to spite people like Lucius Malfoy.

*19th September 1981*

*Dear Padfoot,*

*I’m writing to let you know that we’re all well. Harry added four new words to his vocabulary since his birthday! Now our son also can say Yes, Please, Funny, and Loot.*

*I’m blaming you and James for that. Marauders and their Maps. I wouldn’t be surprised to discover you four really had buried stolen treasure on Hogwarts property just to truly claim the title.*

*However, No is still Harry’s favorite word, especially when it comes to sleeping.*
Dumbledore wrote in August to wish Harry a Happy Birthday (Late) and to ask us to consider allowing one of our neighbors, Bathilda Bagshot, to have access to the Fidelius Charm. He didn’t give a reason, and I didn’t write back to ask.

It doesn’t make any sense, Sirius! If the Charm is to protect the three of us, why can’t Peter and Remus know it? Why her, but no one else except our Secret Keeper?

Sirius scowls at mention of Peter, even if Lily only wrote the letter that way in case the family owl was intercepted. Some days Sirius wakes up to the renewed agony of knowing that he let himself be convinced to allow Peter to be Secret Keeper in his place.

He’d read the bit about Bagshot the first time in 1981 and laughed off the concern, though Remus had agreed with Lily that it did sound a bit dodgy. Now Sirius has no damned idea what Albus might have been thinking or planning, and he has half a mind to go visit Bagshot just to ask.

This next part...oh, Sirius. I haven’t told James yet.

I’m scared. I don’t know what’s going to happen. I’d rather tell you in person, but that seems unlikely right now. You deserve to know, my love, just in case something goes wrong.

I’m pregnant.

Before you ask? I don’t know if it’s yours or James’s child. It had to have happened on Harry’s birthday. We’ve been a bit too busy dealing with an insomniac toddler since then.

I think it’s yours, though. Call it women’s intuition or something. I’m not certain, but maybe by late April you’ll have an Heir to the Black family.

If not? Then we’ll certainly try again. And again. And again.

I hope you can tell I am not opposed to trying.

We miss you terribly, Sirius. It’s breaking my heart that you can’t be here where you belong.

All my love,

Lily

Sirius has to put the letter back into the box, almost overwhelmed by the sight of Lily’s handwriting. James had beautiful script when his arse could be bothered. His letters might have boisterous phrasing, but his handwriting had never been a reflection of his personality. Lily wrote with an economy of speed that was half-print, half-cursive, and not ornate at all. It was Lily captured in ink, the way she’d thought and moved, spoken and laughed.

He gets up and walks over to the repaired Black family tree, going straight to the branch bearing his, Lily’s, and James’s names. There are other moving photographs in that box, pictures of all three of them, even all four of them together. He remembers them all, refusing to give up the memory of those images to the Dementors.

These two portraits of Lily and James on the tree are still new, images that haven’t replayed in his
thoughts over and over again. So is the portrait of Harry, which always tries to smile for Sirius when he becomes aware that he’s being looked at.

“It’s really not fair that this is where it’s always going to stop for you,” Sirius whispers, resting his hand on the wall beneath Harry’s portrait. “Not when there is so much more.”

The wall shines gold beneath his fingers. Sirius jerks back on reflex before his thoughts catch up. Not a hex or a trap, he realizes. Just unexpected magic that vanished the moment he took his hand away.

Sirius narrows his eyes and places his fingertips back on the wall. The gold returns, swirling lines that climb down like vines to illuminate three new portraits framed in green leaves—portraits of Galiena, Brice, and Elfric.

“Oh.” Sirius swallows hard. Nizar had to have added this just for Sirius, and he never said a word. He must have been conspiring with Remus to do it, too; Sirius didn’t know Nizar had returned to the townhouse at any point after Compitalia.

Brice’s name connects him to a new portrait, a spouse that Sirius suspects that Nizar doesn’t remember, as he’s never mentioned her. Sirius watches, his heart in his throat, as Uriel deSlizarz appears next to Galiena, and then Sirius’s great-grandchildren and their spouses begin to populate the Black family tree.

To his dismay, the marriage between Brice and his wife never produced any children. The familial line from Galiena, meanwhile, wanders along the wall as he traces it, careful not to lift his hand away, until the family line ends in 1512.

He traces his way back to the very beginning to see that Harry’s portrait has become Nizar, who is giving him an amused look. He can’t hear what the portrait says, but Sirius learned to read lips during untold detentions: *Discretion is a virtue.*

“Yeah. Good thing I figured that out.” Sirius lifts his hand so he can wipe his face dry with his sleeve. The moment he’s no longer touching the wall, all of the newly mapped lineage disappears. Nizar’s portrait becomes Harry’s again, like nothing had ever changed at all.

Sirius goes straight to the writing desk in the library, finds paper and one of Remus’s non-magical pens, and sits down. There isn’t a lot he can say in a letter that has a chance of being intercepted, but he wasn’t a fucking Marauder for nothing. He can actually be secretive, if not subtle.

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5th February 1996

Nizar Deslizarz,

Regarding the Tree:

Thank you.

—Sirius Black

By the way, I have a few things you might wish to see. At your convenience, of course.
Remus is awake and entering the basement kitchen by noon. Sirius pauses with a forkful of Chinese noodles halfway to his mouth as they stare at each other.

Sirius decides to go with the blatantly obvious. “You’re awake.”

Remus joins him at the table, brow furrowed in utter bafflement. “Yeah.”

“And…you still feel all right?” Sirius asks tentatively.

Remus nods. “Not a thing wrong. I feel fine. No pain, no headache, no nothing. Like it’s a normal day.” He hesitates. “I don’t think I’ve ever felt fine, Sirius. I can’t remember what it was like—before.”

Fine. Remus is absolutely fine.

Sirius gives up on lunch and puts the fork back down on his plate. “My son really is a fucking genius.”

“Yeah,” Remus whispers. Then he breaks down and weeps with his face buried in his hands.
A Natural Soporific

Chapter Summary

“If you mope beyond a fortnight, I will have no mercy at all in regards to dragging you out of your self-imposed pit of misery, even if I have to poison you to distract you.”

Chapter Notes

@norcumi, @jabberwockypie, @mrsstanley, & @sanerontheinside still deserve love <3

(I still need more antibiotics. 25 days and I still need more. This is some obstinate foulness. So glad this was already written...)

Nizar rests his head against the mantelpiece above his fireplace. He wasn’t expecting last night to be anything except grief. Instead, two near-strangers took advantage of the full moon to lead him across the grounds and through the forest, keeping Nizar too busy with canine shenanigans to think much on the funeral, a few restored memories, and a painful lump that still feels like betrayal.

“Did it work?”

Nizar lifts his head and turns around to find his 992 portrait lurking in Brice’s frame. “What?”

The portrait looks deferring and fretful, as it often does when he’s truly upset about something. Nizar wonders if he still does that himself, or if it’s a trait he lost over the centuries. “The potion. Taming of the Beast. Is he—is Remus okay?”

“Yes.” Nizar scrubs at his face, surprised to find dampness on his cheeks that has nothing to do with morning dew. “He was...he’s fine.”

“You saved him.” The portrait’s eyes are huge and veering far more towards emerald instead of multi-toned hazel. “You saved our godfather.”

“I suppose I did.” Nizar sighs and walks over to slump down in one of the elf-acquired chairs. He hadn’t thought of it that way. He doesn’t remember Remus Lupin that way!

He was thinking of Nymphadora Tonks, who welcomed Nizar with a smile and never once questioned his intentions. He’s thinking of a N.E.W.T. Potions student Severus always referred to as Miss Tonks, one of the few who never once let Severus’s past, his temper, or his acrid words destroy her abundant cheer.

Nizar was thinking of Brice and Galiena, and late nights spent outside on that same ground. The stars and moon overhead and two wolves running in circles around their brother Elfric, who always tried to stay awake for the entire night but would fall asleep on someone’s discarded cloak before morning.

“You look like shit,” his portrait says, startling him. “Go the fuck to sleep.”
“I can’t.” No matter how much his head is still pounding from the return of a war mage’s full awareness of a kingdom. No matter that his chest still aches due to a memory from the year 1234. “I have classes to teach.”

“Trust me, as someone who actually remembers being a student here?” Nizar glances up to see the portrait grinning at him. “None of them will complain if you cancel your classes for the day.”

“They might not, but I’m the one who is aware of exactly what they don’t know,” Nizar retorts. “Get out of my quarters. Go pester Salazar.”

The portrait shrugs. “Have it your way, then.” He vanishes from the frame.

Nizar jolts awake a few minutes later when he becomes aware of someone in his sitting room. He nearly knocks a phial from Severus’s hand when he tries scrabbling for his wand. “Fuck!”

Severus regards him with a mix of concern and amusement. “You’ve been exceptionally twitchy since the Queen recognized you as a war mage. I notice the rest of us haven’t been affected that way.”

“Uh.” Nizar scrubs at his face. “It’ll fade. The twitchiness, I mean. I think. It’s probably—how did Salazar say that remembered panic is referred to in non-magical circles?”

“PTSD,” Severus replies. “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. I’m assuming you’re referencing PTSD that’s subconsciously tied to the war mage title.”

“What a mouthful of words that is,” Nizar mutters. “I probably am. What are you holding?”

Severus holds up the potion again. “A Restorative Draught. I thought you might appreciate it, given that you’ve missed breakfast and it’s ten of eight.”

“Shit!” Nizar launches himself from his chair and nearly falls straight to the floor. Severus drops the phial to catch him; Nizar looks down at the unbroken stoppered glass and thinks it’s a good thing the elves found a rug with such a thick weave.

“Properly translated: that meant you were to drink the Restorative first,” Severus tells him dryly.

“I gathered that.” Nizar closes his eyes and sits down when the floor begins to spin. He does not want to see that many patterns spinning. When Severus presses the phial into his hand, Nizar pulls the stopper and drinks it without bothering to open his eyes.

“You should cancel your classes for the day,” Severus says.

Nizar finally dares to open his eyes again when he can feel the Restorative kicking in. “Oh, so now it’s a portrait of myself and you telling me to skive off. No.”

“Why not?”

“A ridiculously overblown sense of responsibility,” Nizar replies.

Severus smirks at him. “Gryffindor.”

“No, the word you’re looking for is ‘idiot.’” Nizar has a great deal more success standing up this time. “Could you bring me another one of those…wait.” He thinks on it and decides he might not make it through until lunch. “Between our nine o’clock and ten o’clock classes, would you bring me another of those? We can meet in the staff lounge. I know there may be staff who are paranoid
enough to believe that as I wasn’t at breakfast, I was eaten during the night.”

Severus presses his lips together before speaking. “They would not be the only ones.”

Nizar bites back his first, temperamental words. Deep fears are not overcome in a single evening. “You didn’t sleep either, did you?”

“No.” Severus reaches out and pulls Nizar into his arms. “Though it wasn’t just out of paranoid concern about a werewolf on the grounds. It’s the fucking war mage magic. I spent the entire night bloody sifting!”

Nizar chuckles against Severus’s robes. He feels so much better, and it isn’t just the potion’s doing. “It does get easier. Go on to class while I change into clothes that didn’t spend the night in a field. I’ll see you in a couple of hours.”

When Nizar steps back, Severus gently grasps Nizar’s sleeve and lets go, just enough of a tug to gain Nizar’s attention. “Are you all right?”

“I haven’t slept, but I’m well aware of what every single one of my lecture classes is going to wish to discuss today. I’m prepared for that. I’ll be fine today, Severus.”


“I’m intelligent enough to know when to be specific.” Nizar hesitates, but Severus deserves an explanation before there is a need to ask the question. “I don’t handle grief very well. I probably never have. I—please don’t take this the wrong way, and please don’t take it to mean that I want you to stay away, but I…”

“Need to be alone?” Severus finishes when Nizar doesn’t know how to continue.

Nizar nods. “Not forever. Just for a few days. A week, maybe?” He gives up and looks at Galiena, who has yet to wander off for the morning. “Help.”

She smiles. “A fortnight would be a good estimate, Severus, though usually it takes less for him to do something foolish that attracts attention.”

“Galiena!”

Severus chuckles and places two fingers beneath Nizar’s chin. “Two weeks. I won’t stay away, but I’ll absent myself in the evening unless you ask me to stay. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” Nizar replies.

Severus tilts Nizar’s head up, kissing him first before stepping back with a clear look of regret on his face. “If you mope beyond a fortnight, I will have no mercy at all in regards to dragging you out of your self-imposed pit of misery, even if I have to poison you to distract you.”

“I want a hint on the type of poison,” Nizar says. Galiena’s clear laughter drowns out Severus’s silent amusement.

“Perhaps we can negotiate on that point.” Severus reaches into his robe and hands over a rolled-up copy of that morning’s Daily Prophet. “You’ll be interested in the front page. The rest of it can go hang for drivel.” He Disapparates after Nizar takes the paper.

Nizar tosses it onto his table to look at later. He now has five minutes to get ready for his first class,
and he’d rather not teach while smelling of forest mold. He somehow succeeds in stripping off his
clothes, casting a Refreshing Charm, and getting dressed again in four minutes. He is a
Metamorphmagus; he can bloody well cheat and make his hair appear as if it’s seen a comb this
morning if he wants to.

When he opens the outer door, the first students are just starting to arrive in the classroom. Nizar goes
to his desk and sits down in his chair while waiting for the others. His entire body hasn’t stopped
aching, not since Saturday morning’s restoration of a war mage’s full awareness. He’s experienced
this before and knows how to sift it properly—so it’s background noise instead of a cacophony—but
still he aches. Too many emotions, a fucking horrific flashback, too little sleep, alcohol, and running
around with a wolf and a dog for the entire night did not help at all.

“Good morning,” Nizar greets his fifth-years as they finish seating themselves. “Should I bother to
ask what it is you would all like to speak about today?”

“It’s your task to choose the lecture, sir,” Parvati Patil responds. She’s smiling, but it’s not sparkling
mischief. He appreciates that after yesterday’s unexpected funeral.

“Oh, it certainly is, but why bother when I know that none of you will be paying a whit of attention
until I’ve sorted your curiosity?” Nizar counters.

Granger puts up her hand. “You know, you talk more like Professor Salazar when the two of you
have been together recently.”

“Be thankful I’m not rambling on in Castilian, then. Most of you would be hopelessly lost.” Nizar
crosses his arms over his chest. “What do you wish to discuss about Elfric deSlizarse?”

“Actually, Professor, most of us agreed on something fairly simple,” Malfoy ventures. “We wanted
to know if Elfric deSlizarse ever wrote a book, like Brice did.”

Nizar raises both eyebrows. “All right, I admit that didn’t occur to me. He did, yes. He completed
three before his death.”

“Prolific, wasn’t he, sir?” Weasley asks in surprise.

“It was less a desire to write actual books and more that Elfric and I both shared the habit of wishing
to write everything down so we would remember it later,” Nizar says. “But given the way he
restricted the nature of each subject to a single volume instead of interchanging ideas…in the end,
they were books, not journals or copious notes.”

“Can we see them?” Granger asks excitedly, a sentiment rapidly echoed by half the students in the
room. The others also look interested. “That’s why we wanted to know, sir.”

“Absolutely not.” Nizar does his best to keep his smile on his face when confronted by a wave of
disappointment. “Two of those books will be N.E.W.T. level for the sixth-year classes next term.
The third book I would only give to an adult who intended to learn the art of Necromancy in truth
rather than idle curiosity. Its contents are a bit intense.”

Zabini frowns at him. “Are you trying to bribe us into taking Defence as a sixth-year N.E.W.T.
elective, sir?”

Nizar gives him a wide-eyed look. “Would I do such a thing, Mister Zabini?”

“Yes!”
It’s a bit easier to smile when the reply is so emphatic. “Then I suppose you’ll have to weigh the pros and cons of attempting sixth-year Defence. Unlike what other teachers have required in the past, anyone is welcome to join in my N.E.W.T. subject as long as you do not score below an Acceptable. If you happen to score a Poor grade but still have an interest in Defence, I might make an exception if you demonstrated a higher level of understanding during the term.”

“Why would you do that, Professor?” Goyle looks absolutely confounded by the notion. “Failing is failing.”

“Mister Goyle, in case you’ve forgotten, I hate the notion of your grading system. I’m far happier when all of you learn what I’m teaching. Your grades can go hang as far as I’m concerned.”

“Er, why, sir?” Crabbe chimes in, surprising Nizar. Sometimes one of that pair will speak in a class period, but it isn’t usually both. He wonders if they’re gathering information for Death Eater parents, or simply too confused to grasp the concept that Nizar is more concerned with teaching than those stupid O.W.L.s.

“Some people don’t test well,” Nizar decides to answer. “I’ll be paying attention to your practicals during your O.W.L.s, as well. If you achieve a Poor grade overall but otherwise demonstrated potential, such information will be sent to you over the summer so you can contemplate your decision to take this class at N.E.W.T. level.” He pauses. “None of you are required to take Defence if you feel it doesn’t suit you. But I should like to see you all again in my classroom next year.”

“So we won’t be roaming targets for You-Know-Who,” Longbottom says.

“That noseless twit is not the only danger you’ll ever face in your lives. He just happens to be a blatant example.” Nizar glances at each of his students. “Anything else before we continue with attempts at scholarly wisdom?”

“Does he have a portrait?” Miss Bones asks. “I’d very much like to meet your youngest son in a way that does not involve good Preservation Charms and a burial.”

“I do have one,” Nizar answers. This question, he had expected. “Elfric kept it updated until his death, but it was painted when he attained his apprenticeship majority at age fourteen. I’m thinking you would all rather meet the adult.”

“Both, maybe.” Finnigan tries to duck down in his chair when Nizar looks at him. “Him being young and smart, that’s encouraging, sir. Him being an adult and smart—we see enough of that already.”

“That is an excellent observation, Mister Finnigan. Five points to all Houses, and don’t get used to the idea.”

That earns Nizar more wide-eyed stares. If he hurt less and had slept more, it would be entertaining.

Miss Shafiq is the first to speak in a wobbly voice. “But—a Gryffindor made the point?”

“That he did, but it was the conversation at large that led Mister Finnigan to making it, and that is a conversation all four Houses participated in,” Nizar replies. “I’m not about to start playing favorites at this date. You’re all here working together to attain the same goal. You simply had one of those lovely, rare moments when that proved true.”

“Ohhhhh-kay, sir,” Thomas says, still boggled. “When will we be meeting the younger portrait, then?”
Nizar considers the schedule of lessons that he feels they still need to accomplish. “This is likely something that won’t happen until next month. However, if you all perform well throughout the rest of February? I’ll introduce you to all three of my children’s apprenticeship portraits. Galiena was a master of both Magical Arts and the Written Word, the latter of which seems to be an incredibly rare mastery these days. Elfric held masteries in Necromancy and advanced forms of Mind Magic. Brice was a master of Defence and Blood Magic.”

Miss Brocklehurst isn’t the only one who looks intimidated. “So you’re going to throw all of the information at us instead of just part of it, sir?”

“In case you hadn’t noticed, that’s what I’ve been doing since the first week of November.”

* * * *

Minerva, Aurora, and Severus all look up from the table when Nizar enters the room. “Well! Fancy seeing you darken this particular doorway,” Minerva says while Aurora nods in greeting. Severus just scowls his concern without voicing it, handing over the Restorative that Nizar asked him to bring.

“Thank you,” Nizar says, yanking off the stopper and drinking it down before he can taste it. Pain and lack of sleep have finally decided that nausea is today’s magical combination, and he’s not allowing it to win.

“You always make such a face,” Minerva comments in amusement after Nizar gives the empty phial back to Severus. “Is that particular potion another thing you find to be a failing in 20th century Wizarding Britain?”

“The brewing of it? No.” Nizar sighs and slumps down into an empty chair at the table to join them, feeling no need to rush right back upstairs when he can simply Apparate. “But the color is different. Salazar’s were always a very deep, pond algae-colored green. These are more violet.”

“That looked quite green to me,” Aurora says of the potion.

“To you, maybe,” Nizar mutters. “I wonder if Salazar has that formula anywhere. I’d like to know what’s different. Oh, I did finally get to look at the Prophet,” he says to Severus. The promised notice had graced the front page: Madam Amelia Bones, head of the Magical Law Enforcement division, announcing her intention to run for Minister of Magic the moment it is possible to do so. The first surprise the article contains was Bones’s announcement that she was stepping down as head of the M.L.E. in order to avoid any potential conflicts of interest.

The second surprise was discovering that Bones named Kingsley Shacklebolt as her successor.

“How did Albus seem to be enjoying the news of Kingsley’s promotion?” Nizar asks them. Aurora is not directly involved in the Order, but he’s aware of the fact that she’ll fight with them if asked.

“Given that it’s Kingsley, I imagine Albus knew last night,” Severus replies. “He was exceptionally pleased this morning.”

Nizar makes a brief sound of acknowledgement. The idea of having a member of the Order of the Phoenix in charge of the M.L.E. is probably warming Dumbledore to his gaudy-robed toes.
“Dear boy, you look _wretched_,” Minerva says in concern. “None of our students would think badly of you if you canceled the rest of your classes for the day.”

“I can’t do that. ‘I can’t do that. They can’t afford to miss any lecture, not if I want them at the level they should be at the end of this term. I just needed to be away from the classroom for a few minutes. If I tried to rest in my office, I’d just go to sleep.’ Nizar lifts his head and props his chin on his crossed arms. Severus looked worse through the weekend. Now he seems to be doing better than Nizar—or is hiding it very well. ‘I’ll be fine. Tea is a miracle cure, and I’m not above drinking it in front of my students.’

“At least you can do such in your classroom and not be setting a potentially lethal example,” Severus mutters. “I have a potent black leaf tea I can fetch during lunch.”

“That would be amazing, thank you,” Nizar replies, aware that he is desperately trying to pretend that everything is—well, if not normal, then at least as close to it as is possible to manage. It’s the middle of the fucking school term. He can’t afford to fall apart because one of Elfric’s spells backfired a thousand years ago.

“Have any of _yours_ acted like imbeciles today?” Aurora asks, sipping terrible-smelling liquid compost coffee.

“I answer their questions first. It lulls them all into a false sense of security before I throw information at them,” Nizar answers, “but yes, they’ve all been rather…twitchy.”

“The full moon was last night. That would stir them up,” Minerva says. “Speaking of such, did everything go…as expected?”

Nizar smiles, glad that _someone_ is asking about Lupin with sympathy rather than fear. Quintinus was too busy bleating for Nizar to be interested in giving him an answer when Nizar encountered him in the hall. “It went perfectly, Minerva.”

“Now you have to publish,” Severus points out with no small amount of vicious glee.

“I was already thinking about it, actually. But it would be a very specific sort of publishing.” That only serves to make Severus glare at him again. Point to Nizar; Severus hadn’t expected his response.

“It’s Monday.” Severus resumes the previous topic of conversation as if they never veered away from it. “The students are always imbecilic on a Monday. The full moon merely exacerbates it.”

“Every time I hear someone in my field declare that there is no detectable magical measure from the full moon that would cause exaggerated behavior, I want to strangle them,” Aurora grumbles.

The discussion is interrupted by Salazar bursting into the lounge. Nizar thinks that the one bright point he expected from this entire week just occurred.

His dear brother finally met Professor Cuthbert Binns.

Salazar stares at them in a glorious blend of furious bewilderment. “Are you all out of your fucking minds?”

Aurora lifts an eyebrow. “We teach here,” she says mildly, deciding to accept Salazar in a temper as equivalent to dealing with Nizar or Minerva in the morning—or Severus in general. “The answer to that question should be obvious.”
“Fine. Fair point,” Salazar allows, and then points back the way he came. “Why is a ghost being allowed to teach a fucking class?”

Minerva lets out an amused snort. “Because Binns died in his very own armchair in 1958, got up the next morning, and carried on like normal.”

“Why?” Salazar asks, still baffled.

“No one is actually certain if Binns is even aware of the fact that he is, in fact, deceased,” Severus replies in a dry voice. “Given his attention span regarding his own students, I’m personally convinced he never noticed his own death.”

Salazar slaps his hand over his face. “I’d wondered why the grade averages by year, and for those stupid tests, were so low for History. Then I entered that classroom today to discover most of the students bloody well sleeping! Does no one realize that ghosts are a natural soporific?”

Nizar is not going to ignore that granted opportunity. “Isn’t History of Magic the class that you skived off on every single time after the first lesson, Severus?”

Severus has a glint of amused suspicion in his eyes when he answers. “That would be the one, yes. It’s called having a sense of bloody self-preservation!” he adds when Minerva and Aurora both stare at him. “I did the far more intelligent thing, read the textbooks, and was thus the only student of my year in my House to attain an O on the bloody History O.W.L.”

“I’m not upset that you did that,” Aurora says after a moment’s pause. “I’m angry because it never occurred to me to do the same thing!”

“Binns certainly wouldn’t have noticed if you had.” Severus smirks at Aurora. “You Gryffindors are such gluttons for punishment.”

Salazar has finally put aside bewilderment to be utterly incensed. “Did it not occur to anyone at all to hire a replacement for the dead man?”

Minerva rests her chin on her hand, apparently enjoying Salazar’s outrage. “I do believe Headmaster Dippet, Albus, and the School Governing Board were all fond of the fact that they have a member of staff who costs the school no money per year whatsoever. Ghosts do not eat, need clothing, require pay, or even notice a lack at Christmas.”

Salazar pinches the bridge of his nose, hissing in Parseltongue under his breath. “By all the—that’s complete lunacy.”

“Even if Albus hired another teacher, Binns still wouldn’t leave,” Aurora says. “He’s rather attached to the place.”

Severus glances at Aurora. “I doubt Binns would even notice if another instructor replaced him in that classroom. He’d simply drone on as usual.”

Salazar drops his hand and glares at them. “Then why not move the classroom? Oh, and look at what is conveniently available—a Defence Tower fourth-floor classroom empty and waiting to be used, complete with a connected office space on the second floor.”

Minerva lets out a slight cough. “There is also the, ah, lack of knowledgeable magical history teachers in Britain, Salazar. There is especially a lack in regards to history teachers who are willing to put up with both Hogwarts’ and Albus Dumbledore’s eccentricities. I highly doubt there is anyone qualified, even if you were to do as you claim, pull the money from your own coffers, and hire
another history teacher yourself.”

“It’s not mine; it’s an account set aside solely for the school,” Salazar mutters. Then he notices the wide, merciless grin on Nizar’s face. “Brother. No.”

“You’re the one who has lived through the last thousand years, experiencing history directly.” Nizar ignores Salazar’s angry growl. “Who better to teach history than someone who was actually there?”

“Nizar—”

“Were you not the one just complaining about the soporific qualities of ghosts?” Nizar asks innocently. Severus makes a faint, strangled noise that has to be suppressed laughter.

Salazar scowls. “I will not be doing it. You’re not winning that wager, hermanito. I’ve not been a teacher of children in a very long time.”

“All right, then.” Nizar gets up from the table and shrugs. “I’ll just be letting Rowena’s portrait know that she’ll be needed to teach, as the living man with the best credentials available refuses to do so.”

Salazar’s expression of thwarted fury is wonderful to behold. “FUCKING FINE!” he roars, and stalks out of the lounge, just missing Filius and Rolanda.

Filius looks bewildered. “What was all that about?” Rolanda is still in the doorway, her head tilted to one side to observe Salazar’s angry progress down the corridor.

“Oh. That was us gaining Hogwarts a useful history teacher,” Nizar replies as he sits back down. “What could a portrait do to cause such an immediate, loud capitulation?” Aurora asks him.

“Rowena would never, ever let him sleep again.” Nizar feels his grief ease for a bit, temporarily replaced by smug satisfaction. “If he kept portraits out of his bedroom, she’d send in the castle’s ghosts. He’d never have a moment’s peace until he agreed to replace Binns.”

Rolanda finally enters the lounge, grinning. “That was cruel, and very Slytherin.”

“Absolutely I am,” Nizar says, smiling again as he bows his head in a graceful nod. “Besides, how else are we going to get all of our lovely little blighters—I mean students—to learn the correct history of this school unless they’re hearing it from one of the original four?”

Severus is smiling in a way that causes Aurora to give him a stern look. “You didn’t tell Salazar about Binns. You let him discover that little truth on his own.”

Nizar lifts both eyebrows. “It must have slipped my mind, informing him of such things. Oh, and he now owes me thirty Galleons. It’s only the beginning of February, after all.” Then he informs them of the terms of the original wager.

Minerva looks both disapproving and pleased. “You set him up to lose, Nizar.”

“I know my brother very well. If there is one thing he can’t stand, it’s a lacking education.” Nizar grins. “Zure eskolaratzea gaitzets dituzte I.”

“Which means what?” Filius asks, bright-eyed with curiosity.

“It’s Basque. Euskaran. It means I loathe your schooling.”

“No more Binns. Instead, we’ll have a most experienced history instructor.” Minerva glances around
at the others before looking to Nizar and applauding, swiftly joined by Filius, Rolanda, and Aurora. Nizar smirks, spreads his arms, and bows again without standing up.

“And what of your next trick?” Severus asks. To everyone else he would sound mocking. Nizar just hears barely restrained, fierce pleasure in another Slytherin’s success.

“Oh. That.” Nizar pulls one of the old journals out of his robe pocket. “I’ve recently been starkly reminded of a few differences between this school then and this school now. Hogwarts currently has a total of twenty subjects available. There are seven primary subjects, plus flight instruction for first-years, and twelve electives.”

Aurora and Minerva both look like they’re getting ready to receive a blow. “Dear God, how bad is it?” Minerva asks.

Nizar pages open the journal to the place where he marked it with an ancient, Preserved strip of ribbon last Friday evening. “We had thirty subjects available in magical and non-magical classes, which led to the possibility of a student being able to choose among Britain’s forty-six recognized magical masteries. Some of those a student could only attempt if they had an innate talent for it, particularly the elemental magics, but the basic education to succeed was available even if they had to seek their apprenticeship outside Hogwarts.”

Not surprisingly, Severus is the first to recover from hearing those numbers. “I am not teaching any of those classes,” he growls.

“Nor I,” Aurora adds, bewildered. “We’re at our work limit as it is. If the student population ever increases, we’ll be overrun!”

“That’s because we have too few staff.” Nizar pockets the journal. “We also structured things a bit differently. Excuse me; I need to go back upstairs to make certain that door behaves itself and admits my next class.”

Nizar collects informative gossip from the Weasley twins later that same afternoon. Salazar apparently entered Binns’ classroom, encountered a ghostly professor, and promptly filled the air with colorful, delightful Castellano that made the students who were still awake turn their heads and stare.

Granted, the Weasley twins didn’t need to gather their gossip from others. They were hiding in the classroom that morning under the Invisibility Charm. Nizar is still not certain if he’s grooming the twins towards general Defence, or if he’s creating the sort of spies that wander into enemy encampments to leave chaos in their wake. Either is fine, really.

The students receive new timetables Tuesday at breakfast. The reaction to the changed classroom for History of Magic and the subject’s new teacher is mixed. Some of the excitement comes from the fearless academics and the Slytherins, but the others are largely subdued by the idea of having an actual Founder teach them history. Aside from that, the most prominent student belief is that Salazar cannot possibly be more dull than Binns.

“You’re also a Founder, Protectoris. They’re not bloody terrified of you,” Salazar mutters at Nizar as breakfast is ending that morning.

“I’m not one of the original Four, and yes, they absolutely were terrified of me,” Nizar responds, feeling no sympathy for Salazar at all. “Have fun!” Salazar growls something impolite at him and leaves the table.
On Wednesday morning, Miss Granger delivers reports from one of her own cultivated gossip sources, Edward Black, who attended the very first of the new History classes on Tuesday morning. Salazar made it three pages into *Hogwarts: A History* before his jaw dropped. Then he threw the book behind him, sat down on the desk, and proceeded to ask: *Who wrote that rubbish? Are they still alive?* and *Does anyone know where she lives so that I can visit and correct her fascinating errors?* Ginevra Weasley reported to Gryffindor Tower that in her class of fourth-years, Salazar was assigning them a chapter a week of *Hogwarts: A History* to read. They’re to write down what they suspect to be the truth as well as what they suspect to be complete nonsense.

Nizar nods. “Salazar reacted to that book’s existence about as well as I expected, then. I hate that damned book, too.” By the time Nizar finished slicing out paragraphs and pages of horseshit in the copy he acquired, he had perhaps one-third of a book remaining.

Miss Granger pauses in the midst of packing up her bag. She’s always the last to leave his classroom after practicals are done, but as she vacates before his next class arrives, Nizar doesn’t mind that she lingers. She’s intelligent, a good source of information from the student body, and has informed him that she’s inclined towards accepting his offer of being Nizar’s assistant next term. Best she’s used to him now than jarred by something later, when more responsibility is required.

“It’s still the oddest euphemism for killing someone I’ve ever heard,” Miss Granger says. “Correcting someone’s errors, I mean.”

“Killing people is messy,” Nizar replies absently, flicking through the pages of the journal. He’s still trying to make sense of the fifth journal he wrote in 990. Based on what Salazar has mentioned, Nizar thinks this one was written when the Horcrux’s slow removal was tiring him—his thought patterns and handwriting are both a disjointed mess. Worse, it doesn’t help him to recall any of those events at all. It’s like reading the words of a stranger. “The M.L.E. gets involved, and then everyone wants to make an awkward fuss.”

“Sometimes you say worrisome things,” Miss Granger comments, but she doesn’t seem alarmed. “Oh, and you swore in front of an underage student, sir.”

Nizar looks up from the book. “Did I?” He recounts his words and sighs. “So I did. At least you’ll be seventeen this autumn.” Now that he’s paying attention, though, his words regarding the M.L.E. don’t necessarily feel like his. He feels like he’s…quoting.

Quoting who?

“Oh, and it seems that Professor Salazar is scheduling a specific lecture in the dungeon ballroom for every History student to attend Friday evening after dinner. That is when he’s supposed to be telling everyone the story of the actual Founding. When I asked, he said it began in 984. The year 990 is merely when the school was officially opened to any student wishing to learn! Isn’t that exciting?”

Nizar musters a smile for Granger’s enthusiasm. “I hope you enjoy your time in his classes. Believe me, he is never dull.”

“Were any of them?” Granger counters as she slings her bookbag over her shoulder.

“No. None of them were dull, Miss Granger.” Now it’s a fight to keep the smile in place. “I once told Professor Snape that the Founders were all kind, vicious lunatics. I don’t think there is room for even a hint of dullness in that description.”

Miss Granger looks delighted. “Not at all! I seem to have a knack for falling in with that sort, sir.”
“Of course you do,” Nizar replies. The moment she leaves the room, his smile dies a pathetic death. He misses everyone from that era terribly—all of his family. If the portrait preserved anything correctly, it was his grief. Holding Elfric’s second funeral has stirred all that grief back into a whirling maelstrom, and he fucking hates it.
Founding

Chapter Summary

All stories deserve a beginning.

Chapter Notes

I wasn't going to post this yet, but I got hit pretty hard by emotional family bullshit drama last night, and whenever that happens, I tend to want to give people shiny things because it helps to be able to make other people's days better. It's a nice alternative to stabbing the deserving.

(Continuing hails to the betas and cheer-readers!)

Draco eyes the crowd in the old DADA classroom and tries not to wince. Professor Salazar must feel the same way about repeating himself as Professor Slytherin does. Their entire year is trying to seat themselves in the room rather than only two Houses at a time.

“This would be so much worse if it was Quirrell’s setup,” Pansy comments. “It would be positively claustrophobic. Oh, I see free desks up front.”

“Of course they’re terrified of him,” Theo mutters under his breath, snickering. “Come on.”

When they sit down, it’s to find that Slytherin dominates the front of the room, though the swots from the other Houses are just behind them—well, and Weasley, who did challenge Professor Salazar to chess rather than shriek and hide. It’s everyone else who is still leery of their House Founder, which is patently ridiculous. They’re used to Nizar Slytherin; Salazar Slytherin should not be that intimidating!

Draco mentally composes a letter to his mother in his head while they wait for class to begin. He can’t wait to tell her about the lingering fears, though he has to coach his words carefully. He doesn’t want to send along his certainty about Professor Salazar’s identity and leave Mother in the position of having to defend her son’s continued “rebelliousness” before the Dark Lord.

When Professor Salazar appears, he isn’t wearing the beautiful woven robes from one thousand years ago, or anything wizard and modern. It’s that beaten leather jacket over a t-shirt with a rainbow-triangle design, black denims, and oversized boots, ones definitely meant for work instead of leisure. Except for the prism, Salazar Slytherin is wearing Muggle black from head to toe…and yet he still manages to look imposing and regal.

That, I want to learn, Draco thinks in admiration. Father can say what he likes about clothes making a man, but if a man can put on the most casual and worn of clothing and still have that sort of bearing, then the clothes are only a part of what it takes to command a room.

His father is an idiot, anyway.
“Oi, what’s with that getup?” Macmillan asks. Draco makes a face at the Hufflepuff’s rudeness. Macmillan is a Pure-blood. Even though blood purity is nonsense, he should have been raised with better manners.

“It’s called clothing, Mister Macmillan,” Professor Salazar drawls in lazy response, proving that he is already aware of everyone’s names. He’s had several weeks to observe, so the others should have been prepared for that instead of acting like their teacher just began juggling severed heads.

Draco glances over just in time to see Granger roll her eyes at the dramatic gasping. She’s always been quite levelheaded about that sort of nonsense. He liked that about her even when he wasn’t allowed to like anything about her.

“Er, sorry. Sir,” Macmillan remembers to tack on, sounding sheepish. Or terrified. One of those. Draco isn’t certain he cares which it is beyond the need to always be aware what sort of impression he’s left in his wake.

“You’ll learn,” Professor Salazar says. He walks along the front of the room, giving them a measuring look. “I’m certain the gossips have already brought to you the news of what I think of this school’s sanctioned history tome.”

“That it’s rubbish, sir,” Millicent responds, and is visibly relieved when he doesn’t say anything about her lack of signaling for attention. Draco didn’t expect Professor Salazar to follow academic standards, anyway, not when Professor Slytherin only gives them a passing nod.

“That’s putting it kindly, Miss Bulstrode.” Professor Salazar leans against the front of his desk and crosses his arms. “Your homework—yes, we’re already discussing that. Isn’t it terrible?—will be a bit different from that of your younger classmates. This Friday, I’ll be hosting a lecture in the evening, mandatory for anyone attending this class. Your task after the lecture will be to seek out a book or other documentation that is in agreement with me, and no, it isn’t arrogance if you’ve the right of it because you literally lived it, Miss Blishwick.” Professor Salazar seems amused by the Gryffindor’s irritated huff. Granger just looks annoyed. “You’ll then be writing on what that resource says, or on how it expands upon what I’ve told you. Given that this is going to be a very difficult thing to find, you’ll have until twenty-first February to turn in your results. Do note that I’m not speaking of necessary length. I’ll accept a single page that barely qualifies as a scroll as long as you record all of the means used to attempt to find these resources.”

“What—what is the lecture going to be about on Friday evening, s—sir?” Corner stutters out. Draco eyes him, well aware of why Michael Corner would fear a Founder. Idiot.

“The actual Founding of this school,” Professor Salazar answers as if it should have been obvious. “If you’re going to learn it, you’re going to learn it properly. Today, however…”

Professor Salazar grins at them. “Today we’re going to discuss why the 1970s in Britain were complete shit for everyone. After I’m done, you might understand your parents a bit better than you did before.”

“Everyone?” MacDougal asks curiously. The others are shifting a bit, realizing that Professor Salazar is not going to be a narrow-edged instructor. Any Slytherin could have warned them, but then, they didn’t think to ask.

“And that is why we’re going to start with why it was such a fine time to be Irish,” Professor Salazar replies. He then drops them head first into horrifying politics that none of them are prepared for at all.
On Friday afternoon, Nizar’s next bright spot is listening to Salazar whinge at length in regards to the history textbook’s failings. “The first quarter of it is wrong, awful, and full of bloody fanciful suppositions!” Salazar yells, stomping back and forth in his new office on the second storey. Nizar thinks it convenient that this office is also attached to the classroom by a private stairwell. Either someone was thinking sensibly, or this was a…

Staging area. The stairwell is there because this room was a staging area for those going up to the fourth floor of the tower to defend the castle.

Nizar rubs at his temples. Stupid random recollections.

“I’m not used to teaching children who think I’m terrifying,” Salazar finally says as his ranting ceases. “Or that there are so many of them at once. Oh, and I’ve insulted and angered quite a number of them by teaching not mere History of Magic, but History in regards to this entire world.”

“That must be going over well,” Nizar says. “I have students who insist that there are no such things as airplanes.”

Salazar nods. “A number of Pure-blooded blighters think I’m pulling their legs. They’ve never encountered the idea of orbital satellites before in their lives.”

“The horror. You’ve shattered their innocence forever.” Nizar might not have seen a satellite launched into the sky, but at least he’s been paying enough attention in the last few months to know what a satellite is. He thinks he even understands their purpose. Maybe.

Nizar has also stood on top of the Astronomy Tower and watched one of those orbital satellites sail across the clear night sky like a large, brilliant star. He hadn’t been able to breathe until it disappeared from sight. He wonders if Aurora has ever tried to explain those large moving “stars” to her students and found herself facing a wall of disbelief.

Maybe she didn’t know what it was, either. That’s a depressing thought.

“Oh, I can do ever so much worse than that,” Salazar replies. “Explaining the concept of radio waves will be entertaining, as it does actually apply to their Wizarding Wireless.”

“That still sounds simpler than dealing with Dumbledore regarding your inadvertent sacking of his staff ghost.” Binns continued on teaching through Thursday afternoon before it finally occurred to him that he was lecturing to an empty room. The resulting angry shriek echoed throughout the entire castle, prompting Nizar’s students to remind each other to avoid that particular part of the third storey. It would be amusing if they did not now have a classroom haunted by an infuriated ghost who likes to throw desks.

Salazar makes a noise that sounds like bottled, fermented frustration. “I spoke with that one on Monday afternoon before changing the bloody scheduling for History. He thinks my teaching the young ones will be an ‘insightful experience.’”

Nizar raises both eyebrows in surprise. “That’s the only thing he had to say?”

“Yes, but it isn’t the only thing I had to say. I asked him why he’d left a ghost in charge of teaching
history for over forty years. Dumbledore said he’d been taught history by Cuthbert Binns as a student
and found him to be a candid educator, as he put it. When Binns insisted upon carrying on with his
employment despite dying, the Headmaster at the time and the staff—Dumbledore included—
decided that Binns was still capable. I asked the spangled bastard if he’d ever sat through one of
those classes since Binns’ demise. He had not. I’m still not certain how I managed to get through the
rest of that conversation without needing to dispose of a corpse.”

“It should have occurred to me long before now—he never did observe any of my classes after
Dolores was removed,” Nizar realizes. “Dumbledore did ask me once or twice how things were
getting on, but none of my students reported being interviewed by the Headmaster regarding their
Defence lessons.”

“I asked the other staff. They reported similarly.” Salazar looks as if he’d prefer to bash his head
against his desk several dozen times. “Politically, Dumbledore has done a fine job as Head of the
school. In regards to academics?” He shakes his head. “I’d ask the Heads of House to vote for his
sacking, but I already know two of them would say no and another is not yet ready to be convinced.
I would also need to find a replacement, but the Lioness is quite accurate as to how few wish to be
employed here. She doesn’t want to be Head of the school, either.”

“Speaking of those who wish to be employed here, you still haven’t paid me for that wager,” Nizar
reminds Salazar, smiling.

“That is because I’m still deciding if I will actually be continuing with this,” Salazar retorts. “It’s…
they lack so much, little brother. I scarcely know where to begin.”

“I imagine that would be why the students tell me that you seem to talk about whatever crosses your
mind. That does work, you know. Not knowing when to shut up is still a means of littering your path
with information for others to trip over. Besides, you’re the one who will now set the O.W.L.s and
N.E.W.T.s at the end of term. You’ll remember what you’ve told them and what you haven’t.”

Salazar rubs at his face. “I have no idea how you adjusted to this so well.”

Nizar refuses to clench his jaw, much as he’d like to. “Not much choice in the matter, Sal. Besides, I
witnessed the evolution of how they were taught. It was familiar already, even if I still refused to
teach according to someone else’s shoddy standards. You’ll get used to it.”

“And then there is their utter lack of a full education.” Salazar begins opening and closing drawers in
his new desk, probably in hopes that someone forgot a stash of alcohol. If he succeeds, Nizar will
warn him off; he wouldn’t trust anything Dolores left behind. “These children know almost nothing
of other cultures, other languages, science, health, mathematics, healing, literature, economics, civics
—and geography! I’ve not seen your map anywhere in this castle, hermanito, and its lack is as
disturbing as the fact that it was never replaced in any form.”

Nizar frowns. “What map?”

“Your version of the Recording Charm, little brother.” Salazar gives up on the liquor hunt and sighs.
“You pieced together scrolls until you had a length of paper the size of one of the kitchen trestle
tables. Then you recreated from memory a map of the entire Earth, as witnessed during your years in
primary school in this time.”

“Oh. That must have been…well, useful. I think.”

“Nizar: it was amazing.” There is an echo of ancient wonder reflected in Salazar’s eyes. “None of us
had ever seen our entire world mapped in such a fashion before. Our students were the most
“Maybe it’s in the rubbish room aspect with everything else, though it does make me realize that there are no maps in Hogwarts. I haven’t even seen one of bloody Britain.” Nizar can’t recall if there had been any other maps in Hogewáþ in his time or not. There must have been a map somewhere, even aside from what sounds like a very devoted undertaking on his part. “That’s an odd lapse.”

“It’s perfectly in line with the schemes of that fucking governing board and useless Ministry,” Salazar points out, scowling. “I’ve been dwelling on that for days now. After I put in a weekend visit to London, that classroom come Monday will have its walls covered in maps from differing eras.” He sighs. “I’d love to start with Hogwarts’ first map. I’d like to show them what we did know.”

“Try a Seeking spell in the rubbish room aspect,” Nizar suggests. “That might do it. I’m more concerned by the fact that right now, Hogwarts has twenty subjects it teaches. Only twenty, all magical, and all of them crippled by the governing board.” And by Utredus Gaunt, he thinks, but can’t bring himself to say that aloud. “All it would take is the student count increasing by twenty and the staff would be at the maximum they could handle without being overworked. Those who aren’t overworked aren’t qualified to teach anything else. We need help, Salazar.”

Salazar rests his face in his hands. “I know. This gap is so vast, Nizar. I’m not certain I know how to fill it.”

“Lists. Lists are our friends,” Nizar says in a dry voice. Salazar lets out a muffled laugh. “In the meantime, I don’t know how you’re handling it, but I haven’t just been teaching Defence. I’ve been covering the basics of Healing Magic, diplomacy, ethics, Mind Magic, history when necessary, the differing types of magic—which is supposed to be covered by bloody Magical Theory! That class is meant to be a requirement, and yet somehow half the students in Hogwarts manage not to take it. It’s treated as a fucking elective.”

Salazar lifts his eyes to Nizar. “How much worse can it get, little brother?”

“I’m having to teach them basic dueling form, as trying to teach them actual dueling was a complete fucking failure,” Nizar says in a flat voice. “They could only improve so much on the lessons they’d received in the past. Once I realized the problem, I made them start over. They didn’t know how to move, and they all relied on the exact same sort of casting position. My students are still learning those basics, but at least now I think we’ll get somewhere. Then there is the fucking pamphlet.”

Salazar is starting to look pained. “What pamphlet?”

“The pamphlet I had to construct and give out to all of my students in order to teach them how to properly write an essay. I received utter disasters from students that are otherwise intelligent!” Nizar yells, striding across the office to rest his head against the wall. “Then there are the ones who are curious about flight and levitation now that they’ve witnessed Miss Lovegood’s broomless trips around the castle. I still want to show them all how to build a broom so they don’t have to buy overpriced and limited goods in a bloody shop. It’s one thing if you’ve a professional need, but Wizarding Britain turned brooms into an expensive commodity—and do not get me started on that fucking cobbler in Diagon Alley.”

“Please do not stab that cobbler. There are puffed-up Pure-bloods who would be so disappointed.” Salazar starts chuckling. “Then again, perhaps that is an excellent reason to stab the cobbler. Nizar, that is all too much for one man to teach at once.”

“I’m aware of that!” Nizar retorts, turning back around so he can pace the room. “But no one else is teaching it, Sal. I’m not trying to pad their education with fluff. We’re discussing things that they...
“Like bloody finances.” Salazar drops his hands so he can lean back in his chair. “Sciences. Training
the non-magical students in the use of a quill, or at least let them bring a bloody fountain pen to
Hogwarts. The lack of accommodations for those with physical impairments that would be stymied
by stairs—or even the mental impairments, like young Mister Weasley and his dyslexia. You’re right
that we need help, little brother, but I’ve no idea where to even begin finding it.”

Nizar shoves his hand into his hair. “We had twenty-eight magical subjects and fourteen non-magical
ones, Sal, but we don’t have to restore all of the non-magical ones, thank the gods. These children
come to Hogwarts already knowing basic maths, reading, and how to write. The majority of them
don’t know a damned thing about how to construct their writing, but at least they can put words on
paper.”

“But the rest is still a problem, and I’ll need to find another History teacher who isn’t a blithering
idiot,” Salazar mutters. “It’s this summer, little brother.”

Nizar looks away. Salazar isn’t wrong about summer. Nizar can feel it, a vague sense of time
catching up to them both. The house-elves also think Voldemort will die this summer, divining it
with runes, Arithmancy, water, stone, thread, metal, or whatever tool they’ve come to use for their
gifts.

Not if I can help it. Nizar has no idea what he can possibly do to keep Salazar from dying when
Voldemort does, but that doesn’t mean he’s going to stand aside while Salazar reaps the rewards of a
stupidly worded contract.

“Then I’ll change the topic to something you would like to discuss,” Salazar says when Nizar
remains silent. “Do the letters from irate parents in the Prophet rate your approval?”

“I wasn’t certain anyone would be able to get them published after that first article,” Nizar admits.
“But I’m glad to see I was wrong.”

“Right now, those letters are coming in from people with money enough to pay to see their words in
print.” Salazar looks thoughtful. “I don’t yet know how many Madam Malfoy could reasonably
expect to finance before it’s considered a Malfoy-led conspiracy.”

“That’s an accusation she can’t afford, not when she needs to maintain her voice in the Ministry. She
could convince someone else that she’s helping to pave the way for someone more ‘appropriate’ to
take control of the Ministry, but I’d rather she not have to do that, either.” Nizar sits down on the
edge of Salazar’s desk. Balancing the politics necessary to unseat Fudge, work with the Queen,
charm the rest of Wizarding Britain, and act against Voldemort is already a complete pain in the arse.
It would be all too easy to destabilize one or all of those plans by making a single wrong decision.
“Or perhaps we’ll be fortunate, and the Daily Prophet will keep printing those letters of outrage if
public opinion turns.”

“I don’t think we’ll get there so easily, hermanito. Cornelius Fudge is too entrenched. He’ll fight
back.”

Nizar shrugs. “I fear nothing from a man who insists upon wearing that hideous hat.”

* * * * *
Before dinner, Nizar and Salazar both seek out Aurora Sinistra’s quarters within the Astronomy Tower. As Salazar suspected, it’s a tiny, twisting maze of a room that used to be storage, though neither of them can recall what it held.

“There is plenty of room in this tower, and it’s not being used. Why?” Nizar wonders, placing his hand on the stone wall between a set of hanging photographs. He’d never realized that Aurora had siblings. “Wasn’t this once an open section, Sal?”

“I believe so.” Salazar is standing in the center of the room; Nizar can feel his brother investigating the area with the help of the castle’s magic. “That wall was not built by anyone who held her magic.”

“I just hope no one entombed a body in there.” Aurora smiles to hide her nervousness at the idea of hidden corpses. “It would be just my luck that I’ve had an unwanted neighbor for the last fourteen years.”

“Take down your photographs and move everything away from this wall,” Salazar instructs, helping Nizar and Aurora to clear the space by hand and with magic. Then Salazar reaches out to the castle, removing the stone by means of having its material bleed away into the original walls of Hogwarts.

“Oh. It’s merely more storage,” Aurora says in surprise. “Though I do still hope there are no stored corpses.”

“If they’re within that space, they were tidily preserved—Nizar?” Salazar breaks off in concern. “What is it?”

Nizar is staring at the painting that has been left leaning against an old storage chest. Even in the dim lighting of the revealed large space, he can make out a woman’s Romanesque features and dark hair pinned atop her head with large silver combs. She has the northern Pictish eyes that look like the green-blue of the ocean, but her skin is a darker bronze than his and Salazar’s.

“She’s bloody taller than everyone except for Godric!”

“She is that, yes. Helga seems pleased.”

“Helga seems to be over the fucking moon, Sal.”

“I am going to assume that means something pleasant, Nizar.”

“Lady Edonya, forgive my curiosity: is your height due to giant blood, or are you simply very Norse?”

Her words had been deep and bell-like, the voice of someone who sang often. “Just a hint of giant blood…and I’m also very, very Norse.”

“That you are.”

Nizar has no idea that he blacked out until he awakens, utterly confused to find himself lying down and for the ceiling to be overhead.

Fuck, but it’s the ceiling in the hospital wing. Gods, Sal, why?

He struggles to prop himself up on his elbows and nearly gives it up when the room begins to spin in an unhappy whirl. “Why?” he asks again, though that particular plaintive whine is meant for the fucking spinning.
“That’s very much what I’d like to know, hermanito.”

Nizar glances over at Salazar, who is sitting on the next bed over, arms crossed, with deep concern stamped onto his features. “Sal, I have no idea what—”

“I’ve just gotten Mister Hughes and Mister Ackerly settled, so I can—good, you’re awake,” Poppy announces as she approaches, her wand already in her hand. Severus is following her. Nizar catches a brief look of concern before Severus smooths his features out to his habitual impassiveness. “Now I can work a proper diagnostic spell.”

Nizar tries not to flinch back from the cast charm. He’d rather perform them himself, knowing from experience that he isn’t comfortable with most Healers who are not Helga. “I’m probably fine—or not,” he says when he sees the results of the spell glimmering in the air.

“Your blood sugar fell to the floor just as you did,” Poppy announces in displeasure. “That is not what caused your collapse, though it certainly contributed. It’s this activity here in the brain.”

Nizar looks up at those blazing red and orange areas. “What the hell is that?”

“Those are parts of the mind usually associated with memory,” Poppy explains briskly. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were exposed to a powerful surge of magic, and it attempted to feed your portrait’s disturbed Preservation Charms.”

“You are not incorrect.” Nizar glances at Sal and knows his brother came to the same realization. It isn’t just lingering aftereffects from the Preservation Charms and the castle’s magic attempting to help him fill in the blanks. The full might of that original, complicated working is still attached to him. With the available boost in magic, those spells and charms are now truly intent on doing their job.

Fuck. Nizar has enough to concern himself with instead of needing to worry about complicated spells that won’t end until they consider their task to be complete. It isn’t even safe to get rid of the bloody things!

“The blood sugar crash is fixable, as long as there is not anything else…?” Nizar trails off, hoping the answer is a resounding no.

Poppy scowls. “I am used to seeing readings like these on children I know come from homes that are not seeing to their needs. Mister Potter—” She breaks off, visibly upset. “He is often my worst offender for not eating or sleeping properly. You need to take better care of yourself, Nizar.”

“I’m well aware of what my habits have been of late.” Nizar feels a return of this week’s constant exhaustion. “Is it the dinner hour yet, or did I miss it?”

“You’ve missed the first half.” Poppy dismisses the diagnostic image with her wand. “I’ll have the elves bring dinner here. For all three of you, as these two idiots also neglected to eat.”

“I was not leaving this room until I had answers,” Salazar says in firm voice.

“Nor I,” Severus adds, but he does offer Poppy a graceful nod. “Thank you for your assistance and consideration.”

Poppy smiles and pats Severus’s arm, a familiarity he allows without a hint of the usual flinching. “You’ve been nothing but scrupulously polite to me ever since your third year, Severus.”

“That’s because I didn’t wish to be flayed alive,” Severus mutters once Poppy has retreated to her office, ostensibly to call for dinner. “Nizar?”
“It was that painting, wasn’t it?” Salazar asks.

“It was. Someone help me to sit up. Everything keeps spinning, and it is not pleasant.”

Salazar and Severus take his arms on opposite sides and help him to sit upright until Nizar doesn’t think he’ll simply fall over. “Thank you.” Nizar rubs at his eyes and sighs. “I remembered who she was. I remember Edonya, Sal.”

“I’m glad of that, at least, even if I’m not happy about the manner in which you remembered her,” Salazar replies. “Strong magic, hermanito. It has to be the magic of granted land and title attempting to fuel those remaining Preservation Charms.”

Nizar nods, relieved when the spinning doesn’t get worse. “I don’t understand why I decided to bloody well pass out from it, but it’s a logical conclusion.”

Severus frowns at him. “I’m more concerned that it really was due to the bad habits Poppy mentioned.”

Nizar rolls his eyes, which makes the spinning room loop a bit more stridently. Bad idea. “I’m not starving myself, Severus. I just don’t eat well when I’m upset. I never have.”

“No, you don’t, and I’d forgotten all about that,” Salazar murmurs. “I imagine you forgot that if you’re doing so, you need to ease back on anything magical.”

Nizar stares at Salazar before he says, “Fuck,” in the most disgusted tone he can muster.

“That definitely confirms my hypothesis.” Salazar smiles when three elves appear with trays full of food. “Thank you all for the kindness.”

“It is being no trouble, Professor Salazar,” one still dressed in Greengrass colors chirps, disappearing after she’s handed Nizar the first tray. At least its contents are sensible: soup and bread, water and tea. He can cope with that.

“Who is Edonya?” Severus asks after Nizar all but inhales dinner. The room has stopped spinning, and he feels like he could stand up without falling over.

“Edonya Dyonisia was a Norse vikingr and Vǫlva of mixed Persian descent,” Salazar answers. “She was a beautiful woman with a bit of giant’s blood in her lineage, and thus taller than all of us in the castle but for Godric. You saw the portrait of her when I removed it from Aurora’s properly enlarged quarters in the tower.”

Severus nods. “I did. She was beautiful, as you described, but it was hard to determine her size from a portrait.”

“She was also Helga’s lady. They were hand-fasted, married without it being something that magic or the Church would recognize. They didn’t want Helga’s idiot brother to get any foolish ideas into his head if he learned that his sister had wed.” Nizar stares down at his empty tray, feeling the food he’s just consumed try to sour in his stomach. “Edonya died during the invasions of 1013. Helga was devastated—she always thought she’d be first. She was older, famous, and a visible target in our society, whereas Edonya was not.”

“We were heartbroken,” Salazar says quietly. “She was an excellent magician and a good friend. To lose her the year after Brice…that was hard on all of us.”

Nizar considers the potential outcomes of flinging his teacup at the nearest wall. “I disliked King
Æthelred upon first meeting. Those battles made me hate him.” He shakes off the memory and its accompanying anger. “Sal, are you still giving that lecture in the dungeon ballroom tonight?”

“I am. Why, do you plan to be in attendance, hermanito?” Salazar asks.

“Someone has to be there in case you get something wrong,” Nizar replies. Salazar smiles. “And how would you even know it to be incorrect?”

“When it comes to our history?” Nizar puts the tray aside, not really in the mood to smile in response. “I’ve always known if I’ve heard something said wrong, even if I didn’t know why.”

* * * *

Minerva isn’t certain what she expects when she goes to the dungeon ballroom that evening. It’s always been a rather gloomy space, more appropriate to telling ghost stories. She wonders if that is what Salazar intends. Those sorts of tales do tend to keep a young one’s attention riveted.

Instead, she enters to find the room brightly lit by flaming torches that encircle the room; candles are all gleaming in the cast-iron round candelabras hanging from the ceiling. Rather than an empty room, stadium seating that was likely made from the very stone of Hogwarts has turned the ballroom into an amphitheatre. The seats are absolutely packed with students but for a section that has been claimed by staff, with room remaining for stragglers like herself.

She chooses to sit down with Nizar, who is next to Severus, who is sitting at the very edge so he does not have to tolerate anyone else at his side. “Are you all right?” she asks him.

Nizar rolls his eyes. “Does everyone bloody know? Yes, I’m fine. Magical incident, not dead, dying, or incapacitated. Fully capable of heckling if Salazar botches something.”

Minerva smiles. “As long as you have your priorities in order, dear.”

Filius is seated just below them, taking one of the empty spots below Minerva and Nizar. Almost all of the faculty is present, though Minerva narrows her eyes as she notes that Barnaby and Eustas are not. To her surprise, Sibyl has come down from her tower, which is a very rare event. Argus is standing off in a corner, holding Mrs. Norris and pretending to be invisible.

Salazar is standing on the floor before the stone risers. She almost expected him to dress Muggle, just to be irritating, but instead he’s chosen black boots and trousers with a dark green shirt that looks to be one of the fine linen originals. Over that, Salazar is wearing his long black silk vest embroidered in gold and bronze, which most certainly sets the proper tone.

He is currently pointing at rows, lips moving as he counts under his breath. “Oh, there will be students who receive disappointing O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. results this summer.” He glances at the doorway as their last two students, older Hufflepuffs, scramble into the room and wedge themselves in among the others.

“I’ve put quite a bit of thought this week into deciding how I should tell this tale.” Salazar words gain him immediate silence. “If I speak too long, not one of us will be fit to greet the world before noon tomorrow, yet all stories deserve a beginning.
“So: this is ours.”

The last living war mage, Myrddin Wyllt, watched five centuries of war unite and divide his beloved isle over and over again. He decided in the middle of the 900s that if he did not leave behind a sanctuary devoted to magic, then his entire life’s work would be for naught. To that end, he found a magical node in the southern Highlands, one of the strongest on the island, and there he placed a stone. Myrddin linked that Founding stone to the great node buried in the earth, and raised a stone structure high around it, the first buildings of the school he named Hogewáþ. It is and is not a surprise to hear that the eldest parts of the school are the Entrance Hall, the Great Hall, and the tower that now holds the Grand Stair.

Minerva listens in utter fascination as Salazar discusses the eldest Founder, Duchess Hrodwunn—Rowena—of the Magical Bavarian duchy named Raven’s Claw. A brilliant young woman who learned every language set before her, who attained her first self-taught magical mastery in Arithmancy at age fourteen before continuing to teach herself any magic that seemed appealing. Her only marriage gave her a non-magical son and two magical daughters.

Rowena was the first of the four to meet Myrddin in the flesh, though Helga arrived soon after, fleeing her brother’s attempts to eliminate all perceived threats to his claiming their parents’ throne in the north. At age sixteen, Helga Hlodvirdóttir (later calling herself Hugðilepuf) was a fully recognized and trained magician among the Norse, the rare warrior Vǫlva who also chose to be a Healer. Salazar tells them without the slightest hint of bragging or falsehood that Helga was one of the loveliest of women who ever inhabited this Earth. He amuses Minerva by adding that Helga would often use that beauty to lure in those foolish enough to assume a pretty face equated to weakness.

Salazar made certain that his sister Estefania would be granted control over their lands and holdings and allowed to act as Marquésa in Salazar’s place before bringing his very young family of himself, wife Orellana, and toddler daughter Fortunata to Briton. He met Godric for the first time in Inverness; they were introduced to each other by the High King of the North. Along with Godric’s wife Sedemai, they traveled into the Highlands together.

Their very first sight of Hogwarts—then far more a keep than any sort of castle—was of Helga defending it against an army sent by her own kin. Salazar then promptly demonstrated that at not quite fifteen, he had no bloody idea he was an Earth-Speaker, called upon that magic as they were being overrun, knocked a bunch of idiots to the ground, and then promptly joined them.

“In typical Slytherin fashion, you made certain to make an impression, then,” Miss Parangyo teases him.

Salazar grins. “I’d like to claim such an opportunity for a pun, but alas, Godric made certain I left no such impression on the ground.”

Myrddin named Godric, Rowena, Salazar, and Helga as his school’s Founders: those who would be linked to the Founding Stone, Keeper of Hogwarts’ Magic. The points on the compass who would guide.

“Uh—what is it liked to be tied into a magical node at age fifteen?” Mister Sloper asks.

The expression on Salazar’s face is somewhat comical. “I’m an Earth-Speaker, Mister Sloper, one who is especially attuned to the magic of the earth. I was as high as a bloody kite for nearly ten straight days. Myrddin was not amused, but as he is the one who didn’t consider that side effect, the blunder was all on him. Helga never let him forget it.”
From the autumn of 984 through the winter of 990, the four Founders, Orellana, Sedemai, and their acquired staff built onto the castle using the magic channeled by the Founding stone. Myrddin’s houndings and mutterings, Salazar’s scrying, Godric’s instincts, Helga’s desire to protect, Rowena’s desire to educate—all served their purpose. By first March of 990, Hogwarts was perhaps three quarters of the way to being the size it is now. In 991, they added the structures that would take it up to seven-eighths complete, and after the Founders’ time, all other additions were made by others.

“I didn’t remember that,” Nizar murmurs under his breath as another student asks Salazar why his sister and brother didn’t accompany him to Hogwarts. “I didn’t remember it was the same day as my birthday.”

“Estefania was far more interested in politics, and she was very, very good,” Salazar answers the student. “Nizar, like the rest of us, was educated at home until the school was officially ready to open its doors. Not that it stopped anyone who heard tale of what we were up to in the north. We had students all but dropped on our doorstep all throughout the previous year by desperate parents who wanted their magical children safe and educated.”

Then there is, formally, an open school for magic on the isle of Briton. Godric’s wife Sedemai explained the first ideas of Magical Theory, taught Transfiguration to all, and tested their students for skills at levitation or flight. Someone is foolish enough to claim that no one can fly with magic; Salazar merely rolls his eyes and ignores them, which is the sort of answer that makes the asker feel foolish and allows others to realize that there was no joke intended. Helga taught Charms, Rune Magic, and Healing while also teaching Apparition. Godric was a teacher of Defence and History, and was such the storyteller that he and his audience often had to be reminded that there were other things to be done that day. Rowena catered to the teaching of languages, geography, mathematics, Arithmancy, reading, writing, the magic of the spoken or written word, Mind Magic, courtly behavior, ethics, and diplomacy.

“When did Rowena Ravenclaw ever sleep?” Miss Stivers asks, appalled.

Salazar chuckles. “Things were a bit different in those days. We didn’t need to run our students into the ground with a full day of lessons on every single day. Once they mastered what was required, they moved on to a new lesson. For quite a long time, I was the only one qualified to teach anything of Divination, Potions and Herbology, Astronomy, Elemental Magical Theory, Weather Magic, and if any had ever shown the inclination, Earth-Speaking. Until she died…”

Salazar always pauses before saying her name, and that is how Minerva knows whom he will speak of. “Orellana was a Wood-Speaker who showed the young ones how to build their brooms, and taught Alchemy to those who wished to learn. She had no deft hand for Potions, but the science of Alchemy? That was another tale altogether. Thus it was just us six until September in 991, when Orellana died.”

“How?” Miss Vane asks, one of many students who seem distraught.

“Childbirth,” Nizar answers rather than Salazar, who looks relieved not to have to voice the cause. “She had a blood deficiency—you’d call it anemia—that we tried to treat through the latter half of her pregnancy with Zuri. We thought we’d stabilized it, but…we were wrong.”

There was no one who could teach Alchemy after Orellana, but Nizar had been Orellana’s student in wood-speaking, which enabled them to continue broom lessons until they gained another teacher for both subjects. They did so just in time for Nizar to take the Defence post from Godric in the summer of 992, as Godric wished not to dwell on fighting unless it was to take on an apprenticeship.

“You were bloody seventeen!” Mister Carmichael declares, staring at Nizar. So do all the others who
would much prefer not to be taking on any sort of hefty responsibility until they aren’t given a choice in the matter.

Nizar looks annoyed. “So?”

“Mental,” Miss Bhatia says in a bemused voice. “But we knew that, sir.”

No one else resided in the castle through the summer of 992 but for students, teachers, and their staff…and that brings them to the tale that most of Minerva’s Gryffindors have been curious about from the very start. Most of the staff Salazar has told them of are non-magical, though two are non-magical people from a magical lineage.

Minerva listens with her heart in her throat as Salazar describes to them why he learned never to discount his brother’s instincts, no matter the reason. One of those two non-magical men from a magical lineage, Nizar had never trusted. That man waited until all of the magicians were out of the castle dealing with another matter and absconded with two of the students, young girls. Nizar had already been named the school’s protector by Myrddin, and while the castle was supposed to tell them all if something was wrong, that is the day they learned that his senses were more fine-tuned—and still it was not enough. The first child was dead, and the second grievously injured, before that man was stopped. No one is foolish enough to ask how Nizar stepped him, not given the expression on his face.

If Orellana’s death broke the dear man’s heart, then that non-magical servant’s act shattered Salazar’s trust in those who’d been with them for years already.

“And that’s why non-magical types were banned from the castle,” Mister Zabini says. “That’s when Muggles stopped being able to see Hogwarts.”

“No only for that reason, Mister Zabini, though without such details, it does look very much like that,” Salazar replies quietly. “To our eyes, that man’s act served as a warning of things to come. Certain of our students already had to dwell in the castle throughout the year, as it was not safe to go home to their families. The church on the island was far more tolerant in those days, but worse was coming and we knew it.

“I’ve been alive from twenty-eighth December 969 until this very day,” Salazar says, “and no matter my years, I still could not tell you if I thought we did right or wrong by choosing to hide the way we did. I honestly could not say if I believed us to have made things better or worse.”

Salazar wisely changes the subject, going into more detail of the structure of Hogwarts, particularly those who were permitted to be students in its halls. Any magical being was welcome, Salazar tells them; magic was the only requirement for entering the school as a student. The sheer amount of muttered outrage the students indulge in when they learn that mixed-blood students of other races as well as Squibs were educated in Hogwarts makes Nizar scowl and Minerva wish to plaster her hands over her ears when the walls echo with it.

“Squibs are without magic, you say?” Salazar does not look impressed by the primary argument. “My mother was descended from one of the most powerful magical families in the County of Castile. The magic in her line had skipped the previous three generations, but it still flowed in her veins, else she would never have been able to pass her family’s magic on to my sister...or on to me.”

Salazar holds up his hand, allowing emerald flame and silver sparks to dance in his palm. “That green shine of my magic is of my father’s family. The silver is of my mother’s. She would never have been able to pass on magic if she were without it.” He dismisses the fire and points to Argus lurking in his corner, whose eyes widen as half the assembly turns to look at him. “If Squibs were
truly without magic, that man would not be able to see this castle or work within her halls—and yet, there Argus Filch stands. Your primary and stupid argument regarding Squibs is easily dismantled. Oh, and do stop insulting my mother,” Salazar adds. “I still take such comments personally.”

“But the Founders booted out Squibs and half-human types!” Mister McLaggen exclaims.

“We did no such thing,” Salazar retorts. “As a matter of fact, that didn’t happen until the thirteenth century. That is the same century when the enslavement of elves began, elves who were free beings of Hogwarts, and it started when their contract with Hogwarts was deliberately hidden away, their education taken from them. The rest of those ridiculous rules banning students for foolish reasons came about early in the fourteenth century.”

Salazar glances at Nizar, who seems to consider something before he nods. Whatever Salazar has asked, Nizar does not look happy. “What if I were to tell you that the divisions you all know, the separation of Pure-blood, Half-blood, and the insulting term Muggle-borns, were all the result of one man’s vile actions in the first half of the 1200s? That before such time, those distinctions never existed?”

“No recognition of a Pure-blood at all?” Mister Malfoy asks. Minerva glances at him to see no trace of defensiveness, just curiosity. He has grown up quite a bit this year, and she could not be more pleased.

“Long-lived and uninterrupted magical lineages were recognized and honored so long as they continued to earn that respect,” Salazar tells them. “But otherwise? No. One was a magician, or one was not. You did not need a lineage to become famous…or infamous.”

“You’ve proof of this?” Albus asks.

Minerva frowns. If she didn’t know any better, she would suspect Albus of being the one sounding combative. Odd.

Nizar stands in place. “The man in question—whose name I will not mention, as I have no wish to sully his descendants—came to the Slytherin Common Room in 1234 to brag to the portrait of the castle’s last known, titled Protector as to what he’d spent years in Hogwarts doing while acting as one of her instructors. He didn’t realize he was bragging to the real person, of course. Not at first. When he did, he moved the painting. If you’ve been tied into a magical ley line for your continued survival? Having that forcibly stripped away bloody well hurts.”

Minerva discovers that she’s wringing her hands together. She did not know any of this, which means it must be a very recent discovery. Even Albus looks taken aback by Nizar’s recitation.

“And you didn’t remember.” Miss Fawcett looks sad. “Because the painting was moved.”

“No. Not until very, very recently.” Nizar sighs. “Our lovely perpetrator kept Obliviating the Headmaster at the time so he would conveniently forget his fears and concerns. He removed paintings, hid paintings, cursed paintings, and convinced the Sorting Hat to resort to simplicity of song rather than recitation of the school’s Founding history. In short, this man did an excellent job of sabotaging everything my family worked to build here.” Nizar sits down and Minerva reaches out to pat his arm. He gives her a terse smile in response.

“Why not name this man?” Mister Derrick of Slytherin asks. “History should hold him accountable!”

There are several students who add their agreement before Salazar holds up his hand. “This man wanted the truth to be forgotten. The best revenge is to make certain he is forgotten. I’d much rather
we go forward from where we are now rather than dwell on what was.

“Now, I’ve covered the actual Founding, along with a few things I’d no intention of discussing at all this evening. That means you may now ask questions, and I won’t turn down a single one.”

Minerva has to clamp her lips together to keep from smiling as Salazar is subjected to an interrogation that sounds very much like the one the Order treated him to on second January.

“All right, something a bit different, then,” Miss Mirfield says. “How can so many of us be descended from Godric? It seems I can’t turn around without walking headfirst into yet another distant cousin!”

“Sedemai would be laughing so much right now,” Nizar whispers, smiling. Minerva is glad to see that he seems to be in a better mood now that discussions of this mysterious villain and paintings have been put aside.

“Godric and Sedemai had what you lot would call an…” Salazar frowns. “No, wait, some of you are probably not aware of that term yet, as it’s largely in non-magical use. They call it an open relationship. Godric was free to look about and follow his inclinations with other women so long as his wife approved of his choices beforehand. Sedemai wasn’t the type to do so, herself, but as far as she and Godric were concerned, there was no dishonor in it. They had faith in each other’s words and trust in each other’s dealings almost from the moment they met until death parted them. The, ah, problem of Godric’s many descendants is that Godric had the worst luck when it came to Contraception Charms acting as they should.”

Miss Weasley raises her hand, bright-eyed. “I’m one of Anna Mirfield’s many, many cousins, sir. I take it you mean the Contraception Charms kept failing?”

“That they did. Godric was of a long line of magical English eorls and took care of any child he sired if their mother requested assistance. The difficulty was that we didn’t even know there were so many failures until the odds started to stack up against him. Sedemai even accused him of being too pissed to remember to use the magic properly, but that was never Godric’s difficulty. It was his own magic, you see. It was…” Salazar smiles. “It was something else, darling Gryffindor. The man radiated magic in a way an Elemental Magician would, yet he was not of their ilk at all. His magic had a way of affecting things that spent a long time on his person, that talking Sorting Hat included. It’s a living, talking hat because it was Godric’s Hat, struck with a Babbling Hex. Gods, but if only I’d chosen something else to fling in his direction that day.”

Minerva clasps both hands to her mouth to muffle her sudden laughter. She may as well not have bothered, given that laughing is what most everyone else seems to be doing.

“And I still say that it was Helga’s fault!” Nizar shouts above the racket.

“Oi! How would it be our Founder’s fault if it was Godric Gryffindor wearing the Hat and Professor Salazar casting the hex?” Miss Applebee wishes to know.

“Never mind. We’re back to it being our fault,” Nizar concedes. “My brother and I felt challenged and crafted the only known alcohol potent enough to overcome Helga’s very Norse constitution. She was really not pleased to wake up with her very first hangover that next morning, and started throwing spells at myself and Sal for being the cause. Then Godric got involved, and it was a complete debacle.”

“You know, we’ve been wondering why you keep calling the Sorting Hat an alcohol-soaked bit of talking felt,” George says, grinning.
“However, that does make perfect sense, and feels quite appropriate besides!” Fred chimes in.

“Please never give my students alcohol,” Minerva requests in a dry voice.

“Minerva! They’re underage!” Nizar responds, insulted. “I would only do that once they’ve graduated.”

“No thanks,” Miss Shah says at once. “You’re Spanish. I don’t want to die, Professor.” That sets the lot of them off laughing and talking again.

“Okay! Wait! Question!” Mister Thomas yells, causing most of them to settle again. “Your bit about the Gryffindors’ relationship had me wondering, Professor Salazar. How could they get away with that sort of arrangement back in those days?”

Salazar raises an eyebrow at Mister Thomas. “Muggle-born?”

“No sir, Half-blood whose magical father decided to take off instead of hanging about,” Mister Thomas replies. “I was raised Muggle, though.”

Salazar nods. “I see. Your history books in primary school would have talked of what relationships in our time were presumed to be like. Most of them are entirely incorrect, by the way. I will say that in Christian circles, it was frowned upon to be with another outside your marriage—at least as far as the Church was concerned. There was overall more of an attitude of ‘Mind your own business’ when it came to that sort of thing. As long as you weren’t causing dramatics that stirred up the entire village, no one was much bothered. In magical circles, Godric and Sedemai’s marriage arrangement wasn’t unusual at all. Open marriages, triad marriages, group partnerships and marriages, hand-fastings instead of recognized marriage, casual relationships, cross-cultural and cross-species relationships—all were common in our day. That really didn’t stop being the case until the Ministry formed.”

“That’s a lot more open-minded than I expected,” Mister Goldstein says in surprise, accompanied by muttered agreement.

“Open-minded.” Salazar considers it. “I would imagine it’s a matter of perspective. No matter if you had magic or not, the world was a different place one thousand years ago. You lived with the knowledge that a disease could strike you down. A minor wound could turn septic and kill you if no healer could cure the infection. A blade might end your life whether you were actively involved in a conflict or not. When you are always aware that Death might lurk just around the corner…you laugh more. Love more freely. Live more. You delight in existing. You are yourself, to your utmost ability, because you never know when those chances might be taken from you.”

Minerva swallows, sobered once more. She is doing exactly that now, but she hadn’t the sense to do such when she was younger. It took age and grief to learn that lesson.

Salazar glances down at the floor. “You’ve no idea how grateful I am that disease, the violence, and deaths by infection are all so much less than they were. I lost almost the whole of my family’s descendants from every branch to plagues and pandemics. But when the fear of death faded, what seems to have replaced it is the fear of living. We once took every opportunity granted us to celebrate, because those moments, great and small—all are worth celebrating. Now the very idea of celebrating beyond a strict set of Western ideals is looked down upon as if it’s some sort of failing.

“Why should it be considered a failing to take joy in being alive?”
The Notion of Trading

Chapter Summary

“I sense shenanigans, Minerva. What were the Heads of House busy doing after tonight’s lecture?”

Chapter Notes

All hail betas @sanerontheinside & @mrsstanley, along with patient cheer-readers @norcumi & @jabberwockypie, who are probably still trying to figure out what order things were supposed to happen in because I'm not writing very linearly, either. *G*

Nizar is so glad that the students ran out of questions around eleven. There is a Quidditch game early enough in the morning that some of the players chance yawning through the game if they don’t start taking themselves off to bed. As it is, they can’t get rid of any of them until the students linger to witness Salazar returning the ballroom to its original form. There are a lot of wide eyes and gleeful smiles as they watch a Founder of Hogwarts ask the castle to reclaim solid stone.

He wasn’t certain how tonight’s story would affect those who listened, but so far what he’s seen and heard is overwhelmingly positive. Thank the gods.

Nizar turns around when someone coughs for his attention. Argus Filch is standing there, cradling Mrs. Norris in his arms. “D’you have you a moment, Professor?” Filch asks.

“Many.” Nizar follows Filch over to the shadowed corner the man lurked in for the entirety of Salazar’s tale. “What can I do for you, Mister Filch?”

Filch gives several students an angry scowl when they wander too close. “It’s just…I was wanting to apologize, Professor. About the—the incident. With the music.”

“Oh? It’s not racket any longer?” Nizar is trying not to be bitter about that moment, but he still regrets what he did while still in the throes of a massive flare of temper. That alboka would have been better served by lingering in Hogsmeade’s music shop for another century.

“No,” Filch grumbles.

“Are you going to continue to ban rules that don’t exist to suit your own personal preferences?” Nizar asks.

Filch’s expression turns sour. “No, I won’t be. I shouldn’t have reacted—that way. I heard ’bout what happened to that instrument you were playing.”

“An alboka,” Nizar supplies. He never informed anyone else as to the alboka’s fate, so Severus must have mentioned it to Salazar. His brother must then have mentioned it to whoever he judged would be in the right position for Filch to find out without the truth being shouted in his face.
“Alboka, then. That’s not something I ever wanted to see happening, Professor,” Filch says. “I just have such a terrible trouble with noise!”

“Noise.” Nizar frowns. “Sound, musical sound, or any loud noise?”

“It’s all noise to me, Professor,” Filch admits. “It’s always been just overwhelm’ sound, anything louder than a conversation—and sometimes even that’s just too much for my ears.”

“Sound. Any sound.” Nizar blinks a few times and turns around. “Sal! Come here!”

Salazar looks at the crowd of students and staff between them, shakes his head, and then Apparates directly to Nizar’s side. “That would take too bloody long, otherwise,” he says. Filch stares at him for a few seconds in shock before apparently deciding to ignore the in-Hogwarts Apparition.

“Argus Filch here was just telling me that he has trouble with sound. Any sound,” Nizar says. “Conversations included. Doesn’t that sound familiar?”

Salazar grins. “It does indeed. I do believe we may’ve stumbled over this man’s magical talent!”

Filch is furious. “I’m a Squib!” he hisses. “Got no magic!”

“No, you have very little magic compared to a wand-waving magician. As I told those young blighters, if you were completely without magic, you couldn’t see Hogwarts to work here,” Salazar counters. “For a so-labeled Squib, it’s about finding the ways in which their talents do manifest themselves. You, my friend, need to be studying the sciences of Magical Sound. Your ear is untrained, which is what makes all noise seem overwhelming.”

Filch looks stunned, and possibly on the verge of abruptly sitting on the floor. “How would I even do such a thing?”

“To start with? Reading.” Salazar rubs at his bearded chin. “I’ll seek out those particular books on your behalf. From what I’ve seen, Hogwarts’ library is not what it should be in regards to the rarer magics and masteries. Afterwards, you’ll need a teacher, and we don’t have one here. Barnaby Harper has no mastery in Magical Sound, and I wouldn’t trust him to be a decent teacher. That may mean traveling elsewhere during the summer months.”

“Bear in mind that this won’t make you capable of wielding a wand,” Nizar says, wanting to forestall any possible disappointment. “But mastering the magic you do have certainly won’t hurt you.”

Filch nods, still a bit suspicious. “You said your own mam was a Squib. If she were that, what did she do for her bit of magic?”

“She understood water. Elemental magic,” Salazar answers. “She could not manipulate it directly, but she was trained to understand what she could hear and feel, and thus knew how to properly harness its strengths. Her side of the family had always been prone to speaking to air and water. Should I fetch you those books?”

“Er…aye. Yes. That would be…I don’t have much money. A caretaker’s salary isn’t much t’all,” Filch mutters.

Salazar swears in Parseltongue, but Filch only leans back instead of attempting to flee. “That I can also fix, though—and I mean no offence—I’m not certain why Hogwarts has a human caretaker. The elves were our caretakers by agreement.”

“Professor Dippet hired me when I was younger. Professor Dumbledore suggested to him that
maybe they should put a human face on the castle’s care, what with the house-elves being so shy,” Filch says, staring down at the ground. “I understand if you’ll be wanting to sack me from a pointless position.”

“No, I do not wish to sack you,” Salazar replies, brow furrowed. “I simply want you to be in the place that is best for you, your talents, and your interesting cat who is not a cat at all.”

Filch clutches Mrs. Norris protectively. “Now—you be leaving my darling alone!”

“You are touchy, aren’t you?” Salazar observes. “I’ve no intention of doing anything with your cat. What you two get up to on your own time is none of my business. Come on, brother. I’m in the mood for a late tea.”

“Wait! You’d be interested in—in helping me—and I’m still not certain that’s actually your goal, mind,” Filch says huffily. “I know you don’t much like me.”

Nizar just shrugs. “I’ve never held anything against you but one single moment of foolishness, Argus. Oh, and my brother and I tend not to say things unless we mean them. Good evening.”

“I see we’re here by ourselves this evening,” Salazar asks after Nizar uses the opportune moment to Apparate them upstairs to his sitting room.

Nizar glances at the tea tray in relief when one of the elves pops it into place on his table. “For now. Severus was waylaid by Pomona, Minerva, and Filius, but I’ve no idea what that’s about. Tea?”

“Yes. I’d prefer a drink and the means to bloody well calm down after that.” Salazar sits down, revealing that his hands are shaking. “I’m glad the students found much of it to be light-hearted, little brother, but that was harder for me to speak of than I expected.”

Nizar frowns and pours tea for Sal before retrieving his own cup. “I thought it might be. No Mind Magic to distance yourself from it at all?”

“I thought it might leave the wrong impression,” Salazar replies after he’s added cream to his tea to cool it down. “I didn’t want any of the darlings to pick up a hint of emotional distance and think my words weren’t true.”

“That’s probably for the best. I think in those willing to listen, it had the greatest effect.”

Salazar picks up one of the biscuits and stares at it instead of eating it. “Most of our young Marked Death Eaters were not in attendance, though a few were.”

Nizar takes up the same kind of biscuit and understands at once why Salazar was hesitating. It’s been sweetened to his preference rather than the sugar content of food that Sal has grown used to, and might actually be bitter to his senses. “I had to use Mind Magic to speak of…of him. Croaking out inaudible words is no way to make an impression.”

“Unlike falling into the dirt,” Salazar agrees. “And I blame you not at all. You still came across as one on the verge of either tears or murder, so it worked well enough.”

“Minerva definitely noticed, yes,” Nizar eats the biscuit just to be certain he’s consumed something before midnight lands on them. He’ll never escape Poppy’s clutches if he passes out again because of easily remedied reasons. “Who did you tell about that poor alboka?”

Salazar makes an amused noise. “Cornered your ginger twin mischief-makers and asked them to be subtle about it. They said they’d be as subtle as I required as long as the end result was that the daft
old man apologized for what he’d said.”

“He isn’t daft. Not entirely daft, anyway,” Nizar amends his words. His older students had informed Nizar as to how thrilled Argus Filch was with Dolores Umbridge’s temporary presence. “He’s bitter and tired of living his entire life as a subject of mockery. Sound—that should have occurred to me that very day.”

“Yes, but you’ve always had a temper, and it was about two sensitive subjects, besides,” Salazar says. “That it occurred to you today is good enough.” He glances down into his teacup. “An alboka made the traditional way, over a century old. Those tend to remain in families. Replacing such a thing isn’t easy.”

“Easier than you’d think.” Nizar leaves his teacup on the table. “Wait here.”

He goes into the combined workroom and study and returns with a box. Salazar gives him a suspicious look, as if Nizar retrieved a container full of beetles. Nizar wonders if they remain one of the only creatures on the planet that Salazar is leery of.

“What is in that, brother?” Salazar asks.

“Well, it’s a different box, as the other one aged so much it wasn’t capable of doing its job anymore.” Nizar places the box down on the table in front of Salazar. “Galiena had a new box made, and then she placed it into that applewood trunk. I didn’t find it until I was almost done clearing out all of that magical space. Open it, pendejo,” Nizar instructs when Salazar just stares at it. “It doesn’t bite.”

“You’ve said that to me before, and it was very much something that liked to bite.”

Nizar smirks at him. “Scarab beetles are pretty, useful in potions, and it was a box of dead ones.”

“And yet still one managed to clamp down on my finger,” Salazar retorts, but does finally open the box. Then he sits back in shock, staring at what it holds. “Is that what I believe it to be?”

“It is.” Nizar nudges Salazar’s shoulder. “Maybe you should pick it up. You know very well that this especially does not bite.”

“No,” Salazar whispers. “This is an entirely different sort of biting.” He lifts the alboka out of its maple case, revealing the polished oxen horn and its rowan wooden reeds. The gentle designs carved into the wood are still easily identifiable to Nizar’s eyes, representing all the serpents known to have been called upon by the Deslizarse bloodline. “I didn’t realize you still had it.”

“I gave that to Zuri, actually, thinking that it should remain on your side of the family,” Nizar explains. “I don’t know how Galiena managed to reclaim it after Zuri’s death, but she did.”

Salazar is running his hands along the entire instrument, as if he can’t quite believe what he’s holding. “I’ve only a single silent portrait left of him remaining in Gipuzkoa. I never thought to hold anything of my father’s again, Nizar.”

Nizar smiles. The expression on his brother’s face is all the payment he will ever need for being required to stand up and speak of Gaunt’s actions tonight. “Then I’m glad my daughter knew when and how to be properly underhanded. Can you still play it?”

Salazar makes a face and then lifts the horn to his lips. What emerges is almost true music accompanied by quite a bit of out-of-tune noise. “Oh, definitely not!” he says, laughing. “That’s almost worse than your first attempt, hermanito!”
“Really? I don’t recall. I’m sure it had to be memorable if you’re still thinking of it one thousand years later.” Nizar accepts the alboka when Salazar hands it over. “I was trying not to maul ‘Herr Mannelig’ when Argus had such a terrible reaction to the sound.”

Salazar smiles. “It amazes me how people simply cannot recognize how old that tune really is. But I’m glad it’s not been forgotten. There are interesting variants of it being played now, including one done by a young German rock band that likes to indulge in the old songs and sounds. They remind me quite a bit of the loud celebrations the Norse knew how to indulge in.”

Nizar gives in when Salazar subjects him to too many pleading looks and raises the horn to his lips. “If this is terrible, you brought it upon yourself,” he warns Sal, breaths in, and begins to play. To his relief, it’s not that bad. He always had a good ear for notes, if not the potential for any sort of magical understanding, and he knows he’s holding the melody true.

When there is a knock on his door, Salazar gestures at him to keep playing as he gets up to answer it. “Good evening, Lioness;” Nizar hears.

“Good evening—and there is Argus Filch’s most hated sound again,” Minerva says in surprise.

Nizar lowers the pipe for now, knowing a true interruption when he sees one. “Not only this, but that can wait. What is it, Minerva?”

“A bit of thought from the Heads of House within the school.” Minerva frowns. “It actually took me several attempts to gain access to your classroom door. You’d think it was trying to keep me out.”

“No, not at all,” Salazar tells her, taking her hand as he guides her to the table just as if they were in Court. “Spring is approaching, and that always makes magic feisty as the winds bring in extra energy. The towers are more susceptible than the rest of the castle.”

Minerva raises both eyebrows. “That would explain why Ravenclaw and Gryffindor both have the more active pranking wars at this time of year.”

“It really does.” Nizar smiles when another teacup pops into existence on the tray. “Tea, Minerva?”

“Gladly.”

Nizar allows Salazar to explain the alboka while Minerva prepares her tea and Nizar readies a second cup for himself. “Well over one thousand years old,” Minerva says, marveling over the alboka. “It’s quite beautiful, though the sound was a bit intense even in a space as…er, enlarged as this one.” Minerva glances around. “I do recall this room being far smaller, Nizar.”

“Geomancy fueled by knowledge of Pictish magic.” Nizar tries to be nonchalant to soothe Minerva’s nervousness at the change. “I simply restored it to what it used to be.”

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“I see. It is…fitting,” she says at last. “I do like that you now have two eastern-facing windows. I’ve always been fond of such, myself.”

Nizar gives the alboka back to Salazar so that it can be secured again in its case. “I sense shenanigans, Minerva. What were the Heads of House busy doing after tonight’s lecture?”

“We’ve been enjoying the letters that have been published in the Daily Prophet this week regarding Fudge’s incompetence,” Minerva begins. “We each found ourselves wondering how many students of well-connected Pure-blood families or Half-bloods with good family relations dwell within our Houses. There are, of course, quite a few. We began wondering how many of our children we might easily convince to write to their parents of their concern regarding Fudge’s lack of concern for their
safety. Perhaps a mention of the Dementors, the lack of doubt in Voldemort’s return…”

Nizar taps his fingers along his teacup and smiles. “Convincing them individually would not be difficult in some cases, but I imagine asking the more subtle among them to drop hints to the others, or simply write the letters in public spaces to be caught at the act and thus needing to explain…”

Minerva smiles. “Such a Slytherin, though I confess that we all discussed those ideas. Filius is still utterly seething over the Dementors that kept invading school grounds, not to mention that idiot Minister bringing one directly into the school. Even Pomona is quite prepared to participate in the matter. She does not like the idea of her Hufflepuffs in danger. We’re keeping Albus out of it, of course. The school’s charter aside, Albus will be able to tell the bloody Wizengamot in complete honesty that he has no idea what it is we’re up to, even if he suspects collusion.”

Nizar rolls his eyes when there is a second knock on his door. “Come in.” He waits until Severus has entered and closed the door behind him. “Do stop knocking! I’ve already granted you permission to enter whenever you like.”

Severus gives him a bland look. “It’s polite. I take it Minerva is informing you of our thoughts this evening?"

“I am,” Minerva says just as a fourth teacup is added to the tray. “And the elves seem to be wishing to assist.”

“Considering that idiotic petition that the Minister is waving about, trying to claim they have the right to re-enslave the elves?” Nizar snorts. “I think they’re in the mood to remove Fudge’s guts and use them for garters, but the elves don’t like leather-working.”

Severus joins them at the table, though he ignores the tea. “I had a thought after we separated for the evening. Why are we limiting our efforts to Wizarding families? Muggle-borns have parents who are capable of writing letters. The British Post sorts them right over to the Owl Post the moment they receive them.”

Nizar leans back in his seat. “Letters from a potential of two-hundred-eighty-one students.”

“Imagine the Howlers.” Minerva smiles, pleased. “Three-quarters of the school will have parents capable of sending those, and some of our students would be able to provide the means for crafting one to their non-magical parents. One does not need to be magical to speak to a prepared Howler, after all. It only captures the voice of the one speaking.”

“I wonder if that would be enough to convince Fudge to resign,” Nizar says.

Severus lifts one eyebrow. “That depends on who else we can convince that this is a worthy venture. There are many people in Wizarding Britain who have no love for Albus, but they absolutely despise Fudge.”

Salazar grins in fierce delight. “I know quite a number of magicians within Britain’s boundaries. I could, perhaps, be asking how many of them dislike the Minister—or would at least be willing to pretend to hate the stuck-up bastard if I asked.”

*If you’re so concerned with blood purity, Godric and Rowena were both of Pure-blooded magical lineages.*

*Needs must. 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.*
Nizar jerks out of the recollection to find the others staring at him. “Uh—sorry. I really need to—I need to sleep. You three may feel free to sit here and plot for as long as you like, but I’m…bed. That.” He leaves the table to an air of absolute silence, and wonders at what sort of expression must have been on his face when that memory shoved its way before his eyes.

*          *          *          *

Salazar waits until he hears the bedroom door shut. “Fucking portrait,” he says, and slings back the rest of his tea.

Minerva looks concerned. “Was he that bothered by what was discussed this evening, then? Regarding the painting being moved?”

Severus glances at Minerva, thin-lipped. “Yes.”

Minerva glances in the direction of the hallway. “He was downplaying it, wasn’t he? It was ever so much worse than he implied to the students this evening.”

Salazar nods, sighing. His little brother did not deserve what was done, and he shoulders a blame that isn’t of his making. “Yes, Lioness. It truly was.”

*          *          *          *

Saturday morning brings another moment of brightness in a week that Nizar would otherwise like to forget. The Daily Prophet’s front page is devoted to the Queen’s restoration of magical nobility. The photo is of Draco, Adele, Daphne, and Blaise seated in a neat row, accompanied by Lupin and Black standing to one side of them. It’s a very casual group photo, made formal by their appearances rather than stiff attitude.

Spencer and Dervish had madly wanted for Nizar and Salazar to join the others, but Nizar didn’t want that photograph to be desperately unbalanced. The two adult Gryffindors don’t quite balance the scales, but it shows others that title restoration isn’t just for those of Slytherin’s House. It also has the added usefulness of showing Slytherins and Gryffindors in agreement over something that isn’t spiting each other.

In the article itself, Joyous Spencer is careful to explain that this restoration is open to any magician whose family once held title and can prove it, is willing to become a citizen of both Wizarding Britain and the United Kingdom, abide by the kingdom’s laws, and will protect the land and people attached to their granted title. Then Spencer absolutely loses her verbal mind and fills the rest of the article with excited babble about each magician with a restored title. There is a tasteful biography for each student, their title and the lands it’s tied to, polite recitation of family history, and even details on who last held the family’s title before the Statute. Lupin and Black have longer pieces, especially Black, as Spencer takes the opportunity to go into further details regarding the many reasons why the Queen granted Sirius Black both title and royal amnesty. Nizar thinks that her mentioning his place in the line of succession—minus the bit where Black is ineligible—is a very subtle touch.

Nizar is also pleased that she restrained herself to brief biographies for himself and Salazar, as
agreed. She mentions that Salazar was recognized by the Spanish crown until the focus of his allegiance needed to shift to the United Kingdom. Other than that, she lists only their lands and titles in Britain, Nizar’s profession as it’s stood for the last thousand years, and after a bit of owl correspondence, Salazar’s new position as History instructor for Hogwarts.

“You didn’t tell me you were doing that,” Salazar mutters as he spies that part of the article.

“Please, you would be doing yet more whinging if I’d said a word.”

“I think it was quite tastefully done,” Minerva says. They’re all watching a calm sort of chaos unfold in the Great Hall as everyone talks about the article and those photographed. Salazar and Nizar being nobility are not a surprise at this point, but everyone else is.

“Yes, and quite sneakily done, too.” Filius smiles. “Marriage proposals.”

“That was not a lie. There was indeed a meeting between families, as Miss Greengrass’s father really was being that idiotic,” Severus responds, still frowning at the paper. “Madam Spencer was going to space out her articles by a matter of two days each. This is nearly the full week after the first article written against Fudge. They’re having to fight for it.”

“Fudge.” Salazar hisses in Parseltongue under his breath so that he can curse at the staff table without drawing Minerva’s ire. “He must truly have forced their hand to leave the \textit{Prophet} no choice but to devote nearly the week’s papers to refuting the allegations in the Sunday paper.”

“Not to mention his utter panic over Madam Bones announcing her intentions,” Dumbledore adds without removing his gaze from his politely curious study of the students. “I don’t think he did himself any favors by trying to attack her credibility. I might often play the hapless fool, but she never has.”

“I’m waiting with absolute delight for Madam Bones’s commentary in response to all of Fudge’s nonsense this week. She’s always been fond of letting one dig their own grave,” Sasha declares, grinning at her paper.

“That still does not solve the problem of the free press.” Salazar sips at his coffee. “In the meantime, someone might wish to intervene before certain of our Slytherins are crushed to death by a mob.”

Nizar sympathizes with Daphne, Adele, and Blaise. Draco was raised to understand this sort of attention by his parents, Narcissa in particular. He’s handling the slew of question graciously, even if his words are clipped if the asker is rude. Blaise and Daphne, never expecting any part of their status to be recognized, aren’t prepared at all. They’re staring at everyone else, wide-eyed and mute. Given that Blaise is one of the most talkative, easy-going young men that Nizar has ever met, that is quite a feat.

He’s almost certain that Adele hid beneath the table and then escaped using a Disillusionment Charm the moment she discovered the contents of the morning paper. Nizar approves of that sort of quick thinking, even if the newly titled baroness can’t hide forever. Reaction to her newfound fame will be even worse when the war mage article makes its appearance.

Nizar didn’t want anyone to know he’d gained a new title, either. He didn’t fucking \textit{need} another title! Bloody Earl over the Heights of Brae—what was Her Majesty thinking?

While Severus stands up to go terrify everyone into giving their titled Slytherins some breathing room, Aurora leans back in her chair so she can speak to Salazar. “The current owner of the \textit{Daily Prophet} is likely being blackmailed by Fudge,” she says in a low voice. “I wouldn’t know a thing
about my cousin’s doings, of course.”

“Of course. I don’t suppose it’s possible for your cousin to counter this theoretical blackmail?” Salazar asks.

“It’s…complicated,” Aurora hedges while Septima steals the coffee pot from Salazar.

“You mean there is money involved. I—” Nizar glances down the table just in time to see Salazar’s eyes widen. “Oh. He doesn’t look a bit like his father at all,” Salazar says.

“To everyone’s great relief,” Aurora replies dryly. “However, if anyone were to find out…”

“Your cousin Amfractus married Celeste Slughorn.” Salazar glances up at the ceiling and sighs. “Greed is more important to them, is it?”

Aurora shakes her head. “Apparently so.”

“Competition would certainly encourage him to pay less attention to one man’s nonsense. The magical world should have more than one bloody newspaper.” Nizar is still not impressed by that lack.

“Well, there is Witch Weekly, but that’s mostly gossip, recipes, the occasional celebrity interview, and some truly dreadful advice columnists,” Pomona says from further down the table. “I did try to subscribe for hope of differing news, but grew tired of it quickly. It doesn’t really count as competition for the Prophet.”

“And there is The Quibbler.” Salazar’s words are met with immediate derision on all sides. “Ah, so judgmental,” he mocks them with a thin smile. “If you put aside the man’s fanciful conspiracy theories, Xenophilius Lovegood has yet to be wrong about anything.”

“There are no such things as those bedamned bloody nargles!” Rolanda exclaims in vexation.

Nizar starts choking on tea and his own laughter. “Oh, do I have some terrible news for you.” Severus glares at him. “Those fucking things are real?” Minerva is desperately calling for them to stop swearing, but the others are too distracted.

“Yes, they very much are,” Salazar answers while Nizar is still recovering from trying to breathe tea. “As are heliopath. The rest of the creatures Xenophilius loves to discuss are also real; they just do not bear such ridiculous names as he’s granted them. I knew them by description.” He frowns. “I believe two of them have been extinct for several centuries, though.”

Filius looks excited rather than concerned. “You’re not in jest, are you?”

“Not about this.” Salazar smiles at Filius. “That man married a Greek magician, a woman who then gave birth to one of the only Elemental Magicians currently walking this earth, and you think I’m in jest as to Xenophilius’s subject matter?”

“Apparently not.” Minerva’s brow furrows. “Then what in heaven’s name are nargles?”

“There are multiple species. They like to hide within the differing types of flowers they resemble. Two arms and two legs, black eyes, wings, smaller than hummingbirds.” Nizar tries to decide if he’s going to steal the teapot and clutch at it throughout the entirety of that morning’s Quidditch game. “If you make friends with a piecemeal of nargles, they’re utterly loyal, and will kill anyone who attacks you in their presence. If you anger them…well, you’d best hope you can avoid an entire species of
their particular flower for the rest of your life.”

“I still think you’re both pranking us,” Aurora says, scowling.

“Believe what you like.” Nizar stands and swipes the teapot, which is nearly full and makes him suspect the elves snuck a fresh pot onto the table while he wasn’t looking. “By the way, there is still ice on the grass,” he adds, and departs to Salazar whinging about the cold.

* * * *

“Come on,” Daphne hisses at the stragglers. “Move it, or we’ll miss the game and our opportunity!”

Granger’s hand is plastered to her side as she, Fred, George, and the Weasel catch up. “Sorry,” she gasps out in a loud whisper while the Weasel bends over to rest his hands on his knees. Daphne wonders if he’s going to sick up and wrinkles her nose. Not in front of her, please. “Filch turned up just after you went down the stairs. We had to ditch him on the second floor.”

“He didn’t follow you, did he?” Pansy asks, leaning around the edge of the wall at the end of the corridor.

George shakes his head. “Not us, Parkinson. Made me long for the time Mrs. Norris spent most of the year Petrified in the infirmary, though.”

Ginny sticks her head around the corner to join Pansy. “I did not just hear you say that, George Weasley!” she hisses.

George holds up his hands. “I apologize profusely forever,” he says, and then makes an entertaining noise when Daphne loses patience with their dawdling. “Move it!” she orders Granger, Fred, and the Weasel as she drags George along behind her. The Weasel frowns, but Granger seems amused and the other ginger is laughing.

“Time to trade,” Astoria announces cheerfully when they finally arrive at the entrance to their Common Room.

Draco gives them a serious look. “The password will be changed tomorrow, and no, I won’t tell you what it is, since the seventh-year Prefects handle that. If you’re thinking of getting up to mischief—”

Fred shakes his head. “We’re trading. We don’t abuse trust when it comes to that. Now, if we find out the new password…”


The Gryffindors look suitably impressed when the wall for the Common Room entrance slides open. “It also acts like a door if you’re in a hurry,” Astoria says, ignoring Daphne’s warning glare. “But the wall is awfully impressive.”

“It is very cool,” Fred agrees, and everyone nods—except the Weasel. It isn’t that he’s in one of his sulky brat moods, either. Daphne has suspicions, and they started when he was the only Gryffindor not excited by the idea of finally getting the chance to view the Slytherin Common Room.
“Okay, Astoria was right. This is very, very green,” Granger comments, smiling as she looks around.

Ginny is staring up at the ceiling and its glassed-in view of the lake. “Wow. I thought we had a great view, but that’s amazing.”

Pansy looks smug. “The Merpeople like to come and talk to us, too.”

The Weasel frowns. “How can you talk to them with that glass in the way? And what with them shrieking?”

“Mermish isn’t shrieking if it’s underwater, dingbat. Remember?” Granger shakes her head. “Honestly.”

“Sign language.” Draco demonstrates British Sign Language for them, which makes the Gryffindors gape in amazement. “Honestly.” He mimics Granger’s frustrated tone. “It isn’t that difficult.”

“Even if we did have to add a few words on our own for what the language doesn’t have,” Astoria says.

“Mostly I’m just amazed that you were willing to learn something so Muggle,” Granger tells Draco, and then adds in BSL: “I’m impressed!”

Daphne tries not to snort when Draco’s cheeks turn pink. He has such an obvious crush, the stupid sod.

“To be honest, we didn’t know it was a Muggle thing. The Half-bloods and Muggle-borns in our House were smart enough not to tell us,” Pansy explains. “And they were right. It—it took a while. To stop being…”

“Twits,” Astoria supplies, beaming at Pansy when she glares at her. Daphne has no idea when the others are going to figure out that Astoria’s bright-eyed innocent act is exactly that, but in the meantime, Astoria pulls it off very well.

“I see we have guests,” Salazar’s portrait says from its place above the fireplace. All four of the Weasleys cringe with the guilt of being caught before they realize it’s just a portrait, not the man himself. Daphne is going to treasure that moment for a long, long time.

“Hello, sir,” Granger greets him politely. “Are you going to be ratting us out?”

Salazar grins at them. “No, I’ve heard tell of the upcoming trade. Just don’t get caught at it, is my advice.” Then he rolls his eyes. “I remember when Common Rooms welcomed guests of other Houses, not this password shit.”

“Did his portrait just swear?” Ginny asks, eyebrows rising in surprise.

“He does that. Professor Slytherin is a lot more of a stickler for not swearing in front of people who are underage,” Draco explains. “However, when you turn seventeen…”

“All bets are off, is what I’ve heard,” Pansy finishes, smirking.

Fred and George glance at each other. “That does explain quite a bit,” Fred says.

“Now that we’re in a private room, though, as I know Professor Salazar is quite sensible…” Granger ignores it when the portrait of Salazar looks pained by the honorific. “I’d much prefer it if Blaise were here, too, but this morning’s paper is what last week’s politics were about, isn’t it?”
“Yes,” Daphne says in a flat voice. “Why, are you going to tear us a holier-than-thou Gryffindor new one for being titled Pure-bloods?”

Granger seems bewildered by the accusation. “No. If I’d known more of what you were walking into, I could have helped you to be more prepared.”

“You would?” Draco’s gaping would be more entertaining if Daphne were not aware of the fact that she’s doing the same.

“Why?” Daphne asks, her voice sharp with suspicion.

“Oh, for goodness’ sake.” Granger looks to be on the verge of slapping her hand over her face. “It’s basic deduction! If you two, Blaise, and Adele were willing to become citizens of the United Kingdom by royally recognized magical title, then that title’s magic ensures you actually are going to be loyal to the kingdom the title is attached to! If you’re not, the title rejects you, and it obviously didn’t because you would definitely not have been running around this week like nothing was wrong. You might have been a bit too busy with death.”

“Oh. I believe I might have forgotten that part,” Salazar’s portrait says.

“Exactly my point!” Granger throws up her arms and sighs. “Hopeless, all of you. Hence the helping. Your actual self and your brother are very used to how anything Court-like works. If you have an outside point of view, someone is there to see the things you might’ve missed!”

Salazar’s portrait frowns. “Why are you not in my House, Miss Granger?”

“Because the Hat decided I was already good at this part,” Granger retorts in a prim voice. Daphne thinks Draco might actually swoon. “Since your magical titles didn’t reject you, that means you’re serious, which means you definitely aren’t in it for any of that Pure-blooded codswallop. You’re doing it for the right sort of reasons—and yes, I’m aware that personal gain can be a good reason. I mean that you’re willing to embrace people like my parents as not being inferior just because they’re dentists instead of magicians!”

“Please do not make me willingly embrace dentists,” Daphne says after a moment of shocked silence. “I have heard horror stories from the Muggle-borns that make my skin crawl.”

“My parents are very good at their jobs and are not the sort that create horror stories. Well, except for their insistence that my oversized teeth were natural and beautiful, and they weren’t going to do a blasted thing to fix them,” Granger adds, scowling. “If Madam Pomfrey paid even the slightest bit of attention last term, she’d have known at once that I was having her shrink them too much, but I like being able to eat an apple without feeling as if I’m going to become stuck in it.”

“I didn’t know,” Draco blurts out. “I didn’t actually know what that hex did. The—the teeth-enlarging. Thing.”

“Oh.” Granger glances at him. “That isn’t actually why I mentioned it. You sort of did me a favor, really, since it meant a longstanding problem was fixed. My parents attribute their new size to my ‘growing into them.’” She pauses. “Why did you cast a hex if you had no idea what it did?”

Draco puts his hand over his eyes. “My father heard about my teeth needing to be reset, though I didn’t tell him why. He suggested I use that hex the next time I was in need of a good distraction.”

“And you bloody well laughed about it!” the Weasel yells.

Draco drops his hand and glares at the Weasel. “I had to!” he shouts back, and then winces. “And
you’re all quite aware of why that is. It’s why all of us laughed like bloody hyenas. If we didn’t…"

“Parents.” Pansy huffs out a breath. “Mine are still arguing. I’m not looking forward to that outcome, and I won’t be going home for Easter break. If they decide to kill each other over You-Know-Who, I’d rather not be the one to discover their bodies.”

“Right. Yeah. Parents.” Ginny bites her lip. “Sometimes I forget how lucky we are that we don’t have parents who are…arguing like this. They either know where they stand, or they don’t care. I’m really sorry.”

“We’ve still got more sympathy for you, Gin,” Astoria says, a nickname that makes Daphne’s eye twitch. “You had to deal with…with him. At age eleven. Even if it was just a—a shade.”

“It was no shade. It was an aspect of magic that allowed Tom Riddle to store a part of himself inside that fucking book,” Salazar’s portrait informs them in an angry voice. “Young Miss Weasley may as well have encountered Voldemort in the flesh.”

“That really doesn’t help! Wait. Do you guys have the feeling we’re forgetting something?” Ginny asks the twins.

George puffs out his cheeks as he thinks about it. “Probably.”

“I just feel like it’s the sort of thing we’re supposed to keep forgetting about,” Fred says. “Like a compulsion?”

“Ah. Yes. That would be the sign of the Deflection Charm, which is far safer than that horrific Obliviation spell. When it’s safe, you’ll stop forgetting what you’ve been asked to conveniently not think about,” Salazar tells them. “In the meantime—stop thinking about it!”

The Weasley twins both hold up their hands. “Not thinking about it,” they say in one voice. Ginny settles for nodding, though she still looks confused. Daphne knows the Deflection Charm sometimes requires assistance for the magic to kick in again. A distraction is called for.

“Now that all of the politics are out of the way, I want the Weasel to cough it up about why he’s not eyeballing everything in this room the way the rest of you are.” Daphne crosses her arms and gives him an icy stare.

“Oh. Uh…” the Weasel puts his hand on the back of his neck as he ducks his head. “I’ve been in here before. With Harry. Second year.”

“How the hell did you manage that?” George asks. “I’m proud, little brother!”

“We’ve never pulled it off!” Fred adds. “What ingenious method did you use?”

Weasel points at Granger. “She did it! She made it.”

Granger rolls her eyes. “He means Polyjuice. They were in such a hurry to get in here.”

“You mastered working Polyjuice. A N.E.W.T.-level potion. In your second year.” Pansy stares at Granger. “You are such a swot.”

Granger smiles back, unoffended. “A swot who can brew perfect Polyjuice.”

Draco is starting to frown as he looks at the Weasel. “Second year. You—of all people, you chose Goyle and Crabbe?”
“Because you hung about with them the most!” the Weasel retorts. “You were the one blabbing on about how you knew all about the Chamber of Secrets!”

“Oh, so this is suddenly my fault, then,” Draco sniffs.

“Yes,” Granger says in such an emphatic voice that Draco looks taken aback. That is also going onto the list of moments Daphne is going to treasure.

Ginny’s face is scrunched up. “What did they taste like?” she asks her brother.

The Weasel, already pale green thanks to the light cast by the lake above, manages to deepen that green by a few shades. “You really don’t want to know.”

“I always wondered why they bolted like that,” Draco says thoughtfully. “Where were Crabbe and Goyle?”

“Sleeping off a set of cupcakes that were altered with a sleeping draught.” Granger gives them all another innocent smile when they stare at her. “What? We didn’t make them eat the cupcakes.”

“You’re scary. Let’s keep her,” Pansy says.

Daphne approves of that sneakiness, but she also has to admit, Potter and the Weasel willingly drinking a draught that would taste like Crabbe or Goyle takes intestinal fortitude for more than one reason. She certainly wouldn’t be lining up to do so—and all because they were searching for clues about that stupid Chamber!

“We should get our cloaks. It’s supposed to be cold outside,” Astoria suggests.

“You lot behave yourselves!” Pansy chirps as they head towards the stairwell for the downstairs girls’ dormitories.

“I’m right here,” Draco reminds Pansy in irritation.

“What did you mean, about the Common Rooms and the passwords?” Granger is asking the portrait when Daphne, Astoria, and Pansy return. The Weasley twins are paying strict attention to Granger’s conversation with Salazar.

Salazar lifts one eyebrow as he studies Granger. “What I mean, young Gryffindor, is that in the old days, these were public spaces. They were devoted to the students apprenticed to our Houses, yes, but they were not exclusive, secretive chambers. The passwords and wards were devoted to a student’s sleeping chambers. Eventually it became the dormitories that were warded, not individual rooms or spaces. Then, at some point after my portrait was stuffed into a bloody storage closet, the Common Rooms became like they are now.”

“Then it was…well, forgive the pun, but it was common to host friends from other Houses in one’s own Common Room,” Daphne says in surprise.

Salazar’s portrait nods. “It was indeed. Perhaps with this sort of trading occurring between Houses, it might begin to happen once more.”

“Not until after Voldemort’s dead, it won’t,” Astoria mutters unhappily.

“Don’t say that name!” Daphne snaps. Astoria winces, but she doesn’t nod in agreement.

“Don’t fear the name, Daphne Greengrass,” Salazar’s portrait says, his tone gentle. “Fear the man
who bears it…and perhaps laugh at the idea that the fool named himself *Vol de Mort. Flight of
death."


Salazar’s response is a wolf-like grin, all bared teeth and delight. “Maybe he did. You should be
going. There’s a game on in five minutes. Slytherin versus Hufflepuff, I believe.”

“Five minutes—shit!” Draco yelps. “I have to go, or they might actually kill me for being late!”

“At least he’s already dressed for the game.” Fred slaps his younger brother on the shoulder as Draco
races out of the room. “C’mon, you daring and cheeky little Polyjuice fiend.”

The Weasel shoves at his brother’s hand. “Bugger off!”

When they’re all back out in the corridor, with the Common Room sealed behind them, Pansy
shocks Daphne by putting her arm around Granger’s shoulders. “Gryffindor’s not playing today.
You should come sit with us.”

“Er, well—” Granger stutters.

“We have friends playing for Hufflepuff today. And no offence to any of you, but except for Draco,
your team isn’t all that nice,” Ginny says.

“No one said you had to cheer for Slytherin,” Pansy counters. “Cheer for the Puffs all you like.
People will make appalled faces and provide all the entertainment our hearts desire!”

“Oh, that part?” Fred begins.

George nods decisively. “Totally worth it.”

“Too bad it’s not the Ravenclaws. We could have borrowed Luna’s screaming eagle hat,” Ginny
muses.

Astoria makes a face. “Not the hat. That hat is *loud.”

“Wait. This will save us some time,” Granger says, retrieving her wand. “I really have no wish to sit
on the risers and freeze just because we’re running late.” She Summons her cloak; the Weasleys
catch on and quickly do the same.

When they make it out to the pitch, both teams are already in the air. The rest of their House gives
them odd looks for the cluster of Gryffindors they bring up, but except for the twits who’ve sided
with Voldemort, no one says a snide word about it.

Most of the Slytherin team all but makes a spectacle of themselves with poor flying, playing, and
blatant, inappropriately unsubtle cheating. She’d rather not witness any of it. Instead, Daphne amuses
herself during the first part of the game by keeping track of how many times Draco’s eyes veer away
from Snitch-watching to look at Granger.

She also keeps count of how many times her own eyes drift over to the Weasel. He’s growing up
nicely, and isn’t so freckled in his gingeriness. The Weasel also showed cunning, getting into
Slytherin’s Common Room with illicit Polyjuice, and that is a trait she appreciates. If only there was
a way to train him into being less obnoxiously irritating.

Daphne is expected to marry well, but most of those her parents think of as being well enough to
marry are also…well, they’re either Voldemort supporters, or they might as well be. She now has a weapon on her side that she never had before—she’s the titled Vidame of Magical Northumberland, not her parents. The moment she turns seventeen, the house and its lands are hers. Then her marriage is her decision, and they can say nothing at all. They can’t even withhold money in order to try to starve her into submission, not when the generous stipend attached to her title goes into a personal vault, one which also becomes available on her seventeenth birthday.

The Weasel is as poor as her family, but at least he’s a fellow Pureblood. Her parents wouldn’t be able to complain about that if she experimented with dating a Weasley while in Hogwarts. Daphne isn’t certain she’s all that fussed about bloodlines any longer, herself, but if she decided to keep to the tradition, the Weasleys have been so long separated from the Greengrass bloodline that there is no fear of inbreeding to concern herself with.

Of course, Potter was also part of that Polyjuice plot. Potter is neither ginger nor obnoxious, even if he has an annoying habit of attracting werewolves, mass murderers, and insane Dark Wizards. Potter isn’t poor, and is much nicer on the eyes than the Weasel. Perhaps when he returns…

Daphne is promptly distracted from her musings when she notices how close Astoria is sitting next to Ginny Weasley. The looks Astoria sends Ginny’s way when the other isn’t paying attention—friendship, Daphne’s entire backside! Astoria is crushing on a ginger, hard, even if it looks like the ginger in question hasn’t noticed yet. Worse, it’s a girl. Their parents might claim to be enlightened, but they expect both of their daughters to marry men.

She told the Queen that she wanted Astoria to have the means and opportunity to make her own decisions. This is not how Daphne expected to have to contend with that particular problem.

If Mother and Father discover that Astoria is bent for girls…

Daphne sighs. Astoria is still meek when it comes to their parents, but she knows how to keep secrets. It’s the gossip that would out her.

This, Daphne thinks in resignation, is a disaster waiting to happen.
“You did say you’d played the game before.”

“It was still fairly new at the time, though it’s older than I’ve heard students claim. We were already calling it Quidditch in 990, so I’ve no idea what’s up with that 1050 nonsense.”

Bonus chapter going up because of a few absolutely wonderful people who are helping to save my ass financially this week. The drywall contractor taking care of the work I can’t do right now found another problem today. *whimper* That's problem number four. Problems are expensive. There will be photo updates this weekend for those keeping track of the SAGA OF THE 2ND FLOOR APARTMENT.

At least it no longer reeks up there because of filthy ex-tenants and their not-ever-cleaning nonsense. It just smells like fresh drywall, spackling mud, and pine instead. (Yes, those totally do count as nice smells!)

(All hail to my quartet of betas/cheer-readers!)

“Ah, a balmy six degrees Celsius,” Severus says of the weather as they go outside. “I really hope it’s warmer by the twenty-fourth.”

“But that’s almost within the bounds of March. Then it will be the wind we’re contending with,” Salazar comments, ignoring the angry glare that Severus turns in his direction. “I missed the first game I would have been present to witness, given that we were otherwise occupied last weekend. Where do we stand?”

“Ravenclaw lost to Slytherin last Saturday. Today’s game determines who will play the final game against Gryffindor,” Severus explains.

“Oh, your favorite tradition.” Nizar grins when Severus decides to glare at him, instead. “Slytherin versus Gryffindor.”

“It isn’t a foregone bloody conclusion!” Pomona protests as they sit down.

“Ten Galleons that it is,” Salazar says, and Pomona shakes his hand on it. Nizar almost feels bad for her; that was such a sucker bet it almost seems an unfair wager. Then again, she is an adult and knows how her own House has been playing this decade. It isn’t his fault that she refuses to be realistic about it.

Nizar watches the players gather on the pitch, which includes Draco’s late arrival. He has yet to see
Slytherin fly—his first game of the year was Gryffindor against Ravenclaw, then Gryffindor against Hufflepuff, followed by Hufflepuff playing the Ravenclaws. He already knows the lineup just from Common Room chatter, but seeing it is almost comical.

Draco Malfoy is perfectly sized for a Seeker, sleek and fast, and though Draco would never admit it, a bit of a lunatic. The others, though—most of them don’t seem to fit. Crabbe and Goyle look far too oversized to be effective Beaters, no matter how hard they can knock a Bludger. Cassius Warrington as a Chaser seems all right, but Graham Montague’s takeoff is wobbly, not good for a Chaser or the team captain. Adrian Pucey was scowling before they even made it into the air, as if he’d rather not be playing at all. Miles Bletchley looks to be using his girth to keep the Quaffle clear of the goal hoops, and that has never been a wise tactic to rely on. Gryffindor is a perfect Quidditch team by comparison.

Hufflepuff looks to be composed of the same sort of shit flying, which means the previous games weren’t flukes. Zacharias Smith and John Cadwallader don’t rise into the air with any sort of grace, though Heidi Macavoy does better. Maxine O’Flaherty and Anthony Rickett seem to work well together as Beaters, though so far their tactics make Nizar want to march right down to the pitch and demand they both get their backsides into his Defence class yesterday. Herbert Fleet is putting his Defence lessons to good use as their Keeper. Nizar has rarely seen Alex Summerby about the castle at all, though he’s flying like he hopes to stumble over the Snitch by sheer fortune rather than actively looking for it.

Worse, three of their team is Marked, which means there are a total of six baby Death Eaters in the air. “For fuck’s sake,” Nizar mutters under his breath. “Six Marked students,” he explains when Severus eyes him in silent request for an explanation. “Also, most of them are terrible at this.”

“Montague is the Slytherin captain. Blame him,” Severus replies in displeasure. “I could not afford to have any say over those decisions until quite recently, but even I’m not fool enough to sack half the team in the middle of the season. They still did well enough to earn their way here.”

“Earn how—oh, there are our late arrivals.” Nizar gestures in the direction of the student section devoted to Slytherin, where Pansy, Daphne, and Astoria are just arriving…in the company of all four Weasleys and Granger.

Severus stares at them for a moment as they sit down. “I do not even want to know.”

“I think it’s quite the improvement, not to mention quite the brave thing. Tensions between Houses are not entirely forgotten,” Salazar says. “I wonder if it’s in response to this morning’s paper?”

“I’m more concerned by the fact that Miss Parkinson and Miss Granger appear to be colluding. I do not need that sort of terror in my life.”

“Think of it as a challenge, Severus,” Nizar suggests, and smiles when that earns him a vicious scowl. “My apologies; I need to ask Salazar about something.”

Severus grimaces as Goyle performs a blatant foul right before Rolanda’s eyes, giving Hufflepuff the opportunity to score by penalty. “By all means.”

“What was that bit about Aurora’s cousin at breakfast?” Nizar asks Salazar in Parseltongue.

“Oh, that.” Salazar watches the Quaffle change hands before it’s intercepted by Hufflepuff when Pucey bloody well drops it. “Celeste Slughorn was once married to Cornelius Fudge.”

“Someone was willing to marry that fucking idiot?”
“Believe it or not, he was once a bit more…tolerable. Being Minister went entirely to his head, and he promptly stomped on any good intentions he might once have had in favor of power and politics.” Salazar bares his teeth in a way that reminds Nizar very much of their sister. “Once Celeste realized what sort of man she’d married, she re-evaluated her options and then foolishly went and had an affair with Amfractus Sinistra Macmillan before remembering that one in her position should first file for divorce. Not only does Fudge have that indiscretion to hang over their heads, the young man who is considered to be Amfractus and Celeste’s only child was not sired by Amfractus at all. Celeste would lose her inheritance the moment her family discovered that their money would go to Cornelius Fudge’s only child.”

“You got all of that from a few sentences’ conversation with Aurora?”

“I pay attention to the doings of magical families on this island, little brother. I’ve had to.” Salazar rolls his eyes as Smith misses an easy goal. “Are they all playing like drunkards today?”

Nizar frowns. “But Celeste Slughorn was married to Fudge previously. Why would the inheritance be a concern at all?”

“The Slughorn family wrote her out of the will when she wed Fudge at the age of eighteen. The clan then wrote Celeste back in when she left Fudge and married a man related to two families in excellent standing instead of a blowhard from a family of middling importance. They doubled the amount to grant to her when they realized her Heir would also be inheriting the Daily Prophet, possibly hoping young Jericho Macmillan will recall their generosity and never drag any of their ill dealings through the mud once it’s his paper to run.”

“This blood prominence nonsense is truly fucking irritating.” Nizar hears Severus growl when Rickett and Pucey decide that a midair collision and fistfight is the best way to settle matters. He stands up and yells, “YOU BE A BIT MORE FUCKING SUBTLE!”

“Like you were just then?” Severus asks in a dry voice.

“That wasn’t in Parseltongue, was it? That was not intentional. I’m so glad no one could hear that.”

“We heard you just fine,” Pomona points out while Filius all but cackles with laughter.

“Yes, but you’re not students, so I don’t care.”

Severus’s lips turn up in a faint smile. “Ah, hair-splitting.”

“It’s not hair-splitting. You can happily break each other’s limbs in Quidditch without being a complete prick about it,” Nizar mutters.

Severus gives him a look of disapproval. “I see that certain Quidditch philosophies remain stubbornly unaffected.”

Nizar has no idea what that’s about, so he glances at Salazar again. “How old is Jericho Macmillan? I’ve never heard that name mentioned in Hogwarts.”

“The lad’s twelve, but he’s not schooling in Hogwarts. His parents sent him to Beauxbatons in France. Lingering concerns about the war, of course,” Salazar answers.

Nizar sighs. He still has no idea how many British-born children are off at Durmstrang or Beauxbatons. “Of course.”
As the morning progresses, Severus finds himself fiercely glad that today’s game is not against Gryffindor. It makes Lee Jordan and Minerva both a bit more sedate when commenting on the game. It also means Severus does not have to watch this disaster lose to Gryffindor. This is quite possibly the worst game he’s witnessed his Slytherins play this year. It makes him want to strangle the life out of everyone but Malfoy and Warrington, who are at least trying to fly like they’re not imbeciles.

Severus is also seated next to Gryffindor’s former Seeker, a fact that they were both unaware of the first time Nizar finally remembered that student Quidditch existed. The two games played in January have not made the situation any less baffling, even though Severus is fine with Nizar’s identity in every other circumstance. Perhaps it’s merely leftover paranoia that he has no idea how to cope with, fear that remains from the three years (plus one Tournament) Severus spent needing to be concerned about that child killing himself during every single Quidditch match he played in. Nizar’s comment about breaking bones did not help at all.

*Then discuss it*, he thinks. “You did say you’d played the game before.” Severus keeps his voice bland enough that no one should notice a damned thing wrong.

“It was still fairly new at the time, though it’s older than I’ve heard students claim. We were already calling it Quidditch in 990, so I’ve no idea what’s up with that 1050 nonsense,” Nizar answers in an absent voice, his eyes searching the sky above them for the Snitch. “I was decent at it, though.”

“Lies,” Salazar comments from Nizar’s other side. “He was damned good at it, playing every position except Keeper. That drove Godric to drink on more than one occasion.”

“Oh, do inform us why,” Sasha requests, leaning down from a higher riser. Severus nearly twitches due to her sudden proximity; he had no idea the woman bothered of late to emerge from the rubbish room aspect unless teaching was required.

“It served Godric right for betting on the wrong team.” Nizar grins when Warrington scores. “Better.”

“Formal teams were never declared?” Filius asks curiously. Severus already knows the answer to that question, but decides to wait to hear how Nizar or Salazar will answer.

“No, we didn’t have formal teams. It was something we did to relieve stress,” Salazar says. “Teachers versus students, groups of teachers and students together playing against the same—we filled the positions, played a game, and then swapped around to do it again. We didn’t play for any Cup; we played because we enjoyed it.”

“Sal was a decent Keeper.” Nizar’s eyes narrow as he notices something in the distance. “Draco, it is right there,” he murmurs. “He was better at Chasing, though. I can’t remember who would act as Keeper most often.”

“Anselmet,” Salazar says. “At least for the first few years.”

Nizar glances at his brother. “I don’t recall who that is.”

Salazar’s expression falters into weary sadness. “That, I am truly sorry for. He was a good man.”

“Change the blasted subject,” Severus hears Filius order Pomona, but she seems too flustered to
Severus is busy rolling his eyes over the fact that Goyle and Crabbe have decided to assault Summerby with their bats instead of using the Bludgers. “I would desperately like for Montague to gain sense and replace the Beaters on his team—Nizar, no. Yell at them after the game, please.” Nizar huffs out an irritated sigh.

“Why was Godric Gryffindor betting on games instead of playing?” Charity asks suddenly. “You two don’t speak as if he was playing Quidditch at all.”

Salazar grins. “He wasn’t. That man could not fly to save his own life. Gods know I loved Godric, but if you put him on a broom it was a complete disaster.”

“Rowena, though—she was an excellent Seeker.” Filius beams like a miniature sun at Nizar’s words. “Helga and Helena were good players, as well, especially Helga. She was a vicious Beater.”

“Helga felt so guilty for giving Nizar that concussion—bloody hell.” Salazar stands up. “THAT WAS PATHETIC! Rhawch eich cefn i mewn iddo, byddwch yn idiot!” Montague looks startled, but then he nods and recovers the Quaffle to try again. This time the Quaffle makes it past Fleet’s guard, scoring Slytherin another ten points.


“Bloody Welsh,” Salazar replies, snorting. “I told you that I’ve not spoken Cumbric in eight centuries.”

Nizar looks baffled. “I guess I picked up more Welsh in the Common Room than I’d realized. The Sorting Hat won’t be disappointed, at least. Oh, finally! Draco’s on the Snitch.”

“Summerby’s on him,” Pomona says. Severus observes their flight and thinks that Summerby doesn’t have a chance in hell.

Draco’s catching of the Snitch ends the game with Slytherin over Hufflepuff, two hundred ten to sixty. Nizar is smiling as he applauds. “Good on them—and without sending anyone to the hospital wing this time.”

“And that statement officially makes this one of the oddest experiences of my entire life,” Severus mutters, the comment buried beneath the cheering from the stands.

Salazar hears the words where Nizar does not. The smile Salazar grants Severus holds a wealth of sympathy that Severus doesn’t understand at all.

* * * * *

Hermione has to admit, Draco’s flying as Seeker is a lot more sporting of late. Granted, that might also be because he and Harry aren’t trying to kill each other atop brooms, but she thinks maybe… maybe that wouldn’t be the same sort of issue anymore. Well, not beyond the standard sort of violence Quidditch seems to instigate, anyway.

Pansy and the other Slytherins don’t let them escape, dragging Hermione, Ginny, Ron, and the twins
to the Slytherin table rather than the way they’ve been turning to chat with each other from the Gryffindor table. Hermione watches Slytherin faces and reactions throughout lunch, listens to words murmured and spoken aloud, and suspects that Pansy is trying to make her own sort of political statement while Slytherin is partially distracted by their Quidditch victory.

This isn’t about the appearance of civility. This is a group of Slytherins stating boldly that they have invited their allies to the table, and it’s expected that they be treated accordingly.

Gryffindor Tower isn’t devoid of politics—Hermione doesn’t think any dorm truly is—but the level of political intrigue necessary just to exist in Slytherin House seems to be insanely convoluted. Professor Salazar says it wasn’t always that way, stating that the politics came about as the divisions rose with the inflicted notion of blood purity that didn’t begin until the 1200s. Hermione doesn’t disbelieve him, exactly but she’s seen how Professor Salazar and Professor Slytherin treat with each other, the staff, and the students. Some of those Slytherin political behaviors, Hermione believes, came straight from an ancient Spanish court.

The Slytherins convince her to linger at the table to play a game of Exploding Snap with both Weasleys and Slytherins. Hermione abruptly stands up mid-game when she remembers she has an appointment. “Sorry!” she blurts out, trying to put her cloak back on and return her set of cards to Fred at the same time. “I forgot; I promised I’d meet Hagrid for tea.”

“Because Professor Slytherin is going to be there, maybe.” Daphne is not doing a very good job of hiding her smile.

Hermione rolls her eyes. “That,” she says, “is a fringe benefit. I was already visiting with Hagrid for tea on the regular.”

“That’s a thought. I’ve not been doing that like I should.” Ron looks up at her. “Can I come with you?”

“That depends on if you want to learn to levitate,” Hermione replies, knowing exactly how Ron feels about any sort of flying that doesn’t involve a broom or the lost Ford Anglia.

Ron’s eyes widen. “No, absolutely not. That’s just fine, thank you.”

“We’re learning it in N.E.W.T. Defence,” George tells Ron with a merciless grin.

“You’re not doing a bloody thing to encourage me to take N.E.W.T. Defence!” Ron retorts.

“Voldemort,” Fred says without looking up from sorting Hermione’s cards back into their Exploding Snap deck.

Ron groans and lets his head thump down on the table. Astoria bites her lip and gives Ron a hesitant pat on the head while Ginny giggles.

“Going out for lessons on a Saturday.” Pansy grins. “Have fun, Granger.”

Draco frowns. “Would you, er, ask Hagrid and Professor Slytherin if anyone else is welcome to try out these levitation lessons?”

Hermione pauses in the midst of putting her chair back under the table. “I’d start with asking about Hagrid and tea. I think you have to move up to the levitation lessons.”

To her surprise, Draco nods. “That’s fair.”
Hermione hurries out of the castle after that, shivering as she greets the cold air outside the castle. It’s supposed to be warmer today, but it doesn’t feel like it at all.

She freezes in place, a greeting dying on her lips, when she notices who is waiting outside Hagrid’s hut. “Er—”

“Please feel free to pretend that I am not here, Miss Granger,” Professor Snape says without looking up. “For that is most assuredly what I am doing.”

“Yes, sir,” Hermione manages to say without stammering. Snape is reclining on Hagrid’s big wooden chair from inside the house, reading a book whose leather cover definitely identifies it as something pre-1600s. Snape is wrapped in what looks to be an actual fur cloak against the February chill.

That’s Professor Slytherin’s cloak, she realizes, trying not to stare. It’s very odd to see anything obvious about their relationship, as they tend to be very much the opposite.

“Hermione!” Hagrid bellows as he steps outside and sees her. “Glad ter see you! Want some tea?”

“Tea would be nice, thank you,” she replies. “I’m sorry, I didn’t bring anything to trade—”

Hagrid makes an amused sound as he comes back with two large mugs of tea. “Nah, s’no bother. Nizar’s the one who insists. Slytherin thing, like.”

“I’ve heard the others mention that, but their system of trade is really odd.” Hermione does her best to ignore the fact that Snape is no doubt listening to every word. “Is it about…points?” she asks as Hagrid hands her an oversized mug full of steaming tea. It even smells like he got the spices correct for proper chai. Hagrid never forgets those details. “Not the school points, but having something to hold over someone else?” If certain Slytherins are going to decide she’s theirs, or whatever it is they’re doing, she’d like to not botch the…the friendships that might be developing. It would be nice to have more friends. She really doesn’t have anyone close aside from Ron, Harry, and Ginny. Viktor is nice, too, but he’s busy with his Quidditch team. It’s very difficult to have a friendship with someone who has almost no free time to spare at all.

Hagrid sips at his tea and then his face puckers. “Watch it, still a bit hot,” he advises. “And holding it over another? Mayhap someone like Lucius Malfoy would do that. Tom Riddle, back in his day, he sure enough did. What he wanted in return was never an even trade, but he could sweet-talk anyone into believin’ it were.”

Hermione decides not to dwell on the fact that Hagrid went to school with Voldemort. It leaves her in a foul temper on behalf of her friend. “Then what is it?”

Hagrid sits down on a stump; Fang immediately puts his head on Hagrid’s leg and whines for attention. “What I saw, from folks like Andromeda and Narcissa, Professor Snape there, Professor Slytherin, and the few others who managed to come through this school after Riddle and not pick up on all his awful habits—it’s them not wanting a debt hanging over their heads.”

Hermione frowns. “So, it’s an ‘I loaned you a pencil and now you owe me a pencil’ sort of thing? And the one in debt pays how? Equally, or does it need be a given pencil instead of a return of the loan?”

“It’s Saturday afternoon and we’re discussing politics? This is terrible. I just left politics behind in the castle!” Professor Slytherin is making his way down the path, scowling, but with his usual gift for Hagrid in his hands. Hermione notes with pleasure that it’s a basket, which means something more
substantial than tea biscuits.

Snape looks at Professor Slytherin from the corner of his eye. “Politics of what sort?”

“Negotiating a bloody cease-fire on the ground floor.” Professor Slytherin hands the basket to Hagrid and then abruptly sits down on an available tree stump. “Davies and Chambers versus Roshan and Carmichael.”


“Trade,” Hagrid says hurriedly, which just serves to fuel Hermione’s suspicions as to what caused an altercation between students in the same House to be labeled politics. “It depends, Hermione. An even trade cancels the debt, yeah. But if you give back a bit more than was given, you’re thanking them for the trade on top of paying the debt.”

“So one would repay a trade of a pencil with a…what, a quill? You’d think that would only incur more debt.” Hermione selects a cucumber sandwich and a stuffed date from the basket with relief. She hadn’t been able to stomach breakfast, and not only because Ron still hasn’t mastered the art of chewing with his mouth closed. She’s just felt off for days now, like she’s missing something obvious. Even putting the final touches on her Defence essay before she reads it over again one more time hasn’t helped to make the feeling go away.

“I like the pencil analogy, actually.” Professor Slytherin accepts tea from Hagrid when he brings out another steaming mug. “A bit beyond the original loan is a thank-you, and a simple quill fits that idea nicely. If you loan someone a pencil and they give you a gilded fountain pen, then that is a debt rebounded. You can choose to rebuff their idea of a paid debt, or you can accept and find out just what they’re after. Depends on how nosy you’re feeling, how much you trust the person in question, or if you’re ingratiating yourself because you know for certain they’re doing something they ought not be doing.”

“How does one tell the difference between a debt and a gift, then?” Hermione asks. “Say a Slytherin gives you something without you needing it, or saying you need it.”

“Unless they call it a loan, or say that you’ll owe them a favor later, it’s a gift. Whether you reciprocate with a gift of your own could mean many things,” Professor Slytherin answers. Hermione glances down at her tea, feeling her cheeks burn. “Oh.”

“Was it an anonymous and expensive gift, Miss Granger?”

Hermione glances over at Snape in surprise. “Er, yes, sir. Green and silver wrapping, though. Either someone is trying to be discreet, or…or really obvious.”

“Sometimes I truly despair that they teach Muggle-born students nothing of magical customs,” Snape mutters. “True discretion would be noted by grey or black paper, Miss Granger. Neutral colors.”

“Not white?”

“White would be Hogwarts’ color within the castle. Outside the school, the seal would be on it,” Hagrid says. “Hogwarts is neutral, Hermione, but not so impartial.”

Before Hermione can ask about how a school system with a House Cup and bloody points can be even remotely neutral, Professor Slytherin is addressing Hagrid. “How goes the levitation?”

Hagrid heaves out a sigh. “Oh, s’not so bad. I can levitate things just fine, and I don’t need to say a
word to do it! That just seems to be as far as I can get.”

“Well, we’ve not been doing this for very long. Both of those are steps in the correct direction,” Professor Slytherin assures him.

“What comes after that, then?” Hagrid asks warily.

“Levitating objects without a wand,” Professor Slytherin replies, and Hermione lets out a muffled wail of despair. “Oh, that didn’t sound good.”

“I can’t do it!” Hermione bursts out. “I can finally use *Adlevo* non-verbally, but it only works half the time! I can’t perform any other spells non-verbally at all!”

“Now, Hermione, that’s not so bad,” Hagrid tries to reassure her.

“No, it isn’t. The only unfortunate thing I’ve just heard is that you labeled a *success* as a failure,” Professor Slytherin adds, looking perplexed. He sits his tea mug down on the ground, which is somehow already empty. Hermione has no idea how anyone outside of Hagrid can consume that much tea so quickly. “You adore logic. I’m surprised you don’t excel at chess.”

Hermione blinks at the apparent non-sequitur. “Oh, the logic is fine. Chess is just so *dull*, even if it’s a speed match! I start to overthink it, and then when it’s my turn I can’t decide on what to do!”

“That, I can work with.” Professor Slytherin stands up and bids for Hagrid to remain where he is. “Come here, Miss Granger.”

Hermione hands her tea over to Hagrid for safekeeping, whose hands are more than capable of keeping it warm, and joins Professor Slytherin within the bounds of Hagrid’s pumpkin patch. “Sir?”

Professor Slytherin pulls out his wand and casts a wide shield charm around them, enclosing the garden. “You’ve talked about overthinking your tactics. I’m not going to give you the chance to think. You know your Repelling Charm, yes?”

“Yes, sir.” Hermione gets out her wand, swallowing down nerves. “What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to fling objects at you for two minutes, and during that time, you’re going to show me that you’ve mastered the Repelling Charm by casting it against every single object.” Professor Slytherin smiles. “Then I’m going to tell you to switch to the Levitation Charm, and keep flinging things at you. You won’t have time to *overthink* the situation. Understand?”

Hermione bites her lip and nods, holding out her wand in the new posture Professor Slytherin insisted she learn. It’s been odd, his version of introducing them to practical dueling forms. Professor Slytherin didn’t want them all to learn a single, standardized form. Instead, he watches them and adjusts their grip, posture, and foot placement into whatever casting position makes them the most efficient. It means unlearning several bad habits taught in books written during the last century, but she can already tell that it’s *better*.

She is still not much of a duelist, but she isn’t a slouch, either. That’s Lisa Turpin and Ron, which is driving Ron ’round the absolute twist. She suspects the only reason Ron hasn’t screeched and resorted to punching his next opponent is the professor’s comments that Ron is improving.

The real duelists, however—that was a surprise. Neville. Kellah Shafiq. Blaise Zabini. Draco Malfoy. Daphne Greengrass. Susan Bones. Megan Jones. Anthony Goldstein. Isobel MacDougal. Padma Patil. Hermione always suspected Malfoy of being more talk than skill with a wand, but none of the others are what she’d have considered battle material, either. Not until Professor Slytherin gave
them the opportunity to prove it.

“Now, Granger!” Professor Slytherin shouts, and then Hermione is facing a clod of dirt flying through the air at her in a high arc.

“Repulso!” Hermione yells on instinct, flinging the dirt off to one side. In comes one of last year’s pumpkins, which makes a sickening splotch when it impacts the Shield Charm’s magical wall. A rock capable of giving her a concussion. A tree stump rotten enough to bruise, not flatten. A sandwich from the basket—distracting enough that she nearly misses the tree branch. Another rock. One of Hagrid’s empty mugs. More dirt. A ball of burning green fire. A bloody water balloon!

Hermione is panting, but she only has twigs in her hair. So far, so good. Then Professor Slytherin orders, “Fling them back at me!” and she reacts.

“Adlevo!” The tree stump—not rotten, oh my God!—is levitated away from her, even though she drops it before it can hit the professor. A pumpkin that looks significantly less rotten. A mushy apple gets through her guard and slithers down her collar, but she has to deal with incoming mud, fire, and water all at once. Hermione slashes her wand through the air, not caring if it’s a proper wand technique, and sends them high into the air.

“Here, Granger!” Professor Slytherin points at his eyes with both fingers. “This is where your attention belongs!”

Hermione is so used to obeying a teacher speaking in that tone of voice that she simply does so. The chair hovers in the air over her head, its leg nearly touching her wand point, before she sends it back. Another stone. A hail of pebbles makes her flinch back. A distraction, the bloody cheat—she finds poor Fang in the cloud of dirt and gentles the strength of the charm so she won’t hurt him, she can’t —

After she’s sent Fang gently floating back in the professor’s direction, she realizes the assault is over. No more flying debris.

Professor Slytherin smirks at her and points down. Hermione’s eyes follow his fingers…only to realize that the ground is now at least a foot below her. She’s not standing on anything but air.

Hermione shrieks and falls to the earth, bruising her knees and elbows in a botched attempt at trying to catch herself. “Right on there, Hermione!” Hagrid is cheering. “I knew you’d do it first!”

“What was that?” Hermione sputters.

Professor Slytherin takes her hand and hauls her up from the loose dirt of the unseeded garden. “That, Miss Granger, was levitation in the midst of a pitched duel. Now then: listen to me.”

Hermione gulps and nods, aware that Snape and Hagrid are watching from the fading boundaries of the Shield Charm. “I’m listening, sir.”

“There may come a day when age catches up with you, and ‘I can’t’ is the correct answer when someone asks something of you. There may be a day when you’re too ill, and ‘I can’t.’ is the proper answer, just as if someone asks you for something you’re certain you aren’t capable of giving them. But right now?”

Professor Slytherin puts his hand on her shoulder, staring into her eyes with burning intensity. “Right now, you’re a young, brilliant magician in excellent health, one who possesses an incredible intellect. There is nothing I’m teaching you that you cannot do.”
He steps back while Hermione swallows again, trying not to cry. “What makes a good duelist, Miss Granger?”

Hermione stares at him, baffled by the question. “I—they can fight, sir.”

“Yes, but what allows them to be good at it?” Professor Slytherin tilts his head. “More specifically, why is Padma Patil a good duelist and Ron Weasley, an excellent chess player, not? He has the skills that will keep him alive, no doubt there, but he’ll never be great. Why one, but not the other?”

“They—they don’t think about it. They just react,” Hermione says at last. It’s the only answer she can come up with that doesn’t sound laughable.

“Partially correct. A great duelist does think about it, Miss Granger. They just think about it very, very quickly. They can apply the knowledge they have much faster, and far more effectively, than your standard magician with a wand.” Professor Slytherin puts his wand away. “But for three instances, you were casting both charms non-verbally the entire time, and during the second round, you did so while levitating without thought to keep pace with your opponent. You followed me into the air because that was where the fight would be. That’s quite a bit of split focus and sheer instinct being employed at once.”

“But—but—I’m not a fighter,” Hermione protests, overwhelmed.

“Well, I don’t think of myself as a politician, and yet I persevered when Rowena Ravenclaw discovered that I could talk rings around people I disliked and yet still have them joyful of the privilege,” the professor replies. “You have two years of school remaining after this one, Miss Granger. You have time to figure out how to incorporate your skill as a great duelist with your many other talents.”

That seems to be the end of her lesson for the day, which Hermione is grateful for—she’s starting to feel the cold. Hermione uses her wand to clean off the slimy remains of rotting apple; Hagrid brings her a blanket before he lumbers off for his turn, cheerfully asking for the same sort of lesson. His Repelling Charms aren’t so good, which means he ends up covered in quite a bit of pumpkin goo, dirt, and twigs, but Hagrid is laughing.

Hagrid’s Levitation Charms are so much better, and he can send every object flying directly back at Professor Slytherin without hesitation. His feet never leave the ground, but Hermione can watch and see that Hagrid understands exactly how the charm works. She might have levitated while distracted, but Hermione really believes Hagrid will be the first to figure out how to do it deliberately.

Snape’s voice, closer than expected, startles her. “He’ll manage it deliberately first.”

Hermione looks up to find Snape standing next to her chair, the cloak folded over his arms as he watches the flinging duel in progress. “I—I was thinking the same thing, sir.”

Snape nods. “You’ve a good eye for magic, Miss Granger.”

It takes a great deal of effort not to boggle at him. “I—I’m sorry, did you just compliment me, sir?”

Snape glances down, his expression shuttered. “If one already knows something, I will not be stroking their ego. However, if one is good at something and lacks the awareness that they are successful, I do tend to tell them so.”

“With a heaping helping of vitriol, maybe,” Hermione dares, and then tries not to cringe. The Gryffindors will be in an uproar if she loses them points on a Saturday.
Snape only raises an eyebrow. “Vitriol does not change facts, Miss Granger.”

“But it isn’t exactly encouraging, either, sir.”

“Perspective,” he murmurs. “That might be useful.”

Hermione tries not to stare at him. Snape is not prone to sharing his thoughts aloud—not with students, anyway. “Sir?”

“This evening, I will be sending you a scroll that is of my own work in my fifth year of Hogwarts. There was obviously a different Potions teacher here at the time.” Snape looks at her again. “I would like you to compare it to one of the essays you’ve received from me this term. I think you will find it enlightening.”

“Er—yes, sir.” Hermione frowns. “Am I to be graded on this, sir?”

“I do not need yet more grading to be doing, Miss Granger,” Snape retorts. “However, I do expect you to be able to discuss the differences with me in an intelligent manner. Is that acceptable?”

“Yes, sir!” Hermione says quickly. She has enough homework to do this weekend. “When would you like to discuss it, Professor?”

“My Tuesday afternoons are free after lunch. I will be in my office,” Snape replies, and turns his attention back to Hagrid and Professor Slytherin. The Shield Charm is coming down; Hagrid is still beaming, and the professor seems pleased. “Nizar, it is freezing out here.”

“And I very much need a shower,” Professor Slytherin says, brushing off his robes. Hermione bites back a smile when she sees a dribble of rotten pumpkin in his hair. “Thank you for the hospitality, Hagrid.”

“Anytime’s fine,” Hagrid responds cheerfully. “All three o’ you are always welcome. I’m off to a bath, m’self. Think there might be several apples sliding down my backside.” Hagrid shrinks his chair to put it back inside his house, and then slides the pink umbrella bit back over his wand to hide it. “Be seeing you at dinner!” he calls cheerfully, and ducks into his house, followed by a tail-wagging Fang.

“Miss Granger.”

“Yes, sir?” Hermione is surprised to have Snape approach her for a second time in the same hour. She is quite used to Professor Snape attempting to ignore her existence.

“The gift. What was it?” Snape asks.

“Oh. It was a—a fountain pen, sir. A really nice one,” she answers, glancing at Professor Slytherin. She wonders if the pen counts as one of the professor’s ‘flashes of insight.’

“What did it look like?” Snape presses. His tone is polite, but he is still demanding an answer. “Gryffindor colors?”

“No, sir.” Hermione tries not to bite her lip when one of Snape’s eyebrows lifts in what is either surprise or derision. “Silver and periwinkle, sir, and it can be converted to hold a quill if I wanted.”

“Silver and periwinkle.” Snape rolls his eyes. “Miss Granger, the giver’s intention is beyond obvious.”
It takes the rest of the walk to the castle for Hermione to realize what he means, and then she promptly flushes in embarrassment.

A courting gift. Someone from Slytherin House is…is asking to court her. A real courtship. That is…that’s actually rather terrifying.
Hermione wanders the castle in a bit of a daze, only realizing when the flocking begins that it’s time for dinner. She follows the others into the Great Hall and sits down at the Gryffindor table between Ron and Edward, who is staring down at his plate.

“What’s wrong, Edward?” Hermione asks.

“Oh, it’s nothing—well, my sister’s sick,” Edward mumbles. “She’s not bad sick or anything, but it doesn’t really happen very often. She’s got magic, like me. Our cousin Rob, he’s a wizard, too, and he says it’s really rare because magic is usually doing a thing with our immune systems to make us resistant to colds and stuff.”

Hermione’s eyes widen; she thinks that might be the most she’s ever heard Edward speak in one sitting. “I’m sorry. I didn’t even know you had a sister. She’s all right, yes?”

Edward nods, shrugging. “Yeah, she’s fine, Hermione. I’m just still used to being there if anything is wrong. It’s my third year. That should be a thing, right? Being used to not being able to just go home?”

“Not always. If my parents were ill, I’d want to go home to make sure they were okay,” Hermione says, trying to remember that she is a Prefect and she should be acting like one. Being a Prefect includes reassuring those of her own House that things will be fine. “I’m sure it will all blow over.”

“Yeah, your sister will be fine, Edward.” Ginny slings her arm around Edward’s shoulders. “I’ve met your parents. They’re smart Muggles, those two. They’ll have her up and about in no time.”

Dean looks up in surprise. “You’ve met Muggle parents?”

Ginny gives Dean a blank look. “Sure. Why wouldn’t we? Edward’s my friend. Mum and Dad took
me to their house, which is a neat flat in London. Edward’s parents have even been to the Burrow, though we all but had to lead them in by the hand so they could find it.”

“My Mum’s never wanted to meet Wizarding parents before.” Dean scowls down at his plate. “Bloody hell, I got the luck of the draw, didn’t I?”

Seamus elbows Dean. “Well, you got me out of it, mate. Can’t be all bad.”

Dean smiles. “Fine. But you’ve got to introduce me to your Mum and Dad.”

Seamus utterly wilts. “Can we, uh—can we pretend that we’re just best mates an’ all for at least another year? They’re Catholic, Dean. I think they might die and swan off to Heaven just from the shock of it.”

“You think being seventeen will make it less of a shock?” Dean asks, grinning.

“Well, no,” Seamus admits. “But at least then I’m legal, so it won’t matter all that much if they boot me out of the house.” He frowns. “Maybe after I’ve put aside enough money to try and cover books and such for seventh year.”

“Seamus, if it comes down to it, I’ll make my parents bloody spot you for seventh year,” Hermione says. “And no arguing. You’ll finish school and go out to terrify Wizarding Britain, or else.”

Seamus salutes. “Yes, Miss Scary Prefect, ma’am!” When he lowers his hand, he says, “And, uh, if that does become a thing—your parents are bloody saints.”

“No, they’re dentists,” Hermione retorts.

Seamus blinks a few times. “Terrifying saints, then.”

“What was all that about?” Ron asks Hermione when Dean and Seamus are distracted by talking about Seamus’s parents, and Ginny and Edward are distracted by telling the others about Muggle reactions to a magical house. “The expression on your face when you walked in, too—is it about Harry?”

Hermione bites her lip before shaking her head. “No, it’s not Harry. Not more than usual, anyway. It’s just…I heard an odd rumor. About me. Nothing bad!” she hurries to say when Ron’s temper kindles in his eyes. “It was just…odd.”

Parvati looks up from her dinner and grins. “Someone likes you. That’s the rumor, isn’t it?”

Hermione blushes, which is all the answer Parvati needs. “I,” Parvati announces, “am telling everyone.”

“Parvati!” Hermione hisses desperately. “Please don’t!”

“Why not?” Parvati asks, treating Hermione to a patient look. “It’s high time someone noticed you were growing up to be a looker, Granger. You’ve caught up to your curly hair so it no longer looks like it’s trying to eat your head, your eyes sparkle, your teeth are great, your skin is a clear, wonderful shade of golden brown, and still it took someone over half the term to notice you’re bloody gorgeous! I’d have propositioned you if I liked girls. Of course I’m going to tell our entire House. It’s like a minor miracle occurred!”

Hermione lets out a quiet, squeaked, “Oh.” She can’t actually think of a counter-argument. She’s too distracted by receiving a string of compliments in a row. She doesn’t think she’s—she is not
gorgeous. She is acceptable enough not to hate her reflection in the mirror, and anything else is inconsequential.

“It’s that fountain pen, isn’t it?” Kellah asks, grinning. “The one delivered to you that was wrapped in green and silver!”

“Kellah!” Hermione gasps, feeling herself turn an even darker shade of red. Parvati is giving her an expect look. “Fine! Yes.”

“A Slytherin gave you a fountain pen?” Neville glances over from his conversation with Aamir and Raza. “What color?”

Hermione resists the urge to put her hands over her face. “Perwinkle and silver,” she whispers.

“Oh.” Neville grins. “That’s rather particular, that. Someone definitely remembers the Yule Ball in a nice way! I wonder if Colin has those pictures.”

“There are pictures?” Hermione asks in dismay.

“Triwizard Tournament,” Parvati says, amused. “Of course there are pictures. I’m just glad the one of myself and Harry during that first dance doesn’t make me look ridiculous.”

“You look gorgeous, Parvati,” Neville points out. “Harry is the one who looks like he was about to pass out. Not that I really blame him.”

“So, so nervous, and so distracted,” Parvati says fondly, which is a far cry from how much time she spent glaring daggers at Harry until the disastrous end of the Tournament. “Harry would have saved himself so much trouble if he’d just asked a boy, instead. I would have happily gone with Aamir.”

Aamir stops chewing in the middle of a mouthful of mashed potatoes. “You would have?”

Parvati nods. “I was considering it, but then Harry asked me, so I thought it was worth a go.”

“Would you consider dating me now, then?” Aamir asks.

“Not with your mouth full of potatoes, I won’t,” Parvati replies, and Aamir flushes scarlet.

Hermione bites her lip again. She’d passed on the promise that Professor Salazar had given her about Harry being all right to the rest of her House. Gryffindor at large has taken it as a reassurance that Harry will definitely be back, and in the meantime, they’re going to act as if everything is normal. It’s quite sweet of them, at least when it doesn’t make Hermione’s chest ache.

Ron glumly pokes at his own mashed potatoes instead of eating them. “It had to be a bloody Slytherin to notice first, didn’t it?”

“Oh, not that again!” Hermione says in sudden exasperation. “Honestly, Ron!”

“It’s not that! It’s just…well. You’re a girl.” Ron turns red. “I never went and noticed until last year. I always just thought of you as my mate, Hermione, and then you turned up and you were a girl.”

“I’ve always been a girl, Ron!” Hermione retorts. “Besides, when you noticed, you were a complete twit about it!”

“I know, I know, and I’m still sorry about that!” Ron stabs viciously at a kipper. “I just don’t know how to think of my mate and this pretty girl who showed up in my Common Room.”
Hermione rolls her eyes. “Please continue to think of me as ‘my mate Hermione’ because if this is your attempt at trying to gain a date? That would be ruination, Ronald Weasley, and it would be ruination of the sort where I would convince Fellona to make you sleep out in the hall every night until we graduate.”

Ron cringes. “All right, all right! My mate Hermione! Best friend who happens to be a fine-looking girl, who I will never try to date because I like sleeping in my bed!” He lowers his voice. “But whoever this bloke is, sending you fancy pens like that—they’d better treat you like gold, or I’ll sic Fred and George on ‘em.”

“Who are we being sent after?” George asks, looking up from a kidney pie. “I ask for posterity, of course.”

“No one, not yet!” Hermione says quickly. “You plan your vengeance after the fact, not before!”

“No, sometimes it’s definitely before,” Fred chimes in. “One should be prepared for any eventuality.”

“Besides, how do you know it’s a bloke?” Hermione asks Ron in a prim voice. “It could be a girl. Or someone agender. We do have a few of them, right?”

“A girl.” Ron looks like he’s on the verge of sputtering. “Hermione, mate, there is only so much one man’s heart can take before it’s just too much.”

“Dating? In that case, one definitely plots the revenge in advance,” Fred says.

Hermione snorts and shoves at Ron, knocking him into Fred. That bumps him into Angelina, who rolls her eyes and reaches up to slap Fred on the back of the head. “How do I signal to this person that I’m maybe interested in their courtship offer? We don’t do things this way in the Muggle world.”

“Oh, that part’s easy enough.” Ron shoves a forkful of pie into his mouth and then speaks through it. Back to normal, then. “Just start using the gift in public, during classes and such, if you’re really into the idea. If you’re hesitant, use it in public places, but not all the time, like between classes or here in the Great Hall when you’re scribbling notes at breakfast and dinner. That sort of thing.”

Hermione thinks about the pen in its box upstairs. The outside might have been Slytherin green with a silver ribbon that slides off and on to keep the box closed, but the inside was lined in velvet with Gryffindor scarlet on top and gold along the bottom. She didn’t mention it to Snape, but that part wasn’t hard to figure out. Whoever this Slytherin is, they’re announcing their affiliation while pointing out that they don’t mind hers at all. It also has to have been someone who attended the Yule Ball to see her periwinkle dress, which at least narrows down the list a bit. All of the seventh-years at the time graduated at the end of the year. Only a few third-years—now fourth-years—were present. That actually doesn’t give her a very long list of Slytherin students to wonder about.

She looks over at the Slytherin table while keeping her face lowered to her plate, hiding her spying beneath a curtain of hair. She doesn’t suspect any of the fourth-years, since she barely knows them. Greenwood and Shah are both out of the running, since Greenwood is married to academia and Shah has a boyfriend. Parangyo is holding Fred at arms’ length while he tries to fumble his way towards getting a date with her, but Hermione thinks Parangyo just wants to be certain Fred is serious.

Amrish Gupta, maybe. He isn’t a sleazebag, and he’s intelligent to be in both N.E.W.T. Defence and Potions. Kinjal Bhatia is betrothed for a family-negotiated marriage after Hogwarts and uni, but at least she seems really happy about it.

Warrington? Hermione makes a face. No, he’s spouted too much Pure-blood nonsense. Definitely
not him. Pucey, Bole, Montague, Peebles, and Melville are all disqualified for the same reason. Pansy loves boys too much. Millicent has grown from sort of pudgy and bland-featured to looking a bit more like an unkempt Greek goddess, but Hermione doubts she’d be that subtle about trying to get a date. Blaise Zabini is a possibility, as is Theodore Nott. She’s not sure she could tolerate Nott, even though he is definitely not the Death Eater type, but Blaise was courteous even when their Houses were pretty much at war.

Hermione eyes Draco, who is talking to Blaise, Kinjal, Seamus, and Nandini Johar (the latter turned around in their seats, which is annoying Dean since he’s trying to eat). It’s a really expensive pen, not a quill, which means someone went to the trouble of looking up the Muggle equivalent of a fancy writing tool while also making it quill-convertible.

*He did apologize,* Hermione thinks. If Draco did send the pen…well, his features are no longer so pointy, and he grew tall and lanky over the summer. The haughty mask that Hermione always hated vanished over the winter holiday. Malfoy still has a public mask, but it’s not cold or cruel, just polite —until he starts talking to a friend. Then it’s gone, and beneath is the sort of person that Lucius Malfoy would despise. Draco’s father would also loathe the fact that his son pledged his service to a Muggle, Queen or no Queen. Not even a magical title would be enough to make up for that sin, not in Lucius Malfoy’s eyes.

Hermione knows Draco didn’t do it for power. Professor Salazar and Professor Slytherin would have been certain to inform the other four students how much work is involved in being nobility in Britain. Draco won’t be able to escape the consequences if he broke an important Muggle law—like trying to avoid paying taxes. That would definitely be the fastest way to gain their government’s attention.

She decides that she’s going to use that new pen in class. She really wants to find out who sent it, if only so her curiosity doesn’t drive her mental. She just has to find a nice periwinkle-dyed quill to use with it.

Hermione spends the rest of her evening proofreading Brice deSlizarse’s book. It’s even more brilliant than before. No, it’s the same brilliance, really. It’s just much more obvious when it’s been written out in a linear, instructive-like fashion. Professor Slytherin’s elder son was a genius, but he wrote that book as if it was more of a…of a graduate thesis.

Well, it was exactly that, Hermione remembers. Even without being linear, that thesis text was still more useful than the absolute rubbish that Umbridge—that woman—assigned as their DADA text for the term. Hermione hadn’t needed to read it all the way through to realize it was useless, though she did anyway, just in case. Professor Slytherin does say there are some useful bits in that book, but if so, they must be truly tiny and esoteric, because Hermione isn’t finding them.

She jerks back, startled, when three scrolls pop into existence on her bed. She picks up the smallest one, marked with her name in Professor Snape’s spidery script. Hermione breaks the green Slytherin wax seal and unrolls it to read.

*Miss Granger,*

*The essay you've just received from myself is a copy of the original, so you may write on it as much as you wish in your effort to develop the perspective I've made mention of.*

*Your work on last week’s paper merits an Outstanding grade for a fifth-year student. For a N.E.W.T. student, it would barely scrape by with an Acceptable. Bear that in mind if you intend to*
pursue a N.E.W.T. in Potions.

—Professor Severus Snape

Hermione yanks open the scroll she now recognizes as hers. Just as Snape said, there is a red O at the top, even though her essay on Runespoors is absolutely slaughtered by that same red ink. The idea of writing only of Runespoor eggs for illicit potions had seemed utterly dull, a topic covered so many times by different Potion Masters that the essay all but wrote itself. She’d veered instead into wondering about the uses of Runespoor venom, skin, and scales in potions, a topic that is much harder to research in Hogwarts’ library. It hasn’t been addressed nearly as often, which incited Hermione to add a critique of potion-makers overlooking ingredients with known traits and values that are easier to come by than illegal Runespoor eggs.

That is where the red ink looks less like a slaughter and more like thoughtful—if still vicious—commentary. He agrees with her points and then lambasts her for not expounding on the ideas further. It’s such a depth of critique that Hermione scowls, gets out quill, ink, and another scroll, and starts rebutting every argument. How would she know what potions those items are useful for when she could find no books in the Hogwarts library that listed potions with those ingredients, anyway? That’s what books are for. That means either no one is publishing their findings after using those ingredients, or no one is doing it at all.

With that done, and Hermione feeling as if she’s justifiably defended her work, she opens the second scroll. It’s perhaps a foot or two longer than her own. The grade at the top makes her frown before she’s even read his name. An A? Professor Snape? Absolutely not. She might not like the man, but he is highly intelligent. His handwriting has always been spiky and spidery. What she gets to see on the blackboard and on her returned essays is the refined version, though for a fifth-year, his was not bad at all. She glances at his name, surprised at the inclusion of his second name, which she’s never seen before. Severus Prince Snape. That isn’t the sort of second name a parent chooses; that looks much more like the mother’s name set before the father’s name.

Now there is a topic I should have been researching in the library, Hermione thinks in amusement. Snape’s parents and their attendance at Hogwarts. She wonders what they were like, though she already suspects Snape had more fondness for his mother. Prince is written in darker ink, definitely emphasized over Snape.

The essay is the same assignment, Runespoor eggs and their proper uses in potions, whether or not the eggs are illegal. Snape spends a much shorter period of time on the eggs, listing off their uses in known potions with brisk, almost angry-sounding efficiency. Then he adds another list of potions that has Hermione blinking down at the paper before she flips her own graded essay over to start copying them down. She’s never heard of half of these, and definitely didn’t know Runespoor eggs could help any of the others. If they can really do that to a potion for improving mood, it’s no wonder Runespoor eggs are illegal to import.

Then, like Hermione did, Snape drops the topic of eggs to focus on venom, scales, and skin. She’s about to start writing on her rebuttal scroll again, incensed, when the standard uses fall away and then the ideas begin. Snape took the attributes of each ingredient, ignored the utter lack of information, and made up his own.

Hermione finishes reading the essay and frowns as she hauls the paper back down towards her until she’s looking at that A-grade again. She’s no Potions Master, but those new potions had nothing in
them that would cause anything explosive. They might be experimental and potentially useless, but they wouldn’t cause accidents of the sort that Neville used to manage on the regular.

It takes a second reading to realize what’s bothering her, aside from feeling rather foolish that combining ingredients on her own never occurred to her.

There are no comments on this essay. In fact, the only thing left at the end is a brief note about Snape being too ambitious for his skill level. Hermione stares at that unfamiliar script and wonders at how a single sentence can be so infuriatingly condescending.

Ambitious! Snape is a Slytherin; of course he’s ambitious! What is this complete rubbish?

Hermione takes notes on all of her thoughts, bundles everything up, and puts it aside for tomorrow. Tomorrow is Sunday, so she’ll have all the time she needs to read everything again—not to mention raid the library.

Sunday, however, turns out a lot differently than anyone planned.

*          *          *          *

Severus awakens at six-thirty and groans, rolling over and attempting to bury his face in the pillow. No good. He can’t go back to sleep, and it’s not simply because his bed is empty. That has been consistent for a week now, much as he finds he really doesn’t prefer it any longer. At all.

*Why the hell am I awake?* he wonders blearily, taking a bath just to dispel the sensation of a Dementor’s fog trying to take up residence in his head. He should not be awake. It is Sunday, and he has no damned reason to be awake at this uncivilized hour at all.

He arrives in the Great Hall exactly at seven, where Nizar, Salazar, and Minerva all greet him with varying expressions of surprise. “Why the fuck are you awake?” he snarls at them, slinging himself into his chair so he can glare at the students who are already attending breakfast instead of people he considers to be—friends.


“I can say the same. One does not really find sleep at the age of one thousand twenty-six,” Salazar says.

“He kept me awake all night!” Minerva snaps, pouring tea into a cup with more vigor than is really necessary. Then again, Severus is doing the same. It’s a good thing the elves learned their lesson a long time ago and provide the staff with far larger cups of a morning.

“I did warn you that I was in no mood for sleep, Lioness.”

“I am going to slip a sleeping draught into your tea, Salazar Slytherin!”

Despite the early hour, Severus has to bite back a laugh. “Please stop. I still have no wish to know those details. Ever. What is your excuse, Nizar?”

“Oh, I just felt like climbing the walls.”

Severus lowers his teacup to look at Nizar. “Tell me no one saw that.”
“Just Peeves.” Nizar looks irritationally alert for someone who didn’t sleep. “That poor ghost was so fucking confused.”

Albus also looks confused to see them when he arrives in his usual early fashion. “And good morning to all of you. I’m not used to seeing those of us who prefer mornings the least to be at this table before everyone else.”

“Good morning, Albus,” Minerva says politely. Severus just says something rude under his breath, but as Albus is used to that, he just twinkles merrily and goes to sit in his hideous chair.

“Why are you awake so early?” Nizar asks Severus once Albus is distracted by Filius’s cheerful arrival.

“I couldn’t go back to sleep, much as I really wanted to.” It isn’t as if he’s really needed to oversee breakfast on a weekend. The majority of his Slytherins feel the same way about weekend mornings as he does.

Nizar raises both eyebrows. “Severus. The last time that happened, someone had bloody died.”

Severus glowers at him. “Fuck you very much for bringing that up.”

It says a great deal about Nizar’s current state of mind that he doesn’t take the granted opportunity and turn it into a ribald joke. “And yet you trudged out here at seven o’clock.”

“Stop talking about it,” Severus growls. “Maybe whatever it is will fuck off and not come back.”

Minerva slices apart a roll in order to turn it into a crazed collection of breakfast parts. “Gentlemen, there are students who are going to be sitting nearby momentarily who will be able to hear you.”

Severus is beginning to relax when the owls arrive, delivering no mail but for the Sunday Prophet. Nizar snatches up Minerva’s copy, but at this juncture she just rolls her eyes and lets him have it. Severus puts his own aside, as he’d be too tempted to kill someone using a newspaper as a blunt instrument if provoked at the wrong moment.

The next thing he knows, Nizar is on his feet, green and silver sparks riding the air. “SON OF A—”

Minerva leaps up and clamps her hand over Nizar’s mouth, muffling his next word. “That is not what I meant by—oh dear,” she breaks off, staring at the front page of the Prophet.

“Is someone actually dead?” Severus asks. “Because if so, I hope it’s someone we didn’t like.”

“He’s going to be!” Nizar declares after Minerva judges it safe to remove her hand. “The absolutely useless, flesh-wasting, bloody—”

Minerva sighs and clamps her hand over Nizar’s mouth again while the man vibrates in sheer outrage. “If he suddenly disappears, you’d best have an angelic, ironclad alibi!”

Salazar stands up and eyes the newspaper. Severus notes the lack of dramatics and thinks that it cannot possibly be that bad until Salazar says, “Ah. So that’s why the slimy bastard was crafting delays.”

“Oh dear.” Albus has his copy of the Prophet spread out on the table in front of him. “Severus, you’ll definitely wish to see this…though I understand congratulations are in order?”

Now Severus is angry and too damned confused by Albus’s nonsense not to look. His day was
already ruined when he woke up too early and alone, anyway.

The *Sunday Prophet’s* screaming headline is such an affront that for a moment he simply stares at it.

*Inept Muggle Ruler Restores Unwanted War Mages In Order to Terrorize Wizarding Britain*

Severus puts down the paper, scrubs at his face, and picks it up again. Yes, the headline is still both insulting and ludicrous. Rita Skeeter didn’t even need to add her name for the article to be so obviously of her making.

*With Muggle fears growing due to false and unfounded rumors of You-Know-Who’s return, an aging relic of a ruler from a disastrously outdated institution has gone over our beloved Ministry’s head and named new war mages to terrorize British soil. Her choices could not show more bias against current Minister Cornelius Fudge, and demonstrate a blatant lack of respect between our mutual governments. War mages have been banned from Wizarding Soil for centuries, as everyone knows—*

“Do people actually believe this shit?” Severus hears Miss Parkinson ask. He glances up long enough to see her reading the paper with Miss Bulstrode.

“Some people are truly that stupid, Pans,” Miss Bulstrode replies.

“Nizar! Nizar, give me that newspaper right now!” Minerva orders, and then still has to snatch it out of Nizar’s hands. “You’ve already extinguished half the candles in this Hall. Please calm down!”

Severus glances up, startled. He’d thought clouds had come along to mask the sun, not that there was a sudden lack of candlelight. The ceiling reveals that the sky was already overcast and grey. There are several elves up on the candelabras relighting candles, one snap of magic at a time.

Minerva shoves Nizar back into the chair beside Severus. “Sit down. Calm down. Try not to put out the lights, set anything on fire, or murder anyone for the next five minutes.”

“Fine,” Nizar grinds out, his jaw clenched so tightly it’s a wonder any sound emerged at all.

Severus deliberately turns the paper so that Nizar can’t see the front page before he continues reading. The rest of the article is in the exact same vein as the start, so ludicrous as to appear plausible. The biographies she writes of the five of them are of the worst sorts of bottom-feeding rubbish. Severus had fewer crimes attached to his name as an actual Death Eater than Rita Skeeter is fabricating for this article. He isn’t certain if he’s impressed with her gall, or if he wants to choke the life out of her with his bare hands.

Then he reads her biography about Adele Greenwood. Strangling a reporter to death is definitely the more pleasing option. He leaps out of his chair and temporarily hands the paper off to Mister Zabini as he rushes by to intercept Miss Greenwood.

Miss Greenwood sees him coming and halts in place at the far end of the Slytherin table. “Sir? What is—” She glances around at the other students, most of whom are white-faced as they read the paper.
Severus isn’t certain if he’s seeing outrage or terror. If strong reactions were what Skeeter and Fudge hoped to create, they succeeded.

“Do not read today’s paper,” Severus says.

“The paper?” Miss Greenwood spies the headline due to someone’s open copy and pales so quickly that Severus thinks she’s on the verge of fainting. “What did they say?”

“The headline is informative enough.” Severus grips her arm firmly enough to impress the necessity of listening upon her, but not hard enough to bruise. “Trust me as your Head of House: do not ever read that article.”

Miss Greenwood swallows. “As long as you tell me why.”

“Because then you would be very, very upset, and I would be facing murder charges due to striding right into the offices of the Daily Prophet in order to kill a useless waste of a reporter,” Severus replies in a stiff voice.

“But—but what are people going to think? What are my parents going to think?” Miss Greenwood whispers.

“Miss Greenwood, what other people think or believe is immaterial.” Severus has to take a breath to say the next sentence. “Potter of Gryffindor faced this sort of slander for well over a year. You are seeing but a single article. If Potter can tolerate this without a disgraceful display of behavior, so can we.”

“What did they say about you?” Miss Greenwood asks in sudden horror.

“Miss Greenwood, Rita Skeeter managed to fabricate crimes for me to have performed that I’ve actually never contemplated before, and I have contemplated quite a number.”

“Hey!” Colin Creevey of Gryffindor is standing in his chair. Severus resists the urge to hex a very loud Gryffindor. “You lot have all seen this, right?”

“If we hadn’t seen it, we’ve got you yelling about it, mate,” Mister Thomas says with his head resting in his hands. “What of it?”

“I heard Adele ask what people are going to think of this.” Creevey straightens in place. “So I thought I’d demonstrate.” Then he holds up his copy of the Prophet and tears it cleanly in two, letting the pieces flutter to the ground. “There. That’s what I think of that rubbish, Adele.”

“Oh,” Adele whispers, starting to smile.

“There are five war mages in Britain now. Five of them! And every single one of them is of Hogwarts,” Creevey yells. “I don’t know where this Skeeter bitch gets off—”

“MISTER Creevey!” Minerva shouts in regards to Colin Creevey’s language.

“—but I know Britain’s history, and I know what war mages are! They’re the utter best of us, an’ I’m proud to be in the same school they are!” Creevey finishes, looking as if he’s going to punch anyone who disagrees with him.

Miss Applebee stands up. “Too right.” She rips her paper in half. “And I’m canceling my subscription to this rot.”
“That’s a good idea. Me, too!” Creevey responds, grinning. “In fact, I’ll be writing for my Dad an’ Mum to do the same!”

Mister Roshan decides to do one better and climbs up onto the table in order to demonstrate. “Absolutely.” A third copy of a severed *Prophet* litters the floor.

Severus glances around as every student in the Great Hall takes it into their heads to make the same exact gesture. Soon there is newspaper bloody well everywhere. Mister Zabini catches Severus’s eye and holds up his abandoned copy of the newspaper. Severus shrugs; Zabini grins and takes that as an invitation to start tearing the paper apart, one strip at a time.

“Hey! One more thing!” Miss Parangyo is standing on the chair next to Mister Zabini, who has just finished throwing newspaper strips over his shoulder. Once she has everyone’s attention, Miss Parangyo turns to face Severus and Miss Greenwood. Then she begins to applaud with all of the grace of a queen.

Severus did expect that those of his House would pay tribute to four Slytherin war mages. House politics would have demanded it, if nothing else. He did not expect them to do it in such a public manner…or for everyone else to join them, students and staff alike.

Miss Greenwood stands next to him and smiles while tears leak from her eyes. Severus is trying to decide why he has been seized by the urge to flee. It might only be his grip on Miss Greenwood’s arm that is keeping him from doing so.

He hasn’t come this close to losing his composure since he began spying in 1980.

Then the flash of a too-bright camera distracts him. Severus turns and glares at Creevey, who is lowering his camera with an utterly unapologetic look on his face. “Mister Creevey, I will confiscate that thing and turn it into its separate atomic components!”

Colin Creevey shakes his head. “Trust me, Professor, you shouldn’t. Not for this.”

“And why not?” Severus is glad that he can still sound threatening while pretending not to be bewildered.

“Because that is going to be a really good picture,” Creevey says. “The right sort of picture, sir.”

Severus hesitates as the realization sinks in. “Very political-minded of you, Mister Creevey.”

Creevey grins back. “Thank you, sir, but you should be thanking our other war mage and Defence teacher. He’s really good at those sorts of lessons.”

Severus looks back at the staff table to find that Nizar is staring at him with no trace of spark or magical fire remaining in the air around him. *What?* he thinks, doing his best to present the thought as being completely out of sorts.

Nizar blinks twice and then thinks something particular—and familiar—in response. *Would it be odd if I said I was proud of you?*

*Yes!* Severus retorts at once. Then he has to swallow as Nizar’s lips curl up in a smile, the first genuine sign of happiness Severus has seen on his face since the funeral. *Yes, it’s very, very odd. But it’s nice to hear.*
Ron steps into the Great Hall with Lee Jordan and halts in shock. “What the bloody hell happened in here?”

Lee snatches a strip of paper from the air and holds it up. “Oh, hey, it looks like everyone decided they hated the *Prophet* all at the same time! Come on. Let’s go seek out the best source of news in Gryffindor that isn’t Fred and George.”

Hermione is daintily picking bits of newspaper out of her eggs when Ron and Lee sit down across from her. “What the bloody hell happened in here?” Ron repeats in the place where it will do the most good to ask.

She pulls a full strip of paper out of her eggs, makes a face, and tosses it before reaching for toast that is also littered with newspaper scraps. “I kept my copy of today’s *Prophet* just to be able to answer that question in a believable manner.” She hands it over to Ron and Lee before picking up the juice pitcher, looking at its collection of soggy paper remnants in the bottom before putting it aside. Some things just can’t be salvaged.

Ron is still reading the front page in disbelief when the twins come along and bracket them at the table. “Lee! Ron! You missed the fun! And by fun I mean the seething anger before a loud Gryffindor decided we needed to turn the *Prophet* into rubbish,” George says.

“Yeah. I can see why. What am I reading, guys?” Ron asks. “I know I’m not the smartest bloke in this school, but I’m seeing words and they make no sense.”

“Rita Skeeter,” Lee says.

Ron glances back at the nonsense title for the article. “Never mind. Suddenly it makes perfect sense.”

“THEY ABSOLUTELY ARE NOT!”

Ron winces when Ginny’s shout pierces his ear right before she snatches the paper out of his hands. “Gin—”

“I’ll kill that woman myself!” Ginny yells.

“Ginny, the line is so long at this point in Skeeter’s career that there won’t even be bits left to stomp into the floor by the time you get a turn,” Lee points out, hunting for coffee among the bits of newspaper. “Oh, there is my precious,” he coos over the pot. Then he’s off on the hunt for a mug that isn’t buried.

“Don’t tear that up, Ginny! I think it might be one of only two copies left, and I’ll need it to explain why…well…everything,” Hermione says.

Edward peers out from behind Ginny, wide-eyed. “Not that I don’t understand the feeling, but the staff were okay with this?”

Pansy sits down next to Hermione. “Pretty sure most of them helped. Share up, Granger. I think you’ve got the only eggs in school that haven’t been sent to the great hen coop in the sky.”

Hermione unearthed an empty plate and hands it over. “Sure, I’ve already been at it.”
Ron glances up at the staff table. “Wow, you’re right. It’s like they celebrated Umbridge leaving all over again, but messier.” He narrows his eyes. “I’m not hallucinating or anything, am I?”

Fred manages to find the bacon while Pansy greedily helps herself to the surviving eggs. “Still not our doing if you are, baby brother.”

Ron feels his eye twitch. “Right. Because Snape’s happy. Or murderous. One of those.”

They all turn their heads to look at the staff table. Professor Flitwick is wearing a wreath on his head made of shredded Prophet; Professor Sprout is busy making another on Professor Willowood’s order. Hagrid and Madam Hooch are throwing the strips about like confetti while laughing. Professor Dumbledore is reading individual scraps of paper and smiling, but that’s just about normal. Professor McGonagall looks like the cat that caught and ate the canary, then hid all the evidence. Professor Salazar is leaning back in his chair next to her with his feet on the table, and McGonagall isn’t yelling at him to knock off with it.

Professor Slytherin has scooted his chair over so that he can lean against Snape. Ron suspects the professor might actually be asleep, which is a bloody amazing feat considering how loud it is in the Great Hall. Snape actually has his arm around Professor Slytherin’s shoulder, his pale hand resting along the professor’s green robe sleeve. Instead of his usual dark-eyed, roving glower of the students in the Hall, he’s only watching the Slytherins…and he’s smiling.

“I’m not really certain I know how to handle three miracles in one day,” Fred says.

“Three?” Ginny somehow gives the newspaper back to Hermione without ripping it to bits. “I’m only counting two—everyone’s reaction to this shit article, and Professor Snape. I mean, that could be murderous,” she says, tilting her head. “But I kind of doubt it.”

Ron shudders. “I don’t want to be thinking about how unnatural it is for that man to be happy!”

Pansy kicks him under the table. Ron bites his lip and somehow doesn’t shriek; Pansy wears some sharp bloody shoes! “Don’t you go off insulting my Head of House, Ron Weasley.”

“Didn’t have anything to do with that!” Ron whimpers, clutching his leg. “Not a Slytherin thing! Just a Snape thing!”

Hermione sighs. “You’re honestly hopeless.”

“I’ll actually give him that,” Pansy says. “I mean, it is a bit odd. We’re all used to Professor Snape being…well…”

“Dour,” George finishes for her, just as Ginny and Edward finally start poking around on the table for undamaged bits of breakfast. “But hey, third miracle—Professor Slytherin is sleeping.”

“In this racket? How?” Ginny asks.

“Because someone spent a week not bloody sleeping.” Fred rolls his eyes. “George asked our Fearless Leader to do us the ‘favor’ of putting the date and time on the notes he sent us for instructions and whatnot, so we’d know how to prioritize, like.”


“You’ve got to be a nutter to be a war mage,” Pansy says, digging out the teapot. “Do you know what a war mage’s life expectancy is like? That is not an easy job, or a safe one.”
“Yes, but are you going by the averages created by Hadrian’s Wall, or before that?” Hermione asks.

“Not much difference between them, really,” Pansy replies. “Cheer up, Gryffindors! At least your war mage is a werewolf, and thus is practically indestructible!”

“Right. Werewolf Gryffindor war mage.” Ginny grins. “How much would you like to bet that’s the part in all of this that made Fudge wet his trousers?”

“Oi! Some of us are eating!” Pansy protests. “Go talk about that man’s bad habits elsewhere!”

“Besides, I’m pretty sure it’s an all-of-the-above sort of answer, anyway,” Lee says. “We’ve got a pair of thousand-year-old relic Slytherin Founders, one not-a-Death-Eater ex-spy, one werewolf, and a magically titled baroness who’s going to hold quite a bit of sway in the Wizengamot after she takes her seat. Fudge is going to be yesterday’s news—literally, even.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t all cancel our copies.” Hermione is giving the Slytherin end of the table a speculative look. “Maybe we should all write in to the Prophet and tell them our subscriptions are as good as canceled unless the Prophet prints a retraction. By…oh, tomorrow.”

Pansy drops her spoon and stares at Granger. “I’ll go tell the Slytherins,” she says, and bolts from the table.

“Gryffindor,” Hermione claims, but takes her teacup with her.

“Ravenclaws, my people!” George cries, heading in that direction.

“Puffs!” Jordan declares, but then Fred picks him up and slings him over his shoulder so they can both go terrify the Hufflepuffs.

Edward glances around before he mumbles, “Staff,” and skitters off in that direction.

Ron looks at Ginny. “What just happened?” he asks. She rolls up a ball of shredded newspaper and throws it at him before following Edward.

* * * *

“It would have been a bit more convenient to have known about my sudden influx of war mages before this morning,” Albus says.

Minerva watches Severus roll his eyes. “And give you that much of a warning? That is no fun at all.”

Albus chuckles. “Of course not. If you’re worried about political manipulation, I’m aware that a war mage’s abilities do not work that way.”

Minerva decides she’d best intervene before Severus throws something at Albus. The dear lad has never liked being put on the spot for doing something extraordinary. “A war mage’s presence is political whether they can access that power or not, Albus,” Minerva reminds him in a tart voice. “The lid was being kept on it for a reason. I didn’t even know until this past weekend, but only because the actual article written by Madam Spencer was supposed to arrive before today’s… today’s…”

“Rubbish,” Salazar supplies for her. He’s still looking remarkably calm about all of this, especially
considering the fiery anger he demonstrated on Mister Potter’s behalf. “Actual, complete rubbish.”

“On the other hand, I did get to listen to Sirius recite a lot of words in languages I didn’t know he’d ever been interested in,” Remus adds. He doesn’t look nearly as sanguine about Skeeter’s article, but Minerva suspects he still wants to eviscerate someone for what was said about Miss Greenwood. Remus spoke highly of her during his year of teaching Defence.

“Indeed. I think our students would have helped add to Sirius’s recitation, but I chose to be selectively deaf.” Albus frowns. “I did want to speak to all of Britain’s war mages. Where is Nizar?”

“Off to see Madam Spencer to convince her to sell her article as an evening exclusive to both Witch Weekly and The Quibbler,” Salazar explains, smiling. “The Prophet has already paid her, and she isn’t under exclusive contract. Undercutting the profits of the unworthy is such a time-honored tradition.”

“And no opportunity is spared to make a pun of it, I see,” Severus notes.

“Be that as it may…at this juncture, I believe Madam Spencer’s article may be little more than damage control,” Albus says.

“I don’t actually think so, and I am a consummate pessimist,” Salazar replies. “That woman writing lies about war mages in Cornelius Fudge’s name—yes, there are always the uneducated who don’t know any better, or are fool enough to take a known liar at her word. However, the most educated of magicians in Wizarding Britain in terms of war mage lore are the Pure-blooded Houses.”

“Those who also hold the most power.” Albus folds his hands over his desk. “Then Cornelius may well have let fear guide his actions.”

“And committed a most grievous miscalculation.” Salazar grins. “I do believe that will come in handy.”

“Ah. Is this something I should be aware of?” Albus asks them all.

“No,” Minerva says firmly. “Not at all. One should not give the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot any reason to be mistrusted if he were to be, oh, restored to office because of a Minister vacating his seat.”

Albus leans back, eyebrows lifting. “I see. Well, then. I trust in your discretion, Minerva.”

Remus departs by the Floo to return to London. Minerva takes the staircase down, aware that Salazar and Severus are accompanying her. They meet Nizar at the statue of Galfridus and find the man grinning like a lunatic. “I hope none of you had important correspondence to see to, because there is not an owl left in this entire bloody school.”

“That is definitely going to set a tone.” Salazar says in a neutral voice that has all three of them glancing at him in suspicion. “My quarters, brother?”

“Oh, I missed something fun, didn’t I?” Nizar disappears with Severus; Minerva accepts Salazar’s arm and finds herself in Salazar’s sitting room a moment later. “Tell me what I missed. I had to go convince a reporter that she was making her career, not destroying it, and those weren’t fun conversations even when I was still having them with bards.”

“My war mages.” Salazar’s lack of concern has vanished, replaced by fierce intensity. “Albus Dumbledore did not say Britain’s war mages when he first mentioned us by title when we gathered. He said my.”
“I wasn’t surprised by that,” Severus says. “I’m not certain why you are.”

“No one owns a war mage, Severus.” Nizar sits down on Salazar’s window-facing sofa. “You cannot own one, bribe one, or even truly control them. If the monarch makes the attempt, forgetting that a war mage serves throne and land by choice, then that war mage can break those ties and walk away from their title entirely.”

Salazar looks too grim to leave Minerva with no concerns at all. “If Albus Dumbledore is as knowledgeable about a war mage’s ways as he claims, he would know that. He either does not know as much as he believes, or he thinks he knows of ways to use a war mage’s presence to his best advantage, regardless.”

“And he won’t try to control us.” Nizar glances at Severus. “He’ll go for you, Remus, and Adele.”

Severus’s most ferocious scowl puts in an appearance. “The hell he will. That man will stay the fuck away from my students!”

“Severus!” Minerva stares at him in surprise. “Despite our misgivings in the political arena, Albus is still the Headmaster of this school!”

When Severus gazes back at her, it’s the dark, foreboding gaze of the spy, though whether or not the affectation is deliberate, Minerva cannot tell. “You desperately need to reevaluate Albus’s actions in regards to your missing Gryffindor, Minerva,” he breathes. “Perhaps then you might realize why I would sooner kill that bastard than to allow Albus Dumbledore even the slightest opportunity to try and corrupt a young woman’s strengths for his own mysterious ends.”

“There is no possible way Albus is responsible for all of the mischief that Mister Potter managed to get into,” Minerva replies, startled anew by his vehemence.

“Of course not.” Severus blinks once and that particular mask is gone again. “But of taking advantage of the opportunities given? That, I doubt not at all.”

*   *   *   *

Salazar takes the Daily Prophet the next morning when Nizar makes no move to steal Minerva’s copy. “Are you ill?”

“What?” Nizar glances at him. “No. I just had a rough night.”

Again. Salazar nods and unrolls his paper, mentally prepared for nigh well anything. He’s lived a long time, and yet still people keep surprising him. It’s a nice bit of reassurance to the fact of existence.

This time, the headline is much more pleasing instead of blatantly inflammatory:

The Restoration of Wizarding Britain’s Glorious Past:

The Mages Who Once Protected The Isles Returned

Second in a series of articles by Joyous M. Spencer
“Better,” Salazar says, especially when he notes the large-print addendum beneath Joyous Spencer’s name: *Originally to Be Published Sunday, 11th February 1996. Our Apologies to Madam Spencer and our Readers for the Delay.*

Not quite a retraction, but it is most certainly a concession from a newspaper that realized they’d blundered and chanced losing a great deal of money from a fleeing readership. Salazar will accept it, knowing well that the fools could have decided to sail their rat-infested ship until it sank beneath the water.

This article is as informative as Joyous Spencer’s first one, rife with fact instead of nonsense. There is just a bit of the fantastic woven in to keep an uneducated reader’s attention. It does help that the fantastic is also true. The magical biographies for his brother and himself are again brief out of necessity, political and otherwise. Remus Lupin and Sirius Black’s skills regarding their magic are as they should be, focusing on their accomplishments rather than their supposed failings.

Adele Greenwood’s story, still brief due to her age, lists her title, academic achievements, her descent from two famous Silver Spears, and her continued training in their ways rather than vicious libel. Hers and Severus’s longer sections are together, and it’s immediately clear as to why. Salazar’s little brother did more with his time away from the castle yesterday morning aside from convincing Joyous to sell her article as yesterday’s evening exclusive to other newspapers.

The photograph included with the war mage article is not the original one that Dervish photographed, but of Severus and Adele standing in the Great Hall, surrounded by applauding students of all Houses. “And that sets the best sort of tone,” Salazar murmurs. He’s going to be keeping an eye on tiny Colin Creevey, who just earned his first professional photographer’s credit in three very different newspapers.

“You did something,” Nizar hisses softly. “What did you do, Salazar? You’re far too pleased with yourself, and that means you were meddling.”

“It wasn’t meddling, little brother. It was bribery. That is far more direct than meddling,”

Nizar rolls his eyes. “What did you do, Sal?”

“I might have gone into the Department of Records within the Ministry and paid a clerk with far too much debt to alter the birth certificate of one Jericho Cosmos Macmillan. It now reads that Amfractus Macmillan is Jericho’s father rather than a hideous-hat-wearing idiot. I then requested a copy and presented it to Amfractus and Celeste so they could publish articles and letters as they wished without fear of losing Celeste’s inheritance.”

“I should really disapprove,” Nizar says, “but I don’t. If forging a birth certificate is the worst thing we do this year, then we’ve done well.”

“Forging?” Salazar pitches his voice to mock-offence. “It’s the Ministry of Magic, little brother. Bribery is only penalized if you didn’t bring enough coin.”

“Effective damage control, do you think?” Minerva asks when Salazar and Nizar are done conversing in Parseltongue.

Salazar looks up and lets his gaze drift around the Hall. There are a few *Prophets* in-hand, but almost everyone is viewing late-delivered copies of last night’s exclusives to *Witch Weekly*. There are even fifteen copies of *The Quibbler*, and if that’s an average that holds true throughout Britain, it will be
the highest-grossing issue Xenophilus has ever sold. The *Daily Prophet* will certainly be feeling the monetary pinch from Sunday morning’s blunder.

“Oh, it is definitely that,” Salazar replies, lifting Minerva’s hand. He thinks he could kiss it in full view of their students and she would allow it, but decides not to. His Lioness wanted them to suffer, so suffering it shall be.
Acceptable

Chapter Summary

Ridiculously. Complicated.

Chapter Notes

Right, it's Friday, isn't it?

....No wait. It's Thursday. (Brain, wtf?)

Oh well. It can be Friday EARLY today. I mean it's already Friday *somewhere.*

(Continuous hailing of betas and cheer-readers @mrsstanley, @norcumi, @jabberwockypie, & @sanerontheinside!)

“I do not want to know,” Severus says the moment he sees Nizar. He delayed as long as he could without skipping the potential debacle entirely. Yesterday had been…a kind gesture, but he understands the limits of kindness.

Nizar refuses to stop blocking Severus’s path to his seat. “Yes, you do.”

“No, I don’t,” Severus retorts.

Nizar holds out a rolled-up copy of that morning’s Prophet. “Prove me right, then.”

Severus glares at him and snatches the paper from him. “Fine.” He unrolls it, snorts derisively at the pathetic retraction, and then realizes that the original picture is missing. The Prophet printed the one Mister Creevey took without permission yesterday morning.

“I do not actually look like that.”

Nizar shrugs. “Then you’re a mirage, and Miss Greenwood is a vampiress?”

“Do not insult one of our students, Nizar.”

“Oh. My mistake. She looks as she usually does, then?” Nizar counters, smiling up at him. Severus knows the man didn’t sleep again last night; it’s in the pinched look to his features. A lack of rest has never stopped Nizar from being a complete bastard, though.

Severus glares down at the photograph. “Miss Greenwood looks entirely acceptable, for given values of weeping while photographed.” To be fair to Miss Greenwood, she does seem to be one of the rare types who can cry without making a complete spectacle of themselves. Lily could never manage it, but her solution was to talk about the slovenly red-faced alien in the mirror when her tears were dry.

*Perhaps I do look my age, as Minerva insists,* Severus finally admits to himself. It is quite possibly
the best photograph he’s ever managed, where otherwise he most often looks to be some form of hideous, animated corpse.

“I heard that thought.” Nizar snatches the paper from him and leaves the Hall, scowling.

Severus looks down at his empty hands before he joins Minerva at the table. “Did I miss something?”

Minerva shakes her head, reaches over, and pats his arm. “Yes, you did. Fortunately, I believe you have plenty of time to figure out what it is that you’re not seeing.”

The Chosen One will return to face him, appearing as the spring moon dies.

Damn that prophecy. Severus suddenly doesn’t feel like eating at all. “I’m not so certain of that.”

* * * * *

Nizar does not ignore Severus for the rest of the day. It doesn’t count as being ignored if the other person is spending their entire day lecturing dunderheads on how to not die. Severus thinks it might count as being ignored when Nizar skips both meals, but that could be lingering suspicion.

He doesn’t understand what caused Nizar to storm off in a temper. Not the worst of his temper, no; Severus witnessed that by seeing Nizar turn his fierceness on Argus Filch during the now-infamous alboka incident. Still, Nizar was definitely displeased.

Severus scowls at the fire burning in the hearth of his quarters. Relationships are ridiculously complicated, and it is no wonder he never bothered until he found someone worth the effort. That is possibly the most annoying part of it all. Nizar is worth the effort. Beyond worth it. For Nizar’s sake, if not his own, he is going to figure out this stupid blunder, fix it, and then…probably move right along to the next massive blunder. Ridiculously. Complicated.

Tuesday brings some hint of normalcy with it. Most of Severus’s students seem to be treating him with the same wary caution they’ve been exhibiting since his status as a former spy against Voldemort was revealed last month. Aside from feeling the earth beneath his feet as he walks and being able to sense the lives around him if he concentrates, nothing about him has changed at all. If his status as a war mage means his students will behave and not act like imbeciles, then Severus doesn’t care.

One hour of fourth-year Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs. One hour of fifth-year Slytherins and Gryffindors, in which Longbottom successfully continues not to cause anything to explode. One hour of first-year Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws, in which three students do succeed in causing explosions. One of them should not even have been possible. Severus glances up at the mess dripping off his classroom ceiling and thinks he will never stop discovering new ways for a student’s pubescent magic to attempt to destroy things. The third-year Gryffindor-Slytherin class is sedate in comparison, but he doesn’t trust the respite. When that particular group blunders, it’s nearly as epic as Longbottom’s explosive failures.

Severus takes lunch in his office rather than chancing the Great Hall. If Nizar is absent, he doesn’t
want to dwell on whether or not it’s because they’re at odds. Given the vexed expressions the Weasley twins were sharing during dinner last night, Severus is beginning to suspect not, even if he does still owe Nizar an apology for reasons he cannot yet fathom.

Miss Granger is exceptionally prompt, arriving when his Tuesday afternoon hours begin at one o’clock. “Sir.” Granger seems to think about it before she shuts the door.

“Wise decision, unless you want others walking up behind you unexpectedly.”

“I thought about that, but I was also thinking perhaps you wanted this to be private, sir,” Granger replies. “Since we’re discussing, er, your work.”

“And yours, Miss Granger.” Severus waves his hand at the seats before his desk. “Did you find it enlightening?”

Granger narrows her eyes. “Actually, I found it entirely infuriating!”

“That is a form of enlightenment.” Severus rests his hands on his desk. “Well?”

“It was easy to see why you chose this particular assignment of yours, as it was the exact same one we just finished.” Granger hesitates. “Did anyone else discuss skin, venom, and scales?”

“Only those students I suspect will score the proper O.W.L. grade for N.E.W.T. Potions,” he replies. “Some wrote of their properties as you did and no further; other students discussed possible new potions. You were the only one to castigate Hogwarts’ library for not having information on potions that might use those ingredients.”

“It should be there!” Granger exclaims. “What’s the point of a library if it’s incomplete!”

“As far as I’m aware, it isn’t possible to own every single book in the world.” Not that Severus disagrees with the motivation behind attempting such a goal. “But you are correct that there is a specific lack. What else, Miss Granger?”

“The grade on your paper, it’s…” Severus can tell that there is a certain word on the tip of her tongue, but not what. At some recent point this term, Miss Granger went from having passable mental shields to very good ones, as many of his properly trained Slytherins do. He’s curious as to what brought about the change, as it’s given him the means to host discussions with someone who really does need a complete kick in the arse to reach her full potential.

“It is what?”

“It’s ludicrous!” Granger scowls. “If there was a grade above Outstanding, your paper would have been capable of earning it easily! Instead, it’s marked with an A! Who was this complete idiot?”

Severus lets out a choked laugh before he can stop himself. ‘That ‘complete idiot,’ Miss Granger, is Horace Slughorn. He is a Ministry-certified Potions Master of Great Britain, my predecessor as Potions Teacher of Hogwarts and as Slytherin’s Head of House, and he loathes my existence.”

Granger’s expression twists up in bafflement. “Because of an essay?”

“In part. It started long before that time, though the essay certainly became the turning point in regards to outright hostilities.” Severus thinks on what he is willing to admit to. If he balances this particular trade well enough, he’ll be able to claim one of the only Potions-inclined Gryffindors of her year in a useful capacity. If he doesn’t, he’ll be faced with two years of whinging as Granger struggles through the subject. He would prefer to avoid the whinging.
“I take it you have no questions over the grade or the comments on your own essay?” Severus asks first.

Granger shakes her head. “No. I mean, I was arguing with you for the second half after I abandoned the topic of eggs, but I hadn’t read yours yet. I wrote it down and everything.”

Severus raises both eyebrows. “I would like to see that after we’re done speaking. It may not be useful, but I’d like to judge for myself.” He waits for Granger to retrieve a bound scroll and place it on his desk. “Very well. The essay you received on Saturday evening was indeed from my fifth year. Before that point, I’d already proven myself to be a thorn in Slughorn’s side merely by existing. Some people have natural expressions of magic. Mine has been strongly aligned with Potions from a very young age, whereas your compass is still swinging around, trying to determine itself. You’ve heard of Felix Felicis?”

“Yes, sir. The potion of luck. It’s supposed to be very difficult and takes six months to brew.” There is a gleam in her eyes; Granger very much wants to make the attempt, but isn’t certain of her skill.

“I brewed Felix Felicis for the first time in my first year at Hogwarts. I waited until winter break so that Slughorn was not here to stop me. I completed a perfect brew in less than a month’s time after hearing the best and most useful instruction in Potions I’ve ever received. They came from your current Defence teacher.”

“Less than a month.” Granger stares at him, shocked and delighted. “How? Or what were the instructions, sir?”

“The best and most useful instructions in regards to brewing?” Severus eyes her. “Recipes are stupid and fallible. Treat them as suspect at the least, and as guidelines at the utmost.”

“All right.” Severus can’t read her thoughts, but Granger’s expression is still easy to decipher. She’s debating on how to approach the problem she now faces—what to ask next. “How did you apply those particular instructions to the matter of Felix Felicis, sir?”

Severus grants her the faintest of smiles, pleased. “I looked up complete information on every single ingredient in the potion, which falls well outside the bounds of most textbooks. When is an ingredient most effective? When is it least? What is the best way to use an ingredient? What is the worst? Which of course then leads on to further questions: what sort of potions require ingredients to be of greatest, least, or middling efficacy? What are the common substitutes available for every single ingredient in Felix Felicis, and why do they work? What conditions do they work under? Do you see where I am going with this?”

Granger is displaying her particular and peculiar thoughtful frown, the rare one he sees when she is required to actually think on a problem instead of simply allowing rote memorization to provide the answer. “You mean aside from the fact that brewing potions is more complex than our textbooks have ever implied?”

“Aside from that. Do bear in mind that I’ve been telling all of you this from day one.”

Granger winces. “Yes, sir. I’m just not certain any of us had the education to understand the context you were using.”

Severus thinks on it. “Fair enough. Please continue.”

“Every variation possible with a potion’s ingredients will vary the nature of the potion,” Granger says. “Every substitution that is supposed to cause similar affects will vary it even further.”
“Hence ignoring the given directions listed in Advanced Potion-Making, reexamining the ingredients, and formulating perfect Felix Felicis over winter break. It was given as a holiday gift to my best friend when she returned to school in January.”

“Best friend.” Granger’s look of sympathy is annoying. “You mean Harry’s mum.”

“Lily Evans. She had a name, Miss Granger. I dislike seeing it ignored.”


Severus rolls his eyes. “Why do you think I despise Remus Lupin and Sirius Black?”

“Oh.” Granger blinks a few times. “You mean they were like Draco. They had to, uh, grow out of being...uhm, ill-mannered.”

That’s a level of insight he hadn’t expected, but perhaps he should have. His Slytherins and the Gryffindors have been conspiring since the end of December. “Essentially. However, this is meant to be a discussion of those essays, and of a certain idiot, not of the deceased.”

“Right.” Granger gets out her copy of Severus’s essay, identifiable by the bit of green ink he added to one corner. “This is—I’ve read published potions work, sir. This is definitely of that quality, even if it would have to be re-written for publication to be well-received.”

Severus nods. “I did publish it. It was very well-received by the Potions community of Wizarding Britain and Europe.”

“But—Slughorn—he ignored it!” Granger bursts out, angered all over again. She certainly enjoys embodying a Gryffindor’s fierce intolerance of injustice.

“He did not ignore it, Miss Granger. He stole it.”

Severus seems to have stumbled over Granger’s most-loathed cardinal sin. Her entire expression becomes tight with rage, though her voice is quiet and steady. “What.”

“Horace Slughorn copied this essay, granting me the barest nod of a passing grade while having the audacity to comment that I was being too arrogant. He then rewrote the essay in publishable format and submitted it to the appropriate division within the Ministry.”

Severus’s lip curls in derision. “His mistake was in leaving the publication proof on his desk, wishing to brag about it in front of his N.E.W.T. students. I saw the book during class. When I noticed its title indicated a very familiar concept, I stole it and discovered that he’d barely bothered to put his own turn of phrase on it before claiming all of my work as his own. That is when the enmity truly began, Miss Granger. I still had my original essay, and like any properly paranoid Slytherin, I’d embedded it with magic to mark it as an original, and to reveal its written date to anyone who could cast the proper spell. Slughorn did not think to backdate his submission. I was able to easily and irrefutably prove that it was my work, and I made an enemy of Slughorn by doing so. The Ministry has kept a close watch on Slughorn’s submitted theses in the field ever since.”

Granger raises an eyebrow. “So...when you make an enemy, you’re certain to do a very good job of it, sir.”

“Miss Granger, if one is going to do something, it should be to the best of their ability,” Severus drawls in response. “Slughorn had no choice but to accept me into N.E.W.T. Potions the next year. It would have been very difficult for him to bar an Outstanding-grade student from the class, but he made certain I remained outcast from the others from that point forward. He especially kept me out of
his ridiculous Slug Club, but I wasn’t fond of the idea of participating in that self-involved idiocy in the first place.”

“What is a Slug Club, and why would anyone want to participate in it?” Granger asks.

“The Slug Club was Slughorn’s means of feeding his own self-importance using the thin and pathetic guise of calling it an academic club for outstanding students. However, Slughorn’s standards required that one be from a famous family, or have a connection to another’s fame. Lily Evans was a prodigious Potions student, but she was ignored by Slughorn during her sixth year. It wasn’t until her seventh year, when it became clear to the school that she and James Potter were likely to wed after Hogwarts, that Slughorn inducted her into his ridiculous club. Potter was from a famous and respected family—more importantly, a wealthy one.”

“But that’s just—it’s blatant favoritism, not about grades at all!” Granger is once again infuriated. It’s amusing to watch someone cycle from curiosity to fury and back again so rapidly.

“It was exactly that. It was blatant favoritism condoned by both Headmaster Dippet and Headmaster Dumbledore. Take from that what you will, though if you ask, Professor Dumbledore will say that there was no reason to dismantle a pre-existing school club.”

“That’s…sort of depressing. I’ve been curious as to why Hogwarts seems to have such a lack of student associations,” Granger says. “When did you finally publish that essay?”

“1978. I didn’t have the opportunity to do so in 1976, as I was underage.”

Granger looks at him in frustration. “But it’s not in the library! Professor McGonagall’s treaties on certain types of Transfiguration is in there, and Professor Flitwick’s Charms theories, and even this Slughorn idiot has a book in there! Why don’t you?”

“Partly because the nature of my work until quite recently required that I not publish, lest I hand over a gift-wrapped weapon to the enemy,” Severus answers. “As to why that early publication would not be in Hogwarts’ library? Research on Runespoors in regards to Potions was banned by Slughorn in 1979, citing the need to decrease the illegal importation of Runespoor eggs. That was three years before his official retirement from Hogwarts. The only references to Runespoors you will find in Hogwarts’ library relates to Care of Magical Creatures.”

“That…is petty. That’s just…” Granger’s face twists up as she decides once again not to blurt out whatever inappropriate term she is dwelling on. “Pathetic.”

“Regardless, Professor Dumbledore will not rescind the ban, so that first work lingers in obscurity as far as Hogwarts students are concerned.”

Granger gives him an odd look. “But—maybe I’m overstepping and interpreting this the wrong way, but why don’t you ask Professor Salazar to rescind the ban, sir?”

Severus stares at her in sheer, muted fury. He’d never once considered that, and it’s so fucking obvious that he really should have. “You are entirely correct, and I despise the fact that you thought of that solution before I did.”

Granger smiles. “Sorry, sir.”

Severus growls under his breath. Granger just inadvertently broke the fucking balance of trade, and now he has to remedy it again. He has it a moment later, and it also gives him the excuse to call on someone. “Miss Granger, do you know who my two best Potions students are in seventh year?”
Granger shakes her head. “No, sir.”

“Fred and George Weasley.”

Granger’s eyebrows fly up in a comical manner. “How? From what I’ve heard the others say, I thought they were failing Potions!”

“Whether they fail the coursework for the entirety of seventh year is irrelevant. All that matters is their N.E.W.T. scores.” Severus leans back in his chair and crosses his arms. “They are willing to try new things. Deviations. Experimentation.”

“I always thought their idea of experimentation was to simply throw things into a cauldron until they had a result or an explosion,” Granger says.

Severus smirks at her. “Miss Granger, sometimes the nature of experimentation requires exactly that in order to achieve something that is new. We’ve spent the last half-hour discussing your fatal failure with Potions. You have never once deviated from the listed recipe for a draught or a brew. Your essays for this class often reflect that same lack of imagination. You have never looked at your ingredients beyond their initial face value. You are not yet prepared for the difference in thought that accompanies a N.E.W.T. Potions class…but you could be.”

“I see.” The pause is long enough that Severus wonders if that will be the end of the conversation until Miss Granger seems to brace herself. “Then how do I—how do I gain that understanding, sir?”

“Wait.” Severus casts his Patronus, giving the European iaculus a narrow-eyed look. He’s never had the opportunity to use it to pass along a message. “Deliver this in Parseltongue,” Severus finally decides. “Nizar, I’m in my office. I need that book I loaned you last year, the one with the notations you find so interesting.” The iaculus flies around in its favored tiny loop and vanishes.

“That is an interesting Patronus, sir,” Granger comments, but he can detect no hint of snideness. “I’m not certain a iaculus would have occurred to me.”

“Whereas the fact that yours is a Kneazle surprises no one at all.”

It takes Nizar five minutes to Apparate into the room. “Sorry, I had to bloody well find it—hello, Miss Granger,” he adds when he spies Granger.

“Hello, sir,” Granger replies politely.

Nizar holds out the book to Severus. “I have second-years playing magical tag in the rubbish room, so I was able to convince Sasha to take a few minutes and watch after them. Otherwise, it wouldn’t have been possible for me to bring this to you until four, but it sounded as if it was urgent.”

“Why do you have one of Professor Snape’s copies of the Potions N.E.W.T. textbook?” Granger asks as she recognizes the cover.

“Because it’s fascinating,” Nizar answers.

“Because he’s a Potions Master,” Severus adds, amused when Nizar glares at him. “It isn’t my fault you recalled enough to remember what is needed for a house-elf to recognize that mastery.”

Nizar tilts his head and then grins at Severus in a way that promises mischief—and probably the need to plot vengeance. “Technically, if you hadn’t moved the painting back to the fireplace, I wouldn’t be here for that mastery to be recognized. Therefore, it very much is your fault!” he declares, and then Disapparates.
Severus feels his eye twitch. “You did not just—tu—¿cómo te atreves? Tu es un bastardo absoluto. ¡Te estrangularé en tu puto dormir!”

He remembers more Castilian than he thought, possibly because most if it was swearing. Then he recalls himself and looks at Granger. “You do not speak Spanish, and you heard nothing of that.”

Granger refuses to meet his eyes. “I don’t know what the last sentence means, sir.”

A partial understanding of Spanish, then. He’ll bear that in mind. “Your fatal academic flaw, Miss Granger, it is your absolute faith in a book’s printed word. Any fool can write something down in a book. That does not make them intelligent or correct. I require that you return this book to me at the end of term.”

Severus holds out the book until she grasps it, but doesn’t yet let go. “If you accept this from me, your coursework and homework for the rest of the term will change. Yes, you will still have no difficulty passing your Potions O.W.L. You could take it now and score an Outstanding. The point is this: do you wish to understand the art of Potions, Miss Granger, or would you prefer to coast along, dependent on books with inadequate instructions?”

“I don’t want to coast along regarding anything, sir!” Granger snatches it out of his grip, glaring at him. “Please tell me that the assigned work for essays will be less dull.”

“Significantly.” Severus gives the book a pointed look. “Disregard the written assignment you received from me this morning in class. Your new assignment is to tell me how it is possible to reduce the brewing time of Polyjuice. I do not care about the length of what is written as long as you are specific and accurate.”

Granger hesitates with her hand on the book’s front cover. “Why Polyjuice?”

“If you could produce perfect Polyjuice on your first try in your second year after stealing the ingredients, you do not need to concern yourself with learning the potion as it is written. It’s now time to concern yourself with learning to improve it. There are notes in that book in regards to that potion, but they are not the answer to your assignment. It’s a different variant.”

“How did you—” Granger bites off the last word. It’s too late and she knows it. “How did you know?”

Severus smiles at her, the unpleasant version he perfected to use on certain students, despised Death Eaters, and hated Ministry officials. “Mister Potter was thinking on it last term when I accused him of stealing the ingredients. Alas that it was not him, but Barty Crouch Junior.”

“You—you used Legilimency on him! That’s—rude!” Granger sputters. “And illegal!”

“Not if your intent is to ensure that someone else does not die,” Severus retorts, his tone like acid. “Legalities do not concern me when lives are at stake, Miss Granger.”

She doesn’t argue with him further, possibly because she isn’t certain what sort of argument to make. Instead, she glances down at the book. “Extra credit if I can figure out what your Polyjuice variant does without brewing it first?”

Severus snorts. “Miss Granger, your grade in my class is a perfect O. What would you do with extra credit?”

“You’re about to make my assignments more difficult, sir,” Granger replies. “I’m going to maintain that perfect Outstanding, thank you very much.”
“Be certain that you do.” Severus waits until she leaves the classroom, clutching the book to her chest and looking like she’s been granted the means to find immortality. “And I would very much like to know who the hell taught you Occlumency.”

* * * * *

That is definitely not what Hermione expected to come about from her meeting with Snape. She envisioned far more yelling, insults, and acidic commentary. Instead, it was…well, it was informative.

She doesn’t have class until the double for Care of Magical Creatures at three o’clock, so she finds a quiet alcove on the ground floor and starts paging through the old Potions book. Hermione didn’t do much with Moste Potent Potions when she’d convinced Lockhart to give her a pass to check out the book from the Restricted Section during second year. Most of its contents had just seemed too…intense. However, she did write down the full formula for Polyjuice Potion before returning the book, to Madam Pince’s irritated relief.

Advanced Potion-Making isn’t nearly as daunting to look at in terms of illustrations. It’s the potions themselves. Every single recipe in the book has notations added in younger Snape’s handwriting. Sometimes it’s only a few words, but often there are complicated notes that involve more steps than what is printed—or they contradict the instructions entirely. He’s even drawn lines through steps and ingredients on multiple occasions to replace them with his own alternatives, along with how to use them.

How did you figure this out? Hermione wonders idly, and then decides to keep writing down every question she has. She checks the book’s printing date after writing the question on a blank scroll and discovers that the book isn’t a copy from the 1970s, which would have been Professor Snape’s decade of attendance, but the 1940s. That makes it a hand-me-down, probably from a parent that attended Hogwarts.

Hermione lights up with excitement even as she’s scribbling down the thought that Snape probably had access to this book before he even started Hogwarts. He did say his magic has always been inclined towards Potions, and a lot of brewing doesn’t require a wand. He could have been making potions before school…and that quickly becomes question number three even as she’s plotting her visit to the library’s archives. She really wants to know why he emphasized Prince on his fifth-year essay.

She gets to the back of the book and is about to close it when more of Snape’s spidery writing catches her eye. Written on the inside back cover in neat, firm printing are the words: This book is the property of the Half-Blood Prince.

“All right. You definitely did not like your father,” Hermione mutters, closing the book and shoving it into her bag. Half-Blood. She isn’t certain if that’s simply a rejection of half of his family, or if Snape meant it by blood purity standards.

She probably shouldn’t pry, but she’s always been curious. Snape didn’t say not to go looking for anything about his family, after all.

Madam Pince gives Hermione a stiff nod when she enters the library, and Hermione smiles back, unoffended. It took her a while to realize that she’s on good terms with the librarian; they both treat
books the same way.

Hermione taps on the card catalogue with one finger, trying to figure out how to phrase her request. “I’d like to find information on anyone with the family name Snape or Prince who attended Hogwarts.” When she opens the drawer, it’s not a card that flies out, but a list.

She grabs the list, shuts the drawer, and walks away as she reads the references. Most of them are in the Daily Prophet’s archives the library keeps on the fourth floor, though a few are in books. None of them are about a Snape attending Hogwarts or being noted in a magical publication.

Making her way through the Prince references takes a while. They’re an old Wizarding Jewish family, which makes her wonder at the lack of Princes in Hogwarts. The family seems to be nice enough from what she reads in ancient copies of the Prophet. The few books written by Princes are focused on interesting subjects, even if the execution is a bit dull.

Hermione has nearly run out of time before she has to rush off to Care of Magical Creatures when she finally finds evidence of a sole Prince student attending Hogwarts in 1949. It’s a newspaper article from the Prophet in awful condition—they definitely tried a different sort of newsprint that year, and it was a miserable failure.

The Prophet must have been having a dull news week if they were bothering to cover student activities at Hogwarts, but it gives Hermione a picture of a sullen, skinny, unhappy-looking girl with a long face and pale skin. Eileen Prince, fifteen years old, fifth-year student and captain of Hogwarts’ Gobstones Team.

“We had a Gobstones Team?” Hermione wonders aloud. They really are lacking in activities for students that aren’t homework-related. There isn’t much else to do in Hogwarts aside from Quidditch. They still have an informal Gobstones Club, but this old official team competed against other groups in Britain and Europe.

Hermione looks at the photograph again. It’s hard to make out any real details, and the photograph’s magic is so deteriorated that it doesn’t even move anymore. She’s still almost certain that this is Snape’s mother. She rather hopes that Eileen Prince grew out of being sullen and unhappy by the time she had a child. Maybe she did, given Snape’s preference for her.

Or maybe Snape’s father was just so much worse that Eileen looked like a saint in comparison. That’s an unhappy thought.

Hermione pulls out the book again and flips to the back. “You’re not a Half-blood because someone’s magic decided to skip a generation. Your father and his family were all Muggles. But you don’t hate Muggles, or you wouldn’t have been friends with Harry’s mother.”

She closes the book again, pursing her lips. There is a Half-blood as Slytherin’s Head of House. Slytherin House, which always boasted of taking only those of Pure blood. Instead, that’s never been true. There are Half-bloods and Muggle-born Slytherin students that she’s met and talked to, now that it’s safer for them to admit to what they are.

Snape dealt with being a Half-blood in Slytherin House when it probably wasn’t safe to be anything but a Pure-blood. Despite that, he’d still claimed his mother’s name and turned it into a bloody title: the Half-Blood Prince.

Then why join Voldemort in the first place? She’s almost certain he wasn’t always a spy, but if he didn’t believe in blood purity…why?
Hermione had really hoped to find an explanation as to why Professor Snape is—well, Snape. Instead, what she’s found has left her more confused than when she started.

She gets through Care of Magical Creatures almost on autopilot. Fortunately, they’re studying thestrals again, which Hermione can’t see. The class mostly involves keeping an eye on the environment around the place where Hagrid says the thestral herd is gathered, watching for changes on the ground, on trees, or the thestrals’ meat pile. Two of the Slytherins can see the thestrals, which makes Hermione feel badly for them, but at least she can watch Daphne and Richard Vaisey pat the thestrals and feed them. It tells her a bit more about what the blasted things are supposed to look and act like.

She spends her class time in Muggle Studies thinking about Snape and a Potions book rather than anything Professor Burbage has to say about telly. She’s almost always wrong, wrong, wrong, but Hermione needs this class on her O.W.L.s for political reasons. She did enough research to know that witches and wizards—magicians—entering the Ministry tend to be viewed more favorably if they score well in Muggle Studies. It doesn’t matter that the entire course is nonsense. It’s one of the only classes in Hogwarts where Professor Burbage doesn’t set the exam; that’s done by a “Muggle Specialist” within the Ministry, and Professor McGonagall has assured Hermione that they are far more accurate than Burbage. Hermione has the feeling that Professor McGonagall likes Professor Burbage well enough as a person, but is entirely displeased with her teaching. She isn’t bad at it—she’s just wrong.

While Burbage is distracted with slides showing off televisions from the bloody 1950s and calling them modern Muggle technology, Hermione pages through Advanced Potion-Making until she finds its Polyjuice recipe. It looks to be the same, though she’ll need to dig out her copied instructions from Moste Potent Potions to compare them. The variant instructions are there, too, but there is no mention of what those variations do.

Hermione frowns and puts her quill to paper. She’ll be going right back to the library after dinner, but this time she’ll be researching potions ingredients.

* * * *

On the afternoon of Wednesday the fourteenth, Salazar, Severus, Minerva, and Septima enter the staff lounge after classes to find Nizar already present. Severus is only hiding in the lounge to escape the Valentine’s Day craze of infatuated students, though it is pleasing to see so many samples of Spiritum Veritatis trading hands. Most of the dunderheads desperately need multiple breaths of truth shoved under their noses.

Nizar is leaning back in his chair, staring up at the ceiling. A rather large scroll is resting on the table in front of him.

“What is that?” Salazar asks.

“That, brother, is a deadly weapon,” Nizar answers.

Minerva raises an eyebrow. “Miss Granger, I presume.”

“You would be presuming correctly.” Nizar is still staring up at the ceiling. “Has she always been like this?”
“I had to order her to keep her first-year essays below ten feet, or I would dock points for having to read eight extra feet per essay,” Minerva says in a brisk voice, putting a kettle on for a quick cup of tea. “What did she give you?”

“No, too curious.” Salazar snatches up the scroll before Nizar can respond and lets it unroll. The resulting length of paper is…daunting. “Dear gods,” Salazar says in blank amazement.

“It’s thirty-two feet!” Nizar bursts out. “When I said she could drown her enemies in paperwork, I meant drown them, not beat them to death with it!”

Minerva looks as if she desperately wants to laugh. “If Miss Granger has presented you with a weapon, then she is indeed grasping that you are teaching a Defence class.”

Salazar lets out a long whistle. Severus glances over to find that Salazar is reading the essay, wide-eyed. “No offence, Lioness, but did this one make the Hat cry, too?”

“I haven’t read it yet. What did she do?” Nizar asks, glancing up at his brother.

“The Sorting Hat didn’t delay at all before choosing Gryffindor, actually,” Minerva tells Salazar.

Severus frowns in suspicion and points at Salazar. “Please do not terrify me by saying that walking encyclopedia should have been Sorted into my House.” He will tolerate her in order to have a student in his N.E.W.T. class who isn’t flailing about helplessly, but the idea of Granger as a Slytherin is appalling.

“No. Well, maybe.” Salazar keeps reading. “I’d give her perfect marks based on the first twelve inches alone. Knowledge of a Ravenclaw, ferocity of a Hufflepuff, self-preservation of a Slytherin, and wouldn’t piss on you to put out the fire levels of Gryffindor.”

Minerva gets out a spoon for her tea. “That is still far more Gryffindor over the other three.”

“I thought vindictiveness was a Slytherin trait,” Septima says while glancing over at Severus.

Severus gives her a bland look. “If they’re burning to death, then they’re not suffering long enough for it to count as vindictive. That’s more of a mercy killing.”

Salazar abruptly lowers the scroll. “I will give you all my earthly possessions if you marry my brother.”

“Oh, for—Salazar!” Nizar yells, getting up to snatch Granger’s essay out of Salazar’s hands.

“What?” Salazar spreads his arms wide, smiling. “I’ve been married five times, little brother. You’ve five weddings to catch up on!”

Nizar glares at Salazar as he taps his wand to the essay, rolling it back up into a neat bundle. “Shut Up. Besides, what earthly possessions? I’ve seen no proof you own anything except a small flat and a moldering Gringotts vault’s mysterious contents.”

Salazar’s expression lights up. “Yes, that! All my earthly possessions and a vault!”

“Salazar Fernan Deslizarse, it is not 996. It is 1996. Please stop trying to purchase me a spouse,” Nizar hisses.

Minerva glances at Severus. “I’m surprised you’re not responding to this.”

Severus gives her an amused look. “Wealth, land, and titles are traditional, not just wealth.”
“Do I still have those properties?” Salazar asks—right before Nizar clobbers him across the face with Miss Granger’s thirty-two foot essay.

“I’m leaving,” Nizar announces, scowling his way out of the room. On his way through the door, he passes by Pomona and Poppy, who both stare after him in confusion.

“What is that all about?” Poppy wishes to know. “Usually if one of us is storming off in a snit, it’s you, Severus.”

Severus glares at her. “Not. Every. Time.” He will lay claim to most of the time, though.

Salazar rubs at his jaw. “That actually hurt. I think beating someone to death with that essay might be possible.”

Severus hears the whisper of “Marriage!” from Septima before she, Poppy, and Pomona all turn to give Severus matching expectant looks. “So! Is there something you wish to tell us?”

“Absolutely not,” Severus replies, deciding it’s wiser to avoid Valentine’s Day chaos elsewhere. He pauses in the lounge doorway to glance over his shoulder. “You might, however, wish to interrogate Minerva as to how enjoyable her nights have been of late.”

“Severus Snape, I’ll have your head for that!” Minerva shouts after him.

Severus ignores the threat while considering where Nizar is likely to be going. He then Apparates directly to the seventh floor corridor in front of the tapestry. It’s an effective place to lie in wait.

Nizar actually halts in place when he realizes that Severus is leaning against the hideous tapestry, doing an excellent job of blending in due to a partial Disillusionment Charm. “Hello?”

“Have you been avoiding me?” Severus asks as he drops the charm and steps forward.

“During the day? Not intentionally. It’s been an interesting week so far. Also, I need to go grade this…” Nizar holds up Granger’s essay. “This weapon. I imagine the words are even worse. She isn’t the only one who turned in an early essay to snatch up that extra credit I offered, either.”

“I wanted to apologize,” Severus makes himself say. “For Monday morning.”

Nizar lowers the essay, his eyes narrowing. “Do you even know why you’re apologizing?”

“Apparently, for once again impugning your sense of taste.”

“Yes. That would be it.” Nizar sighs and steps closer. “Severus. Your intelligence is astounding and your wit is stimulating, but to complement both, you are also a handsome man.”

“Rubbish,” Severus replies. “I am ghastly pale, sullen, sour-faced—”

“Do not describe Eileen Ruth Prince to me, Severus!” Nizar snaps in sudden anger. “I am well aware of what she looked like!”

Severus rears back in shock. They both came to a silent agreement years ago never to discuss his mother, who would have been one of the many Slytherins Nizar kept watch over during his time in the portrait. “I’m not.”

“You very much are,” Nizar retorts. “That woman was never happy, not from the moment she stepped into the Common Room at age eleven and left at age seventeen. She was the very definition of sullen, an attitude perfected by her parents, who were both unsociable, petulant bullies.
“Not once were you ever so unpleasant. You entered that Common Room as a bright-eyed, intelligent child with interest in life, and you had the proud smile of one who knows things others do not. Unlike your fucking grandparents, you never once lorded that knowledge over others, even when you could have. You expressed it, to Slughorn’s intense regret, but that isn’t the same thing.”

“Nizar—”

“I wasn’t fucking finished,” Nizar growls, walking forward until Severus is forced to retreat, his back pressed firmly against the tapestry. “You had a shine that Voldemort took away, but when you came back? You were broken, but you rebuilt yourself. You were more. Even when brooding, even at your most bitter moments, you burn inside in a way that makes your eyes reflect all of the passion of your intellect. When you smile, it’s like seeing a brief glimpse of all the waiting knowledge of the universe.”

Nizar steps back and gives him a brief, tired smile. “What have I possibly got to offer in the face of that?”

It takes a moment for Severus to find his voice. “Are you now impugning my sense of taste?”

“I—” Nizar’s expression doesn’t shutter and hide the whole of who he is, not that like terrible week before the Solstice. He just seems disconcerted. “I’m sorry. I should not have—I shouldn’t have said that. I need to go…” He sighs again. “I need to do my fucking job. I’ll see you at breakfast, Severus,” he says, and Disapparates.

Severus stares at the place where Nizar was standing, trying to figure out what in the hell just happened. A snide response in regards to what Nizar said was probably not the best decision, but it’s still such a fucking habit to be…vile.

He Apparates back to his own quarters and sits down heavily on the sofa. The glowing embers of the fire turn into spreading flame when the elves recognize that he is present and add wood to the coals.

If Severus utterly loathed his father, then he truly resented his mother. Tobias Snape’s memorable moments involved yelling, screaming, terrifying small children with no means to defend themselves, vomiting, and generally being a drunken nuisance whose only real value was pulling in unemployment benefits from the British government. Eileen Snape did not work, not in the Wizarding world or the Muggle one. She spent her time at home, and Severus was the only one there to catch the brunt of her resentment.

_You only catch flies with vinegar. Try not to be such a sour child, Severus._

_You’re so utterly dour! Why that little girl associates with you, I’ve no idea._

_Os and Es on your O.W.L.s, then? I suppose that’s acceptable._

_Your temper is the absolute worst! God, but you’re just like your father._

Severus feels his lip curl in angry contempt. “And I hate you too, you old dead bat.”

He gets up from the sofa and decides that he’s going to take a bath before dinner, the better to remove the fumes gathered from a full day of brewing performed by the competent as well as the inept. “I was right, though,” he mutters to himself after washing the worst of the cauldron smoke from his hair. “From one stupid blunder right into another.”

He can’t help but think of Nizar in that moment, the green in his grey eyes blazing as if it were on the point of magical fire. _You burn inside in a way that makes your eyes reflect all of the passion of your_
Severus gets out of the bath, dries and dresses, and then faces the accusatory face in the mirror. “I
don’t see what you see, Nizar.” He eyes his straight, stark black hair that has finally grown back to
the length he preferred before that damned cauldron incident in the summer of 1991; his gaze is
piercing and sharp, not kind at all. There is no mistaking that his skin is ghostly pale, though at least
it is clear, and has always done him the favor of not producing noticeable stubble until the day is all
but over with.

*          *          *          *

Nizar resists the urge to bang his head against his own desk. Why, why, why does he keep sticking
his foot in it? Gods, why? He can charm people he absolutely despises, but he can’t figure out how
to stop saying exactly the wrong thing to someone he loves. He said he wouldn’t rush the man, and
Severus was not ready to hear that—not any of it.

Job. You have a job. You are a teacher. Please act like one, Nizar thinks, and mentally sets
everything aside to deal with later.

He looks up from piling essays on his desk to snatch the piece of paper that appears in the air. “And
what are you, then?” He unfolds it to find Severus’s handwriting in black ink, and sucks in a
surprised breath when he reads the words.

If I burn, then you are a radiance that never ceases.

That is really not helping him to focus on anything he needs to do this evening. At all.
Thirty-Two Feet

Chapter Summary

“You shortened that blasted thirty-two foot essay?”

Chapter Notes

Betas/cheer-reader credit continues: @mrsstanley, @sanerontheinside, @jabberwockypie, @norcumi!

I broke 3k followers on Tumblr (bwuh!?) and decided that weird moment deserved a chapter.

By that evening, Nizar has six total essays that have been turned in early. He saves Granger’s for last. If Salazar was that intrigued, there is a very real chance he’ll start reading it, get distracted, and forget to grade the rest of them.

Other things about the twentieth century that are stupid: grading scales and the legal requirement that students have a grade from each course at the end of the year. He understands the purpose of the O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s, even if he still thinks they’re ridiculous, but the rest of it is sheer nonsense and extra work. He only has two hundred fourteen students, and he knows how every single one of them is progressing—or not progressing.

Nizar reads Granger’s essay with both eyebrows stuck up near his hairline. Maybe he isn’t quite as aware of it as he should be in one particular instance. “Vicious” might actually be an understatement. He also isn’t teaching the magic she discusses in the latter half of her essay. Granger asked him about Mind Magic, but he hasn’t introduced the concepts she writes of to the fifth-years beyond the fact of the subject’s existence.

He retrieves a blank scroll, sits down with her essay rolled back to the beginning, and begins again. He isn’t even going to be able to grade this properly unless he takes notes.

The elves bring him dinner when it becomes blatantly obvious that he isn’t budging from his office. Nizar notices long enough to sling back a cup of tea that’s already turned cold and then forgets the tray is there again.

“Well, that just helped me finalize several decisions.” Nizar makes a copy of Granger’s essay, followed by several others, and Apparates directly to Minerva’s office to drop the largest scroll on her desk.

Minerva doesn’t jump in alarm, but she does peer up at him without raising her head. “Those who are polite use the door, Nizar. They do not Apparate directly into my office.”

“Yes, but if I’d used the door, others would know I was here, and at the moment I’d like to keep this between us,” Nizar replies, smiling. “Tea?”
Minerva leans back and presses her hands to her hips until her spine cracks. “Oh, that’s a marvelous idea. What time is it?”

“Two hours after dinner. Did you remember it?” Nizar asks.

She sighs and drops her quill. “No. I was caught up in grading and didn’t notice at all.”

“I thought so. I did the same thing.” Nizar calls for Dobby, who is starting to look resigned to the idea that he fetches food for a bunch of idiots who forget to eat. The fact that there are two cups on the tray is a blatant hint.

“Do join me,” Minerva says dryly. “If I am not the only one neglecting such things, better to do it now or be hounded by a great number of house-elves.”

They have tea, which is a green—an interesting change from the usual black. Nizar tries to enjoy the puffed bits of pastries, stuffed with meats, cheeses, or cheeses and vegetables, but there is something about the flavors among several of them that remind him of something he doesn’t like. It isn’t a bad flavor; he just can’t identify it, and it’s off-putting.

Minerva motions to the bound scroll on her desk. “This looks to be Granger’s mysterious thirty-two foot essay. The rest of staff is already whispering about it in horror. Why have you brought it to me, Nizar? I see quite enough horror, I assure you.”

“This is a copy of the original, which I would literally frame and hang on the wall if I wouldn’t need to drop it from the height of a tower just to view it all.” Nizar smiles. “It’s my argument for pushing Hermione Granger up from fifth-year Defence into the sixth-year N.E.W.T. class.”

Minerva frowns. “We don’t really do such things, Nizar.”

“Oh? So we stifle our students and ignore their accomplishments instead of allowing them to demonstrate their strengths?” Nizar rolls his eyes. “Please. That’s the governing board speaking, and they can all go fuck one of those Muggle blenders.”

She puts her napkin to her lips while trying not to laugh. “Nizar, that was a terrible thing to say. At least have pity on those poor blenders! Tell me why Miss Granger should be moved into a higher class when it’s already the second month of the latter half of the term.”

“Her wandwork is improving—and I mean she’s going to be in the very small selection of students who are excellent duelists,” Nizar says. “She still needs a push, but as of last Saturday she is almost there. I do not pity any Death Eater who ever decides to get in her way.”

Minerva nods. “Hagrid has been bragging on her since that unofficial lesson. What else?”

“Granger’s first essay was twenty-four feet, turned in early. Not only was it the best in her entire year, it was N.E.W.T.-level work. On the first day that I was willing to accept my February assignment early in exchange for extra credit, she and several others turned in their second essays. Aside from its size, Granger’s is once again N.E.W.T.-level work on a N.E.W.T.-level subject that I’ve introduced in fifth-year by name, but not by concept or use. Not only do I believe it will be the best in all of fifth-year, I don’t doubt it will take top marks for sixth-year, too.”

“You really should set limits, Nizar,” Minerva says, eyeing the scroll in concern.

Nizar makes a dismissive noise. “I really shouldn’t. Most of them are lazy and barely scrape by with the required sixteen feet. It is not difficult to write sixteen feet over a period of two months.”
“Hmm.” Minerva smirks at him. “But you want something out of this arrangement, too.”

“You’re learning from Salazar.” Nizar smiles back. “My twin Weasley assistants graduate at the end of term. Miss Granger turns seventeen on nineteenth September of this year. She’s my best candidate by far to replace them, as I know she could keep up with both her own courses, anything I might ask her to do to assist me with the lower classes, and any plausible apprenticeship she might ask for. It would be very convenient to have Miss Granger in the seventh-year N.E.W.T. class next term.”

Minerva looks surprised. “You believe Miss Granger to be capable of doing all of sixth-year’s Defence work, as well as taking her Defence O.W.L.s with the rest of the fifth-years?”

“Absolutely. She works better under pressure—she doesn’t have time to panic about it if her hours are already filled with things to do,” Nizar replies. “You’ve noticed it, too, or you wouldn’t have signed off on that Time-Turner in her third year.”

“That’s true,” Minerva admits. “Her only fumble was taking on Divination and Muggle Studies. The former did not suit her, given Sybil’s…er, flamboyant nature. The latter was unnecessary, but she insists on continuing it for career-related reasons.”

“And Salazar says Hogwarts’ Muggle Studies is a load of hogwash. Pun not intended.”

Minerva looks thoughtful. “Salazar would be in the position to know, wouldn’t he?”

“If I thought he could do it without eating his way through a stone wall in frustration, I’d tell Sal to teach both classes just so they bloody well learn something.” Nizar sighs. “We’re digressing, though. I have several students who I need to shift upwards, and I’m not certain how Filius will feel about discussing Miss Chang.”

“Miss Chang is doing that well?” Minerva asks, raising both eyebrows in polite surprise.

“She is, but then, she was given a rather harsh reason to succeed.” Minerva nods in grim agreement. “Miss Chang might be ready to take her Defence N.E.W.T. at the end of term, but I’m not calling it a certainty. What I do know is that Miss Chang’s skills are moving past the sixth-year curriculum—not to Miss Granger’s extent, but she’s still doing it—and she needs to be in an environment where she’ll feel like she can continue to learn. That’s the seventh-year class.”

“You are plotting to restack the deck, aren’t you?” Minerva murmurs, pouring herself a fresh cup of tea. “Well. Only these two? You don’t intend on shuffling any more students about?”

Nizar places a second, twenty-foot essay on Minerva’s desk. “Yes, but it’s a student whose family would take some very careful diplomatic negotiating in order to convince them it’s the right decision. I have no wish to be murdered.”

Minerva unrolls the scroll just far enough to read the name. “Ah, yes. I understand exactly what you mean. Should I intervene?”

“Not yet. I have a few ideas.” Nizar smiles again. “There is also Miss Lovegood.”

“Miss Lovegood?” Minerva asks in astonishment. “She’s succeeding well enough to be placed in a fifth-year course? I can barely keep her focused in class as it is!”

“It’s very hard to focus when no one has ever taught you how to know the difference between what a normal magician can see, and what an Elemental Magician can see,” Nizar says. “Unfortunately, we don’t have any Elemental Magicians aside from her. We can give her the old lectures on Elemental Magical Theory, but that isn’t the same thing as hearing about it from someone who shares
in those experiences.”

“I see.”

“Besides, right now that isn’t the point. Academically, Miss Lovegood does still need the push, and I would absolutely not allow her to sit the Defence O.W.L. But in other matters? Yes, she needs this. Thank goodness she belongs to Filius and not Pomona, or I’d have a bloody war on my hands.”

“I should possibly discuss it with Albus,” Minerva starts to say.

Nizar shakes his head. “It isn’t his decision. You’re Miss Granger’s Head of House, Minerva. It’s your decision and yours alone. It’s the same for Miss Weasley—you have final say. Albus Dumbledore doesn’t even sign paperwork on the matter.”

Minerva looks at the scrolls on her desk. “Am I to read these before making a decision?”

Nizar inclines his head. “If it will help you be comfortable with the idea, then certainly.”

His conversation with Filius goes much better than he expected. “Do you truly think Miss Chang can do it?” Filius asks, looking surprisingly hopeful. “I realize the N.E.W.T.s may not be possible, but the rest?”

“If you’d asked me that question in November, I would have said no. Absolutely not,” Nizar says. “Now? Yes.”

Filius nods. “And Miss Lovegood?”

“Not the O.W.L.s,” Nizar answers, and Filius breathes a sigh of relief. He’s seen the same difficulties, then.

“Good lad,” Filius says, patting Nizar’s arm. “Thank you for looking after my Ravenclaws, both of them. Miss Chang has had a rough year of it, and I’m so very glad to hear that she’s beginning to recover. Miss Lovegood, I think, could desperately use the boost in confidence. You have my permission—oh. Should I inform them, or will you be doing so?”

“You’re their Head of House, Filius. I think it best if they hear it from you. Besides, you’re the one in control of their schedules.”

Nizar is still lurking in his office near curfew when Minerva steps into the classroom, shutting the door behind her. “You almost missed me for the evening.” His office hours ended at first curfew, but one of his young Hufflepuffs delivered an early essay before darting off to bed.

Minerva strides right into his officer before waving the larger of the two scrolls she’s carrying in his face. “I know why your brother looked so shocked earlier, and that’s aside from the fact that you could have broken his jaw if you’d hit him harder with this essay!”

Nizar smiles. “I take it you had an enlightening evening.”

“Yes!” Minerva huffs, scowling. “This is brilliant madness.”

“It is, yes. She’s entirely correct, by the way.”

Minerva narrows her eyes. “And she asked no one about this? No one at all?”

“No one. I suspected in early January that Miss Granger was up to something involving Mind Magic, given how she reacted to something I said about it, but this is a lot more thorough than I expected.
Now do you understand why I want her in my N.E.W.T. class?"

"Absolutely, yes. If anyone calls you on it, send them to me. I’ll roast their bloody ears!” Minerva declares in a thick rolling burr. “I’ve already confirmed her updated timetable, to be delivered in the morning.” She visibly calms herself, smoothing down the front of her robes. “As to our other Gryffindor—whatever means you attempt in order to convince the family, I’ll support you.”

“I’m glad you said that, because the process has already begun.” Nizar ducks when Minerva tries to hit him over the head with the copy of Granger’s essay. “You said you approved!”

“But you could have waited,” Minerva says in a stern voice, but her eyes are sparkling with amusement. “Presumptive man. Do actually try to get some rest tonight.”

“And you as well…if Salazar lets you,” he adds when she’s almost left his classroom. Minerva turns, delivers one more fierce scowl, and slams the classroom door behind her.

“Dobby?” Nizar waits for the house-elf to show up, brushing crumbs from his spindly fingers. “Can you find Miss Granger and tell her that I need to see her in my office?” Nizar checks his watch. “This may extend beyond the Prefect’s curfew, so if she’s concerned, reassure her that I’ll escort her back before Argus and his insane feline try to attempt anything involving thumbscrews.”

“Dobby will be doing that, and Dobby will remember to leave the classroom door open!” Dobby says, and vanishes.

Nizar is reading through the second half of Granger’s essay for the third time when he hears someone knock on the office door. “Come in.”

Miss Granger opens the door, peering around it nervously. “Sir?”

“Come in please, and yes, definitely shut the door. Considering the entire school is aware of my preferences, I don’t think we need to worry about accusations of improper behavior.”

She smiles a little. “Fred and George wanted to come anyway, but I talked them out of it, sir.” She notices what he’s holding and blanches. “Is something wrong with my essay?”

“No, though it’s certainly dual purpose. If I’d hit Salazar with this any harder, I might have fractured his jaw.”

Granger gives him an odd look. “Do I want to know why you’re hitting your brother with my essay, sir?”

“He started it.” Nizar rolls the essay back up and puts it on his desk. “There is nothing wrong with this essay, and so many things astoundingly correct with it that I wanted to discuss them with you.”

“Okay.” Granger seems to be bracing herself.

“In particular, you go into the specifics of Mind Magic, though you still refer to them as Occlumency and Legilimency. You discuss blood magic links, and then relate them all to your missing friend.”

Granger looks down at the floor and nods. “I did, sir. Should I not have?”

“Why does this school seem bent on encouraging its students not to think?” Nizar sighs. “Dobby?” When the house-elf reappears, he requests tea for two. Dobby glances curiously at Granger and pops out again.
Granger finally looks at him after she’s holding a teacup. “You don’t think I’m wrong.”

“Actually, I think you’re brilliant.”

She flushes. “I wasn’t expecting that. Not from…well. No, I won’t say that. It’s not fair, and I know it isn’t true.”

“Not from a Slytherin?” Nizar smiles when she nods, looking guilty and miserable. “Some concerns are harder to dismiss, though yes, I am aware that you know better. I wouldn’t have extended the offer of being my assistant, much less offering a potential apprenticeship, if you didn’t. I truly do not care about House affiliation beyond desiring to protect those of my brother’s House, children who went without such a thing for far too long.”

Granger frowns. “I don’t see how the Slytherins went unprotected, sir.”

“You don’t.” Nizar thinks about what he’s witnessed in recent months. “Yes, I could see how you could make the connections you did in this essay and still miss an obvious one. The House prejudices will not be remedied overnight. Before I decided to literally fall out of a portrait, Miss Granger, how many Slytherin faculty members dwelt in this school?”

A line appears between her eyebrows as she considers it. “Just…oh. Just one, sir.”

“Exactly. Slytherin House also boasted the smallest student population overall. They were outnumbered, they knew it, and knew they were targets because of it.”

“So they decided to target everyone else first?” Granger asks doubtfully.

“Offence is part of defence,” Nizar reminds her. “They are not disparate concepts, no matter what your rubbish Defence textbooks said.”

“All right.” Granger sips her tea. “You didn’t just bring me here to talk about Houses, though.”

“No. I am absolutely impressed that you took the events of the Triwizard Cup, tied them to dreams your friend suffered from, connected the dots back to Voldemort, and then figured out that Mind Magic would have been your friend’s best line of defence against such a connection.”

“Would have been?” Granger glances down at the floor again. “That sounds more like dead instead of misplaced, sir.”

“My apologies. I didn’t mean to imply that at all. Everything I stated to you before about your friend’s well-being is still true.” Nizar taps his fingers on his desk. This is quickly heading into territory he didn’t yet expect to confront. “You asked me questions about the subject in January, but have you attempted Mind Magic, Miss Granger? Shielding, in particular?”

“It’s a subject of Defence, so yes, though I started when Umbridge—Professor Umbridge—that woman—” Granger winces. “Well—”

“You were studying on your own time to make up for a complete lack of classroom education,” Nizar says for her. “Relax; your opinion of Dolores Umbridge is shared by every teacher within this school, even if the others are being circumspect. Dolores was a terrible person as a student—yes, I observed such—and she never grew out of it. To be quite frank, I’m certain she revels in being horrible.”

Granger nods. “And…at the time, I was doing it to distract myself, sir. Ron was a lot more confident than I was about Harry being…that he would be all right. But everyone said Harry would be okay
during the Tournament, and that ended with Harry being kidnapped by a Port Key, Voldemort returning, Cedric dying, and Harry having to duel Voldemort. Harry readily admitted that the only reason he escaped is because their wands met in *priori incantatum*, like yours and Professor Salazar’s did during that duel at breakfast a few weeks ago.”

“Properly, it’s *priori incantamentum,*” Nizar corrects her. “Previous spell or enchantment. *Incantatum* is a declension of *incantatus*, which means enchantment in the sense of delight, not magic.”

Granger finally looks up, scowling. “Why does everyone keep teaching us incorrect Latin?”

“Centuries of habit,” Nizar replies dryly. “Miss Granger, due to the lovely standards the governing board inflicted, I have been reserving Mind Magic for N.E.W.T. classes, if only not to overwhelm all of you. But if you’re actively attempting to learn it, then I’d really like to know if you’ve had the opportunity to practice.”

Granger shakes her head. “No, sir. I don’t know any practicing Legilimens, and since I wasn’t supposed to be doing this in the first place…”

“Who said that?” Nizar asks in disbelief.

“I had to get the books from the Restricted Section. You’re supposed to have a teacher’s permission to borrow books from that area.” Granger blushes, though to her credit she doesn’t lower her gaze to stare at the floor again.

“And so you forged a pass to gain what you required. Very good,” Nizar says, pleased. “Ten points to Gryffindor for refusing to allow a ridiculous rule keep you from knowledge.”

Granger stares at him. “You just gave me points for breaking the rules.”

“I did, didn’t I? I’ll have to remember to do that more often. I keep forgetting the points system exists,” Nizar explains. “We didn’t concern ourselves with points a thousand years ago.”

*Hogwarts: A History* claimed that the Points Counters have always been there.” Granger seems to be biting back a smile. “Professor Salazar seemed terribly insulted by that idea.”

Nizar laughs. “I’m still amazed that Sal made it past the second page of that book. In the meantime: Miss Granger, within this school there are at least four dozen students who practice Mind Magic shielding aside from my N.E.W.T. students. As for Legilimency, your imbecilic Ministry has declared that one can only perform that magic if one is seventeen or older. That gives you the choice of shielding practice with myself, Professor Salazar, Professor Snape, or your Headmaster. It’s a shame none of the female teachers have the training, though your Head of House is learning it from Salazar. You could wait and allow her to test your shielding, if you’d prefer, but I don’t know when those lessons will be finished.”

“Practice.” Granger blinks a few times. “I—well. You’re my Defence teacher, aren’t you?”

“And not nearly as terrifying as the other available options?” Nizar asks, curious as to her opinion.

“Professor Dumbledore doesn’t tell us everything, even when there are times when I think he should have.” Granger’s eyes shift over to stare resolutely at the wall. “Professor Snape has, uh, calmed down a bit since his, er, relationship with you, but he was initially terrifying all the time, so calm is a relative term. Your brother is a Founder and is also sort of, uhm…imposing.”

Nizar didn’t expect Granger to have that opinion of Dumbledore. Interesting. “Do you know how I
would test your shielding, Miss Granger?"

Granger swallows and nods. “We would face each other and look each other in the eyes. You would raise your wand and cast the *Legilimens* spell.”

“I don’t need a wand. A wand is used if one prefers to attack rather than simply look.” Nizar waits for Granger to digest that. “I also do not dig through anyone’s memories without permission, never fear. I find it very ill-mannered. We would meet each other’s eyes, yes, and I would merely attempt to slip past your shields. I will try not to pry; this exercise is about keeping me out, not about me trying to discover what Gryffindors talk about between classes.”

“Quidditch,” Granger says in an immediate, despairing tone. “It’s O.W.L. year, and it’s always *Quidditch*!”

“Not even sex can displace Quidditch?” Nizar asks. “What are teenagers actually doing these days?”

Granger turns an interesting shade of reddish-purple. “Not that. At least, not me. No, thank you.”

“Sorry. However, as I’ve ruffled you, this is an opportune time to test your shielding ability. If you still want to,” Nizar adds.

Granger hurriedly places her teacup back onto the tray. “Yes, sir. Please.”

Nizar tilts his head from side to side until tendons release with pleasing pops. “All right.” He peers into Granger’s dark brown eyes, observing flecks of gold and yellow that others might not be capable of seeing. Then he gently dips beyond that, exploring the shielding she’s created.

“It’s a book. An endless book.” Nizar grins. “That’s an amazing idea.” He turns one of those mental pages and finds the tiny text from one of the Oxford dictionaries, though the words are nonsense patchworks of passages from different books and resource materials.

Granger is frowning while he flips pages. “That feels very odd. I can tell that something isn’t right, but…”

“That’s all that you should be feeling. I did say I wouldn’t pry.” Nizar blinks away the mental imagery. “The next step would be for me to try to find a way in.” He pauses. “Books do burn, you know.”

“Real ones do,” Granger replies, her eyes narrowing at the implicit challenge. “You have my permission, sir. Try. I’d like to know if I could keep out someone who really wanted in.”

It takes a lot of careful mental manipulation of those pages, but he does get past them…just in time to greet the mental image of a sparkling gold wand thrust in his face, held by a child with brilliant emerald green eyes. “Absolutely not,” the child orders, and Nizar gets shoved out so hard that his chair slides backwards.

“Oh.” Nizar takes a moment to breathe. “You even knew to craft a secondary layer of shielding. A person you think of as a protector. That was unexpected.”

“Did it work?” Granger asks. “You seem pale, sir.”

“Dobby!” Nizar waits for the house-elf to appear. “Go kidnap my brother, please. I need his assistance. Also, if you need a break, tell me to ask for Filky or one of the others.”

Dobby looks insulted. “Dobby *likes* helping his friend Nizar,” he retorts before he vanishes.
“Cheeky bugger,” Nizar murmurs, smiling. He finishes off his tea and shakes off the tingling aftereffects of magic work. Granger’s defences would require a wand if he tried harder, but that was unexpected enough that he’s not sure he can get past it.

“I, er, did say Salazar Slytherin was intimidating,” Granger says in a quiet voice.

“Is the relationship between Ginevra Weasley and the twins intimidating?” he asks.

Granger shakes her head. “Well—no. They’re just siblings.”

Nizar nods. “Exactly. Think of us more in those terms, and he is suddenly far less intimidating. Also, do recall that I hit him in the face with your brilliant essay.”

Granger is smiling when Dobby returns with Salazar. “One kidnapped Slytherin, as promised, Professor Slytherin!” Dobby chirps before leaving again.

“Oh, it’s the girl who crafted the lethal essay!” Salazar greets Granger with a pleased grin. “My face is bruised, I’ll have you know.”

“Is that a compliment?” Granger asks warily.


Nizar lifts an eyebrow again. “I don’t think what the two of you are doing counts as courtship so much as shagging like cats in heat. Salazar,” he says, noting that Miss Granger blushes again. She knew already; she’s just never heard it spoken plainly before. “Miss Granger here is a self-taught practitioner of Mind Magic who, until tonight, never had opportunity to test her skills. She has some very interesting defences in place, and I’d like you to take a look.”

“A self-taught practitioner of Mind Magic?” Salazar peers down at Granger. “There are not many who can do that. A student usually requires a guide.”

Granger bites her lip. “I read a lot. Some of the descriptions were really detailed, sir.”

“Well, then.” Salazar Conjures a wooden chair from Nizar’s quarters and sits down across from Granger. “Miss Granger, might I have your permission to see what you’re capable of?”

“Siblings,” Granger mutters under her breath before she nods. “Yes, sir. Though, er, if you succeed, try not to pry too deeply? Some of it’s a bit personal.”

“Miss Granger: all of it is personal,” Salazar counters gently.

“You don’t need a wand, either?” Granger asks when Salazar doesn’t produce one.

“A wand is used if you think you’re going to be facing a real mental battle. This is infiltration, not a war.” Salazar rears back in surprise a moment later. “You shortened that blasted thirty-two foot essay?”

“Uhm—”

“No, I’m not in yet,” Salazar reassures her. “I just found pieces of it in your intriguing book shielding, which is resistant to fire, water, ice, rot, and claw. You value books; you protect them. You imbue them with invulnerable properties the moment you claim them as your own. It’s no surprise to me that your barrier works so well.”
“I’m giving her perfect credit for April’s essay, too,” Nizar says to distract Granger. “She’s bloody well earned it.”

“You can’t do that!” Granger blurts out, appalled. “I have to write another essay!”

“Hah! Got past the books!” Salazar crows, and then abruptly falls silent. “Interesting choice.”

Granger winces. “He’s my friend.”

“With some very particular attributes.” Salazar turns his head away, breaking the connection. “I’d need a wand to get past that, and I’m not going to push that hard, not right now. In fact, I’m not certain I would succeed.”

“What do you mean, ‘particular attributes?’” Granger looks torn between curiosity and being miffed by a potential insult.

“You think of your friend as a guardian, and a very good one.” Salazar considers her thoughtfully. “How did you meet your friend, Miss Granger?”

“On the Hogwarts train, but we weren’t friends until Hallowe’en of that year.” Granger looks down at the floor again. “I’d overheard Ron Weasley saying things that were…they weren’t very nice. He was right, but he was still a prat about it. I got upset and hid in the bathroom. That evening, Professor Quirrell let a troll into the school. Everyone was ordered back to their House dormitories, but Ron and Harry both realized I didn’t know. They came to find me, sir, and they saved me. Ron is brilliant at chess, but when it came to helping people…that’s Harry. It was usually him prodding us into doing the right thing, even if it was scary.”

Salazar nods before he looks at Nizar. “What are you going to do?”

Nizar shrugs, feeling a bewildered sort of helplessness. “I don’t know. You can go now, though. You did mention a Lioness.”

“That I did.” Salazar smiles at Granger as he stands up and Vanishes the chair back to its previous location. “You did an excellent job, Miss Granger. If you continue like this, my brother will teach you all the ways in which we once used Mind Magic, and why we didn’t consider them separate lessons at all.”

Granger waits until Salazar leaves the office, using the door instead of a house-elf or Apparition. “What does he mean about—about you doing something?”

Nizar holds her gaze. “Can you think upon those memories of the troll? Can you hold them in a linear order and show them to me?”

Her expression twists up. “I—I can try. What do I need to do?”

“Just think on them,” Nizar repeats, and then he can see those events, just barely peeking out beyond pages and pages of shielding.

A lavatory, a girl crying—Miss Granger, twelve years old and still small for her age. Then comes the troll; right behind it are two eleven-year-old boys, also so very young and small. Ron Weasley definitely had one hell of a growth spurt over the intervening years. The green-eyed child did not manage the same. The two boys work together with simple charms, assisted by Granger when she gets over the shock of a sudden case of mountain troll. Between the three of them, the troll is unconscious before teachers arrive.
“You claimed it had been your idea to keep your friends out of trouble?” Nizar smiles. “Cunning magician.”

“Er, yes.” Granger looks to be on the verge of wincing. “You’re not going to tell anyone, are you?”

“No. I wouldn’t be complimenting you otherwise. You recognized that given the situation, no one would believe your friends if they said they’d only come to find you, so you claimed responsibility. That’s a very brave thing to do, no matter your House affiliation. You’re a good person and an excellent student, Miss Granger, and that combination isn’t as common as it should be. You really are well on your way to drowning your enemies in paperwork, and better still, it’s well-done paperwork.”

Granger beams at the string of compliments. “Thank you, sir. Though, you still haven’t answered my question about what sort of decision your brother meant in regards to me.”

Nizar smiles. “Cunning of a Ravenclaw, ferocity of a Hufflepuff, self-preservation of a Slytherin, and the burning fire of a Gryffindor. I can see why you would have been friends with Mister Potter.”

Mention of the child brings sadness to her eyes. “Thank you.”

“Come with me,” Nizar says, standing. “I think this is a decision that I’m feeling out as I go.”

“Where are we going?” Granger asks. “Should I bring the tea?”

“The house-elves will come and claim it the moment we turn our backs.” Nizar pauses. “This is an act of trust. Never do what I am about to show you unless I’ve invited you alone to do so, or it is a true emergency.”

Granger narrows her eyes, suspicious for all of the right reasons instead of the wrong ones. “All right, sir.”

Nizar flips the cast-iron S on his door and opens it. “This way.”
Nishmati

Chapter Summary

“The reason I asked you in here is twofold, and still requires trust. Bear in mind that if I murder you, I don’t have an assistant for next term.”

Chapter Notes

Bribery accepted. For now. <3

(goes back to panicking about the money needed to repair both cars to pass inspection and that does not even count the fact that there is paint and flooring and also how the fuck am I still sick WHY also could do without the panic too)

Granger steps into Nizar’s quarters and stops short. “But—the classroom!”

“I designed this entire section of the castle to be what I wanted, and to provide what I needed.” Nizar gestures for her to shut the door. “That included living space for myself and my children. Having my quarters, office, and classroom clustered together was convenient when they were younger.”

“Oh.” Granger glances at Nygell, who is resting on his perch in a sulk instead of lingering in the Owlerly. The two portrait frames for Hedwig the snowy owl are empty.

Then she notices the other three portrait frames. “I’ve seen them about the school, lurking in other portraits! Hello!”

“Hello, young one,” Galiena says, a greeting mirrored by Brice. Elfric twists his face up and finally greets her in Old English.

Granger surprises Nizar by answering Elfric in the same tongue, though her accent is appalling. “You’re studying Old English, but not Latin?” Nizar asks.

She offers an apologetic shrug. “Fellona speaks Old English if you ask nicely, so I’ve been able to practice a bit. She doesn’t know Latin, sir, and I wasn’t sure which portraits I could ask.”

Or which teachers is an obvious, silent addition. “No, Fellona and Latin never did get on. Miss Granger, this is Galiena, my eldest, followed by Brice, then Elfric, who is finding it hardest to adjust to modern English. They’re all Parselmouths, like Salazar and myself, and Elfric prefers the easier tongue over the one that is a melting pot of historical insanity.”

“I get to see them before anyone else,” Granger whispers, her eyes bright with delight. “It’s wonderful to meet you all. Professor Slytherin says you have differing Masteries that you’ll discuss with the Defence classes next month.”

“That we do, Miss Granger. I’ve a Mastery in Magical Art and A Magical Mastery in the Written Word, though I’m no slouch when it comes to defending myself,” Galiena says proudly.
“Er—how?”

“Because she’s a werewolf,” Brice says in a dry voice. “Even when it is not the full moon, she’s very strong, and could break any one of us in half if she’d ever felt like doing so.”

“You deserved being bitten,” Galiena retorts.

“And it didn’t work!” Brice responds with mock-outrage. “Father’s potion worked too well. I had to go to the trouble of learning to become a wolf Animagus!”

“Oh, the difficulties you faced.” Galiena rolls her eyes. “Don’t let his whinging fool you, Miss Granger. Brice still holds the title of youngest magician to master the Animagus form. He was ten.”

Granger is definitely biting back a smile. “I didn’t realize anyone could master Transfiguration so young.”

“He didn’t master Transfiguration. That is actually not quite the same thing,” Professor Slytherin says. “I’ve a Mastery in Metamorph Magic, but not Transfiguration. Animagus Magic is the aspect of understanding the inner self in order to create true shapeshifting ability. Metamorph Magic is about understanding the nature of the self’s physical structure, combined with an excellent ability to focus on an appearance you want to attain. Transfiguration is about an understanding of the physical structure of other things, and changing them from what they are into something new.”

“One can be a Master of Transfiguration and of one of the two shifting disciplines, but not all three,” Galiena decides to add.

Granger gives Nizar a surprised look. “I’ve never heard Professor McGonagall mention anything like that. Is it N.E.W.T. level?”

“I’m not certain Professor McGonagall knows, and when she finds out, everyone who understands Scots Gaelic is going to be looking for a place to hide.” One thing at a time, though. Nizar would rather Minerva master Mind Magic first. “The reason I asked you in here is twofold, and still requires trust. Bear in mind that if I murder you, I don’t have an assistant for next term.”

Granger lets out a startled giggle before she presses her lips together. “Yes, sir.”

Nizar decides that Dobby is just going to have to deal with the potential insult. “Filky?”

The house-elf Apparates into the room only seconds later. “Filky was beginning to think the Professor Slytherin had forgotten Filky today!” she says, indignant.

“No, but trying to placate six hundred house-elves all in one day is not easy,” Nizar replies. “Please go ask Professor Snape if he is available. If so, tell him I need to see him in my quarters regarding a student matter. Please only return to let me know if he can’t do so.” As far as code phrases go, that one is very simple. Severus will know that Nizar is in company that requires professionalism rather than the slight lowering of his guard that he will allow Minerva or Salazar to witness in private.

Granger wanders the sitting room while Nizar waits to hear back from either Severus or Filky. Nygell investigates her fingers without once threatening to peck at them before he scoots over on his perch to demand scratchings and affection.

“Did you bribe my owl, Miss Granger?” Nizar asks, smiling.

“Nonsense, sir,” Granger refutes. “Perhaps he just likes women better than men.”
“Not given what Professor McGonagall had to threaten Nygell with in order to retrieve my mail.” Nizar has never seen the owl act affectionate towards anyone else. Maybe he’ll give Nygell to Miss Granger and find one that’s a bit less spiteful. Or perhaps he’ll stick with his plan to convince a Kneazle to learn Apparition.

“Right.” Granger gives Nygell one final pat, looks at Hedwig’s empty portrait, and then studies his children’s portraits again. “I don’t miss my parents so much,” she suddenly confides. “I like them and all, and they indulge my love of books, and of me being a witch—magician, I mean. But they are both perfectly normal, ordinary Muggle dentists. I wasn’t inclined towards being ordinary even before we knew about magic and Hogwarts. But Harry is…he’s different.”

Granger’s eyes widen when Nizar raises an eyebrow. “Not romance! Not that way! I mean…I miss him in a way I don’t miss them. Like he’s…family. More than my real family.”

“Oh—bloody hell,” Nizar swears, pinching the bridge of his nose. No matter how this experiment turns out, he knows what he’s decided on. “Given that my children were all adopted, Miss Granger, I do understand what you mean. We Slytherins tend to claim things and not let go. Call it a character flaw.”

“I don’t think that’s a flaw at all, sir,” Granger says, but she’s still giving him a startled look over the swearing when Severus Apparates into the room.

Severus glances from Nizar to Granger. “Is the student matter that of unusual detentions?” he asks, giving Granger a cool, appraising look. Granger winces a little under Severus’s regard, but doesn’t retreat. That’s a good sign.

“Not a detention, but it is a student matter, yes. She has some of the most incredible mental shielding I’ve ever come across—well, outside of mine and Salazar’s, but that is not something she would have been in the position to recreate.”

Severus’s voice emerges as that intriguing roll of smoke he does so well. “Does she?”

“What is it?” Granger asks Nizar, ignoring Severus’s displeasure in favor of academic curiosity. “Your shielding?”

“My first layer is not insurmountable, but it is unpleasant. My second layer of shielding is the lethal stare of a basilisk’s unlidded gaze.”

Granger’s mouth falls open. Then she says, “No offence, sir, but you’re mad. Why on earth would you want to do such a thing?”

“Because…” Nizar frowns. “Because I do not like anyone rooting around in my thoughts unless I’ve invited them to do so.”

Severus’s gaze turns sharp. “What was that?”

“There was…something. There is a reason I decided desperate and permanent measures were in order. I don’t recall anything else, though. I’ll ask Salazar later; we’re working on a different problem right now.”

“Such as?” Severus sounds unruffled, but Nizar can hear the wariness that others would miss.

Nizar looks Granger in the eyes. “I said this was about trust? This is also about necessity. You can say no to what I’m about to propose, and that is as far as things will go.”
“What if I don’t say no?” Granger asks.

“Then if you succeed, I will give you something you’ve been looking for,” Nizar replies. “But only if you succeed.”

Granger isn’t foolish. She pales a bit, but doesn’t flinch. “You want him to test my shields, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Why would I be doing this?” Severus asks, affecting boredom to disguise what is either suspicion or anger.

“Salazar and I could not get past her secondary layer of defence when she asked us to try,” Nizar explains. “You’re one of the most powerful practitioners of that aspect of Mind Magic I’ve ever known.”

“And of course, safety would be of utmost concern,” Severus murmurs, frowning. “Why?”

“Because I think if we do not control these circumstances, she’s going to figure it out for herself,” Nizar answers. “I’m sure you recall the deadly weapon I used to hit Salazar with this morning?”

Severus eyes Granger again. “What did she spend thirty-two feet writing about?”

“The best way for someone with a blood link caused by a Horcrux to defend themselves from the person who crafted the Horcrux in the first place.”

“How the—how do you know of those things, Miss Granger?” Severus snaps just as Granger asks, “What’s a Horcrux?”

Nizar points at Severus. “You can read that essay later and find out, as it will answer every single question you have.” He points at Granger. “I am so very glad you do not actually know what a Horcrux is, even though I’m also concerned that you do not know what a Horcrux is. However, that can wait. Severus?”

Severus glares at him, a thought lurking behind his eyes. She didn’t overhear it from another? No. Hence, the dangers involved in guessing.

“Very well,” Severus says aloud, giving Granger a cold look. “I use a wand, Miss Granger.”

“I know what that means, sir,” Granger whispers, but then she thrusts her chin forward and glares right back at Severus. “Try it. You have my permission.”

“This should be fun. Miss Granger has some deep-set anger in regards to you, Severus.” Nizar might be putting it too mildly, but Severus deserves the warning. Hermione Granger is still infuriated with Severus on the child’s behalf, even though it’s in regards to matters long over and done with.

Severus pulls his wand from his sleeve. The incantation is silent, but Nizar can feel it by the change in the air. Granger plants her feet as her glare hardens into a furious scowl.

One to plan, one to scheme, one to defend, Nizar thinks, remembering Weasley’s skill at chess. Granger is definitely the schemer of the triad, though he suspects she would likely deny it to her dying breath.

The connection is broken not by success, but by Severus literally being thrown backwards. He lands
on the floor with a muffled curse.

“Well?” Nizar asks.

Severus gets back on his feet, dusting off his robe and trousers. “I will admit it: I’m impressed, and I never want to try to read my way through that first mental barrier ever again.” He notices the wide grin on Granger’s face. “Please do not become even more insufferable over this.”

Granger rubs at her forehead. “Is insufferable some sort of code for telling me to shut up and let others blunder their way through answering a question, since it’s obvious I know the answer already?”

Severus raises both eyebrows and glances at Nizar. “She really has been paying attention in your classes, hasn’t she?”

“I wouldn’t have offered the apprenticeship opportunity if she hadn’t. Besides, one should be utterly ready to defend themselves if one is considering politics.” Nizar gestures for Granger to wait while he goes into his study. He wouldn’t have this to offer at all but for a visit from a foreign elf just the other day, wishing to know if Nizar would like his property returned.

The moment Nizar realized what the elves in Burgos were giving him, he had such an intense feeling of awkwardness that he’d locked all of those letters and scrolls into the box he’d retrieved from the Black Lake. Now he’s glad that the elves were so faithful. Nearly one thousand years is a long time to safeguard something, even for elves.

Nizar returns to the sitting room to find Granger and Severus trading evaluating looks when they each think the other won’t notice. “Hold out your hands, Miss Granger.” When she does so, he places a very large stack of bound letters into her arms and taps it with his wand.

“What is this and what did you do?” Miss Granger asks, staring down at envelopes that are of unfamiliar construction to anyone raised in this century.

“They’re letters, and what I did was to temporarily remove certain pertinent information,” Nizar explains. “However, they are labeled so that they can be read in chronological order.”

Granger spies the neatly detailed number one on the corner of the nearest stack of envelopes and nods. “All right.”

Nizar adds a much smaller bundle of three scrolls bound into one roll. “Don’t lose those. I have no way to create copies because of the magic that was used to make them.”

“Okay.” Granger swallows, as if realizing that she’s being granted an incredible favor. Gods, but she has no idea. “I take it I’m to read them?”

“Yes. Letters first, in their numbered order, then the scrolls. Once you’ve done that, you won’t need that missing information to understand the nature of what you’re being trusted with…but you can then also cast Secreta Revelare.” Nizar gives her a stern look. “Only cast the charm once you’ve read them all. Afterwards, no matter what time it is, you may ask one of the elves to bring you to the classroom so that you may knock on my door directly. Do not attempt to walk here, which can be easily observed. I could tell anyone concerned that you are simply that academically devoted and they would believe it, but I’d rather not have to. Do you understand?”

Granger nods in what looks to be near-overflowed agreement. “But Professor—what do they say?”
“That is a very good question. I’ve no idea,” Nizar answers her, and turns to Severus. “Please teach her your privacy charm. Miss Granger, while reading you’re to employ that charm as well as a Protego Charm around your reading area…which I suggest be your bed, since you can use its curtains rather than a third spell to block out unwanted prying eyes. I need to leave the room for a moment. Please do not kill each other.”

Severus rolls his eyes. “I have yet to kill any of my students, Nizar.”

Back in his study, Nizar leans over the desk, breathing in and out a few times until he knows he’s steadied himself. This has the potential to blow up in his face in unpleasant fashion, but right now he doesn’t know what else to do.

He consoles himself with the fact that Granger knows how to keep her silence with a Slytherin’s utmost dedication. Besides, if she does what Fred and George did not do and accepts a formal apprenticeship, it may be much harder to keep this particular secret.

Nizar retrieves one more scroll from the trunk before he rejoins the others. “That’s it?” Miss Granger is saying. “That is brilliant and simple, and now I’m truly angry that I didn’t think of it.” She pauses. “Does it work on telephones?”

Severus seems amused by the question. “It works on normal telephones in the sense that no one on the other end will be able to understand a word you’re saying, and thus is counterproductive. However, it does make mobile phones stop working.”

“Neat!”

Nizar hates to interrupt one of the few times he’s seen those two communicate without any hint of animosity, but it really is getting late. “And now you need to go. Winky?” He smiles at the house-elf when she appears. “Please take Miss Granger directly back to the Gryffindor Common Room, Winky. It’s past everyone’s curfews, and given that this is my fault, I’d rather she not be in trouble for it.”

“And: if those letters contain what I suspect? You tell no one,” Severus instructs in a flat voice. “Absolutely no one.”

“Because of V-Voldemort.” Granger gives Severus a grim nod. “I understand, sir.”

“Winky can be carrying all of that, Miss Granger!” the house-elf chirps. She whisks the letters and scrolls out of Granger’s grasp, making them fit into the magical space of an elf-sized satchel that appears at Winky’s side the moment she has need of it.

“Er. Thank you,” Granger says, and then surprises Nizar by hugging him. At least this time she doesn’t squeak and leap away like she tried to hug a hot coal.

Nizar gives Severus a baffled look. “It’s your own fault you have a clingy Gryffindor,” is Severus’s sardonic response.

“An intelligent and vicious clinging Gryffindor,” Nizar counters after Granger is gone. “You truly do need to read that Defence essay.”

“At this point I’m too intrigued not to, even if I’m not looking forward to thirty-two feet.” Severus looks at the scroll Nizar is still holding. “What prompted you to do what I suspect you’ve just done?”

“The essay, as I told you…well, that and the potential for guessing dangerous secrets. I’d rather she know in advance not to be telling anyone.” Nizar runs one hand through his hair and sighs out
tension that keeps trying to build. “Take a look,” he says, handing over the scroll. “I’m going to fetch that essay from my office.”

When he returns, it’s to find Severus staring at the unrolled scroll held in his hands, an undecipherable expression on his face. “Oh, it can’t be that bad.”

“I find I’m dwelling on Salazar’s unwanted implications regarding teachers and students on Compitalia,” Severus replies.

Nizar does his best not to laugh in response. “Severus, no. There is at least one of those for every staff member of this school but for three exceptions.” He waits for Severus to look at him, curious. “Not Eustas, though given how anti-social he is, I’m not surprised. I doubt that child ever met him, or Quintinus Stirling. There is also an utter lack of anything Dumbledore.”

“That last part is very interesting, but not as interesting as the magic itself.” Severus lowers the scroll so that Nizar can easily see it. “How?”

Nizar studies the moving, full-color image again, which resembles a magical photograph of this era, but with much finer detail. Unlike a photograph, the actions are set by the caster, not by the magical impressions the camera records when a photograph is taken. It’s of Severus, which is why Nizar is showing it to him. Nizar isn’t certain of the year, but Severus is inside his classroom, all but gliding along in the front of the room before the blackboard.

He’d stared at this scroll for a very, very long time when he first uncovered it among the others. He has no idea why his younger self made the image, but he certainly appreciates having it now. “When is that, Severus?”

“Given the length of my hair? 1991, most likely. I had an incident with a potion that August which meant trimming it shorter than I prefer.” Severus narrows his eyes. “Trade paid. How, Nizar?”

“This is Recordari. The Recording Charm.”

Severus allows the scroll to snap shut again along its original curl. “I’d call you out on an obvious lie, but I know better. Nizar, the Recording Charm doesn’t work this way, else everyone would be using it!”

“I know. No one ever quite figured out how I took Rowena’s instructions for the charm and created those images, and that includes myself. It’s just something I do, Severus. Salazar tells me that I made a map of our entire planet for Hogewáþ the very same way, but neither of us knows where that map is now.”

“The entire planet.” Severus frowns. “As much as I would like to see that, it only now occurs to me —there are no maps in this school. None.”

“Much like the portraits that do not wake, we’re not certain why no one recognizes the lack until it’s specifically pointed out. I didn’t notice, either, and I didn’t leave the castle for nearly a millennium. No one is certain who is to blame or what is causing that particular blind spot, but hopefully they’re long dead, as Salazar and I would get into an argument over who would have the pleasure of making them become very, very deceased.” He doesn’t even think the lack of maps is Gaunt’s doing. It doesn’t quite fit with what the revenant was trying to accomplish.

Nizar accepts the Recordari scroll when Severus hands it over, trading it for Granger’s essay. “You’ll want to sit down to read that, and not only because of its physical weight.”

“Did you use your version of Recordari to make those tarot cards?” Severus asks before he can
Nizar smiles. “I did tell you that I’m not an artist.”

He puts the *Recordari* scroll away with the others and realizes only then that he never did eat dinner. The elves weren’t trailing after him in pathetic-eyed droves, so they must have judged him appropriately occupied by the tea tray he shared with Minerva. He calls for their attention yet again to accept a second, very late tea tray. The elves are still not pleased that his appetite has been lacking and would rather he eat more, but grief has always done this to him.

Severus is even less pleased with Nizar’s lack of sleeping, but that, at least, is normal. It’s usually not this bad unless the seasons are changing, but he has no idea why—

Right. Nizar considers slapping himself in the face. He isn’t just dealing with a war mage’s fully returned awareness. He’s been adjusting to holding magical title over the land associated with the Heights of Brae. That would definitely keep him awake as his awareness grew. He wouldn’t even have noticed any strange odors associated with the Heights because he’s already bloody well home.

Nizar wonders if the others that accepted magical title are having trouble sleeping as their lands begin to speak to them. Salazar hasn’t mentioned anything, but Salazar seems to have also adopted Nizar’s habitual insomnia.

Severus reads Granger’s thirty-two feet without pause until he reaches the end. Then he uses his wand to roll it back up. “I’m so very glad that Hat didn’t put her in Slytherin.”

“She would be terrifying, yes,” Nizar says. “Gryffindor is balancing those scales nicely for her.”

“True,” Severus agrees. “Miss Granger will be the only Gryffindor in her year that will make it into my N.E.W.T. classes.”

“Just the one?” Nizar exclaims in shock. “Out of the entire fucking lot of them?”

“Just one from Hufflepuff, as well. Four from each of the remaining Houses, for a grand total of ten.” Severus shakes his head. “I know I’m a harsh teacher, but this group of fifth-years…I don’t know if they’re at fault, or if I am.”

“I really doubt that you’re the problem. You usually average at least twenty, but their year has been worse than most for attracting distractions. Maybe some of them will improve before the term is over.” Nizar feels a sense of mischief that’s been missing of late. “Like, oh, Neville Longbottom perhaps.”

“Please do not deliberately set out to give me nightmares.” Severus puts Granger’s essay on the table next to Kanza’s charmed heated rock, which has been abandoned for the fireplace hearth until the cold and damp season turns warm again. “Is there anything else you needed this evening, or should I remove myself from your company?”

Nizar feels himself tense at Severus’s curt tone. He deserved that, but fuck did it hurt. “No need,” he makes himself reply in a light voice. “I know I won’t be sleeping anytime in the next few hours, so I thought I’d go out and confuse the centaurs again. I’ll see you in a while.” He Apparates in place, arriving in the dark courtyard in front of the Entrance Hall’s double doors. Nizar shrugs out of his robe, leaving himself in only shirt, trousers, and boots to guard against February’s chill. The robe he hangs off an edge of stone next to the doors to keep it away from any potential dewfall.

When he’s run for long enough to be warm despite the freezing temperature, he thinks, *You are a coward and a complete idiot.* He hadn’t lied when he said he wasn’t going to sleep, and he’d been
contemplating running no matter what the weather had in mind, but it had also become a convenient excuse to escape.

Nizar himself is definitely the reason why he’s never managed a successful romance with anyone, and it’s that same fucking cowardice. He can’t cope with the idea of gaining that much ground, that much trust, and then having it crumble. It’s the same reason why Nizar and Peregrine were never more than friends. Peregrine was far too fickle, and Nizar couldn’t handle the inconsistency at all. Fortunately, it was a trait Nizar noticed in his friend at once, so there were no…complications.

No complications aside from Peregrine causing his own death, at least. Nizar hasn’t stopped being angry about that, though possibly some of that is lingering upset at what Peregrine’s death did to Marion.

Fuck it. Nizar uses the Forbidden Forest’s blue-violet pathways to break through Hogwarts’ wards on the eastern boundary. The moment he steps onto Brae land for the first time since the visit to Frogmore, he knows at once that it’s definitely been contributing to his insomnia. If he’d bothered to set foot beyond the school gates to visit Hogsmeade, he would have known already.

It isn’t that far to the Heights of Brae. He used to run that track. There is absolutely no reason why he can’t do it now. He turns north to meet the passage that will let him out of the valley that shelters the school.

It starts spitting sleet a few minutes after he finds the inclined path. Of course.

Nizar never gave up on the madness that is long-distance running because of the way he stops thinking. Sometimes it is a blessing to not think. It’s pounding tread that matches the pounding of his heart, the burn in lungs and muscles, the ethereal colors of night mapped out by his eyesight that leads him unerringly along.

Godric could run at night without stumbling over a single obstacle, too. It was just a part of who he was.

Nizar glares at the roads and scattered houses that dot the landscape before the Heights. It’s enough of a visual change from what he remembers that it disrupts his concentration, and then he’s bloody well thinking again.

He’s not wearing robes. Trousers, shirt, and boots are still normal. His wand is hidden in his sleeve. He’s soaked with sweat and melted sleet.

If there are any locals about, they won’t think him a magician. They’ll just think him insane.

He doesn’t see anyone, though there are lights on in several different cottages. He runs up the side of the Heights without stopping, but by the time he reaches the top, he’s gasping like a bellows.

Nizar collapses next to one of the ancient stones that still jut out of the earth. The stars overheard are muted by the drifting clouds that keep insisting on spitting sleet, even though it’s so blasted dry tonight it shouldn’t be attempting to snow at all. He closes his eyes, resting his right hand over his chest as his heart thumps in angry reminder that he probably should not have run all the way to and then up the Heights.

Cowardly. Idiot.

He has no idea how much time has passed before he hears, “The Heights of Brae? Really, Nizar?”

Nizar opens his eyes to find Severus in the air several feet above him and to his right. It’s so dark
atop the Heights that his robes blend in like moving shadows. Even Severus’s pale skin isn’t as noticeable at night. If someone were attempting to search, it would be very, very difficult to locate Severus in the air.

“How did you find me?”

Severus makes a derisive sound. “All I needed to do was look for the cloud clinging to the ground.”

Nizar breathes out, adding another plume of mist to the steam rising from his soaked clothing. “Fair point.”

“Why are you lying on the ground?” Severus asks.

“Originally? I was trying to catch my breath and cool down.” Nizar looks up at the sky again. “Now I’m just waiting for the stars to cease fucking spinning.”

Severus drifts closer. “Similar to the instance with the painting hidden beyond Aurora’s removed wall?”

Nizar thinks about it. “No, I’m not recalling anything—” Oh. “Never mind. I suppose I am.”

“May I ask what?”

Nizar sits up and slings his wet hair back from his face with one hand. That doesn’t help the dizziness, but at least this wave isn’t so intense he’s blacking out. It probably helps that the elves have refused to let him miss more than one meal a day. Stubborn, cheeky buggers.

“The last time I came to the Heights, I ran here with Godric,” Nizar says. “Between certain aspects of his childhood and the number of battles he’d been in before age seventeen, he was another chronic insomniac.”

Severus lands on the ground, though his drop to the earth is silent. “When was the last time?”

“The night before the portrait’s magic would be performed. The eve of Samhain. I couldn’t sleep. I’m not certain any of us could, but the others coped by occupying themselves with things that were not the lunacy of running all the way from the castle to the top of the Heights.

“Godric didn’t say anything. It had already all been said, I remember, even if I can’t recall what or when. They all knew I didn’t want—” Shit. It isn’t enough that the weather is foul. He’s crying, too. “I kept it from the family. They were upset already, and I didn’t wish to make it worse. Godric knew, though. No matter the means, Godric knew that I didn’t want to return.”

“Do you regret it, then?” Severus asks quietly.

“No,” Nizar whispers. “I can’t regret it. If I do, then it means I’d prefer that to you, and I’m not—I don’t—I can’t do that. I’m sorry, by the way. I shouldn’t have kept you at arms’ length for the past ten days.”

Severus lets out a resigned sigh. “Nizar, I came here so that I could apologize to you.”

Nizar gives him a confused look. “What for?”

“You once said you feared pushing too hard?” Severus shakes his head. “Tonight, that is exactly what I did to you—I pushed too hard. I knew you were grieving, and that you’d asked for that time and space, and still I couldn’t resist the urge to speak words that I knew would be painful to hear.”
“They were true words.”

Severus glares at him. “That doesn’t mean they needed to be said. I was…” He hesitates. “I was jealous.”

Now he is not only dizzy, he’s utterly baffled. “Jealous of what?” Nizar asks.

“Of…of Granger,” Severus forces himself to say.

Nizar tries to process that. “I hate to break such terrible news to you, Severus, but she’s a young woman, and I’m gay.”

That earns him a brief hint of silent laughter. “Not of anything so inappropriate.”

“What, then? I have a friendship of sorts with the Weasley twins, and that never seems to bother you.”

“That is different.” Severus retrieves a white handkerchief that shines with many hues in the dark, holding it out to Nizar.

Nizar wipes his eyes, which are still intent on producing stupid tears. “Why is it different?”

“The child was not close friends with the Weasley twins. You might not recall it, but Granger and Ronald Weasley both hold that distinction. The three of you were very close.”

Nizar stares at Severus. “Did you seriously contemplate the idea that if I ever do recall that friendship, it would supersede your relationship with me?”

“I’m sure you’ve had opportunity in your life to observe that jealousy is not logical,” Severus grates out. “And there is the matter of what you gave to Miss Granger.”

“Letters. I gave her letters that I cannot remember writing, all of them addressed to her.” Nizar reaches out and plucks at Severus’s fingers, not certain if he should try to latch hold or not. “I apparently felt talkative one thousand years ago. There are letters addressed to several people in what was delivered by a Burgos elf a few days ago. The elves held them in trust for me,” Nizar explains when Severus frowns. “Those letters and the Recordari scrolls that were of people in this time. All of the others I made were of people in my time, and those are in the trunk Galiena left for me.”

“I see. Not only did you write everything down, you were blabbing about it to others while also capturing images to document it all,” Severus says, a hint of a smile appearing on his face.

“Some of those letters are addressed to you.”

Severus’s eyes widen, causing them to shine in the dark with the metallic hues of blue, green, and violet. “What in the world did you say?”

“I’ve no idea,” Nizar replies. “I didn’t open them. They’re addressed to you, after all, not to me.”

“Oh.” Severus finally claims his hand. “But still—Miss Granger, Nizar?”

Nizar manages a smile. “I did mention that she was going into politics.”

There is a beat of silence before Severus is laughing again. “Politics. I overlooked that. You were plotting right beneath my considerable nose, and I missed it.”

“Do not insult your nose. I happen to like it,” Nizar says. “Politics, yes. It isn’t underhanded to want
them to be capable of making sensible decisions before they enter the political arena.”

“You’re grooming allies. You have been from the moment that portrait’s magic ended last Hallowe’en.” Severus smiles. “You have no idea how much I dearly wish to compare notes with Estefania’s portrait right now,” he says, and then his grip on Nizar’s hand tightens. “You’re shivering.”

“Am I?” In truth, he hadn’t noticed anything beyond Severus’s hand being warmer than his own.

“We’re going back. Right now,” Severus says in a displeased voice. “Bath.”

“That’s right. You haven’t seen much of my quarters lately.” Nizar has to wait through the Apparition that Severus initiates before he continues speaking in the warmth of his sitting room. After being outside in the cold for hours, it feels stifling. “I’ve been moving things around.”

Severus looks at the fireplace, which has been shifted from the outer wall of the sitting room to the opposite side, fronting the sofa and chairs. “I had noticed that. Is the hallway even longer, now?”

“No.” Nizar opens the window and Summons his robe from the place he left it, catching it in his hands when it arrives a minute later. Then he eyes Nygell. “I’m not bringing you mice, you spoiled bastard. Go find your own dinner.” Nygell musters a glare before he flaps his way through the window to go hunting. Nizar latches the window behind him; Nygell will most likely return to the Owlery so that he can sulk in company.

Severus waits for him to hang up the robe. “What did you move?”

“Well…it’s both a moving of things and an addition,” Nizar says, leading the way down the hall. He opens the door on the left and waves his hand. “Like so.”

“You changed the entire bathroom,” Severus says, frowning at the blue-tinged grey stone, bath, and sink. “And it’s smaller than the other.”

“That’s because this is now a bathroom for guests, since they keep turning up,” Nizar explains. “I actually didn’t have to put up with half so many visitors in the old days. We all met in public areas of the castle, but it’s not like that anymore.”

“And it’s not really safe,” Severus says under his breath, following Nizar to the bedroom. Nizar feels his heartbeat quicken again and tells it to please stop with that nonsense. He isn’t—that is probably not a possibility right now.

Severus raises an eyebrow at the new doorway and its contents. “You added a room to your bedroom to give yourself a private bath. The same bathroom that was originally in the hallway.”

“It’s magical space, and I can do whatever the fuck I want with my own living quarters. Why not?” Nizar gestures for Severus to go inside. The bathroom is exactly the same as it was but for the expanded space for a single addition.

“A shower.” Severus looks at the single glass panel that rises from floor to ceiling, the only barrier between the shower and the rest of the bathroom. The shower itself is simple open space with a copy of the square showerhead he first encountered in London.

“I fell in love with the idea because of Salazar’s flat. Blame him,” Nizar says.

“Please tell me you can add a shower to my quarters downstairs.”
“It might require adding a touch of magical space to the bathroom so there is enough room, but I don’t see why not—” Nizar halts in surprise when Severus starts unbuttoning Nizar’s shirt. “What are you doing?”

“You need either a bath or a shower so that you don’t blunder your way into being ill,” Severus mutters, scowling. “You’ve skipped too many meals and too much sleep for it not to be a possibility after running over five miles in icy weather, Nizar.”

“That’s…probably true,” Nizar admits. “I—will you—”

Severus looks up from Nizar’s shirt to meet his eyes. “You know that all you need do is ask.”

Nizar feels his throat lock up. Shit. Shit! He can’t. He fucked up, and he can’t, he’s shaking and he can’t even breathe—

Severus briefly closes his eyes before he cradles Nizar’s face with both hands. “Nizar. Do you want me to stay?”

Nizar swallows. “Yes,” he answers. It’s a horrible rasp, but at least it’s a word. With it spoken, he can breathe again.

Fuck, but he panics over some truly stupid things.

Severus removes his robe and then uses the Greek charm that Nizar taught him to deal with far too many buttons. Nizar thinks he must have helped to remove both their clothes, but it’s a blank moment. They’re standing outside the shower, and then they’re within the shower, naked, with hot water cascading down. Nizar almost shrieks at the difference in temperature, which feels scalding until he begins to warm up.

Nizar is also in Severus’s arms, shaking and sobbing with his face buried against Severus’s shoulder. He has no idea when that happened, either, but he’s so tired that he doesn’t care.

“I should have pressed you on this much sooner,” Severus murmurs next to Nizar’s ear. “You really do prefer to bury everything until you reach a breaking point.”

“I didn’t think I was,” Nizar gasps out. If he’s truly been fighting the whole of his grief since Elfric’s funeral, then he isn’t capable of fighting it any longer.

Or perhaps it isn’t just the funeral. Maybe this is everything Nizar couldn’t voice from November onwards, when he couldn’t remember enough of what was lost to grieve.

Severus runs his hands through Nizar’s hair, stroking down his back, long and soothing passes of warmth and touch that ease his shaking limbs. Nizar clings to Severus without shame, letting sensation lull him until his grief feels considerably lighter and he’s no longer weeping.

Nizar steps away long enough to lift his head to the water, washing his face. His skin feels raw from ice and salt both. “Ugh. I probably look to be a complete disaster.”

“But thankfully not a continuous disaster,” Severus tells him, the corner of his mouth turning up in a smirk. “Besides, you were more of a mess when I found you lying on a Scottish hillside like a dying man, soaked to the skin and covered in sleet, yet still managing to create your own personal cloud.”

When put in those terms, that probably did look more disastrous than what feels like swollen eyes and irritated sinuses. “I didn’t mean to worry you.”
“Do shut up.” Severus’s hand traces down his back and then follows the curve of his arse. Nizar sucks in a startled breath, his prick stirring at once in response to the intimate touch.

Severus lifts an eyebrow and then rests his other hand along Nizar’s cheek, his thumb just brushing Nizar’s lower lip. “I should not assume, not right now. It’s your choice, Nizar.”

Part of Nizar is still wondering why Severus would want someone who just finished falling to bits. The rest of him is remembering how cold his nights have been of late, and he doesn’t want to go back to that. Not again.

Nizar opens his mouth and captures Severus’s thumb with his lips, swiping his tongue over the tip. Severus’s eyes lose the multi-colored shine and turn perfectly black. Then he seizes Nizar’s head with both hands and draws him into a hungry, bruising kiss. Nizar’s heart leaps, both in relief and from the thrill of Severus being so willing to demonstrate the strength hiding in his lean body.

Severus bites down on the side of Nizar’s neck, sharp and hard enough to draw blood. “God, but I want to fuck you.”

Nizar gasps, instantly rock-hard. “I don’t have anything in my quarters for that.”

“Later, then.” Severus wraps his hand around Nizar’s prick and strokes him up and down in a grip that is rough, almost painful. It still makes his skin tingle like sparking embers, a rush of absolute pleasure. Severus is holding him in such a way that Nizar can’t even reciprocate. He can only cling to Severus, teeth clenched against the desperate sounds that want to escape.

“Nizar. Look at me,” Severus orders. Nizar swallows and focuses on Severus’s black eyes. “You are mine, and I am very, very bad at sharing.” Then Severus captures Nizar’s lips in another fierce kiss. It’s such an obvious claiming that Nizar whines into Severus’s mouth. Gods, but he wanted—he always wanted this so much.

No. He doesn’t regret at all.

Severus brings him off with rough efficiency that feels so amazing his toes are curling even as he’s groaning out the pleasure of it, coming in Severus’s hand. Severus still doesn’t release his other arm’s tight grasp on Nizar. Instead, he stares into Nizar’s eyes, stroking himself until he’s breathing in sharp gasps. Watching Severus’s face and feeling the pass of Severus’s hand against his skin is so erotic that Nizar’s spent prick stirs anew.

Severus abruptly buries his face against Nizar’s neck, letting out a long, low moan as he clutches Nizar tightly against his body. The warmth of Severus’s orgasm paints Nizar’s hip and thigh before the shower water washes it away.

Nizar manages to get one of his hands free so that he can run his fingers through Severus’s hair. “Severus?”

Severus abruptly releases him, but doesn’t turn away. “Sometimes you frighten me,” he says in a low voice. “I’m not frightened of you. I’m afraid of what it would mean to lose you. I don’t think I would handle it very well.”

“You handled another friend’s loss well enough,” Nizar says, wisely dancing around said friend’s identity. He has no personal attachment to her, but Severus most certainly did.

“That is because I had a goal to focus on.” Severus uses his elegant fingers to remove strands of plastered hair from Nizar’s face. “If you die, I don’t have that sort of…of motivation.”

Severus’s thumbs come to rest just below Nizar’s lip again. “And what if the one who caused your death is already dead, himself?”

“You’re creative. I’m certain you could think of something that would suit.” Then Nizar makes a startled noise when his knees abruptly give out from under him.

Severus catches him before he can strike the tiled floor. “Nizar?”

“I’m all right,” he assures Severus, but he must not be. The next thing he knows, he’s dressed in his silk, sitting on the edge of his bed and absolutely bewildered.

“Now what?” Severus is asking, settling down beside him, already dressed in his black pyjamas.

“Uh—I have no idea how I got out here. It’s a blank spot from bathroom to bed.” Nizar lifts his sleeve to note the gold embroidery at the cuff.

“But you didn’t pass out. Not like the incident in the Astronomy Tower.” Severus frowns, and they spend the next few minutes in silence.

“Flashbacks,” Severus bursts out, startling Nizar out of a partial doze. “Just like the incident in the Black Lake and your missing time. That was a flashback, and so was this.”

“Oh.” That makes a great deal of sense. “Then I can’t remember some of those flashbacks because my ability to recall things was damaged by Obliviscaris Omnia.”

Severus gives him a concerned look, but nods. “I believe so. You carried through with getting ready for bed so well, I didn’t even realize anything was wrong.”

“What do they call it when you do things without thinking about them?”

“Autopilot,” Severus answers.

“That. It was most likely that,” Nizar says. “It’s easy to repeat set patterns.”

“It is.” Severus takes Nizar’s hand in a gentle grip. “Earlier. I—”

“If you’re about to apologize for something I enjoyed profusely, I will beat you to death with that bronze cauldron.”

Severus looks to be biting back a smile as he leans forward, a lock of his damp hair partially obscuring his face. “Please use the cast-iron. It is less likely to be dented in the process.”

“I’ll bear that in mind, but I’d like to focus on other things right now.”

Severus’s grip on his hand tightens. “Like what?”

“How much I love you.” Nizar regrets the words when Severus flinches. Severus’s feelings are true—he’s seen them and felt them—but hearing the words spoken aloud often strikes old wounds. Maybe one day, that will cease.

“I would also very much like for Salazar not to fucking bribe you into marrying me,” Nizar adds in a dry voice.

Severus looks at Nizar from the corner of his eye. “Would that be so bad? Marrying. Me, in
particular. Even knowing everything I’ve done, and everything I am?”

“Bad?” Nizar stares at Severus, confused. “No. Not at all. Why? Did Salazar actually go out and dig up someone’s moulder title to add to his pile of bribery?”

Severus laughs. “Not that he’s mentioned, and I already have to deal with that blasted courtesy title Madam Tyler insists upon using. Besides, what would I do with such a thing, anyway?”

“Lord it over Lucius Malfoy.”

“That was—that was honestly horrible,” Severus manages between fits of near-silent laughter. “Truly.”

“Worth it. I would imagine that Lucius forgot when I made fun of him for not being a real lord when he was a child. Fucker attempted to set my portrait on fire in retaliation. As if no one had ever tried that before.”

Severus tilts his head. “How many people have you managed to incite into attempting to incinerate your portrait?”

“Fifteen or so that I can recall with any detail.”

Severus rolls his eyes. “No sense of self preservation.”

“I just knew it wouldn’t work,” Nizar says, unconcerned. “Then Lucius tried throwing the entire portrait in the fireplace. Oh, was that child angry when that also did not work.”

Severus smiles. “You spent nearly one thousand years doing your utmost to drive students into infuriated rages.”

Nizar shrugs. “It wasn’t as if I had much else to do.”

“I do not recall you ever attempting to do that to me,” Severus says.

“Oh, I did.” Nizar smiles at Severus. “You just thought it was fun.”

To Nizar’s relief, Severus stays with him. He wasn’t certain, despite the pyjamas, until they’re both curled up in his bed with the quilt pulled up. Nizar sighs and refuses to apologize for clinging like a leech.

Severus lets out an amused huff of air. “Nishmati,” he murmurs.

“What’s that?” Nizar asks, yawning.

“It’s Hebrew. It is…a term of affection.”

Nizar opens one eye, knowing an avoidance tactic when he hears one, but decides to let it go. “It has a nice sound to it.”

He’s almost asleep when Severus says, “Yes. It does.”
An Unkind Circle

Chapter Summary

Time is a circle, but there is nothing of kindness about it.

Chapter Notes

I did say I’d still hand out the Friday update.

(Also, after NO INTERNET for 24 hours? YEAH, I WILL BE POSTING A THING BECAUSE MUST PROVE INTERNET STILL HERE.)

Continuous hailing of cheer-readers and betas: @mrsstanley, @sanerontheinside, @norcumi, & @jabberwockypie!

Hermione waits for the house-elf to depart, then darts upstairs to the fifth-year girls’ dormitory. She enters and holds her breath to see if anyone is going to make a fuss about her late return. No one wakes up, so Hermione hurriedly stuffs the entire armload of envelopes and the scroll bundle under her bedcovers and then rushes off to the shared bathroom to get ready for bed. If she starts reading now, she might forget, and no one likes to wake up with their teeth tasting bad.

Well, given some of the boys’ morning breath, maybe they do, but Hermione did not need her parents to instill before-bed brushing habits. The one and only time she purposely slacked off left behind such a terrible taste that she never wanted to repeat the experience.

All right, maybe I’m a little bit like my parents, Hermione thinks as she changes clothes, exchanging her uniform for pyjamas. Some of her dorm-mates prefer nightgowns, but she was a trousers girl long before the school uniforms decided to make her life difficult. The fact that Hogwarts will only allow someone with breasts to wear school trousers is if they’ve declared for another gender is—well, utterly backwards.

Hermione recalls Fortunata’s painting, and the fact that the portrait is wearing her clothes in a style that definitely would have been considered unseemly. Perhaps it’s something she can discuss with Professor Salazar. Between Professor Slytherin hitting the man in the face with her essay, and the bit with the Legilimency testing where the elder Slytherin refused to be terrifying…he seems far less imposing now.

She crawls into bed and draws the curtains. It takes a moment before she’s certain she’s cast Muffliato correctly, but Protego is much easier. She does cast a third spell, but this one just leaves a ball of soft white light hovering above her bed so that she can read without resorting to Lumos or candles. Then she puts her wand under her own pillow and the scroll beneath her spare pillow to save for later.

The tie holding the envelopes shut is flat dyed leather, not ribbon as she’d first thought. It’s like silk beneath her fingers, better quality than any leather item she’s ever touched in her life.
Hermione puts all of the envelopes aside except for the one with its elegant number one inscribed on the front, flipping it over. Her breath catches at once.

The print is clean and distinct, but it’s so very familiar. That’s Harry’s handwriting, and that is her name on the front of this odd envelope. She lifts the flap and winces when the paper crinkles, but no one stirs in the other beds. Then she lifts out two sheets of folded paper that is...odd. It doesn’t look old, but it feels like some of the old preserved paper she’s come across in some of Hogwarts’ library books.

Then again, Hermione knows that Salazar Slytherin had something to do with Harry’s removal from Surrey. Maybe he prefers the feel of paper that’s more like what he knew centuries ago, and it’s all that he keeps available.

Oh, now she’s dithering! She hates dithering. She resolutely unfolds the paper and begins to read. The first thing she notes is the lack of date, which Harry is rather diligent about.

Dear Hermione,

I’m realizing as soon as I begin that I should have been doing this bloody weeks ago. There is so much that I’m not even sure I could summarize it. No, actually, summarizing this would be a stupid idea. It’s too complicated.

Shit. You’re going to think I’ve lost my mind. Yes, I’m aware of the fact that I am already considered mental, and that it’s not news.

Hermione blinks, startled by the language. Harry is one of the few students she knows of who never felt the need to swear—well, aside from the infamous Insomnia Incident in third year. That had been a long, involved litany that proved Harry knew the words quite well. There was applause afterwards, which didn’t help Hermione to feel like any less of an idiot. The idea that Harry wanted to sleep but couldn’t, that he hated his insomnia, had never once occurred to her. It had just seemed so useful! She knows better now, but that tirade also taught Hermione that for as much as Harry told them, there was so much more that he never mentioned at all.

I thought about trying to write my way around everything, but really, I’m not that brilliant.

First: it’s possible to travel back in time without a Time-Turner. That being said, I’m really glad you helped me rescue Sirius with your Time-Turner in third-year. This not being my first bit of time travel made it a little easier.

“Oh, Harry. What did you do?” Then Hermione reads the next line and has to stifle a laugh.

I didn’t do it! All right, I said yes, but I’m not the one who did the thing and this is mostly not my fault.

Second: there isn’t a magical way to send someone forward in time. It doesn’t work, or no one here
knows how to make it work. Actually, there is apparently one entire person in the world right now who knows how to travel backwards in time by magic, but it’s definitely confirmed. Not forwards.

Time-Turners don’t go forwards, either. Who invented Time-Turners, anyway? Please tell me those stupid things have limits.

I’m sort of stuck where I am. No, there is no “sort of” about it at all. I am Stuck. And I don’t mind. I keep thinking I should be absolutely losing it, but nope, I am fine with all of this.

Okay, not all of it. I miss you and Ron, Remus and Sirius, and a certain clan of gingers. I can’t really fix that, though, so I can at least write to you. You always told me I never write enough over the summer, so now I’m going to bury you in letters.

I’m not explaining very well, but I’m nervous, all right?

I have no idea what date you’ll receive this letter, but I’m going to take a wild guess and say that it’s definitely not summer anymore, no one has told you or Ron anything, and you’re both going mad with worry. Don’t, okay? I’m actually fine, and for once, I’m not lying.

I met a Healer. A real Healer, someone who definitely outstrips Madam Pomfrey, and probably everyone in St. Mungo’s. She’s also terrifying, but it’s the sort of terrifying that’s comforting because you know she isn’t aiming the Terrifying at you.

Meeting that Healer? Hermione, I don’t need my glasses anymore. I can bloody well see what I’m doing, all the time!

Actually, I can see a lot more colors than about 99.9% of people on the planet can see if I’m guessing the average right. No idea what it’s called, no idea it was a thing, but it’s really rare.

“Tetrachromacy,” Hermione whispers, even though he can’t hear her. “You have tetrachromacy. How?”

Please do not screech. The colors-thing isn’t something I could see before and it had nothing to do with my glasses. My aunt hit me in the head with a frying pan when I was five.

Hermione screeches in fury. Lavender Brown rolls over in the bed across the room and mutters about people needing to stop talking in their sleep.

So, the Healer reckons I probably had old damage that was never repaired, since my aunt and uncle refused to take me to a hospital. Just told me to not die and make them look bad.

Hermione is very good and does not screech again. She settles for grinding her teeth.

I would probably have needed glasses anyway, but not the same way. It’s really nice, not having to
worry about being fucking blind if I lose my glasses. Do not miss them at all, even if potions instructions for brewing by color are now rubbish.

Right, still failing at explaining. On my birthday, someone offered to help me survive Voldemort. I thought I knew what they meant, that being an actual education on how to Not Die the next time I have to deal with that arsehole. I was right about that part. I just wasn’t expecting the distance, or the bloody language barriers.

Bugger, must go, late for a thing. Still did not explain properly. Cheers on me, then.

—Harry

Hermione wonders if Harry knew that he was dealing with Salazar Slytherin. Maybe he’ll be more specific in the next one—or maybe it wasn’t Professor Salazar at all, just someone he put up to the task.

She puts the refolded letter back in the first envelope, and then takes a minute to count the ones remaining. There are over a hundred letters left to read. Harry really, really meant it about burying her in letters, then.

The next envelope holds another two pages of folded paper. Still no date, but she notices at once that Harry’s handwriting is improving.

Dear Hermione,

This is my—wait, I need to count the paper littering the floor. This is my seventh attempt at writing a letter that doesn’t sound stupid. I think it’s going to sound stupid anyway, but I’ve been trying to figure out how to say it for a full month and I’m not getting anywhere. So, fuck it. Here goes.

On my birthday, a strange wizard decides to just turn up in my bedroom after midnight. I didn’t handle it well and pointed a wand at him, but in my defence, he started it.

Hermione frowns. That sounds…really familiar, actually, but she can’t remember why.

I don’t actually know who he is. He didn’t say. What I do know is that he’s old, he’s really fast, he’s capable of incredible magic, and I think he’s family. He wouldn’t say, but Hermione, he cared. You don’t grow up the way I did and not notice when those things are true.

Yes, Hermione, I do actually think Snape cares, even if he doesn’t know how to do so aside from being a utter bastard about it. You can be a complete dick to someone and still not want them dead. That’s a form of caring, even if it’s, uh, limited? Whatever, it counts.

Sorry, digressed and then had to step away for a few hours. Back to strange wizard in my bedroom, which sounds like a recipe for disaster. But he said he knew my parents. He’s the first adult I’ve ever met in my entire life who told me that my parents would not want me fighting Voldemort. To be fair, no one’s ever outright said that they would want me to be a mythical Voldemort Slayer, but I haven’t exactly heard a lot of arguments against it.
So this wizard who wouldn’t tell me his name gave me a choice. I took the offer.

It’s May now, the eighteenth. Everyone else is off at Pentacoste. I didn’t want to go, so I’m here alone, reading books, writing letters, and realizing that spending a week alone in a completely empty castle is a barmy, stupid idea that I won’t be repeating.

I’ve been here for seventy-nine days if I haven’t confused the rhyme and gotten the days per month wrong. My mysterious wizard family friend didn’t mention where he was sending me.

It’s eighteenth May—

Hermione looks closer at the paper. The ink that would list the year is still present, but unreadable. Then she sees the next sentence and realizes at once why it’s missing.

It’s eighteenth May ——. One thousand five years ago.

Oh, shit. I wrote that, it’s still unbelievable, and I’m the one sitting here living it. I think that is about all I can manage for now, even though I’d dearly like to whinge about West Saxon English and why grammar is stupid. Outside. Outside is good. I really need to get out of a castle that is far too quiet right now.

—Harry

Hermione re-reads the letter, her heart pounding while also somehow managing to be lodged in her throat. She doesn’t need to read the rest of the letters to understand why the need for secrecy is so important.

Fortunata’s portrait said Harry and Salazar were distant family.

She stifles a high-pitched, lunatic giggle. Maybe they were distant family, but she read up on magical adoption just for something to do over the summer after she finished all of the work she missed during second year while Petrified, and the homework…and because she’d already read her textbooks.

Hermione bites her lip and retrieves her wand. She did agree, but she didn’t promise…and he didn’t know what the letters said. He wouldn’t have known that there wasn’t much point to secrecy after the second one.

“Secreta Revelare,” she whispers, casting the charm over the stack of envelopes. The letter in her hand immediately reveals the year in that sentence.

“Oh, God.”

Hermione pulls out the first letter long enough to glance at the date: 14th April 990.

“Oh my God.”

Hermione drops her wand and plasters both hands over her mouth, rocking in place for a few minutes. She’s crying. She should be relieved, because Harry is fine.
He is, but he’s not Harry anymore. She’s lost the best friend she’s ever had.

She sniffs and wipes her eyes, growling at herself to be logical. He isn’t lost. He’s older—a lot older—but magical adoptions don’t change who you are or what you look like. She knows from his sun-lightened hair that Nizar Slytherin spent enough time in the sun to pick up the bronze cast to his skin. It probably wasn’t that hard; in the photographs Harry showed her, Lily Potter had pale skin like Harry, but James Potter almost looked like he was from India but for his hazel eyes. She doesn’t know why Harry would use his mastery as a Metamorphmagus to change the color of his hair and eyes, though.

No. Nizar. Magical adoption. She knows better. If that’s what Nizar and Salazar Slytherin did, then he really doesn’t go by that name at all. Then there is the nonsense with the Preservation Charms failing because an idiot moved Nizar Slytherin’s painting.

Hermione starts crying again. Professor Slytherin never said anything outright, but she’s heard enough to piece together that if Professor Snape hadn’t put the portrait back in its original place, Nizar would have died. Not enough magic left to fuel the spells and charms that made the portrait what it was—a way to travel forward in time.

She does wonder why they left it so late, the portrait. It occurs to her a moment later that maybe the portrait took that long to create.

Then she gasps, wide-eyed. Those stupid failed Preservation Charms.

Lying in front of her in letter form is probably more about Nizar Slytherin’s life from one thousand years ago than he can remember, but she can’t just run back to the seventh floor without reading the rest. She has to know.

She needs to know all of it.

Hermione starts reading at speed, voraciously noting the dates as 990 progresses. Given how much information she encounters in Harry’s first year alone, she should probably be taking notes.

30th May 990

All right, so it’s a bit easier now that I’ve gotten the I’m Stuck In The Founder’s Era bit out of the way. (Nope, still not that easy, but now I can just whinge about things we were never taught.)

Have you ever heard of Moray before? Because I hadn’t and I’m really miffed about it. That’s where I am, or Moravia if you want to be all Latin-y. Hogwarts isn’t in Scotland; the school Hogewáþ is in Moray. Uh, I don’t know if you’ve ever prodded at Old English, but it’s a really crude way of saying to To Seek Thought. To Seek Learning. I like it. It seems a lot more dignified than hogs and warts.

It wouldn’t be so bad if there was only one language barrier. It’s more like ten, and then Sal makes it worse by adding in two more. There are a lot of languages in Britain that are common right now, and everyone knows at least two, and none of them are anything like our English at all. Nobody here can read this letter but me, and eventually you, even if I don’t know how that’s going to happen. West Saxon English, Latin, Pictish, Gaelic (not Scots Gaelic?), Cumbric, francois, Danish, Norse, Norn—Britain is currently a language clusterfuck, and that isn’t counting the Castellano, Euskaran, and Bavarian.
Why did we get rid of the letter thorn, Hermione? It’s bloody useful!

16th June 990

(I am not writing Iunius. I am not. No. The letter J is useful, Rowena!)

Ron would be utterly bleating about my living with the enemy, but he’s in for a rude awakening. The most terrifying of the four Founders isn’t Salazar Slytherin. It’s Helga Hlodvirsdóttir. I hope I spelled that right. No, it’s nothing like Hufflepuff, but she’s very Norse. Viking. Whatever. She’s the terrifying Healer I mentioned before. I like her.

Salazar and his daughter Fortunata are the only Parseltongue speakers on this entire island. Either I live with them and Sal’s wife, Orellana, and at least have translators, or I wander around without a clue as to what anyone is telling me. No thanks. I like knowing what’s going on. Besides, Fortunata is a neat kid, Orellana is very kind, and Salazar is funny.

History is stupid, Hermione. Nothing we’ve ever been told about any of them is accurate. Maybe a grain of truth, but that’s about all, and it’s infuriating. Orellana and Godric’s wife Sedemai are teachers here, too. That stupid fucking book never mentions them!

I miss you. You’d be losing your mind with joy if you were in my place, I know it. I just try not to exist in a state of constant confusion. Everything is the same, but everything is different. Oh, and people keep telling me I’m intelligent. That’s such rubbish, but Sal keeps tricking me into proving it because he is a complete shit.

He’s only twenty, Hermione. Five years older than I am. That’s it. Salazar is the youngest. Helga’s twenty-two. Orellana just turned twenty last month. Fortunata is eight. Sedemai just had her twenty-fifth birthday. Godric will be twenty-seven in a few days. Rowena is thirty-six. Rowena’s daughters Alicia and Helena are fourteen and eleven.

Everyone is so young. Fuck those Entrance Hall portraits for being bloody inaccurate.

There are only seventeen students, total, aside from me. No, wait, Alicia went off to her apprenticeship in Strathclyde today. Sixteen plus me.

8th July 990

Horcrux. Now there’s something I’d really rather talk about going on never, but I don’t have much choice. A Horcrux is a soul jar, and it’s sitting right behind the scar on my head.

That’s right, everyone! The Freak has a shard of Voldemort’s fucking soul stuck in his head.

“Oh, Harry,” Hermione whispers, feeling the self-loathing all but rolling off that particular page. That must have been a rough day.

Mind Magic sucks. (I cannot use that slang here, it is so misunderstood. Remind me to tell you about the difficulty in regards to neat, oxen, kids, children, and goats.)
All right, it probably wouldn’t be so bad, Mind Magic. Everyone here learns it when they’re young, just starting school things. Which is age 8. Not 11. I mentioned history is stupid, right? Mind Magic is treated as step one for learning magic, and from what I can manage of it so far, they’re right. It really helps. It’s just that the stupid Horcrux has been stuck in my head for over fourteen years. That means I don’t just have to learn Mind Magic. I have to Master it. I’m so pathetically undereducated that it’s ridiculous, but I have to throw myself at a magical mastery to get rid of a soul shard.

Hogwarts, er, Hogewáþ isn’t finished yet. In our time, I could go upstairs at night and walk across the rooftops from one end of the school to the other. Yes I did and it’s too late to stop me, anyway. I couldn’t sleep and it was something to do that had the least likely chance of me being caught and losing us points. Oh, there’s no Points system here. That’s a relief.

There is no Quidditch Staircase, no greenhouses outside, no Hospital Tower, no Gryffindor Tower, no Divination Tower, no Clock Tower, and no Dark Tower, not that we need that last one or anything. The Headmaster’s Tower isn’t called that. Godric lives where the headmaster’s office would be now, but all of the student dormitories are in lower sections of that tower. Did you know there are rooms there? Because I sure didn’t, and I don’t remember seeing them on the Marauder’s Map. Where did those rooms go?

The DADA Tower exists, but it’s only called the Defence Tower, and they mean it literally. Godric showed me how the narrow windows are meant for archers, or for casting long-distance spells to defend the castle with less chance of dying in the process. Rowena’s tower is kind of an obvious one, and Helga does live underground near the kitchens, but there are no stupid barrels. Who was dumb enough to get rid of a perfectly reasonable stairwell and door?

The dungeons are maybe a blip compared to what we have, but the ballroom is here. It’s never used for anything except indoor dueling practice during shit weather, but hey, it’s being used. There is no Prefect’s Bathroom, the library is only on the third floor and it is tiny, you would be insulted. The Armory is a literal weapons-staging area instead of just a room full of armor. Zero secret passageways, too. I checked. Yes, of course I did. Maybe they’re added later.

The Chamber of Secrets doesn’t exist.

19th July 990

I have another insomniac for company at last! Well, I learned this back in May, but it’s hard to stay caught up. I’m trying to do things all the time. It’s great, but it doesn’t help the insomnia bit.

Godric is completely mental. He goes running to deal with his insomnia, and I don’t mean little jogs. I mean he runs for miles.


So of course I went out with him again the next time he was in the mood, because glutton for punishment, that’s me.

Helga told me she wants to change her name to Hugðilepuf. Suddenly I understand where Hufflepuff came from, and I’m fucking angry about it. Hugðilepuf was a careful choice that means fierce, quick-thought defence. Hufflepuff in our time is a joke and I hate it.

The Forbidden Forest is called the Dark Forest for, well, obvious reasons. It’s bloody dark in there, even if the new eyesight/colors thing means I have really great night vision now. I think it’s the West
Saxon English Problem.

It is too a problem. I don’t care what you think, stop looking at my letters that way.

Deorc is a synonym for sinister, and then you end up with Forbidden. I can language just fine. (No, I can’t. Help.)

I read that stupid book, Hermione. I really did. I read Hogwarts: A History. It was so dull that I can’t recall a lot of it, but I’m certain that stupid book never mentions anything about the Founders holding the castle’s magic, or that if a land loses its magic, the land dies. I’m pretty sure I would have noticed something about Everything Will Die Without Magic in that dumb book!

I’m a bit freaked out, all right? Godric says that Myrddin (Yep, that Merlin, have not yet met him, not really in any great hurry just based on Salazar’s muttering) created this place because it’s one of the strongest remaining points of magic on the island. If things are already that bad, then shit, what’s happening in our time? That’s bloody terrifying to contemplate, Hermione. I don’t even know if the Heads of Houses in our time are still doing that job!

28th July 990

The youngest student here is named Galiena. She’s six.

It’s not fair. She’s English, so that’s one less language to learn, but she already knows Norn and Norse. And frances. She’s tiny and brilliant, Hermione. She reminds me a bit of you. I told her the story you told me, about Empress Theodora in Byzantium.

I told you I was paying attention. Theodora was a badass.

Hermione smiles. She didn’t know they’d met when they were both so young. That’s Harry, claiming people again.

The Greeks had way too much time on their hands and they used it to make up some truly stupid rules about grammar. I will not be learning Greek in any great hurry. I like Pictish better.

Gaelic is terrible, why did the Irish have to bring it here with them when they invaded? No, why did they leave it here when they went back to squabble over the western isle and the Hebrides and all of the little bits of land floating between us and them?

The others think I’m mental for learning Pictish. I probably am, but I like their magic. I like the way they think about magic.

I like the fact that the theories of magic taught here make bloody sense.

You know, saying, “What would Hermione do?” is not supposed to be a constant refrain so that I don’t do stupid shit. However, your morals also mean I’m going to be adopted, so, great?

I’m not done panicking yet. Details later. Panic now.
Hermione reads until her eyes burn, and then she keeps plowing along. Harry’s next letter does a much better job of discussing the magical adoption and what it means, even though it’s not something that can be completed until the Horcrux is removed. She tears up again when he hesitantly, in his scattered way, admits that he feels like he’s home, and how he’s never felt that way anywhere.

There is also a hilarious recount of Enduring Shopping With A Viking. Eidyn Buhr over Edinburgh. All of the kingdoms of Britain and the closest isles. The way gender roles were nowhere near as restricted as they are now, that history has their progress backwards. (If Hermione didn’t know better, she would suspect Harry had a crush on a female blacksmith.) London in 990, which apparently needed plumbing and sewage in the worst way, while ancient Hogwarts already had both, powered by magic.

Harry’s letter about his theory regarding Snape and spying is so on the nose that Hermione actually stares at it for a few minutes longer than necessary, nonplussed. She knew he was very good about putting just a few bits of information together to figure out a much larger whole, and he’s right, but Harry figured out Professor Snape’s continued role as a spy for the Order because of two things. Just two. While dosed with Dreamless Sleep.

If the letter about Snape is intriguing, then the one about Professor Dumbledore makes her skin crawl. Harry noticing that Dumbledore never tells them anything useful unless they’ve already discovered it for themselves. Harry saying that Snape saved his life repeatedly, but Dumbledore never actually did so. (He’s right, which just makes the gooseflesh worse.) Fawkes is already known to the school in 990 as Merlin’s companion, and Salazar suspects that if Fawkes in their time is loyal to anyone, it would be the school, Merlin’s last project, not to a man. Harry realizing that Dumbledore never claimed to have sent Fawkes to help him in the Chamber against the diary shade and the basilisk—that had to have been Fawkes’s idea. Dumbledore just spoke of it like he’d planned it all from the start.

Harry is still enraged about that month of silence from their arrival in London on first July through midnight on his birthday last year. Hermione, who’d chafed under the order from Dumbledore not to tell her best friend anything, doesn’t blame him one bit. He’d been entirely isolated, and that had struck Hermione at the time as being...well, dangerous.

Does that man actually want me dead? Harry writes, and Hermione shivers.

Then there is the entertaining written shouting asking Hermione to send help. Harry didn’t realize that the younger brother of a Castilian Marqués was also nobility.

Non-verbal spells. Family magic. Samhain. The Horcrux, it’s ability to think, and how it starts to fight back. Harry’s first visit to Ipuzko, and how it, like that time period, feels like home to Harry in a way that leaves him half-panicked.

Estefania, Salazar’s sister, who is apparently a political terror. Twelvetide in a Spanish court. Harry telling off a king, which is so perfectly Harry. He never cares about rank and authority if he thinks someone is wrong, but apparently he’d learned by that point to tell someone off and make them like hearing about it, since the entire visit is judged a success.

Then it’s a two-line letter, dated twenty-seventh December of 990, that only says: I’m in Burgos, in Castile. You’d love it here. The grief in those two sentences makes her want to weep, and she has no idea why.

Harry explains his names, and she does cry again. There is such cautious happiness when he does so. Hereweald, West Saxon English—then a word for an army leader, but Salazar liked the Bavarian
spelling of Hariwalt better. Being told that leading an army is a lot more complex than simply going into battle. Nizar, a Euskaran adoption from the Arabic that means both little and rare.

A rare leader. Hermione wipes her eyes and nose with the edge of her bedsheet. She wonders if Professor Salazar would be utterly baffled if she hugged him.

The first letter Harry writes about basilisks is absolutely chilling.

The second one just makes Hermione sad. She wonders if this Çinara was Kanza’s mother.

A third letter, dated a few days later, talks about Wizarding Burgos. Every single non-human sentient being openly carried wands. He tells her about the free elves of Burgos.

Hermione hugs that one to her chest. He remembered, and he understood.

Then there is a gap of months before Harry, signing his letter as Hari, is writing again at the end of February. The Horcrux was removed early and the fight nearly killed him. He doesn’t go into detail, and Hermione is sort of glad he didn’t. The end of the Triwizard Tournament haunts her dreams enough as it is. The only thing Harry does talk about, rather viciously, is how glad he is that the lightning-bolt scar on his head is disappearing. The Horcrux was creating it, but the Horcrux is gone.

They move the magical adoption from the planned Summer Solstice to the Lencten Equinox. From that point onward, the letters are all signed the same way. Nizar—or if he seems to be in a mood, he’ll write down every single title attached to his name.

Then Orellana dies, and even though Salazar’s second child survives, it just makes Hermione’s heart hurt. Harry spoke so fondly of Orellana, and she seemed to be such a wonderful woman, a brilliant teacher of woodworking and Alchemy. Poor Salazar, too—Nizar believes that it’s only the responsibility of the new baby that is keeping Salazar Deslizarse anchored to reality.

Nizar’s way of speaking becomes more in line with what she often hears from Professor Slytherin, though sometimes their slang will slip into his letters, or he’ll be so excited over some new bit of magic that his letters become more stream-of-consciousness instead of written summaries of events. Hermione enjoys those letters so much; she always knew her best friend was more intelligent than he’d ever been willing to let on, and he is finally, finally letting that intellect roam free. Some archaic spellings and terms are creeping their way in to the letters, but thankfully, she’s spent a lot of time with old books. It’s easy to figure out the odd words by context.

It’s Nizar who takes battle-weary Godric’s place as Defence teacher in 992, when he’s only seventeen. His list of titles grows as the years pass, and Hermione is so proud of him!

Galiena’s formal adoption (including the full reason why he punched Merlin). Hermione thinks he should have saved the punch for when Merlin dubbed Nizar a war mage and the schools’ Protector without so much as a by-your-leave.

Claiming Elfric and Brice while saying he’d best stop scooping up orphans, or he’ll be trying to parent an eighth of the population of Britain. Learning to parent, panicking about parenting, and enough joy in the words for Hermione to know he loves every moment of it.

Salazar meeting Marion of Inverness on the Autumn Equinox in 995 and being instantly smitten. Nizar being a good sibling and endlessly mocking Salazar for it while also happy to see both Marion and her brother, Peregrine, come to the school to learn. Marion is claimed by Rowena at once, though Peregrine seems to drift between Helga and Salazar. The insisted gifting of the twin cherry wands that Salazar and Nizar wield, crafted by Bernier Ollivander in 996.
Nizar Deslizarse, the man who eventually offers apprenticeships in Defence, Blood Magic, Pictish Magic, Mind Magic, Geomancy, and Metamorph Magic. Because, in his words, he’s an insane person who doesn’t sleep.

His children decide their father’s insanity should be emulated, given that they finish their first Masteries in record time after finding their apprenticeships. All of them choose to Master Mind Magic first, though Galiena is inclined towards art, Elfric to restoration, and Brice to mayhem.

Nizar’s letter about Peregrine’s death in 1004 is so full of rage that Hermione understands at once that he must have cared for the other man a great deal. Not marriage-sort of caring; it’s more like the sort of response Hermione would expect from Harry if Ron died.

Brice’s apprenticeship for Mind Magic is informal, under all of the school’s teachers, but his apprenticeship under Godric is formal for Defence. Then he goes out to find a master for Blood Magic and promptly falls in love with her. Nizar is very, very thankful that Brice’s teacher is firm and proper, insistent that there can be no such relationship until the apprenticeship is done…which tells Hermione that this mysterious teacher must have felt similarly towards Brice deSlizarse.

Hermione giggles her way through the letter that Nizar writes to discuss Galiena marrying someone named Uriel from Winchester, a quiet magician who trained at Hogewáþ under Helga. Nizar thinks he is a very good man, especially after Nizar threatened to break the man’s bones one by one with his bare hands if he ever mistreated Galiena and Uriel insisted that it would be just punishment. That was, apparently, the right answer. Helga being angry that Nizar left her with nothing useful to threaten Uriel with except ripping the soul from his body. Nizar telling Helga to please not actually frighten away his daughter’s betrothed.

Ouen Arturus, born in 1005, and Imeyna Genevote, born in 1008 to Salazar and Marion.

Nizar has grandchildren by 1008, too, twin boys named Drystan Peregrine and Paynel Elyas. Hermione has the feeling that this particular letter was written while Nizar was really, really drunk, given how disjointed it is. His way of writing shifts back and forth between the language structure then, their language now, and is interspersed with Old English, French, and some utterly incomprehensible words Hermione suspects are Latinized Cumbric. Maybe Pictish. It’s really hard to tell.

Brice marries his teacher, a half-Veela named Eithnemael. Hermione feels her eyebrows rise when she reads about how a Veela of any blood knows their mate immediately, because the one meant to be their mate will be utterly unaffected by their magic. Veelas also only choose one mate in their life. Only one.

She blinks a few times. Molly Weasley needs to know this, immediately, before she does anything worse to alienate poor Fleur in regards to Fleur’s relationship with Bill.

Vanora Marion deSlizarse is born in 1011 to Galiena and Uriel. Elfric just thinks both of his siblings are weird about wanting to sex or marry anything and declares they can both have at it, as he will not be doing so. No one in the school seems very surprised by this, but at least it means the castle has a dedicated teacher for Mind Magic and Necromancy.

Hermione has to stop reading and take a break, shaken and heartsick, when she comes across a letter dated eleventh November of 1012, but it holds no greeting or signature. There are only three words: Brice is dead.

The next letter is dated six months later. It’s dry and almost formal, but it’s something. It’s about his third grandchild, Vanora, wandering about with a toddler’s usual lack of grace while babbling in a
mix of Parseltongue, Old English, and Cumbric. The twin grandchildren, Drystan and Paynel, are old enough to start getting into mischief, though with a large and watchful family, it’s nothing that ever endangers their lives.

Galiena and Uriel’s wedded bliss. Fortunata’s successful career as a diplomatic magical envoy who offers the services of Defence to those who need help. Zuri, Imeyna, and Ouen’s studies in the castle. Salazar and Marion’s happiness. The joy that Godric and Sedemai take in their four children. Then it’s five, the last they choose to have in fear of risking Sedemai’s health. Alicia having the first of her children with no husband necessary, she is happy as she is, thank you very much.

If there is a common theme through all the letters, Hermione would name it loneliness. Nizar doesn’t talk about courting or dating anyone, or even mention men in any detail as he had in the past in regards to both Anselmet and Peregrine.

“Then why Snape?” Hermione wonders crossly, feeling like she’s staring at another large puzzle with too many pieces missing. “What is it you see that we don’t?”

No, she quickly realizes. That’s the wrong question. It would be more accurate to wonder what Snape allows *Nizar* to see that he’ll show to no one else.

Hermione sighs. Slytherins.

She doesn’t know she’s discovered that fateful year and stumbles over Elfric’s death. The letter is so messy it’s hard to piece any of the details together.

Nizar was still trying to write it for her, Hermione realizes. He never gave up on the idea that she’d see these letters. Maybe he already knew of a way to see them delivered and forgot to mention it before.

Of course he did. Hermione doubts she would be holding these letters otherwise.

Kanza and Betisa Slytherin brighten the rest of 1015 and 1016, even if grief never stops lacing Nizar’s words. Hermione’s heart aches in her chest, thinking that none of it is fair at all. Nizar had been so happy.

Then it’s 1017. The portrait. The shock of knowing what would need to be done.

Of the passing years finally allowing Nizar to discover the identity of that “strange old wizard” at last.

Nizar writes of how he and Salazar realized they couldn’t tell the other Founders. It was just instinct, not even Divination, but somehow it was understood that the others never knew. Salazar and Nizar inform the existing Founders’ portraits instead, swearing them to secrecy. No one is pleased about it—least of all Salazar, who started it all before he ever had the choice to begin.

_Time is a circle,* Nizar writes, _but there is nothing of kindness about it._

*Be well, dearest friend. You won’t know me when we meet again, but I hope I still remember you.*
Chapter Summary

“Can we be friends?”

Chapter Notes

Someone bribed me. <3

Beta hail: @norcumi, @sanerontheinside, @mrsstanley, & @jabberwockypie!

Also, I've caught up to the point where the betas left off, so...there might be a bit of a
wait on the next chapter, as they are busy crazy people.

Hermione lifts the up the last sheet of ancient paper and realizes she’s run out of letters. That was the
last line Nizar wrote to her, over nine hundred seventy-eight years ago.

She pulls the scrolls out from beneath the other pillow and removes another leather band that feels
like silk, her hands shaking. The first scroll makes her gasp. It’s herself, so tiny and so young,
standing just behind an unconscious cave troll in a destroyed bathroom. The image moves like a
Wizarding photograph, but it’s a set memory playing across the paper, not magical captured
impressions. The next one is also of her, writing on a scroll with a quill while looking up on
occasion, as if searching for someone. That was last year; she’s wearing her earrings from the Yule
Ball because the sight of them made Ron turn unfortunate colors.

Somehow, Hermione isn’t surprised that the last image is of herself smiling like a mad fiend over a
pile of books. Bravery, vengeance, and intelligence. Harry always did have a fondness for those
particular attributes.

Oh. Well. That actually explains a lot about why Nizar would be interested in Professor Snape. It
was just a bit less odd before she read all of this.

And you had a crush on Nizar for three months. Hermione buries her face in her hands, feeling a hot
blush against her palms. That just made everything awkward again.

On the plus side, learning who Nizar actually is has done an excellent job of causing that awkward
crush to be very, very dead. She never once thought of Harry that way, and never wanted to, either.

Hermione carefully puts the scrolls back into their single roll, sliding the leather band back into place
to bind them. The last letter is put back in its envelope, labeled number one hundred fifteen; the other
envelopes are all carefully checked to be certain they’re closed before she uses the leather ribbon to
tie them back together again. She gets out her wand and then peeks out between the curtains. The
sky is just beginning to lighten in the east, which means it’s almost six o’clock.

She feels utterly wretched, and strangely elated. This is the sort of problem she’d missed dealing
with, the delight of a puzzle, and her best friend gave it back to her again. Just in a very roundabout fashion.

Hermione dismisses the Shield Charm, but not *Muffliato*. “Dobby?” she calls softly.

Dobby appears in front of her a moment later, rubbing at his large green eyes. “Dobby is being here, Miss Granger—Miss Granger is upset!” Dobby blurs in surprise, staring up at her in concern.

Hermione presses her finger to her lips, very glad she hadn’t dismissed *Muffliato*. Dobby nods his understanding. “I’m not upset. I’ve just been reading sad things.” She grimaces when the elf looks at her in disbelief. “All right, I am upset, but not... I don’t really have the right words at the moment.” She snags her dressing gown from its hook and puts it on over her pyjamas. Then she shoves her feet into her slippers before gathering up the letters and scroll bundle. “Can you take me to Professor Slytherin’s classroom, Dobby? I know it’s early, but he’s expecting me.”

Dobby tilts his head until the tip of sock-clad his ear is dragging on the ground. “Miss Granger is knowing who The Protector is.”


“All elves of Hogwarts be knowing that,” Dobby says, as if it’s supposed to be obvious. Then he takes her arm in a gentle grasp and Apparates them directly to the Defence classroom. “Dobby must be going to help in the kitchen for morning. Is Miss Granger going to be all right?”

“Yes, Dobby.” Hermione makes herself smile. “Go on. Thank you.”

After the house-elf leaves, Hermione regards the door while biting her lip. The cast-iron *S* is so simple, and yet suddenly so intimidating. Turned one way, it resembles a serpent, and turned the other, it’s an *S*. She wonders if she needs to turn it to be knocking on the correct door, but she can’t remember which way the professor twisted it to—

Oh, she is *dithering* again! Hermione knocks on the door with a firm hand and waits.

She’s almost certain no one is going to answer until she finally hears the doorknob turn. It takes quite a bit to stand her ground when the door opens, revealing Professor Slytherin dressed in what looks like very old-styled white pyjamas from... China, maybe? Not pyjamas, then, not with those sleeves and the embroidery at the cuffs.

“You look terrible!” Hermione blurts out when she sees his face. He looks exhausted, or ill, or maybe both.

“Oh—thank you?” Nizar rubs at his face, attempts to smooth his tangled hair, and opens the door wider before gesturing for her to come in. Nygell isn’t on his perch, and the three children are sleeping in their portraits. “Rough night. Didn’t go to bed until late. Or very early. I don’t actually know.”

“Oh.” Hermione wants to know what happened, but she is still a student and he is still a teacher. “Are you all right?” she asks instead. She wants to hug him, but that also isn’t proper.

“I will be. Ran to the Heights last night. Filky, please, I will love you forever if you bring tea.”

The house-elf looks up from where she is stirring the fire back to life. “Filky be doing so, Professor!” she says cheerfully. Then she reaches out to stroke Kanza’s lifted head before Disapparating.
“Too much cheerful. Too early. No.” Nizar walks over to the table, sits, and then rests his face on the tabletop. “Did you not sleep?”

Hermione tries not to smile. The scowling Professor Slytherin they see in the Great Hall in the morning is the improved version, then. “Er, no sir. I was reading. Uhm. Everything.”

When the tea tray appears on the table with three cups, a steaming pot, and tiny breakfast rolls in dishes, Nizar says, “You can sit down, you know. If you haven’t slept, you need tea as much as I do.”

“You did mention several times that you missed tea.” Hermione gingerly takes a seat across from him, keeping her back to the wall so that she can see the hallway off the sitting room. If there are three cups, there is still a Potions Master in these quarters, and she does not want to be startled out of her wits if he suddenly appears behind her. “In the letters, I mean.”

Nizar lifts his head and pours tea, glares at the cup, adds sugar, and stirs it by moving his finger in a circle to swirl the liquid instead of bothering with a spoon. “Did I?”

Hermione copies him, though she adds milk and uses a real spoon. “Yes. They did finally properly explain what a Horcrux is, too. I’ve been wondering about that since January.”

He gives her a confused look before his expression clears. “Oh! I’d entirely forgotten you’d asked about them during that incident with the Horcrux in the rubbish room aspect. I take it you looked up Horcruxes in the library afterwards?”

“And there was nothing to be found,” Hermione says. “Not a thing about Horcruxes! All I knew prior to last night is that it’s an Old English word that means evil jar.”

Nizar lifts his teacup. “We called them soul jars, actually, though evil is the better translation.”

Hermione nods her agreement. She can’t think of circumstances in which a Horcrux wouldn’t be used for evil. “Uh. The letters. I can’t keep them safe, not in the dorm. And I think you should read them, sir.”

Nizar drains half of his tea before he speaks again, which gives Hermione time to sip at her own tea. The familiar act soothes her rattled nerves. “Are they that informative?”

“Yes, sir,” Hermione replies. “They’re, uh…they’re very you. Wait, did you say you ran all the way to the Heights last night? The Heights of Brae? The hills that are over five miles away?”

“I did, yes.”

“It was snowing last night,” Hermione says in complete disapproval.

“Sleeting, actually. Trust me, after a certain point? The ice doesn’t stand a chance.” Nizar starts to look more alert. “Questions, then?”

“Oh. Yes.” Hermione tries to put her thoughts in order. “I—you don’t remember me at all, do you? Because of the Preservation Charms being interrupted by the painting being moved, I mean.”

Nizar shakes his head. “No, I don’t. I’m sorry. I don’t remember any of you from…then.”

“It’s okay. I understand why,” Hermione starts to say, but he narrows his eyes.

“It is not all right.” Nizar glares down at the cup he’s already managed to empty and pours a second
one. “How many terrible revelations can you handle in a single day, Miss Granger?”

“I’ve already read through twenty-seven years of revelations, and not all of them were kind,” Hermione says, thinking of his last written words. “I’ve already cried about it several times. I suppose a few more won’t hurt.”

Nizar smiles at her. “Sorted correctly,” he murmurs. “I’m sure you remember how much of this school’s history has been corrupted between then and now.”

“Given that you speak of it often, and Professor Salazar is throwing an absolute fit about it in History class?” Hermione summons a wobbly smile. “It’s hard to avoid, sir. That and, well, no one has mentioned anything directly, but given what happened to the house-elves’ contract, you and Professor Salazar suspect it was deliberate.”

“No. We know it was deliberate,” Nizar corrects, but he’s staring down into his teacup instead of looking at her. “The Preservation Charms are not the only cause of my faulty memories, Miss Granger. The man who crafted this school’s divisions, its rivalries and its false history—I recalled only recently that he cast Obliviscaris Omnia at my portrait.”


“Such magic was considered utter anathema in our day, even by those who were inclined to be evil,” Nizar says. “It’s one of the only protections the portrait didn’t bear. I don’t remember anything of the next fifty years after the casting of that spell, and it remains—it’s difficult to recall things with any real clarity until the end of the 1700s. I may never be able to remember things the way that I should.”

He snorts. “Even some of the flashbacks I’ve been having are blank spots.”

“That’s…” Hermione bites her lip. “Terrible. It’s awful. It’s not fair!”

He looks baffled. “To who?”

“To you, you—!” Hermione winces. “It’s not fair to you.”

Nizar suddenly grins at her. “I very much want to know what you were about to call me.”

Hermione ducks her head. “I really, really shouldn’t say. It’s not polite.”

“I suppose it depends on who you’re wishing to speak to right now.”

Hermione jerks her head up to stare at him. “But—”

Nizar sighs. “Just because I don’t recall doesn’t mean I do not understand.”

“Can we be friends?” Hermione asks hesitantly. “I mean, it’s…not proper, is it?”

“In public? Certainly not,” Nizar replies. “But there was no stupidity about friendship between those of different rank and ages in our day. In fairness to the fact that it’s 1996, however—if you were younger, I wouldn’t consider it at all, but you’ll be seventeen in September. An arbitrary date does not magically make you suddenly more mature, intelligent, or capable than you already are. That does not mean that certain standards of behavior I set for myself will be lessened, and I certainly would expect you to be properly behaved in public.”

Hermione swallows and says, “I was going to call you, uhm, a dingbat.”

“That’s it?” He starts laughing. “That’s the worst of it? Truly? Given the bruise you once left on
Draco Malfoy’s face, I would have expected something a bit more fiery!”

“I left a bruise in third-year? You got to see it?” Hermione asks, smiling.

“Of course I got to see it. He whinged about being punched by a word I’ll not be repeating. I told him he deserved worse. Draco wouldn’t speak to me for a week until he finally crept out of the dorms one night and said he was sorry for saying that word.” Nizar seems amused. “I asked if he was going to apologize to you, and he said he didn’t know how. Given how bad the rivalries were at the time, and how long it took me to push you stubborn idiots into seeing each other as people instead of labels…well, I can’t really blame him for not knowing how. Also, he was afraid you would actually remove some of his teeth with your fist if he approached you again that term.”

“I probably would have.” Hermione feels an easy sort of relief settle on her shoulders. She hasn’t lost her best friend. It’s going to be very, very different, but she can adjust to different. She adjusted from being an overachieving swot with no friends in primary school to an overachieving witch who could do magic sent off to a magical boarding school just fine. “Draco did apologize, though. At the end of winter break in January.”

“Took him long enough. I hope it was suitable.”

“It was baffling!” Hermione blushes when he laughs again. “Yes, it was ‘suitable,’ but it was still confusing. Even with things better than they were. I didn’t ever expect Draco Malfoy to do that. I really didn’t expect him to accept partial citizenship in the UK, especially as a noble directly responsible to the Queen! That’s…it’s…”

“That is the sign of a young man who wants to be better,” Nizar says quietly.

Hermione finds herself once again wondering if it was Draco who sent the fountain pen. She’s been using it, but if he sent it, she can’t tell. He hasn’t said a word. “I suppose so.”

“I’m surprised you’re not asking about my hair. That’s what Black and Lupin wanted to know.”

“Remus and Sirius know?” Hermione asks in surprise. “And—er—I suppose Professor Snape would know, too.”

“Never be in close confines with a werewolf within the days before a full moon if you are trying to keep a secret,” Nizar says wryly. “Granted, the first time I met both of them, I didn’t know, either. It was the second visit to Grimmauld Place that let that particular cat out of the bag. And yes, Professor Snape knows. He’s the first person I told after I found out, and it was not by sudden recollection. That was by being sensible enough to write myself a letter.”

“That’s the same day you jumped out of the second floor window,” Hermione guesses, and he nods. “Er, how did Professor Snape handle the news?”

“Like himself. He’s a very particular sort of person, Miss Granger. It was a deep shock.” Nizar rests his chin on one hand. “I’ve mentioned age being no barrier to friendship in my day? In the magical world, if you were old enough to seek an apprenticeship at age fourteen, you were considered to be an adult, one capable of making their own decisions. An intimate relationship between an apprentice-age student and an adult was only considered inappropriate if you were also apprenticed to that same adult. Your teachers do not share those views. Professor Snape especially does not share those views. Fortunately, I am forty-two years old, and thanks to the portrait, most certainly older than he is.”

“Right.” Hermione still thinks it’s odd. She is probably always going to think it odd. “That does
explain what you said in your letters about Eithnemael.”

Nizar’s expression goes blank with a lack of recognition. “Eithnemael?”

“She taught me Blood Magic, Father,” Brice’s portrait says, gaining Hermione’s attention. He is awake and giving Nizar a dry look. “Very inconvenient to discover your future spouse in someone you cannot even court until the apprenticeship is done. Oh—God, you don’t remember her at all, do you?” Brice asks sadly.

“No, but it’s probably a minor miracle that I remember Gedeloc,” Nizar says. “Tell me about her later, please.”

Hermione desperately changes the subject back to what it had been. “Sirius?”

“He discovered his son by marriage was safe and contended with the realization that he’d lost him in all legally binding senses of the word on the same day,” Nizar says. “Lupin told me that to say Sirius Black was upset is to vastly understate the case.”

“How do you feel about…uhm, that? We always thought he was your godfather until the Prophet began printing all of this.”

“Oh. Well. The man I’m dating and the man who was once my father by legal marriage tried to kill each other. Often.” Nizar grins. “Aside from the awkwardness, I think that’s funny.”

“You would,” Hermione says, rolling her eyes before her brain catches up to her. “Uh—I mean—!”

He laughs again. “Would it make it any less awkward if I called you Hermione?”

Hermione feels her face heat. “I don’t know. Let’s try it and find out?”

“Fair enough, Hermione,” Nizar agrees.

Her cheeks are still burning, but she’s not going to let that be the end of it yet. Maybe if she’s still bothered in a week she’ll ask him to stop, at least until she’s graduated from Hogwarts. “I don’t need to ask about your hair and eyes. You told me in your letters.”

“Oh.” Nizar looks surprised. “Then they really are informative, aren’t they?”

“Oh, yes. You said one of the reasons that you learned how to be a Metamorphmagus is because you —” Hermione hesitates. “You hated being compared to your father all the time. To James Potter. So you only changed that, and you were seventeen by then, and just doing that meant that you didn’t. Look like him anymore, I mean. Not really.”

“Oh,” Nizar is saying just as Professor Snape declares, “That actually makes perfect sense.”

Hermione squeaks. She seated herself so that she would have some warning, and still Professor Snape managed to appear without her noticing!

Unlike Nizar, Snape is almost dressed for the day but for a missing jacket and robe. “You look abominable this morning, Nizar.”

Nizar smiles. “Beats lying down in dainty repose.”

“That was not dainty repose. That was the ungainly sprawl of a dying idiot,” Snape counters, reaching for the third teacup. “Good morning, Miss Granger,” he says in a far more civil tone, even if it sounds stilted.
“Er. Good morning, s-sir,” Hermione stutters.

“It is too early for me to attempt to bite your head off,” Snape replies in a stone dry voice, sitting down next to Nizar. “I will be reserving that for after seven o’clock.”

“Then I’m safe for at least forty minutes,” Hermione says, and then flinches. “Sir.”

Snape sips tea and glares at her. “Miss Granger, in four-and-a-half years, I have yet to cause you harm despite the fact that you personally set me on fire. Please stop squeaking in terror.”

Hermione stares at him. “You—you know about—you knew that was me?”

“You three were not subtle. I’ve yet to meet first-years who know the meaning of the word.” Snape lifts an eyebrow. “Besides, that incident was useful. It told me that Quirrell was whom I needed to concern myself with regarding the Stone, even if I was not yet aware of what sort of concern it would turn out to be.”

“Those were some carefully worded conversations the two of you had.” Nizar looks to be giving in to the inevitable by eating one of the house-elves’ stuffed rolls.

“Please. Those were not conversations; those were threats,” Snape responds. “The difficulty was in leaving Quirrell to wonder whose side the threats originated from.”

“Which—which one of them was actually afraid of fire?” Hermione asks. “Quirrell, or V—” She grits her teeth. “Or Voldemort?” There. She said it without hesitating. Even Snape looks pleased, for given levels of him ever being pleased about anything.

“Oh, definitely Quirrell. Voldemort didn’t have to concern himself yet with the limits of a physical form.” The smile on Nizar’s face is the feral, vicious one she most often sees when he plays as their enemy during dueling practice.

Filky reappears in the sitting room, but she gives Nizar’s pyjamas a look of complete offence that makes Hermione choke off a giggle. It must be the lack of dressing gown. “Is the professors wishing for breakfast here?” Filky asks. “And does Filky need to bring breakfast for Miss Granger?”

“I think it would be very much remarked upon if you did, so the latter would be a bad idea,” Nizar answers. “Oh, but that updated timetable would not be amiss.”

“Yes, Professor Slytherin!” Filky bobs her head and Disapparates, but not before Hermione catches sight of two tiny silver rings in her left ear.

“Jewelry,” Hermione murmurs. “Oh, I’m so glad.”

“They like it. The elf from Burgos looked to be wearing their own body weight in silver.” Nizar’s hand snaps out to catch the timetable that pops into the air before it can land on the breakfast rolls.

Hermione smiles as he hands the paper to her. “You did say that you kept playing Quidditch.” He also talked about how much he missed the Gryffindor team, but she doesn’t want to mention that right now.

“It was something to do.”

“Why a new timetable, though?” Hermione asks, unfolding it. “We just received one of these on the sixth—why am I being listed for N.E.W.T. Defence?” she gasps in shock. Her eight o’clock block for Monday is now free and empty, just like the rest of the week. Everyone else is in class; it’s the
“Because you are so far beyond what the fifth-years are doing in Defence that holding you back would do you no favors at all,” Nizar replies. “Congratulations: you now have Defence at two o’clock Monday afternoon and at ten o’clock Tuesday morning.”

Hermione can’t tell if she’s excited or terrified. “Professor McGonagall approved this? What will everyone say?”

“They’ll be preoccupied by Miss Chang, who is being shuffled up to the seventh-year N.E.W.T. class. I don’t think she’ll be ready to sit the exam at the end of term. Perhaps halfway through next term, but not now. She shares your difficulty; to keep her with the sixth-years would be to stifle her progress, and I refuse to do that to anyone.” He shakes his head. “I need to move Ginny Weasley into the fifth-year class, but I have concerns about certain gingers attempting to murder me. Bloody sexist rubbish!”

Hermione blinks a few times, startled by the outburst. “Ginny would be—she could do it, though! Easily!”

“No the O.W.L., but yes, otherwise she could, and I’ve a stumbling block in the way.” Nizar crosses his arms and looks furious.

“While he is sulking, do please review the rest of your timetable,” Snape tells her. “Yours was much easier to rearrange than Miss Chang’s.”

“I still say you should just give in and tell Filius to get her a Time-Turner. It would be easier.”

“No, Nizar,” Snape growls.

“We are not dealing with an unmedicated werewolf, an escaped convict, or Dumbledore convincing children to be his minions right now, Severus,” Nizar says. “Time-Turner. Or just suffer by needing to repeat everything to Miss Chang at four o’clock each Monday instead of not needing to worry about it at all.”

“I hate it when you’re sensible!”

Hermione stares determinably down at her timetable, blushing like fire and hoping no one notices. That does not sound like arguing, for all that they’re very good at making it appear that way. That sounds far more like flirting, and she does not want to know!

There is a note from Professor McGonagall on the new timetable that says she expects Hermione to be able to keep up with the assigned work. That’s not just Professor Slytherin’s approval, that’s her Head of House’s full confidence.

She’s being treated like—like she’s intelligent. It takes quite a bit not to hug her new timetable to her chest.

“Wait. What about exams?” Hermione asks, glancing up at Nizar when there seems to be a lull in the flirting.

“I am absolutely confident that you will have no trouble taking the O.W.L. for Defence at the end of the year, as well as the sixth-year exam, without any difficulty at all.”

“But how?” Hermione asks, trying not to wail in despair. “It’s the O.W.L.s! I’ll have to study—”
“Because there is no end of term exam for anyone in my classes except for those sitting O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s” Nizar gives her an innocuous look that utterly fails at being innocent. “My last assigned essay of the term, due in June, is the final exam.”

Hermione gapes at him. Of all the devious—! “Are you going to tell anyone?”

“Oh, certainly. About a week before it’s due. The staff are all in the midst of taking wagers on who will be crowding the library in a panic because they thought to skive off on the last essay, thinking good marks on the final exam would give them the means to pass my class.” Nizar grins like the Cheshire Cat from the animated Disney film Hermione saw as a child. “That sort of chaos is always fun to witness.”

Hermione frowns as a niggling suspicion she’s had all night suddenly blooms. “You were almost a Hat Stall because you were arguing with the Sorting Hat, weren’t you?”

Nizar glances at Snape, who is rolling his eyes. “I told you. Dangerous guessing.”

Snape sighs. “I’m still so very glad you argued with that sodden Hat.”

Hermione is, too, though for what are probably very different reasons. “Uh, you know, if you told Ginny about wanting to move her up a year…she would probably be able to convince her parents. Probably via guilt.”

Nizar grins again.

“You—you already have!” Hermione forgets herself and kicks him under the table. “You utter Slytherin!”

“Thank you for noticing,” Nizar says dryly. “And I’m very glad you don’t seem to be able to kick people as hard as you punch them.”

Hermione does not hide behind her timetable when Snape scowls at her. “Uh. Is anyone else being moved about?”

“Miss Lovegood is also about to inflict her charming company on the fifth-years you’re leaving behind.” Nizar smirks. “They deserve what they’re getting. Dobby!”

Dobby pops into the room in the spot where Filky vacated from a few minutes earlier. “It is still being breakfast,” he says sternly, but then he spies Hermione. “Does Miss Granger need to be taken back to Gryffindor Tower?”

“Yes, please. Be subtle. No one needs to know that she was anywhere else but her bed for the entire night and morning,” Nizar instructs. “You need to get ready for class, Miss Granger.”

Hermione nods, standing up and hastily putting her empty teacup back onto the tray. “Yes, sir. Uh—you really should read the letters,” she says, and then Dobby has Apparated her right back to her curtain-enclosed bed. This time it’s Dobby who puts his finger over his lips before he Disapparates again.

She lets out a breath and flops down onto her bed, staring up at the canopy. “Oh. Oh, dear.”

“Are you awake early again, Granger?” Blishwick asks in a testy mutter.

“As always,” she replies in a sweet voice, rolling her eyes when Blishwick swears at her. Honestly.
Hermione sits back up and slips out of bed, grabbing clean clothing for the day before retreating into the bathroom. None of the other girls will be up until the lure of breakfast drags them out of bed.

She’s running a brush through her hair when she realizes that she’s already plotting ways to convince Ron to learn Occlumency. It won’t be the first clue she’s ever shoved under his oblivious nose.

*Maybe it's a good thing the Sorting Hat never hesitated with me,* Hermione thinks, and bursts into tears.
Severus sits in uncomfortable silence for a few minutes after Miss Granger departs via house-elf. Nizar is eying the pile of ancient letters on the table as if they’re a potentially lethal puzzle, but he doesn’t seem to mind Miss Granger’s newfound knowledge. Severus is still not convinced that informing her was the best idea. Obliviation would suit his paranoia, but he has to admit, Granger did prove that she could withstand the harshest _Legilimens_ he knows how to cast.

“I’ve been thinking about something.”

Severus glances at Nizar to find that the other is studying him in concern. “What?” He grimaces at the sharp tone of his voice and tries again. “What are you thinking about?”

“_Obliviscaris Omnia,_” Nizar says. Years of spycraft keep Severus from flinching. He never thought he would encounter a spell he disliked more than _Crucio_, but the Crucius Curse sounds merciful in comparison. Even Lockhart was not affected by his backfiring _Obliviate_ to such an extent. “I was wondering if another practitioner of Mind Magic could see that damage if they were looking for it.”

Severus frowns. “I’ve encountered _Obliviate_ markers in a mind before, but for this—would Salazar not be the better choice?”

Nizar shakes his head. “No. I trust him, truly, but this would…all of those gaps, all of those missing memories, Severus. Sal would _know_ what isn’t there, and it would upset him. You’ve already been in my head without finding it traumatic. Entertaining, maybe.”

“You’d just had a panic attack. It was _not_ entertaining.” Severus considers the idea. He doesn’t know if it would be of assistance or not to point out those markers to Nizar, but he can’t think of any reason why it would be harmful. “When?”

“Now, if you aren’t opposed.”

Severus glares at him. “You’ve only just mentioned it. Why do you want to do this immediately? Please tell me you have a reason that isn’t ridiculous.”

“I’m not sure if the reason is ridiculous or not.” Nizar smiles. “Hallowe’en of 1991, the evening you had an encounter with a fluffy Cerberus.”
“I’m tempted to refuse outright because of that fucking pun, Nizar.”

“My apologies,” Nizar says in a way that means he isn’t sorry at all. “Whatever happened to Fluffy, anyway?”

“Dumbledore sent him back to Greece rather than allow a dangerous Cerberus to roam through the Forbidden Forest,” Severus replies.

Nizar scowls. “Oh, so it’s all right to have a forest full of fucking man-eating giant spiders, but a Cerberus born and raised on British soil by Rubeus Hagrid is too dangerous? Please do keep giving me reasons to dislike Hogwarts’ Headmaster.”

“We would be sitting here all day, Nizar.” Severus gives him a pointed look. “You were talking about Hallowe’en in 1991.”

“Right, yes—the troll. Granger lied,” Nizar says.

Severus blinks a few times and pinches the bridge of his nose. “Please continue to explain so that this conversation will make sense.”

“I asked Granger to mentally show me the incident with the troll when she brought it up. It was also an excellent means to determine her understanding of projecting thoughts with Mind Magic. She’d…” Nizar looks discomfited. “Miss Granger had hidden herself in that particular bathroom for the whole of the afternoon and evening due to someone’s thoughtless words. The child and Weasley realized that she wasn’t present at dinner to know that there was a troll in the castle and went to go find her. They were right to do so, as the troll had already gone right into the bloody bathroom. I don’t know if their telling any of the available staff of the danger would have been enough to save her, as they rushed and still barely made it in time to create a decent distraction. When you and Minerva arrived, Granger realized that even if her rescuers told the truth, they would be in trouble, so she claimed all responsibility.

“Miss Granger desperately seeks approval from authority figures, and the only way she knows how to attain it is by her academic knowledge and her good standing in authority’s eyes by proving herself to be a responsible student. She was willing to discard that approval out of loyalty to those who’d risked their lives. She’s always been willing to discard that desired approval when it comes to doing the right thing. Even if I never recall anything else of those years, Severus, I’d like to remember her.”

Severus narrows his eyes. “What is the other reason?”

Nizar doesn’t seem surprised by the question. “Miss Granger once told me that she thinks of that child as family, more so than her actual family. Given that the stack of letters meant for her far outweighs those written to anyone else? I think I must have felt similarly.”

“Slytherins and claiming things.” Severus tries to sound derisive and can’t quite manage it. What Nizar just described—Severus once thought the same of Lily. “Is that why you’ve asked her to earn a mastery in Defence with you?”

“No, I was trying to claim Miss Granger for my own nefarious purposes before I ever read that stupid scroll,” Nizar says with an amused smile. “I still find it funny that Sal’s portrait remembered that I wrote myself a letter, but Salazar himself forgot it existed.”

Severus raises an eyebrow. “Funny is not the word you were actually thinking.”

“True,” Nizar admits. “I was actually thinking that it was fucking depressing.”
“Nizar—” Severus bites back useless words. “Fine. I'll do it.”

“Thank you.” Nizar lowers his eyes; when he looks up again, there is an openness to his gaze that tells Severus there is no mental shielding in his way. A silent Legilimens casting became easier for him as his time as a spy progressed, as if prying into the dark corners of Voldemort’s life made it easier to pry into the minds of others.

The very first difficulty Severus faces, something he observed in December, is that there are so many empty spaces where memory should be. Here, Nizar’s voice whispers. The sensation is similar to being taken by the hand, and then he is standing in the memory of Utredus Gaunt’s 1234 visit to the Slytherin Common Room.

Severus lingers only long enough to observe that Nizar has not been exaggerating in order to spare his own feelings. Gaunt’s appearance is nothing like Elfric deSlizarse. Even the corpse taken from the Gaunt tomb did not look like that. There is something eldritch about that reanimated body, a strong impression of wrongness.

He has no wish to witness this memory. It’s merely a starting point that shows him what the first and possibly worst Obliviscatur point looks like. There is a bright light that has to be the flare of the spell, and then nothing but a few connecting lines that look like…

Severus peers closer. Static on a telly’s screen when the antenna loses the signal. That is what it’s most mindful of. He skips past Gaunt into earlier memories to find other gaps. The static lines are also present in those places, evidence of the spell’s widespread damage.

He pages through wisps of memory, as if finding his way through a card catalogue, until he discovers something coherent enough to be considered an intact recollection of events. Nizar is sitting at a slanted desk in a part of the portrait Severus never saw—and he knows it’s the portrait, not a misplaced memory. Nizar looks close enough to himself that it’s difficult to see a difference, but while Nizar’s surroundings are three-dimensional, they are quite obviously composed from skillfully applied paint.

Severus wanders closer out of curiosity and finds Nizar gritting his teeth as he attempts to write a sentence. It’s not the handwriting of a child lacking muscle control, but that of an adult who still learning how to use quill and ink.

“Well, that is terrible, isn’t it?” Nizar murmurs, smiling down at his own shoddy work. “Yes, it is,” he says in response to unseen hissing. “I have other books for comparison, Kanza. This is truly gods-awful.”

That isn’t French, Spanish, or Middle English. That’s modern English. By accent and vocabulary, possibly the mid-1600s.

Four centuries after Obliviscaris Omnia, and Nizar was still relearning how to write. God.

Kanza raises her head, revealing that she was curled around the black inkpot. As with Nizar, the basilisk looks very much like herself, right down to the expression of serpentine offence.

“Did I say I would cease making the attempt? Did I?” Nizar picks up a bit of stained cloth and cleans the pheasant quill, which also doesn’t look like it’s made of paint. Nizar carried it into the painting with him, perhaps, though the quill didn’t survive the painting’s destruction. “I do not know why you insist I do this. Why must a portrait learn how to write?” He smiles and rolls up the scroll while Kanza hisses in response. “‘Not a portrait,’ she declares. You are very much offended by the idea, aren’t you? My vain girl.”
Severus abruptly abandons the memory. It’s far too mindful of the many times Severus had chided himself for his friendship with a portrait, something that would definitely be seen as a character flaw among others. It was a foolish thought of youth, still unwanted; the flaw did not lie with the friendship, even if Nizar had never proven to be anything more than paint and canvas.

He keeps going, searching for those static markers, but it’s a hopeless task. They’re numerous, far more markers than memory. Too many times, Severus finds those static markers connecting blank places to blank places.

Memory isn’t linear, which makes things so much more difficult when he has no specific event to search for. He intended to go backwards, to the time when Hogwarts was Hogewáþ, only to find himself in the wrong era entirely.

He is standing in the portrait’s stone sitting room, watching Nizar watch himself. Severus’s hair is long, hanging halfway down his back and thus able to fly out along with his robes as he paces back and forth.

This is a memory from 1982. Severus had used his meager savings to change his wardrobe, abandoning anything that reminded him of life as a Death Eater. He’d not yet cut his hair to the length he now prefers, which just brushes the top of his shoulder blades. Mid-July, perhaps?

“Did you really think Slughorn would be useful?” Nizar is asking. Severus is standing next to Nizar, and can see now what he could not in 1982. There is such relief etching Nizar’s features that it makes Severus’s chest hurt.

Not mid-July at all, then, but the last week of June. This is perhaps his third visit to the Common Room since finally daring to enter its confines after the term ended the previous week.

“No, but I was rather hoping someone would make him dead in the interim,” Severus’s younger self growls. “Preferably a student he’d been ignoring in favor of sniffing for money.”

“Horace is one of those types who will probably inconvenience everyone around him by insisting upon dying of old age,” Nizar responds dryly. “What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know.” Severus feels a bit of amusement at watching his younger self flop down on the sofa like a sulking teenager. “Perhaps I’ll simply make something up and place a wager on how long it takes to get myself sacked from this ludicrousness.”

“If you decide to make up your lesson plans without reference or guide, please do take me to your classroom so I can watch that disaster unfold,” Nizar says. Severus glances at him, and despite the mocking tone he’d heard that day, long ago, it’s not being reflected on Nizar’s face. His younger self is too busy staring at the ceiling to notice.

You survived. There had been such utter relief in those two words.

“Suggestions?” His 1982 self asks in frustration.

“Hello, nice to meet you, I’m a fucking teacher and I did this job for…a while.” Nizar shrugs. “I recall enough to be a resource, at least.”

“A resource that is one thousand years out of date!”

“I was painted in 1017. I’m not one thousand years old yet,” Nizar mutters. “Find someone among the staff who isn’t a complete imbecile to emulate when you discover a need for information that I lack.”
Severus’s younger self lifts his head and ends his useless contemplation of the ceiling. “I didn’t think of that. Granted, I doubt any of them want a thing to do with me.”

“None of them have stabbed you yet,” Nizar says. “Or was there a staff stabbing attempt and you were cruel enough not to inform me?”

Severus watches himself attempt to hide a smile. “Nizar, I would have been bragging about that during my last visit. How are you going to act as a resource, then?”

“First? By telling you to go to bed. You’re not a useful instructor if you’re falling asleep while sitting upright,” Nizar says. He sounds normal, just as Severus remembers, but there is a very odd expression on his face. “We can talk about setting Slughorn’s old curriculum on fire tomorrow. You can start over with something that isn’t stupid.”

“I don’t have the best luck in sleeping right now,” his younger self retorts.

Nizar rolls his eyes. “Did I or did I not teach you the basics of Mind Magic? Or have you forgotten both that and how to brew Dreamless Sleep?”

“You don’t have to be so bloody sarcastic about it!”

“If it gets a rise out of you, then yes I do,” Nizar says as Severus’s younger self stands up.

“That—that was not funny!”

“Absolutely it was. Good night, Severus.” Nizar waits until his sputtering evening guest departs the Common Room before letting out a frustrated shriek, one followed by a great deal of profanity in Castilian and Latin.

I do believe I just learned at least six new words, Severus thinks, bemused by the tirade.

“I didn’t need that sort of complication!” Nizar shouts. “No one needs that sort of complication!”

Kanza lifts her head out from Nizar’s collar and hisses a question.

“He was walking and talking and waving his hands about and being very expressive and he has nice hands,” Nizar says in a rush, leaning forward to rest his head against the painted wall. “This is terrible! He’s just—well, no.” Nizar lifts his head. “Severus is twenty-two now, isn’t he?” Then he groans and thumps his head against the wall again.

Kanza hisses out laughter, a sound Severus has become quite accustomed to translating. Then she climbs down Nizar’s arm and leg to drop to the floor, slithering away.

“Shut up!” Nizar yells after her. “That did not help! At all!” He pauses to listen. “Yes, I do think whoever decided portraits needed to worry about that sort of thing had completely inappropriate ideas, and they should have been stabbed before being allowed access to paint!”

Severus finds himself blinking away disorientation as he is abruptly ejected from the memory. “Sorry, sorry!” Nizar is holding up both hands, a wide grin on his face…and he is blushing. “That was about to be so much more awkward than it already was.”

“You realized it then?” Severus asks in disbelief. Without Mind Magic’s distance, he is now uncomfortably aware of what he was witnessing. “We’d only just begun to converse again!”

“To be fair, I did tell you the year of that particular realization before, if not in any detail. Twenty-
sixth November, the same day I retrieved a certain trunk from the Grindylow-infested depths of the Black Lake.” To Severus’s confusion, Nizar is still blushing. “Why did you linger in that memory?”

“Curiosity. Unlike other memories I observed, you were very much the man I know now.” Severus hesitates. “You are that fond of my hands?”

“I’m very much fond of all of you!” Nizar ducks his head. “But—yes. They were quite distracting at the time. Revelatory, even.”

“What else?” Severus asks, caught by prurient interest.

Nizar gives him a bewildered look. “You’re not going to let this go, are you?”

“Absolutely not,” Severus replies, smirking. “Anything that leaves you this flustered is bound to be worthwhile.”

“Worthwhile,” Nizar repeats. Then he smiles, but there is hard-edged mischief to it that Severus learnt meant trouble long ago. “Only for a trade.”

Severus leans back. “You’re not serious.”

“It’s embarrassing, Severus. I refuse to pass along those sorts of secrets for free.”

“And if I were to simply go looking if we were to continue this Mind Magic experiment?” Severus reaches out to touch Nizar’s face, letting his fingers follow the fine plane of cheek to chin.

Nizar’s eyelids flutter, but he doesn’t give in to the teasing. “I would be a pathetic master of Mind Magic if I couldn’t keep you away from a specific memory, Severus. Besides—is there a reason to continue? Was there anything useful at all?”

Severus rests his thumb over Nizar’s lower lip. “Possibly. I think Salazar may still be correct in his belief that you’ll recall everything, though it will take quite a bit of time due to that damned spell.”

He drops his hand to consider the problem without distracting himself. “The connections between memories still exist, even if those pathways resemble…incomplete signals,” he finally settles on as a descriptor, not certain he’s ever discussed television concepts with Nizar in regards to how the devices actually function. “It would be helpful to know what those connections looked like immediately after the spell. I’d know if there had been improvement.”

“Unfortunately, I didn’t view my own thoughts during those centuries, so I don’t know if that impression has changed at all. I didn’t remember Mind Magic was a concept that existed until Aberforth asked me about it during his fourth year. I needed…” Nizar waggles his hand in the air, searching for words. “Prompting. There is a great deal that never snapped into place until I heard a word spoken or was asked a question.”

“Why did Aberforth wish to learn Mind Magic at age fourteen?” Severus wanted to learn it at a similar age, but he grew up in terrible conditions, endangered and paranoid.

“Because he didn’t trust his brother,” Nizar says.

Severus frowns. “He already distrusted Albus? At that age?”

“It wasn’t always like that. Not when Aberforth first came to school. He loved his brother.” Nizar looks troubled. “By his fourth year, something had definitely soured their relationship. I’ll not speak of that further; those were words granted to me in confidence. It’s Aberforth’s story to tell if he
wishes to do so. What time is it?”

Severus reaches for his pocket watch to check the time. “Fifteen minutes until seven, and you’re still not dressed for the day.”

“Then we have almost an hour to ourselves before we would need to dedicate a bit of time to being decent for the students,” Nizar says.

“Or we could go to breakfast.”

Nizar gives him a look of exaggerated innocence. “We could do that, too.”

Severus realizes that he’s fighting a smile. “We’re not going to breakfast, are we?”

“You’re the one who keeps the lubrication in his quarters instead of leaving it in more convenient places.”

“That is a convenient place,” Severus counters, grabbing Nizar’s arm and Apparating them both downstairs.

* * * *

“You missed this morning’s news,” Salazar says, tossing the Prophet down on Nizar’s plate as he walks past on his way to his seat at the staff table. Nizar is glad he hadn’t yet put food there. He has no desire to eat newsprint for lunch.

“I’d like to think if someone we didn’t care for dropped dead, you would have informed me before now, which means we haven’t been nearly so fortunate.” Nizar ignores Minerva’s attempt at making a disapproving noise in favor of unrolling the paper. The headline is a changing banner announcing that both Rufus Scrimgeour, Head Auror of the M.L.E., and Pious Thicknesse, a barrister within the M.L.E., are declaring their intent to run for Minister for Magic.

“They’re declaring their intent to run against Madam Bones, yet Fudge is still in office. I wonder if the Ministry knows something about Fudge that we don’t,” Nizar says.

“Doubtful. They’re both idiots,” Severus mutters under his breath as he joins them at the table. “Scrimgeour just happens to be a ruthless idiot who is good at management.”

“I would imagine Scrimgeour is furious that Madam Bones named Kingsley as her successor. By senior ranking, it should have been Scrimgeour.” Poppy directs a grim little smile at her lunch. “But then, Amelia was always far more sensible than that.”

“Who is Rufus Scrimgeour?” Nizar asks when the Prophet’s article discusses the man as if everyone should know everything about him already. They’re too busy waxing vicious poetic over the three contenders waiting “like vultures” to take Fudge’s seat.

“A complete wanker,” Salazar replies. Filius, Aurora, and Sasha do their best not to laugh outright in response, though Sasha fails at the attempt and hides her face with her napkin to muffle the sound.

“While educational, something more definitive than wanker would be useful,” Nizar says. Minerva stops glaring at Salazar for swearing at the staff table and grants Nizar the honor, instead.
Pomona leans back in her chair so she can see beyond everyone’s backs to look at Nizar. “I think the difficulty here, Nizar, is that the term is accurate.”

“Oh. Great.” Nizar sighs. “Shared opinion, then?”

“God, yes,” Rolanda says, stabbing at her plate while rolling her eyes. “He’s good at his job, and no doubt there. He wouldn’t have made Head Auror otherwise. But I’d rather spend three weeks speaking to nothing but a potted plant rather than be forced to engage that man in conversation for two minutes.”

Salazar puts a heaping spoonful of sugar into another cup of liquid compost coffee. Nizar has the experience of London to know that sugar is not an improvement. “He’s quite a bit like Brian Wulfric, little brother.”

Nizar, in the midst of trying to spear some bit of vegetable, accidentally obliterates it as his knife shrieks across the plate. “What.”

“Behave,” Salazar tells Nizar while lifting his coffee cup. “The fens of this island have enough pollution bubbling away in their depths.”

“I thought Brian Wulfric was not nearly as bad as the two of you hinted at, else the field carrion bit would likely have become reality.” Minerva lifts her eyebrow, glancing at first Salazar on her left, and Nizar on her right. “Well?”

“Brian came to the school a mostly-trained magician already—which was excellent, as we desperately needed more teachers,” Salazar explains. “The first difficulty was in finishing his education so that he could teach others proper, as that is the path he wished to pursue. However, Brian didn’t believe he had anything left to learn. Rowena was the only one with the patience not to strangle an eighteen-year-old upstart, but first we had to convince him to sit for lessons beneath her wing in the first place. Play on words not intended.”

“How did you fix that difficulty, I wonder?” Minerva asks, eyeing Salazar again.

“I dragged him up to the western battlements, hung him over the side by one ankle, and asked if he knew how to fly.” Nizar smiles at the memory. “Brian said that he could not. Then I asked him if, in all his wisdom, he had ever learned to levitate. He admitted that he had not. I told him there were no benefits in claiming skills one didn’t have, especially since I could have chosen to test his supposed perfect knowledge by dropping him without asking questions first.”

“Solved that difficulty quite nicely.” Salazar eyes his coffee and adds more sugar. The staff who overheard Nizar’s part of the tale are staring at Nizar and Salazar in displeasure intermixed with vague horror. “Brian was an excellent student after that, and a loyal teacher of Hogwarts, though he never learned how to stop being an utter prick.”

Nizar glances at Severus. Unlike the others, Severus is regarding Nizar with a smile that too many mistake as malicious. “Yes?”

“Just admiring the efficiency of such a tactic,” Severus says in a bland voice, making a show of turning his attention back to his tea.

“I’m relieved to find he wasn’t irredeemable.” Dumbledore is bloody twinkling again. Nizar has not rested enough in the past few days to have any tolerance for twinkling. “I am named after him, after all.”

Nizar frowns. “How?”
“My full name is Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore,” Dumbledore replies.

“Parents couldn’t make up their minds, then?” Nizar asks blithely.

Dumbledore twinkles more brightly as he smiles. “I was their first child. I do believe that making the decision did give them some measure of difficulty, yes.”

Nizar shakes his head. “At least they didn’t do that shit to Aberforth.” Mention of Dumbledore’s brother does dim that irritating twinkle nicely.

“For the record, I’d like to state that I never want to be hung by the ankle from the battlements if my behavior or teaching is found wanting,” Aurora says.

Nizar grins at her. “Agreed!”

Aurora recounts her words and scowls. “Drat it, Nizar! I never want to be hung by the ankle from any height sufficient enough to cause me to splatter to death on the ground!”

Nizar mock-sighs. “Why must you be so particular?”

Pomona gets up from her chair, chin lifted in the air. “I’ve afternoon classes to prepare for, and you’re all bloody terrifying.”

“You’ve a greenhouse full of lethal plants. That is most certainly a matter of perspective, Pomona Sprout,” Salazar counters. He looks amused when Pomona huffs and leaves the table.

Nizar keeps the newspaper unrolled, leaving it on the table between his plate and Minerva’s, and stares at it when he isn’t trying to eat. Something about the image is bothering him, but it isn’t until the students are beginning to clear out of the Great Hall for afternoon classes that he realizes what it is.

“For fuck’s sake,” Nizar mutters, but has no time to act on the realization. Severus is snatching a small scroll out of the air, one with far too many green, scarlet, blue, and gold ribbons attached. Nizar scowls at the excess of ribbon. That isn’t even the correct shade of blue. Or green, for that matter.

“Albus is asking to see us during the last ten minutes of the lunch hour,” Severus murmurs. “The others received their own warnings. That man has never yet learned to be subtle.”

Nizar quietly disagrees, thinking that Dumbledore has chosen to be subtle for all the wrong occasions. “Where?”

“Staff lounge, first floor.”

Nizar nods, stands, and slugs back the last of his cooling tea. “I’ll be there. I need to do something first.” He exits through the rear door and shuts it before Apparating directly to his office. The scroll he selects is from the school’s unmarked supply, though he uses Bertram’s gifted quill and his own jar of ink, a deep green splashed with blue and gold undertones. The letter he writes is addressed to Madam Bones, but Nizar does not place his signature on it. Instead, he rolls it up, heats an ancient, preserved stick of green wax, and seals the scroll with the Deslizarse family crest. If that isn’t sign enough for Bones to realize who sent the warning, then she can join the idiots. “Winky!”

Winky appears immediately. “Yes, Professor Slytherin?”

He hands her the scroll after making certain the wax is dry. “I know you’re capable of subtlety. Please take this to Madam Amelia Bones, though I’m not aware of where she is currently working.
within the Ministry after her retirement as Head of the M.L.E. Just be certain that no one sees you deliver this to her.”

The elf beams at him and tucks the scroll into her favored pouch. “Winky likes doing bad things for good reasons!”


Nizar Apparates from his office to the back stairwell that leads to the first floor, and nearly opens the door directly into Poppy’s face. “Oh! Well, I certainly have good timing.”

“Certainly not,” Poppy retorts, but then she smiles and hooks him about the elbow with her arm. “Staff meeting, dear?”

“Apparently so.” Nizar glances at her. “I ate breakfast.”

Poppy sniffs in disdain. “I said not a word.”

“You’re hauling me about by the arm. I do not believe words were necessary,” Nizar grins. “If I fall on my own face again, I’m certain you’ll be among the first to know.”

“It had best not happen at all, Nizar!”

All right. Perhaps he can learn to tolerate another Healer aside from Helga.

“I will be brief,” Dumbledore says when Nizar and Poppy enter the staff room. Aside from themselves, the only other occupants are Minerva, Filius, Aurora, Salazar, Hagrid, and Severus. “There has been another attempt by Voldemort’s followers to free imprisoned Death Eaters from Azkaban.”

“Another attempt.” Aurora narrows her eyes. “I heard nothing about a first attempt.”

“And there hasn’t been a hint of it in the Daily Prophet, Witch Weekly, or even Xenophilius’s Quibbler,” Filius says.

“The first attempt was made while Cornelius held his full authority, before certain accusations were made,” Dumbledore replies. “Nizar was kind enough to warn me that it was a possibility, thus Kingsley and several others—all Aurors not attached to the Order—thwarted the first attempt in January. With a second attempt made, this one halted by the Dementors themselves, Kingsley is making contingency plans. Fudge has obviously given the Dementors new instructions, but if he is driven out of office by this burgeoning turn of public opinion, we will have a new Minister who will need to be convinced of the danger. We both feel Madam Bones will listen to reason and prove herself capable of acting on policies to ensure that Azkaban remains secure.”

Nizar keeps his expression impassive, though inwardly he is grimacing. He isn’t certain about Bones yet, but she is still infinitely preferable to someone like Scrimgeour. One Brian Wulfric was enough to deal with. He’d hate to discover that Scrimgeour is Brian reincarnated.

“Rufus Scrimgeour is a harsh man, but he also would insist upon maintaining Azkaban’s security. He fought in the last war and helped to put several Death Eaters behind its walls.” Dumbledore pauses. “I’m afraid I know very little about Pious Thicknesse beyond witnessing his excellent service as barrister during trials of the Wizengamot. His sudden ambition regarding the office of Minister is a surprise. Thicknesse was never an Auror, so whether he will take these attempted prison escapes in the same serious vein as his contenders is unknown.”
Dumbledore glances at each of them in turn. Nizar meets his gaze with the proper amount of projected concern. The moment Dumbledore looks away, Nizar taps his hand against his robe pocket. Salazar looks at him from the other side of the room and nods, gaining Severus’s attention after Dumbledore dismisses them.

Nizar ducks into the first floor stairwell after waving off Filius, claiming it a shortcut. Filius chuckles at Nizar’s attempt to keep his Apparitions within the castle to himself, but wanders off. The smile on Nizar’s face is genuine as he sits down on the first stairwell landing, ignoring the dust. Filius is almost ready to ask to be tied into the castle’s magic. Almost there. Nizar doesn’t know what the last nudge will be, but it won’t take much.

Then he casts a specific set of spells for listening charms, and his good mood vanishes as three bricks crack and a particularly thick cobweb falls from the ceiling. “You must be joking,” Nizar growls. Black wrote to him of finding similar in Grimmauld Place’s basement kitchen. It really does seem as if Dumbledore cannot cope with going through life without knowing fucking well everything, and with no thought in his head at all as to whether he should.

Severus joins him first, but Salazar ducks into the stairwell just behind him. “Why are we meeting in a cobweb-filled corridor when there are perfectly reasonable rooms elsewhere?” Salazar asks.

Nizar holds up the copy of the *Prophet* that Salazar gave him at lunch. “Did you not notice? If you didn’t notice, then you are sorely out of practice and I’m ashamed of you, brother.”

“What? What?”

Nizar debates the merits of hitting Salazar with a rolled-up newspaper and decides it wouldn’t be nearly as effective as Granger’s essay. He flips the newspaper open and holds it up. “Take a very good look at Thicknesse’s photograph, idiota.”

Salazar casts a silent *lux* and peers closer. Severus is just behind him, staring at the photo with narrowed eyes as he tries to determine what Salazar was supposed to notice.

“Oh—oh for—gods, I am a terrible excuse for a fucking spy!” Salazar fumes. “Fuck! It didn’t even occur to me to look, and it damned well should have!”

“What am I not seeing?” Severus asks crossly. “And I will not be impugning my own talents as a spy, since I am very much not dead.”

“Thicknesse is under the Tempero Curse, Severus,” Nizar says. “It’s particularly noticeable in his eyes.”

Severus studies the photo with his lit wand. “I believe it must require training and observation to notice the Imperius Curse if it’s been well-cast. I don’t see anything out of place except to observe that he seems to be…” He grabs the *Prophet* from Nizar and scowls down at the page. “No, not dull. You’re right. It is the eyes. There is something peculiar about his gaze.”

“And that is one of the ways to know. The other is in how he moves, as if he’s not quite sure how to accomplish it. That means his actions have been dictated by another. The command is strong enough to maintain control, but it’s in direct conflict with what Thicknesse might actually want to be doing. I rather doubt he wanted to run for Minister for Magic against Scrimgeour and Bones.”

Severus lowers the newspaper. “They’re infiltrating the Ministry.”

Nizar nods. “Or attempting to, at any rate.”
“And you don’t want Albus to know.”

“But my little brother does want the Underground to know.” Salazar leans against the wall, ignoring a spider that scurries across his shoulder in sulky offence at having its home disturbed. “We’re not in the habit of jumping as if we’ve been goosed the moment we learn something of import.”

Severus extinguishes his wand, leaving the passage in near-darkness. “You think Albus would do something rash.”

“I think Dumbledore would claim to take such news under gravest advisement and then not tell anyone else,” Nizar counters. He takes back the paper, if only to use it as a teaching guide later. “I already sent word to Madam Bones. What the M.L.E. does with this attempted infiltration is now up to them.”

* * * * *

Amelia reflects often, with gratitude, that Kingsley was willing to exchange offices until there is an election. She is even more grateful that Ila Patil decided to join her in ‘exile,’ returning to Amelia’s post as mere Wizengamot member and advocate in the courts. Both Scrimgeour and Kingsley now outrank her, but neither are foolish enough to act upon that technicality.

She glances up when there is a pop of displaced air to find a house-elf standing in her office. As the entirety of Britain’s population of elves now houses itself in Hogwarts, there are a limited number of people who could have sent the house-elf. “Yes? Might I help you?”

“Begging your pardon for the interruption, Madam Bones,” the elf says, curtsying. She has a clean white towel and a leather pouch, but there is a flash of silver at her neck. Amelia thinks it jewelry and then dismisses the notion as ridiculous. House-elves do not wear such things. “I have a message for you.” The house-elf holds out a scroll with an expectant look.

Amelia retrieves her wand and casts several bits of magic to determine if the scroll is safe to handle. There isn’t a hint of trouble attached beyond the potential message it bears. “I recognize you,” she says to the house-elf after taking the scroll. “You’re the house-elf that Bartemius Crouch foolishly sacked for that business during the Quidditch World Cup.”

The house-elf blushes violet and stares down at the floor. “Winky didn’t do anything wrong, Madam Bones.”

“You were caught with another wizard’s wand,” Amelia says in a brisk voice, pausing when she notes the seal of green wax. A rearing horned serpent before a rowan tree. She has vague thoughts of seeing that seal before, but what it most reminds her of is the Slytherin crest at Hogwarts. “Per Ministry law, non-human beings in Britain are not allowed ownership of a wand.”

“If Winky was ordered by a wizard of her old family to hold a wand, Winky would be having no choice,” the house-elf says.

Amelia looks up in surprise. The elf is still staring at the floor, but that was most certainly atypical behavior for a house-elf. “Were you ordered to do that, then?”

The house-elf nods. “Master Crouch told Winky to hold the wand while he cast the Imperius Curse on Master Barty for being a naughty boy and misbehaving.” The elf pulls on her ear and sniffs.
“Naughty, naughty boy. Winky remembers when Master Barty was a good boy.”

House-elf testimony is considered inadmissible in court, Amelia thinks in displeasure. Bartemius Crouch had most certainly not been adhering to Ministry law before his death. If Fudge hadn’t panicked and ordered that Barty Crouch, Junior be given the Dementor’s Kiss without due process of law, perhaps they would not now be facing an impending political disaster. She should inform Kingsley—

Kingsley Shacklebolt has Dumbledore’s ear, and Dumbledore was claiming all of this last June. She is the fool who wasn’t paying proper attention.

“Please wait for a moment, Winky,” Amelia says, unrolling the brief missive. The handwriting is distinct, a refined hand intent upon being easily legible rather than ornate.

For the Madam soon to be Minister in place of a trio of idiots,

Pious Thicknesse is suffering from the Tempro Imperious Curse. Discretion is probably called for.

Nizar Slytherin, Amelia realizes, frowning. The seal on the scroll was the same design on the silver ring he wore when visiting her office in January.

Then the letter’s full import strikes her. “Oh. Good God.”

“Is Winky to be taking a message back to Hogwarts, Madam Bones?”

Amelia shakes her head. “No, thank you. Merely let the sender know that it was received and understood.” The house-elf nods and vanishes.

“Ila!” Amelia grabs her robe and pulls it on as she steps out of her office. “If I’ve any appointments at all, cancel them for the rest of the afternoon. If there is an emergency that absolutely must have my attention, I will be with Kingsley Shacklebolt.”

Ila blinks a few times, startled, before nodding. “Absolutely, ma’am. I’ll take care of it.”

Amelia enters Kingsley’s office without knocking and locks eyes with Rufus Scrimgeour. “Shut the bloody door,” she hisses. Rufus, startled, does as asked.

“What is it, Amelia?” Kingsley asks in his perpetually grave voice.

“We have a problem. Perhaps a security breach, or perhaps someone’s ill-conceived prank, but the result is the same,” Amelia says. “Pious Thicknesse is acting under the effects of the Imperius Curse.”

Rufus scowls. “Here now, Amelia! You cannot simply go about accusing your new political opponents of being Imperiused simply to rid yourself of the competition!”

Amelia rolls her eyes. “Please,” she says in complete disparagement. “Thicknesse is a relatively unknown barrister. If I was going to attempt to rid myself of my competition, I would be doing away with you, you old fool.”

“A very good point,” Rufus admits with a toothy smile. “You’ve proof of this, I assume?”
“Only someone’s educated observation.” Amelia looks at Kingsley. “And I find them to be an honest, useful source of information, even if that information is sometimes very much unwanted.”

“You’ve never once been wrong, Amelia. If Thicknesse is cursed, then it will not be a bloody prank,” Kingsley says. “That will be infiltration—” He breaks off in surprise. “You’ve changed your mind. You believe he is back. You-Know-Who.”

“Victoria Bluebell changed my mind, Kingsley,” Amelia snaps at him. “A seventeen-year-old girl with a confirmed Dark Mark belonging to the followers of You-Know-Who! A magical mark that cannot be given to anyone underage!”

Rufus nods. “I came to realize that myself a few days after her trial concluded,” he says, surprising her. “I’m ashamed it took me that long, to be honest. I used to be much sharper than that. It’s why I’m bloody well running for Minister. I thought I was running against someone who was still firmly of the belief that You-Know-Who was bloody well dead!”

Amelia gives him a terse smile. “I was doing so for the same reason. I wasn’t expecting to have you for competition, Rufus.”

“That’s both of us fools, then,” Rufus says amiably, though to anyone else it would still seem nothing more than an angry growl. He never was good at being personable. “Well?” Rufus looks to Kingsley. “You’re now head of the M.L.E., boy. What are we to do about this?”

Kingsley doesn’t bat an eyelash at being referred to as a boy. He’s also used to Rufus, and Alastor Moody often makes Rufus seem genteel. “We can cast the spells to detect the curse discreetly, but I don’t believe we should act to remove it. Someone went to a great deal of trouble to successfully cast the Imperius Curse on Pious Thicknesse, an exceptionally stubborn individual. I suggest we should use the granted opportunity to find out what, exactly, our unwanted corpse is hoping to accomplish. The Unspeakables would be pleased to assist; Thicknesse would not even notice their presence.”

“Not as satisfying as hexing the blazes out of Thicknesse for leaving himself vulnerable,” Rufus mutters, “but it’s a good, solid plan. If Thicknesse speaks to anyone, or curses anyone else, the Aurors will need to know. It’s educational to leave Thicknesse Imperiused for the time being, but I won’t destabilize our Ministry by allowing others to assist him, no matter how willing or unwilling they are.”

“I’m not fond of the idea of leaving an innocent cursed just to know the motives of others…but it’s him. This problem is too vast, too deadly, not to take the risk.” Amelia nods. “I agree, Kingsley. Would you like to request the Unspeakables’ assistance, or shall I?”

“You’re both running for Minister. Beyond your knowledge of Thicknesse’s cursed state, you have to remain as neutral as possible,” Kingsley responds, frowning at Rufus. “At least Amelia resigned, Rufus.”

“That she did, but I had no intention of doing so until I knew if I was going to need to move office,” Rufus replies. “And now I know that I won’t be doing so at all.”

Amelia glances at him. “I beg your pardon?”

Rufus grins, showing off his yellowed teeth from his unfortunate tobacco habit. “Cornelius will lose his stomach for the complaining sooner rather than later. When that happens, I’ll continue my campaign for Minister until the day before the vote, when I shall graciously bow out and speak of how I’d rather continue to remain Head of the Auror Department within the M.L.E. The thankless task of cleaning up this shitheap of a Ministry will fall to your capable shoulders, Amelia.”
“Thank you so much for your generosity,” Amelia says dryly. “Then the vote will only be between Thicknesse and myself. That could still prove interesting.”

“We know exactly why You-Know-Who would want an Imperiused agent running the Ministry.” Kingsley inclines his head at Amelia. “Thank you for bringing this to my attention. If there is nothing else, I have counter-intelligence to plan.”

Amelia and Rufus leave Kingsley’s office and walk past his secretary, who gives them a baffled look when they remain together. In Finkle’s world, political opponents are not meant to be on civil terms.

She matches pace with Rufus as they make their way through the M.L.E.’s maze of offices. She doesn’t yet know where they’re going, and she doesn’t much care. “Bugger,” she finally declares.

“That’s far too mild,” Rufus growls. “This is a dangerous game, Amelia. I wonder if we’re not both too old for it.”

“Speak for yourself. I’m only forty-three years old.”

“But I’m seventy-one.” Rufus halts and leans on his cane, gazing at the sea of desks in the open atrium that houses many of their junior Aurors and their assistants. “I’ve lived a hard life in service to our Ministry, Amelia. If there was a young one capable of replacing me, I’d retire in truth, but you went and stole the best man right from my department and enthroned him in your office!”

Amelia smiles. “I’m not sorry at all. Kingsley is the best man for the job, after all.”

“He is that, yes,” Rufus agrees before sighing. “I fought in the European War and in Britain’s Wizarding War, Amelia. I didn’t want to see another war on this isle.”

Amelia looks around at the atrium, seeing the young faces of far too many innocents who haven’t yet realized the sort of danger they’re in. “Neither did I.”
Safety is an Illusion

Chapter Summary

One door opens while another dam breaks.

Chapter Notes

There was moar bribery...but also it's Friday!

Unbeta'd, but I didn't want to miss the Friday update. ...but now I need to let the betas
catch up a bit. Because oh boy is there Stuff Coming.

Ginny is bloody nervous. She’s a bundle of nerves, a catastrophe of nerves, a flaming pile of
tense. She knows she’s being underhanded, going about it this way, but Ginny knows full well
what Mum would say. She’d say no. She’d weep about protecting her baby girl.

Sod all that, Ginny thinks, and reminds herself to sit up straight in Professor McGonagall’s chair. She
is not a baby, and after Tom bloody Riddle, she has done an excellent job of learning to defend
herself!

Mum would skin them if she ever found out that George and Fred are helping her. More than anyone
else in the family, the twins looked at what happened to Ginny in her first-year and decided: never
again. They might tease her like ruthless cretins sometimes, but they never treat Ginny like she’s
fragile, or like she belongs in a bloody box.

When Fred and George learn new spells, charms, hexes, and jinxes, they demonstrate them for her.
They teach her how to be charming when appropriate, which is far too often for Ginny’s taste. She
definitely has a preference for being as fiery as her hair, but those lessons have kept Ginny out of
trouble at times when she was certain a detention was lurking just around the corner.

Professor Slytherin has also been amazing. Ginny never thought any teacher would ever look at her,
ignore her Weasley name and red hair, and see her true potential, but he did. Hermione, too—
Hermione who is completely insane to be happily heading into sixth-year N.E.W.T. Defence while
still taking the Defence O.W.L. at end of term!

“You’re fidgeting again, Miss Weasley,” Professor McGonagall says without looking up from the
scroll she’s grading.

“Sorry, Professor.” Ginny stills her bouncy leg and wonders what’s taking so long. At this rate, she’ll
miss dinner.

Finally, the flames in Professor McGonagall’s fireplace turn green. Ginny springs to her feet and
smoothes out her skirt as Arthur Weasley enters the room. He never fumbles a Floo exit, even though
she always half-expects him to. “Dad!”
Arthur glances over and smiles. “Ginny.” Then he looks at her professor. “I received a letter from Ginny this morning by owl, but I had to wait until I was finished dealing with some interesting problems at the Ministry. Is something the matter?”

*Interesting problems is probably some sort of Order code,* Ginny thinks. Or maybe it really was a clutter of inbound complete nonsense; her dad’s department sees some very odd things.

“Nothing is the matter at all,” Professor McGonagall assures Arthur. “Ginny wished to see you regarding an academic matter and merely asked for permission to greet you at my Floo. Now that you’ve arrived, I would very much like it if you would conduct your business elsewhere, Arthur. I’ve a great deal of grading to do.”

“Certainly, Minerva.” Arthur follows Ginny from the room while she does her best not to start fidgeting again. “Ginny?” he asks the moment the office door is closed.

“Er, not here. Can we go upstairs, Dad?”

Arthur frowns. “Are you in trouble, Ginevra?”

Ginny tries not to wince. He doesn’t do the Dad Voice very often, which is why it’s still so bloody effective. “No! Absolutely not. I am in the opposite of trouble.”

“All right.” Arthur takes off his robe and folds it over his arm. “If this is about the twins, your mother will hand me my head.”

“It isn’t about the twins!” Please, just once, can’t something be about her? Something that isn’t about the stupid diary, or how she’s everyone’s darling baby girl?

Arthur gives her a quiet, curious look. “All right. Let’s go, then.”

Ginny leads the way upstairs, alternating between biting her lip some more, feeling horribly guilty that she snapped at her father, and angry that she felt like she had to. The worst of it is knowing that even if there hadn’t been a stupid cursed diary in her first year, things would be exactly the same. Well, maybe Fred and George wouldn’t be so helpful, but the rest of the family? Business as usual.

By the time they make it to the seventh storey, Ginny has turned herself from a pile of nerves to an anxious bloody wreck. This is definitely not the way to prove that she can handle fifth-year’s Defence class, and the thought makes her stomach churn.

Ginny takes a deep breath and knocks on the open door of the Defence classroom before stepping over the threshold. The near-silence of the corridor gives way to music, just loud enough to be audible without losing the thread of the lyrics.

Her dad lights up at once. “Oh! I remember this song! It’s Muggle, Ginny. I heard it on the radio while I was courting your mother!”

Ginny frowns. “I didn’t know you’d ever listened to Muggle music. Or that Mum did.” The sound is very much fifteen years ago—at least by Wizarding Wireless standards.

She feels her face heat. Her parents were married in 1969. Hermione has made a point of saying that Wizarding rock music is a bit behind compared to Muggle music, and…well, maybe she needs to be paying a lot more attention to Hermione’s vinyl collection.

Worse, her dad is humming along to the song. Maybe the floor will open up and eat her. It does sometimes create random pits during practicals.
"When the men on the chessboard get up and tell you where to go
And you've just had some kind of mushroom, and your mind is moving low
Go ask Alice, I think she'll know…"

“Oh!” Ginny smiles. “It’s about Alice in Wonderland, isn’t it?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” Professor Slytherin says, stepping out of his office with three different books in his arms. “Hello, Arthur. I wasn’t expecting you.”

“You weren’t?” Arthur gives Ginny a brief glance of muted suspicion. Ginny looks back at him with an air of sublime innocence. Fortunately, it’s her version rather than any of her brothers’ used-up innocent expressions, and tends to earn a bit more belief.

The professor puts down the books and reaches out to clasp Arthur’s extended hand. “No, but I imagine I know exactly why you’re here.” He frowns and then raps on his desk with his hand; two of the desks at the front of the room Transfigure into proper chairs. “Have a seat if you like.”

“You did that wandless!” Ginny exclaims in delight. “How?”

“We’re in my classroom. If I did that elsewhere, it wouldn’t work anywhere near as well,” Professor Slytherin says in a wry voice. “Tea?”

“Yes, please,” Arthur replies. “I just left the Ministry, and it’s been an absolute madhouse today. Three very different people declaring their intent to become Minister of Magic, and all of them from the M.L.E. The entire place is in an uproar.”

Ginny thinks she notices some odd thought captured in the professor’s expression, but it’s gone before she has time to consider what it could be. Bloody Order secretive nonsense. Then the elves deliver tea, and her dad loses his mind for a good five minutes exclaiming over house-elf jewelry and generally being himself. Ginny loves him for it, even if she makes a show of rolling her eyes. Her father loves everything around him in a way that’s just so genuine, and she’s come to notice there isn’t a lot of that floating about.

“Dad. Dad, drink your tea,” Ginny reminds him. The song about Alice in Wonderland has ended in the meantime, and the professor has flipped the vinyl record over. She doesn’t much care for the first song, but the second one, about wanting somebody to love, is sort of…nice.

Ginny blushes again. Finding somebody is definitely not the problem. Deciding what to do about it is going to be the difficult part. Especially when she has a mum who is busy planning Ginny’s wedding to Harry Potter.

She likes Harry. She does. The horrible crush died a noble death about the time she woke up in the Chamber of Secrets, covered in muck, with Harry covered in worse muck and blood and looking sort of bewildered by everything. He saved her, but something about that moment also made him seem completely normal.

Ginny focused on getting to know what this mental bloke who came to the Chamber by his nutter self was really like. The answer was something she should have noticed all along: Harry was so busy shoving “This is me!” into everyone’s faces, all the time, that Ginny knows exactly know who he is.
There is no mystery. He’s barking mad; he’s the opposite of a swot; he’s fierce about looking after
the rest of them; he likes stupid jokes; he likes George and Fred’s *good* ideas; he’s vowed to beat
Ron at chess; he has the worst rotten luck in regards to pretty much everything.

Ginny likes having Harry for a friend. She doesn’t think she would cope very well with trying to
date someone who gets into life-threatening situations every five minutes on accident. Convincing
Mum that she does not want to marry Harry might require the rest of the family to run interference
while Ginny flees the country.

Maybe Harry will find another bloke to marry in the meantime, and Ginny won’t have to worry
about it.

Arthur gets three more sips of tea into him before he has to ask a dozen questions about the
professor’s vinyl player, what he calls a turntable. Ginny thinks it looks a bit more compact and
manageable than a bloody gramophone, and the sound is better—no, the sound is coming through
the walls! That’s awesome. She’s asking about that charm later.

Ginny is on her second cup of tea by the time her dad finally gives up on the turntable so he and the
professor can sit down again. Thank Merlin the elves brought nibbles with the tea. She is now
beyond late to dinner.

“I’ll confess, Nizar, I don’t actually know why I’m here,” Arthur says.

“No?” Professor Slytherin glances at Ginny, who beams at him. “Someone has been plotting. I
approve.”

“Plotting?” Arthur repeats, but at least he isn’t giving Ginny the Dad Look.

“I’m asking you first because if I’d asked you both Mum’d say no before I even said half a
sentence!” Ginny bursts out.

“Slowed down and translated, Arthur: I have four students who have progressed far beyond the
limits of the standard year’s curriculum—and I do mean my standards, not the old nonsense,”
Professor Slytherin explains. “Miss Hermione Granger will be taking her Defence O.W.L. while also
spending the rest of the term in the sixth-year N.E.W.T. Defence class. Miss Cho Chang will be
joining the seventh-years, though I don’t believe she’ll take the Defence N.E.W.T. until
winter break of next term. Miss Luna Lovegood is joining my fifth-years for their practical set every
week. The fourth student capable of making the jump due to their exceptional academic and practical
Defence performance is sitting right next to you.”

Both of Arthur’s eyebrows fly up. “You’re doing that well?” he asks Ginny. “Even with everything
that’s, er, happened?”

Ginny tries not to wince. “Uh…yes?”

Arthur suddenly lunges over and hugs her, so tight it feels like it’s hard to breathe. “My brilliant baby
girl,” he whispers in her ear. Ginny blinks several times and tries not to cry.

Brilliant. Dad called her *brilliant*.

“I understand completely.” Arthur straightens in his chair and looks for all the world like everything
is still normal, and Ginny’s world isn’t sitting at a sideways angle. “You knew how Molly might feel
if Ginny accepted your invitation to join the fifth-years, and would shuffle her right back to the
fourth-years without proper consideration of the matter.”
“And I believe Ginny felt that if you heard the words from me, it might be easier on all of you.”

Professor Slytherin leans back in his chair. “Might I say something in confidence that will not see me hexed beyond an inch of my life, Arthur?”

Arthur smiles and sips tea that Ginny suspects has to be stone cold. “Please.”

“Molly is quite lovely, but she has some very set ideas about the proper ways her children should spend their time. Those strict standards are not the slightest bit healthy.”

Arthur puts his teacup down on the tea tray and sighs while nodding. “I know.”

Ginny stares at her dad. Wait. What?

“When we had our eldest, Bill, the war was just starting,” Arthur says. “None of us knew how long it was going to last, or what the cost would be. Three children, we’d decided. That was what we thought would be best. Then we had Charlie, but the war was still on, and it was no longer just strangers who were dying, but friends. Then came Percy—”

Arthur halts, coughing, before continuing. Ginny again contemplates the joys of punching Percival Ignatius Weasley.

“When Percy was born in August of ’76, Molly and I both had lost a great deal of our extended families. Molly was at home with the boys, and I was active in the Order of the Phoenix, worried about what would happen to my family if I died. There is still a rich goblin-certified Gringotts life insurance policy on me if the worst happens.”

“Dad,” Ginny whispers.

Arthur reaches out and pats her shoulder. “Don’t you worry, Ginny. I’m not going anywhere.”

Ginny nods, biting her lip. She has to believe him; she doesn’t really have a choice.

“The fourth time Molly got pregnant, it was an accident. We’d just had one of our biggest victories of the war so far, got a bit tipsy, forgot the proper charms…” Arthur smiles just as Ginny groans and buries her face in her hands. “We took it as the right sort of sign, that maybe we should attempt to put back what the war stole from our families. Neither of us expected…well. The day we received the news about Gideon and Fabian is the same day we learned that Molly was to have twins. Then, of course, came Ron, and then Ginny, but Molly never really got over how much the war took from us. It’s no excuse, it’s really not, but all she can think about is that having a job in the Ministry means that our children will be safe.”

Professor Slytherin gives Arthur an odd look. “Did Molly miss the part where Voldemort successfully infiltrated the Ministry’s Department of Mysteries this past December? Because I certainly haven’t.”

Arthur grimaces. “Molly thinks it’s a one-off. A fluke that won’t repeat itself.” He abruptly stands up, leaving Ginny scurrying to get out of her chair. “Ginny, take the class. Learn what you can. I’m proud of you, and don’t you concern yourself with what your mother will have to say. I’ll take care of it, all right?”

“I—okay, Dad.” Ginny accepts his hug. “I’ll talk to you later?”

“Of course! Easter break will be here soon enough, you know.” Arthur smiles, ruffles her hair, shakes the professor’s hand again, and leaves the room.
Ginny stares after him, nonplussed. “What just happened?”

“I think that might have been the first time in a very long time your father has discussed any of that, if he’s ever mentioned it at all,” Professor Slytherin says.

“Probably not. I mean—there aren’t any other Weasleys,” Ginny manages to say around the lump in her throat. It’s part of what makes Percy turning utter prat so hard on them all. “Dad had two brothers, but they didn’t have kids and they died in the war. There are a few Prewetts wandering about still, but otherwise…it’s just us.”

“And that is why I believe your father has never made the mistake your mother is making right now. He never forgot the lesson of the last war.”

“Which is?” Ginny asks, feeling her skin crawl.

“You can minimize risk and make provisions for those who may survive you, but that is all.” The professor glances at her. “Safety is an illusion. There is no such thing. You’ve known that since you were eleven years old.”

Ginny nods and rubs at her arms, chilled. “Yes, sir.” She hesitates before asking, “You don’t think I could pass the Defence O.W.L. at the end of term, do you?”

Professor Slytherin studies her. “You know, when Professor McGonagall asked me that, I said no. However…maybe I’m making a similar mistake. Maybe I’m also trying to decide what you are and aren’t capable of without giving you the chance to prove otherwise. Wait here.”

Ginny shifts in place as the professor goes into his office, rummaging around on the shelves. She hopes she hasn’t just opened another floodgate that will keep her from dinner entirely, but if she gets desperate, she does know how to tickle the pear to get into the kitchen.

The professor comes back out holding a copy of the fifth-year’s unofficial textbook in his hands. The swots in fifth-year wax poetic about it on the regular, and Hermione is editing the version Professor Slytherin put together that will become an official book for others to buy. “Here.”

Ginny accepts the book and stares down at it. “I—does this mean I have more homework?” She might be smart, but she does not have a love affair with homework.

Professor Slytherin laughs. “No. Not unless you really feel the need to write four essays for the rest of the term instead of two.”

“No.” Ginny hugs the book to her chest. “Now what?”

“You read the book, or not, as you choose,” Professor Slytherin says. “If you read it and feel confident enough about what you learned, come and speak to me at the end of Maius—May.” He shakes his head. “Sorry, I’ve not blundered that way in a while. Come speak to me in May. We’ll review what you know, or what you think you know, and I’ll tell you if you should attempt to sit the O.W.L. or not. Fair?”

Ginny thinks about it before nodding. “Okay. Yeah. That’s fair, sir. Uh—thank you, sir. For the book, and for believing I can do this.”

He just smiles. “Go complain about your faintness of hunger to the elves, Miss Weasley. I’ll see you on Monday morning for fifth-year’s lecture class.”
Hermione enters the library at five o’clock and tries not to bite her lip at what she finds. Her usual table up front is occupied by Tracy Davis and Ramsay Urquhart of Slytherin, who are snogging like their lives depend on it. All of the other tables nearby are filled with students from various Houses, but at least they’re not snogging in public. Hermione takes note of the books piled up on every table, the desperation on so many faces, and suspects the lot of them are still trying to take advantage of the promised extra credit. When most students missed the extra credit deadline of noon yesterday, Professor Slytherin was kind enough to extend the deadline until just curfew tonight.

Nizar. Her friend. She keeps reminding herself of that and promptly tries to panic. For the moment, it seems safer to think of him as Professor Slytherin.

She shakes her head and wanders further into the stacks. Rushed work tends to be shoddy work. She’d rather take her chances with not having bonus points than turn in a paper so awful that those extra points won’t do any good at all.

She checks the books on the shelves as she walks past. Nothing catches her eye—she’s already read it, or picked it up and discovered it was utter rubbish. In some ways, Hogwarts’ library is so bloody useful. In others, it is so irritatingly limited.

“Granger!”

Hermione glances over to see Pansy giving her a furtive wave from one of the tables in the central part of the library. She hesitates at first, but it’s just habit to do so after four years of open war between Gryffindor and Slytherin. Hermione shakes off the old thoughts and goes to the table Pansy is sharing with Millicent, Draco, Blaise, Daphne, Theo Nott, Padma, Susan Bones, and Megan Jones. “Hello.”

“Granger!” Blaise stands up and pulls out a chair for her with a dramatic flourish, grinning. “Join us in our academic misery!”

“Misery?” Hermione asks as she sits down. She puts her bookbag on the floor, knowing from experience that the whingy tables will tilt to one side or groan in agony if she puts her bag on the tabletop. Some things were just not meant to be enchanted.

“Most of us are trying to finish our Defence essays before the two-week limit ends at curfew this evening. I want those bloody points!” Susan declares, flipping pages through a book that is wafting clouds of dust into the air. The dust isn’t because Madam Pince is bad at her job; some of the old books in the library create their own dust and cobwebs. For dramatic effect. Because some things are really not meant to be enchanted.

“Same,” Theo agrees. “If I’d realized trolls were this complicated when I first started, I would have chosen a different topic!”

“What did you choose?” Hermione asks, curious. “British trolls, Iberian trolls, Western European trolls, Scandinavian trolls, Icelandic trolls, Russian trolls, North African trolls, or…?”

Theo makes a noise rather like one of the tables meeting Hermione’s bookbag and puts his face down in his book. “I just chose trolls! I thought Lupin was an excellent instructor, don’t get me wrong, but even he never mentioned how many different types there were!”

“Quirrell did.” Daphne doesn’t have a hint of sympathy for Theo’s plight. “Granted, most of us were
desperately trying not to breathe in during his classes, so it’s not as if it was easy to retain information from that year.”

“Oh, God. So much ruddy garlic,” Padma mutters.

“I’m bloody allergic. Those were not fun days,” Megan adds.

“Quirrell doesn’t count as a decent instructor!” Theo says plaintively. “How was I to know?”

“Granger knew,” Millicent points out, looking a bit smug.

“Yes, but Granger has also read everything in this library,” Malfoy drawls in response.

“I have not!”

Draco smirks at her. “Not for lack of trying, at least. I would imagine you know where everything in this library is.”

Hermione puts on a disapproving frown. “Please tell me that you did not invite me over here merely to be your card catalogue.”

“Oh, I know they didn’t, but I might take advantage of that,” Padma says at once, looking hopeful. “I’m researching house-elves outside of Britain. Any pointers?”

“You’re not going to make the curfew deadline; there is nothing useful in this library,” Hermione answers. Padma’s face falls into academic despair. “Sorry. I went through everything in this library in third-year, trying to prove that the house-elves’ treatment was wrong. The only things I could find all support what everyone used to think was correct. There isn’t a thing here regarding the Brae Elves’ original contract with the Founders. I’m not certain about Ireland, but I do know that all the elves in Spain are free elves. If I were you, I’d send an owl to a book shop in a country that doesn’t adhere to the Statute of Secrecy.”

“Free house-elves is still a weird concept.” Blaise takes a glance at his book before copying something down about fighting off a vampire’s controlling gaze. “Granted, Professor Slytherin mentioned that other countries where elves were never subjected to the Statute think our elves are weird for putting up with it. He says they’re more powerful than we are.”

“Well, they are.” Hermione notes with amusement that Padma is taking diligent notes. “They’re Fair Folk. Green Folk. Fae—well, no, the Fae are their own people, ignore that part. The house-elves are still Green Folk, though. So are goblins, trolls, gnomes, pixies, boggarts, ghouls, redcaps, dwarves, leprechauns, kelpies, Merpeople, brownies, and sprites. The ones we have here on Earth are the ones who can tolerate iron, so they don’t mind living on a planet rich with it.”

“Let me guess: you read that in a book that came from outside Britain,” Daphne says. “Like you suggested to Padma.”

Hermione nods. “I bought it, actually.”

Padma looks ready to lunge across the table. “Tell me I can borrow it! Please!”

“Well, it’s at home. I left it there during the holiday so I could bring other books back, instead. I really need to figure out how to create Wizarding Space inside my school trunk,” Hermione says, thinking aloud. “Oh, I suppose I can owl my parents for it, but I don’t know when it would arrive.”

Padma smiles in relief. “That’s still a lot more than what I’ve got right now, and that’s bloody
rubbish. Thank you!”

“What are you going to trade for it?” Pansy asks Padma.

Padma looks flabbergasted before she grins at Hermione. “Have you ever wanted to learn anything about ancient Punjabi magic?”

Hermione’s eyes widen. “Absolutely, yes!”


Pansy rolls her eyes. “Swots!”

“Pans, everyone at this table is a swot,” Megan says dryly. “That really is a pathetic excuse for an insult.”

“Oh, look. It’s Granger in her natural habitat!”

Hermione feels her shoulders try to hunch inwards and refuses to let that happen. Instead, she lifts her chin as Lavender Brown, Fay Dunbar, and Bernicia Blishwick approach the table. “Hello,” she says, keeping her tone even and utterly polite. “Are you having a good afternoon?”

“We were.” Dunbar smiles in a way that Hermione hasn’t liked since they first met. Fay Dunbar and Bernicia Blishwick joined Hogwarts in their third-year, transferring in from Beauxbatons. Dorm life has been hell ever since. They make Parvati cry because Lavender used to be her friend, Kellah doesn’t want to get involved, and Hermione never fit in with the other girls in the first place.

“I was just saying to the others that it seems proper to see you in among the rest of the snakes,” Blishwick says. Hermione fantasizes about hitting Blishwick with her bookbag.

“I think it’s entirely proper, actually,” Daphne says in a voice like ice. “Hermione is intelligent, cunning, resourceful, ambitious, and already on her way to gaining an apprenticeship under Professor Slytherin. Can any of you say the same? I rather doubt it; I’ve seen your grades.”

“Granger’s just trying for an apprenticeship because she wants to fuck him,” Dunbar retorts, color rising in her cheeks.

“He’s gay,” Hermione replies flatly. Even in the worst depths of her silly crush, it was never about that. “Or didn’t you notice?”

Blaise snorts. “I don’t think they’re that observant.”

“Or they’re just distracted.” Pansy rests her chin on her hand and smiles at Dunbar in the same way she used to smile at Hermione—pure, delightful malice. “Dunbar has been too busy spreading her legs for Cormac McLaggen beneath the Quidditch stands.”

Dunbar turns bright red, grabs Blishwick’s hand, and yanks her away from the table. The others snicker when Blishwick careens into the nearest bookshelf as Dunbar all but drags her out of the library.

Lavender blows Hermione a kiss. “Have fun with the snakes, Granger. You belong with them!”

Padma lifts up her Ravenclaw tie as Lavender follows the other two girls. “How odd. This isn’t silver and green at all!”

Susan glances at Megan from the corner of her eye and smiles. “I didn’t realize that being a twit
made someone colorblind. Did you?”

Megan flings her Hufflepuff tie over her shoulder. “Maybe they were dazzled by too much intelligence seated at one table.”

Hermione forces her jaw to unclench. “You—you didn’t have to say that to her, Pansy. It was cruel.”

“She was cruel to you first,” Pansy says dismissively. Then she looks at Hermione. “Merlin, Granger! You’re shaking!”

Draco stares at her in concern. “Granger?”

Hermione wraps her hands together and hides them under the table. “I’m fine. Really I am.”

“My arse,” Megan says in disbelief. “I’ve always wondered why I never saw you hanging out with the Gryffindor girls in your year.”

“Parvati and Kellah aren’t bad. We’re not close friends or anything, but they’re good people.” Hermione blinks several times, feeling like she’s going to cry. Please, no. She doesn’t want to cry in front of anyone here, and it has nothing to do with the fact that most of them are Slytherins. “Even Lavender was okay before—well, this year,” Hermione realizes. “But Blishwick and Dunbar, they’re…”

“Twats,” Millicent says in her dry and thoughtful way. “Throwing around words like snake as if it’s an insult. Why would it be such an insult to be a Slytherin?”

“Some people aren’t getting over the House prejudices at the same rate as others.” Susan sighs. “My year in our House isn’t so bad—all of the girls are on the same page, at least. The boys could maybe stand to have a few stones cast at their heads, but they’re getting ever so much better. The upper years might require entire bricks.”

“You don’t have to stick up for my sister,” Padma says to Hermione. “I know she doesn’t do anything to help them, but Parvati doesn’t stop them when they start in on you, either.”

Hermione shakes her head. “Then they’d just turn around and go after her, and they made her cry last time—shit!” It’s too late; the damage is already done.

Padma’s frown is melting into an expression of cool anger. “They made my sister cry?”

Hermione nods miserably. “I wasn’t supposed to say—Parvati wanted—”

“To be a Gryffindor?” Padma rolls her eyes. “She can be a Gryffindor all she likes, but I’m going to be a Ravenclaw. Parvati told me what topics Brown, Dunbar, and Blishwick chose for their Defence essays. I do believe all of the relevant books are about to be checked out of this library.” Padma packs up her belongings and smiles. “Who wants to help?”

Susan grins. “I’m so in for this. I usually don’t get to participate in the mischief. Megan?”

Megan waves them on. “I’ve got to get this last bit finished before dinner. Grab an extra bit of reference material for me, yeah?”

“I’ll help. I’m not getting any work done tonight, anyway. Might as well participate in inter-House revenge!” Pansy cheerfully follows after the other two.

“Chin up, Granger. We like you, even if you are the Gryffindor swot,” Blaise says when he notices
“He’s shortcutting my quote.” Daphne rolls her eyes. “We like you because you’re intelligent, cunning, resourceful, and ambitious. The Gryffindor bits about bravery and insanity are merely pleasant icing.”

“And you’re not a berk,” Theo adds, trying to wipe a sprouting cobweb off his book. “That last part is especially important. But you wouldn’t have been a berk to us in the past if some of us hadn’t started being so in the first place.”

Hermione’s throat feels too thick. “Professor Slytherin did say that offence is part of defence. It’s okay. I get it.”

Blaise smiles at her, but it’s the genuine one, not the smile he uses when he’s flirting. “Forget all that. Let’s just worry about this year, hey?”

“You think I’m smart, and you don’t...you don’t mind?” Hermione asks, hating that she sounds pathetic.

Draco and Daphne give her near-identical blank stares. “Mind?” Draco sounds incredulous. “Why would we mind?”

“Because—I—I turned in my Defence essay on Tuesday evening. Professor Slytherin read it, gave me top marks, and is placing me into sixth-year N.E.W.T. Defence because he thinks otherwise I’m going to stagnate,” Hermione blurts out in a rush. “It means I’ll take the Defence O.W.L. and the N.E.W.T. end-of-term exam both, but he thinks I can do it and I want to do it but I—”


Hermione manages a whistling deep breath and lets it out in a whoosh. “I’m sorry, I’m, uhm—”

“A swot,” Millicent says, but she’s smiling. It makes her dark eyes seem gentle, even if there is always a fire lurking behind the kindness. “That’s incredible, Granger.”

Hermione stares at Millicent. “What?”

“That’s incredible,” Megan repeats in awe. “Professor Slytherin is offering you an apprenticeship, and he’s jumping you up a year because he thinks you’re that capable? That’s bloody well amazing.”

Draco nods. “I certainly wouldn’t be able to manage that, even if I had turned in my essay early. It will be quite good, but even I know this isn’t N.E.W.T.-level work.”

“Mind you, I think you’re completely mental for wanting to take the Defence O.W.L. and sit the sixth-year exam at the same time,” Blaise says, bright-eyed and grinning. “Hermione, it’s a Slytherin professor who’s saying you’re intelligent, and he’s doing something about it on behalf of a Gryffindor. How badass is that?”

“We like you, Granger. You’re funny, and even better for us stuck-up swots, you’re smart.” Daphne smirks at Draco. “And we like you because you punched Draco when he deserved it.”

Draco lifts his chin and sniffs. “That,” he says, “is a fringe benefit.”

“None of us would ever hold being smart against you,” Millicent says, as if the very idea is ludicrous. “That’s what friends do. They support each other—even if they are mental for wanting to take two exams at once.”
Hermione tries twice to say something. Then the dam breaks, and she bursts into tears. “I’m so sorry,” she chokes out, getting up from the table. “Loo run.” She bolts from the library, ducking her head so her hair will hide her face.
“Oh my God! That’s why everyone in Gryffindor is so convinced that Ron, Harry, and I were dating!”

Blaise and Draco both attempt to stand up, but when Granger goes somewhere, she’s bloody fast. They can’t chase after her now without drawing even more attention to Granger’s exit.

“Damn,” Draco whispers. Granger’s quick escape has nothing to do with a sudden need to visit a toilet.

“What the hell was that about?” Blaise wonders, baffled.

Daphne growls and crumples up the paper she’d been taking notes on, glares at the mess, and uses her wand to straighten the page back out again. “I think I know.”

Blaise huffs out a breath as they sit back down. “Then please don’t keep us in suspense, Daph. I’m still learning to translate Granger-speak.”

Daphne glances around before gesturing for Draco, Megan, Blaise, Theo, and Millicent to lean in close. “Granger is the smartest witch in our year,” she says. “That hasn’t been in doubt since the end of our first term at Hogwarts. At this point, it’s a safe bet to say she’s the smartest magician in the school. We’ve seen Granger be sly and cunning. She can defend herself with a wand or without one, and once you push Granger that hard, she pushes back harder.”

Draco thinks of his ridiculous attempt to boast on the train at the end of last term, Greg and Vince at his back, and tries not to grimace. That had not gone well, and it wasn’t only Potter and Weasley who’d done the hexing.

It also hadn’t helped the fear to go away, the terror bubbling in his stomach at every waking moment. The Dark Lord returned. Diggory dead. Potter wandering around that last week of term looking like a ghost himself. The celebratory letter from his father—written with handwriting so uneven that Draco knew that Lucius Malfoy had suffered the Cruciatus Curse. He’d been well-educated in regards to its side effects even before a Death Eater had impersonated their DADA professor for an entire year.

“You deserved that, too,” Daphne says, correctly interpreting the expression on Draco’s face.

Draco nods. “I’m aware, believe me.”
“Can we get back to Granger, please?” Millicent requests testily. “I’d like to know the point of this.”

Daphne looks irritated. “Granger understands the social graces, both wizard and Muggle, even if she doesn’t observe them for herself most of the time. Potter didn’t stop Quirrell from stealing the Philosopher’s Stone by himself; Granger was right there with him. She’s the one who realized that there was a basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets, even if she was Petrified before she could tell anyone. She used that Time-Turner to take all twelve classes in our third year, even if she ditched Divination.”

“I wish I’d bloody well ditched Divination,” Megan says glumly.

“Trelawney is getting better,” Blaise points out. “I’m thinking Professor Salazar might be kicking her arse into teaching shape on the sly.”

“Shut up,” Daphne hisses at them. “Let me finish! Before this year, when it finally felt like it was safe to adopt from the other Houses, who were the only two people Granger spent time with?”

“Weasley and Potter,” Draco says, feeling uneasy. He’s seen Granger with Ginny Weasley and Longbottom on occasion, but it always seems like a casual thing. They’re likely friends, but it’s not the sort of close friendship that involves sharing secrets. That honor always went to Potter and Weasley, and right now, Granger only has Weasley.

“Perhaps the other Weasleys, too, I suppose,” Theo says.

“Possibly,” Daphne agrees, inclining her head. “I’ve heard that Granger has been to the Weasley Burrow, so it’s a reasonable assumption. But otherwise, it’s Potter and Weasley. Now, she adores Potter, and vice versa—”

“Sweet on each other?” Jones asks, raising an eyebrow.

“No, Potter was off on Chang last year,” Blaise says.

Millicent rolls her eyes. “You all need to pay more attention to Pansy. Cho Chang was not where Potter’s eyes kept wandering during the Yule Ball.”

“But who would—oh.” Draco feels the bottom fall out of his stomach. That just made the end of the Tournament so much worse, and Draco had taunted Potter about that on the train…

“Cedric Diggory.” Jones brushes the feathered tip of her quill against her lips. “Well, I can’t fault Potter for taste. He’s got bad fucking luck, but good taste.”

“Back to the point.” Daphne sounds annoyed, but there is a hint of vague disappointment on her face. Draco immediately discerns two things: he isn’t the only one who overlooked the obvious, and until thirty seconds ago, Daphne had been plotting to ensnare Potter. Draco hopes she has good contingency candidates in mind if she’s already considering marriage alliances.

“Granger got onto Potter a bit about his homework habits—not a swot, that one—but I never once heard Potter say an unkind word about Granger’s intelligence,” Daphne says. “I did hear it from the Weasel, though, and it was far too often from someone who claims to be her friend. Weasley is getting better about that nonsense this term, but that’s still four years when he wasn’t. If Granger’s own friend mocks what she’s good at, how does the rest of Gryffindor treat Granger? Or the entire school, for that matter?”

Theo winces. “Well, we all know how Professor Snape used to handle it.”
“Yes, but Professor Snape doesn’t do that anymore.” Blaise makes a face. “It’s weird. He’s not been nearly caustic enough to keep to standard. I feel like I’m waiting for a bomb to drop, especially when he’s not been giving or taking points for weeks now.”

Millicent shakes her head. “Professor Snape still gives points, or takes them, but he does so after class. When I asked, he said he’s more concerned with what we’re brewing to bother during class time.”

“He did absolutely rip into Richard and Tracey for not paying attention to their cauldron,” Blaise says. “They nearly started a bloody fire this afternoon.”

“They deserved it.” Draco is still angry with those two idiots for losing them points, but they can suffer their House’s wrath and enjoy the privilege. He has other concerns right now.

Pansy declared that Granger was scary, and Granger took that as a compliment well enough, but smart—that, they’ve never really said. Not until today. Draco has heard Hermione express frustration with others’ failings so often that he never realized that she might be…

Oh.

Granger is fighting back. Not by meekness or by subtlety (which probably doesn’t work very well in Gryffindor) but by being loud. By her refusal to apologize for who she is.

Draco groans inwardly. He is supposed to admire Slytherin traits! Granger does have a number of those, but he also seems to have a weakness for publicly executed, spiteful stubbornness.

“Daphne, you’re saying that you think no one outside of Potter has ever told Granger that she’s intelligent in a nice way. Right?” Draco asks, just to be certain.

Daphne shrugs. “Oh, her parents might have, though I’ve never heard her discuss them. The only thing anyone knows about Granger’s parents is that they’re Muggle dentists. Healers for teeth,” she adds when Jones and Theo look confused. “Professor Slytherin has definitely noticed; he’s serious about that apprenticeship offer. I believe the only reason Granger hasn’t accepted yet is because she’s having trouble convincing herself that it’s legitimate recognition.”

Blaise nods. “Hermione did come unglued when we were fine with it all.”

“It’s different if you’re hearing it from friends,” Millicent says thoughtfully. “Parents are supposed to tell us that we’re brilliant. Friends don’t have to do that, even if they should. The only reason I have any confidence at all is because you lot decided to adopt an overweight blob of a Pure-blood.”

“You were not fat. You were growing into your height,” Theo says in a prim voice. “Six feet bloody tall.”

Millicent smiles. “Thank you, Theo.”

Draco makes a decision and hopes he won’t regret it. “I’m going to find Granger.”

“Mate, you can’t just go traipsing into the girls’ bathrooms looking for her,” Blaise reminds him as Draco stands up.

“That depends upon the bathroom,” Draco replies. “Moaning Myrtle lords over the closest girls’ toilet. Hopefully I’ll be back with Granger before dinner.”

Blaise rolls his eyes. “Never go anywhere alone, remember? Megan and I will make sure you get to
Myrtle’s place without taking a hex to the arse. After that, you and Granger can watch each other’s backs.”

“I’m going with you, am I?” Jones asks, giving Blaise a calculating smile.

“Sure. You’re good with a wand.” Blaise looks pleased with himself. “Besides, how am I supposed to flirt if I never take granted opportunities?”

Jones drops her quill and closes her book. “We’ll be back in ten minutes, then. If it takes any longer, please come save us.”

“No promises. Fucking trolls,” Theo mutters at his work.

Draco leads them to the staircase that meanders up to the second floor of the library. From there, they can exit out into the fourth floor corridor. There is a stairwell close by that takes them down to the second floor, and Moaning Myrtle’s haunted bathroom is just down the hall. Draco knows from experience that it’s an excellent place to hide.

“All quiet,” Jones says after peering around the opposite corner.

“Same on this side,” Draco mutters, but he doesn’t let go of his wand. Some of the younger students made the mistake of ignoring the warning they spread at the beginning of the resumed term in January. No one knows which batch of idiot baby Death Eaters got the drop on them, but the results were nasty. Rachel Condor’s prosthetic leg had to be replaced entirely, half of it melted to slag. Atsushi was burping up clouds for a week—after the administered potion made certain the yellow clouds would only smell like sulfur instead of emerging as toxic fumes.

It did drive home the point, though. None of them go anywhere alone.

Draco clenches his wand in his hand. Granger went alone, and Draco almost did the same thing. Merlin, he’s glad that Blaise is more sensible than both of them today.

“All right,” Blaise says when they arrive within a few feet of the bathroom. The floor in front of the door is wet again. “Good luck with whatever nefarious thing you’re planning.”

“I am not snogging anyone in a toilet, Blaise. I have standards,” Draco retorts.

“Hah! Then you did send Granger that fancy quill!” Blaise crows. He and Jones even slap hands over it, the complete idiots.

“No, I didn’t. I still have to find whoever did so and strangle them for thinking of that before I did. Now go away!” Draco orders, pushing open the door.

Draco waits for the door to swing shut behind him, cutting off whatever Blaise might be thinking of saying next. At least he’ll be distracted by Megan Jones in short order. She’s quite the Viking Hufflepuff; she won’t put up with any of Blaise’s nonsense. If he wants a date or a snog, Blaise will have to earn it properly.

“Oh, hello, Draco!”

Draco smiles politely at Myrtle as she pops up over the door of her favorite stall. It sends a fresh wave of water around his feet, but as no one ever uses these toilets, he has no concern for something foul attaching itself to his shoes. “Hello, Myrtle. How are you this afternoon?”

“Oh, you know, it’s been the usual sort of day,” Myrtle says, floating upwards so she can seat herself
atop the door. “I gossiped with the mermaids in the Prefect’s bathroom for a bit. It’s not been nearly as much fun since everyone started wearing brassieres and shorts to enjoy the bath.”

“I’m very sorry to hear that,” Draco replies. When Moaning Myrtle came giggling out of the pipes in the Prefect’s bathroom the first week of term, Draco convinced her to leave without causing offence, pulled on his clothes, and then warned Pansy. After the House truce was officially declared in January, they then warned everyone. The girls weren’t terribly concerned, but Rivers, Boot, Weasley, Kartik, Cadwallader, Higgs, Chambers, and Randall were all horrified.

Draco could have tried to warn them in September, but on the scale of revenge for slights granted in previous years, Myrtle’s spying on them was relatively minor retribution—if also highly satisfying.

“I don’t suppose your day has included any wandering Gryffindors, has it Myrtle?”

Myrtle rests her chin on her hand. “It might have done. You’re not going to be cruel to her, are you, Draco? Goodness knows I used to come in here all the time for much the same reason she did.”

“Absolutely not. No one was cruel to her, Myrtle. Well, we weren’t being cruel. God’s truth and Merlin’s pledge on it,” Draco promises, holding up his hand. “I was worried about her.”

Myrtle smiles and peers into the next stall. “Did you hear that, Hermione? He said he was worried!”


“Granger?” Draco hesitates and tries again. “Hermione. Would you come out of there? If you’re not indisposed, I mean.”

“If she were indisposed, I wouldn’t have said anything!” Myrtle protests. “I’m a pervy excuse for a ghost, Draco Malfoy, but not that sort!”

“My apologies.” Draco offers her a half-bow. He refuses to ever earn bad marks in Myrtle’s book. It isn’t wise to anger a ghost who can emerge from any pipe in the castle. Draco never wants to lift the toilet lid for a late night piss in the dungeon to discover Myrtle’s head floating in the bowl.

“Give me a moment, please.” Hermione noisily blows her nose and then pushes the stall door open. Her nose and eyes are both swollen and red from crying, but she still lifts her chin, as proud as any Pure-blooded witch. “I’m fine, Draco. You don’t have to worry, honest.”

“People who are fine don’t usually flee from their favorite place in the school.” Draco glances around, pretending not to notice when Hermione’s shoulders hunch again. Spying a dry spot on the floor next to the wall where Myrtle’s spills never reach, he goes over and sits down before treating her to an expectant look.

Hermione stares at him. “You want me to sit there.”

Draco nods. “I assure you, it’s quite dry. The floor has a bit of a tilt. I think it’s because the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets is just over there,” he says, nodding at the next bank of sinks.

Hermione cautiously sits down next to Draco. “How did you know that? They never told anyone.”

“Rumor got around that the Chamber’s entrance was in a bathroom.” Draco refuses to be distracted by the fact that Hermione sat close enough for their shoulders to brush. “I went looking for anything obvious and noticed that those faucets have a few unusual features, like the silver snakes. I can’t open it, of course, but I do like knowing where things are.”
“Of course, if anyone had asked me, I could have told them,” Myrtle says with a sniff. “But no one ever asks poor Moaning Myrtle…except Harry. He asked.”

“Yes, Myrtle, and I did apologize for that. Several times.” Draco gives her a significant look before glancing at Hermione.

Myrtle grins. “I’ve just recalled I’ve an appointment in the Prefect’s Bathroom. Kartik likes to go for a swim right about now, and if he’s put in a long day, he forgets his shorts!” The ghost giggles and then flings herself into the toilet. Draco watches in amusement as a fresh wave of toilet water goes rolling across the floor.

“I didn’t realize you were so familiar with Myrtle,” Hermione comments.

“No one comes here. It’s been a nice place to go if I want to be alone.” Back when he had no idea if his friends were really his friends, or if their parents were all conniving together to raise good little Death Eaters. Back when he could only take so much of Vince and Greg marching along behind Draco before he desperately needed to be alone.

“Oh, I agree. This is where I brewed Polyjuice in second year,” Hermione says.

Draco turns his head to eye Hermione in disbelief. “You brewed Polyjuice in a toilet. In a girls’ toilet!”

“Well, as you just said, it isn’t as if anyone comes here.” Hermione is wiping her eyes again, but she’s smiling. “I put the cauldron up on one of the toilet seats and floated the heat source beneath. It worked wonderfully.”

“That is mental brilliance,” Draco decides. Needs must, after all. “Would you consider showing me how it’s done? I don’t think Myrtle will mind the return of a Polyjuice cauldron.”

Hermione lets out a sigh. “Certainly, but it will have to be after I complete my new assignment in Potions.”

“New assignment?” Draco asks. Professor Snape has never once handed out extra credit.

“Oh, I said some magic combination of words that caused Professor Snape to ask me to compare our last essay about Runespoor eggs to the one he did in fifth year. It was—Slughorn was so useless!” she suddenly fumes.

Draco is startled into laughing. “You have no idea how often I’ve heard Mother say exactly the same.”

“Yes, well.” Hermione blushes, which he doesn’t understand at all. “Professor Snape asked me if I wanted to continue to rely on a book and never give Potions a further thought, or if I wanted to understand what we were doing. I said I wanted to understand, so he’s changing my work for the rest of term. The first assignment is to tell him how to shorten the brewing time of Polyjuice.”

“That’s easy enough,” Draco says without even stopping to think on it. “Brew it by the lunar calendar of twenty-eight days instead of the solar calendar.”

“But—that—that—” Hermione buries her face in her hands to muffle an indignant screech. “I’m an idiot! I kept trying to figure out how to shorten it by at least a week or longer, but he didn’t say how much time I was to shorten it by! He just asked for a shorter brewing time!”

Draco grins. “How can you be excellent at politics and yet miss something so obvious?”
“Because I thought it had to be a difficult answer,” Hermione mumbles into her hands. “If school isn’t hard, then you’re obviously not doing it correctly.”

“What? That is complete rubbish!” Draco exclaims. “Who told you that?”

Hermione drops her hands, looking utterly dejected. “My parents.”

“They’re masochists, then,” Draco says.

“You don’t understand!” Hermione bites her lip. “They’re doctors and they’re dentists! You don’t have to be a doctor to be a dentist in England, but they went to school and became both. The only reason they keep to a dental practice is because it makes more money through those who are paying privately instead of coming in through NHS.”

Some of those words did not make sense, but Draco will figure them out later. “Is that why you tried to take all twelve classes in third year?”

“It wasn’t hard! Nothing about our first or second year was hard at all except for the bloody Petrification!” Hermione sniffs and wipes at her eyes with a demolished handkerchief. “It wasn’t even difficult to catch up with all of the second-year work, or read the textbooks for our third term. I was done before Harry’s birthday that year!”

Draco shakes his head and passes over his own handkerchief. Hermione thanks him with a desultory nod. “Hermione…have you ever stopped to consider that what you’re doing isn’t hard because you’re highly intelligent?”

“That’s the entire problem!” she bursts out, surprising him. “I turned in a thirty-two foot essay for Defence, Draco! I did it because I wanted to do it right and there is just so much and I just—I had to stop working on it in the Common Room in the Tower. All the others ever did was mock me because I wasn’t slacking off at a perfect sixteen feet! Isn’t that just like Granger?” she quotes in a bitter, mocking voice. “Such a swot, Granger! Such a suck-up. You do know you’re supposed to actually suck on a teacher instead of giving them paper cuts, right?”

Draco clenches his jaw. “How entirely crude.”

Hermione throws her hands up into the air, nearly sending his handkerchief flying. “I’ve been listening to that rot for five terms now!”

“But what about…” Draco makes himself ask. “Potter? And the Weasleys?”

“Oh, Harry never did,” Hermione admits, dabbing at her eyes. “Ginny, Parvati, and Neville aren’t terrible about it, and a number of the younger year students just think I’m terrifying. But I was always supposed to be doing something else rather than waste my time, you know?”

“Actually, I’ve no idea,” Draco says, realizing his eyebrows are raised in complete consternation. “I don’t think it would ever occur to anyone in my House to act like that regarding our education. Greg and Vincent aren’t the smartest wizards ever to attend Hogwarts, but even they don’t mock us for doing well. We return the courtesy and don’t mock them for doing poorly.”

“That’s…that sounds rather nice, actually,” Hermione whispers, sniffing. “It’s just—my parents expect me to do well. They’re brilliant, so I’d better be, also. They learned just enough about Hogwarts to understand the grading system, and I know what my summer will be like if I bring home anything except straight Os for the O.W.L.s. They don’t care what I do unless I bugger something up.” She sniffs again and wipes her nose with his handkerchief.
“I do know what that is like, however,” Draco says. “My father. He is…very much of that sort, but unlike your parents, he has the distinction of also being a Death Eater.”

“I’m not reassured. The other students think my parents are just as terrifying as Death Eaters because they’re dentists,” Hermione replies.

Draco feels his lip twitch. “You know, after hearing Sebastian discuss his first root canal in explicit detail, I did have to stop and ponder which I’d rather deal with—Death Eaters, or Muggle dentists.”

Hermione lifts her head and looks at him. The moment their eyes meet, they both burst into inane-sounding giggles. “Oh! Oh, goodness,” Hermione gasps, wiping her eyes for an entirely different reason. “Can you imagine how many students in Hogwarts might actually choose the Death Eaters over an appointment with my parents?”

“Sebastian says that drill makes your entire skull vibrate like it’s going to come apart!” Draco wheezes, pressing his hand to his side. “So many! It would be so many of them!”

They slowly calm down, though Draco embarrasses himself by hiccupping several times before giving up and casting the charm to get rid of them. Hermione doesn’t seem to mind, but given what she’s doing to his handkerchief, maybe a few hiccups really aren’t quite the social gaffe his parents always claimed.

“I haven’t told anyone in Gryffindor,” Hermione says after balling up the handkerchief in her hand. “About Professor Slytherin moving me into the sixth-year N.E.W.T. class.” Then she surprises him by leaning against Draco’s side, resting her head on his shoulder.

Draco tries not to freeze. He snogged Pansy a few times last year, mostly for fun, not out of any need to date. Archana was kind enough to give him proper lessons in kissing when he was in third-year and desperate not to make a fool of himself the first time he approached a girl. In this case, he probably shouldn’t jump right to snogging.

“I don’t blame you,” Draco manages to say, hoping his voice doesn’t sound squeaky. “You’ll be letting Professor Slytherin explain it on Monday, I take it?”

Hermione nods. “I’m not the only one who was shuffled, so it’s the opportune time for it. Thank you, Draco.”

“Er, what for?”

“I’ve never had anyone except Harry just accept me for who I am, swottiness and all. He doesn’t expect me to be better or worse at something. He just…success or fail, it was fine. I didn’t have to prove anything to him, even if he sometimes made me feel like I had to, but that’s because he’s mental.”

“Potter flew against a Hungarian Horntail on a broom last year. We all noticed that he’s mental,” Draco says while trying to ignore the sharp flush of guilt. He said some truly terrible things about Potter last year, and while Hermione seems to have forgiven him, Potter himself is another matter. Draco isn’t looking forward to that conversation at all.

Hermione giggles again. “Well, yes. It’s just—it isn’t just Professor Slytherin. It’s you and the other Slytherins who aren’t berk’s, to use Theo’s word. It’s the people in other Houses who are looking around at the rest of us, as if finally realizing we’re here in the first place. It’s nice, you know?”

Draco swallows. “Yes. It is nice.” He isn’t only speaking of the inter-House awareness, but it doesn’t seem polite to mention it. Muggles probably have a very different view of this sort of close touching.
He really needs to figure out a situation in which to ask without it seeming too forward.

“Hermione?” Draco gives her a gentle nudge with his elbow. “Might I ask you something?”

“Certainly.”

All right. In for it, then. “The next Hogsmeade Weekend is the first weekend of March. Would you like to accompany me?”

Hermione sits up and looks at him. “Accompany you? Well, I don’t mind…” She trails off, eyes narrowing. “You’re not the one who sent the fountain pen, are you?”

Draco grimaces and glances up at the ceiling. “No! And I very much would like to know who did, because they beat me to it!”

Hermione is biting her lip when he looks at her again. “Okay.”

“Okay?” Draco repeats, confused.

“I’ll go with you. To Hogsmeade,” Hermione clarifies when Draco keeps staring at her like an imbecile. “But we should probably find out who sent that pen. I’d like to know why they never said anything, or if I need to give it back, or…or whatever the proper response is meant to be. I don’t actually know.”

Draco decides that’s a very good opportunity. “Ah. Yes. I’ll, uh, help with that. If you like. You see, this leaning thing you did? In Wizarding circles, you’re signaling that you want to, er, snog me.”

Hermione clamps her hand over her mouth, but what spills out is brilliant laughter, not more tears. “Oh my God! That’s why everyone in Gryffindor is so convinced that Ron, Harry, and I were dating!”

Draco is outraged. “Weasley didn’t warn you?”

“I don’t think he realized, actually,” Hermione replies, still laughing. “I did wonder why he abruptly stopped doing that after the Yule Ball. I thought he was still sour over Victor Krum. Instead, he’d just gotten it through his thick skull that I’m a girl!”

Draco reminds himself that not all Weasleys are hopeless. The twins are loyal and intelligent. Ginny Weasley is smart, and one hell of a Seeker. He’s never seen any of them muck it up that badly in regards to Pure-blood customs. “Perhaps we should…trade. Information.” Draco swallows again when his throat feels too dry. “During the Hogsmeade Weekend. I do need to know more about the— the non-magical world.”

“And I apparently need to strangle several dead authors for not being more useful when it comes to writing down Pure-blood customs,” Hermione says. “Oh—bugger it. It’s nearly time for dinner. We should go back to the library so no one thinks we’ve drowned in here.”

Draco is suddenly, acutely aware of their lack of chaperone. He doesn’t need to sully either of their reputations before they even take their O.W.L.s. “Right, yes. That sounds like an excellent plan.”

* * * *
Hermione isn’t certain what she’s more nervous about—returning to the library to face the Slytherins (and Susan, Padma, and Megan) she abandoned because of her ridiculous crying, or of the Gryffindors finding out about her placement in the sixth-year class. Maybe a Hogsmeade weekend spent with Draco Malfoy will help things seem less strange.

She can’t believe that thought just crossed her mind.

Millicent, Megan, Blaise, and Theo are still at the table; Padma, Pansy, and Susan have come back. Everyone is packing up to leave for dinner. “There you are!” Pansy greets her. “How is my favorite swot?”

Hermione musters a smile. “I’m okay. They told you?”

“Of course they did.” Susan gives Hermione the expression of concern and good humor that Hufflepuffs master so well. It’s a very nice way of asking if she’s all right without saying a word. “You’re our friend.”

“I’m sorry,” Hermione tells them as she retrieves her book bag. “I didn’t mean to have a stupid meltdown at the table. It’s just—”

“It’s fine,” Padma interrupts her. She has a very firm, set smile on her face. “It’s just stress, right?”

Hermione blinks a few times as the others all nod along with Padma. An out. They’re giving her a choice on whether she wants to talk about it or not…and she doesn’t. “You’re right, Padma. It’s—well, it really is stress,” she continues, realizing that it’s still the truth. “Thank you all for being so understanding.”

“So! Did anything exciting happen in Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom?” Pansy asks, grinning like the utter fiend she is.

“Er—well.” Hermione glances at Draco, who for some reason is flushing scarlet. “Draco asked me to go with him to the next Hogsmeade Weekend, and I said yes, but I feel guilty about it. I still don’t know who sent me such a wonderful pen. It doesn’t seem as if I’m being fair.”

“Oh, that’s all right,” Millicent says. “I sent the fountain pen.”

Hermione stares at Millicent. “I…you did?”

Millicent nods. “I noticed you using it, but I’ve been trying to figure out if you were interested in girls before I said anything. If you’re leaning towards Draco, I suppose that you aren’t.”

Hermione begins competing with Draco for who is turning the darkest shade of red. “I, er, no. I’m sorry, I’m not… I think you’re very pretty, Millicent. I even thought just last week that you look like a Greek goddess. But I don’t think of girls that way.”

Millicent’s staid composure cracks around the edges. “You think I’m pretty?”

“Of course I do!” Hermione exclaims, glad that the others chime in with equal insistence. “Why wouldn’t I think so?”

“Used to be fat,” Millicent mumbles. “Still hear it often enough at home.”

“Yes, but now you’re bloody tall, like I keep telling you,” Theo says in a patient voice. “And I’ve mentioned that you’re gorgeous, too.”
“Yes, but you’re boy,” Millicent retorts. “I like girls! It’s different, hearing it from a girl!”

Daphne does an excellent job of competing with Professor Snape for dry delivery: “You’re pretty, you idiot.”

“Love, I’d date you if I weren’t straight as an arrow,” Padma says in frank admiration. “You could pick me up and sling me around like a twig!”

Hermione begins to wonder how many of them are going to be standing around blushing before dinner. Millicent’s face is highlighted red in a way that perfectly emphasizes the line of her cheekbones. Oddly enough, Susan is blushing, too. “Millicent, should I give you back the fountain pen?” Hermione asks. “I’m not really certain how that sort of thing works.”

Millicent finishes packing up her books. “We’ll trade for it.”

Hermione braces herself. She’s still getting used to the idea of trading. “All right. What sort of trade?”

“Three conditions for the trade.” Millicent’s blush fades, but the pleased glimmer in her eyes is still present. “If the conditions are met, you may keep the fountain pen. First, please tell me if you’re aware if Katie Bell is into girls.”

“Er…” Hermione frowns. “I’m not certain. I’ve never heard Katie say that she’s opposed to the idea, though. Ginny might know. I could ask.”

Millicent smiles. “I’ll consider that condition met, then. The second condition is that Draco must reimburse me for the cost of the pen.”

“Gladly, Millicent,” Draco says while blushing again. Hermione desperately wants to know why. “Write down the sum and deliver it to me this evening. I’ll make certain you receive exactly what you ask for.”

Oh—Draco is allowing Millicent the means to ask for extra money as payment for the favor. That part, Hermione understands.

“If you do both of those things, you and Draco may tell everyone outside of our particular circle that he bought you the fountain pen, so he can demonstrate proof that he initiated a proper sort of courtship before asking you on a date,” Millicent adds. “That’s my only other condition. If he’s going to court you, one of us has to make certain he remembers to do it properly.”

“Is this what you had in mind in the first place?” Hermione is intrigued by both the setup of the trade, and the idea that Millicent would look after Draco’s interests this way. Of course, it could be yet another Slytherin thing. “You seem to have planned this out already, Millicent.”

“A good Slytherin plans for any contingency,” Millicent replies. “It was about fifty-fifty, though. If you’d said yes, I would have the pleasure of dating someone highly intelligent and beautiful, if a bit unkempt. If you said no, then I would try my luck at courting the smartest, prettiest witch in sixth-year.”

Hermione can’t protest the unkempt part, but she thinks it’s a bit funny that she thought of Millicent in the very same terms. “Well. Er, thank you then. For the trade. Even if Draco claims the pen plot from now on, it was still a very thoughtful gift.”

“Pen plot.” Blaise snickers. “I love that.”
“I did my research,” Millicent says airily. “Come on, Pans. We need to make certain we’ve taken over our end of the table properly before the firsties try to call dibs.”

“Did you really ask Hermione to go Hogsmeade with you?” Padma asks Draco in an excited whisper as they all leave the library. Hermione already knows what the Gryffindor table is going to be gossiping about through the entirety of dinner. She resolves to hide between Neville and Ron.

“Of course I did.” There is a faint echo of Draco’s old haughtiness in his voice. Then it’s gone when he says, “You can tell the overprotective types in Gryffindor that I have a genuine interest in Hermione Granger’s company, though I do have an ulterior motive.”

“What Slytherin doesn’t?” Megan smirks. “What’s the secondary plot, then, Malfoy?”

Draco smiles at Hermione. It isn’t his usual smile at all, but a bashful, lingering look. “I’d very much like for her to tell me more about the non-magical world.”

Hermione feels an odd curl of delight beneath her breastbone. “You didn’t say Muggle.”

“No, I didn’t.” Draco resettles his bag over his shoulder and straightens his shoulders, lifting his head. He doesn’t appear arrogant in that moment, nothing like Lucius Malfoy. Draco looks confident, brave…and maybe happy, too. “Professor Slytherin has been saying for a while now that Muggle is a slur. If I can stop saying the other one, then I can stop saying this one, too.”
Honoring the Fallen

Chapter Summary

Late spring visit to St. Jerome's cemetery in which all parties involved would rather be doing something else.

Chapter Notes

@sanerontheinside took time out from end-semester shenanigans to give this a look-over! @mrsstanley will be back on duty after sobering up from putting in the last day of this semester of teaching. ;) @jabberwockypie & @norcumi are encouraging shrieky cheer-readers, as usual.

Severus awakens sometime around ten in the morning on Saturday and immediately curses the fact that he overslept to such an extent. He doesn’t like being parted from his weekday schedule during the school year, not when he needs to be awake and aware, fueled by spite and tea, as his first class begins.

Nizar has already abandoned the bed for the day, though he left a note. It’s the note’s contents that make Severus scowl.

Was asked to check that 12 Grimmauld Place is not going to fall down around certain ears due to the removal of a noisy wall. Will bring back gossip without mold or spiders. Taking Lupin his next three doses of Taming so he has no excuse.

This potion desperately needs a new name that is not Wolf Poison.

—Nizar

P.S. If things are truly that dull during the rest of your morning, meet me in Godric’s Hollow at noon. I’m trying to find a door.

Severus thinks about it while dressing for the day. He is in no rush to go to Godric’s Hollow. Once was quite enough.

In September of 1980, he had once stood in the rain on a walkway, disguised by a Disillusionment Charm while he stared at the place where he knew a hidden house lurked. The others might be baffled by the Fidelius Charm’s effects, but Severus could think and remember James Potter’s origins. He hadn’t been to the village before that evening, but all it took was a few scant minutes of listening to gossip in the pub to discover that the other residents of the village were still trying to figure out when the house with that nice young married couple had been torn down. One of the
grandmother types was fussing because she’d knitted a blanket proper for a newborn baby, and now there was naught to give it to.

There was nothing to tell anyone else that a house with a wife, child, and husband was hidden on that quiet street in Godric’s Hollow. Not a hint of magic. He’d turned away and foolishly decided it was enough to save them.

Maybe it would have been, if not for a rat’s cowardice.

Filky doesn’t need to do much to convince Severus to take tea or breakfast, but the idea of Godric’s Hollow bothers him throughout the morning. It’s distracting enough that he almost doesn’t care that Nizar willingly returned to that vile townhouse in London without Order business prompting the visit.

Five minutes before noon, Severus lets out a stream of profanity, fetches a winter cloak, casts the Invisibility Charm, and then Apparates directly to Godric’s Hollow. It’s a much longer Apparition than he should have undertaken, but for once, he feels no lingering ache in his chest or tiredness pulling at his limbs. If that is a side effect of the war mage title, he’ll gladly take it.

Severus looks around to be certain no one is staring in his direction before dismissing the charm. It’s easier to find Nizar than he expected; he’s standing in front of the old statue in the village square, gazing at it in angry bafflement.

At first, Severus doesn’t understand why. It’s a weather-darkened stone obelisk that lists war casualties from World War I for that region of England, erected by the people of Godric’s Hollow decades ago. Severus had looked at it for a moment or two during his last visit, thinking on how long the casualty lists for the Wizarding War would be if all its victims were accounted for.

It’s only as Severus steps closer that the statue shifts, becoming metal, oversized statues of James Potter, Lily Potter, and an infant Harry Potter. This would be where the Ministry decided to put that nonsense. He’d heard the news of its creation and then promptly ignored everything else.

Good God, it’s an ugly statue. Lily would be so offended.

So, apparently, is her son, who is too busy scowling at the statue to greet him. “I take it you’re not impressed,” Severus says.

Nizar’s scowl deepens. “Do you have any idea how many paintings and triptychs I’ve viewed in my life of the infant Jesus that are framed in exactly this fashion? Granted, the space James is occupying is usually taken up by the angel who was nice enough to go tell that poor woman she was going to give birth to a god’s child, but it’s exactly that. I’m not even Christian, and I find this to be sacrilegious.”

“And how long have you been staring at the sacrilegious statue?” Severus asks. Now that Nizar has pointed it out, he can see the religious similarity.

“What time is it?”

Severus glances at his pocket watch and puts it away. “A minute after twelve o’clock.”

“Oh. Then at least ten minutes. Sometimes sheer outrage certainly eats up your day.” Nizar shakes his head. “I approached it because I was told it was a memorial for the Great War—well, World War I, now. Then it shifted into this nonsense.”

“And the fact that you’re a permanent fixture of this nonsense is having no sway over your opinion?”
“No.” Nizar puts his hands in his robe pockets. “It doesn’t even look like them. I might not have memories, but I have photos. This statue wasn’t made for them. It was made for everyone else, and it is beautified ludicrousness. That isn’t—”

Nizar sighs. “I understand that perhaps someone got the idea into their head that the Ministry should honor the sacrifices of others, but this isn’t how you do it. You do not place dead people up on a pedestal that puts on the appearance of everything being *normal*. It isn’t normal. There is no happy family wandering off into history. They’re dead. Fuck the idiots who approved this nonsense. The obelisk with all of those names, that dark stone marker without a hint of ostentatiousness—if you want to honor those who fell, that’s how you do it. You don’t make it a fucking spectacle!”

Severus agrees with Nizar, but he can’t resist the urge to prod at him. “Have you been composing this particular rant while waiting for me to appear?”

“No, I spent most of that time being appalled.” Nizar scowls again. “Is anyone looking?”

Severus takes a surreptitious glance around the small village square. “No. It’s the lunch hour. Most of them are at home or in a pub.”

“Good.” Nizar lifts his leg and stomps hard the ground. Severus winces when the sound rings out like a sharp crack, followed by the fainter, echoing ring of a gong. The ugly statue vanishes, replaced by the original obelisk. Severus isn’t certain, as he couldn’t make out details clearly from fifteen feet away, but he suspects the obelisk’s names are carved out in starker relief than before.

“No that I’m complaining, but what the hell did you just do?” Severus asks.

“That is a trick I must have picked up from Salazar—using the magic of the earth to disrupt an enchantment. I made it so that the obelisk can never be replaced by that appalling bronze bullshit ever again. Anyone who comes here is going to see the casualty list from a horrific war. They can honor *those* sacrifices, instead.”

Severus glances at Nizar. “You do realize you’ve done away with the only war memorial for the previous Wizarding war against Voldemort on this entire island, yes?”

Nizar finally looks at him, his eyes a bright emerald green with hints of silver as his magic flares along with his temper. “Fucking what?”

“The only one. Just that one. There is nothing anywhere else.”

Nizar plasters his hand over his eyes. “The fuck—fine. If I can be plotting the creation of an actual, useful museum, I can throw gold at erecting a real war memorial. Maybe place it inside the fucking museum so people can’t avoid it.”

“Museum,” Severus repeats. “I take it there are plans for the detritus in the rubbish room aspect?”

“Given that the magical world in Britain has no museum except for Hogwarts, which isn’t exactly open to the public?” Nizar nods. “It’s definitely something needed, though the school may lose Sasha over it. She wants to be this potential museum’s curator.”

“I really do need to recalibrate my scale in regards to how much plotting I should expect from you,” Severus says dryly. “Have you seen the house yet?”

“Yes.” Nizar rolls his eyes. “They left it as is, yet another lovely monument to murder, and the Ministry confiscated it. I’m not certain, but I’m pretty sure that confiscating another’s legal property without due cause is a crime in Wizarding Britain.”
They begin walking away from the statue. “You would want back a murder monument, then?”

“Me? No. I can’t legally inherit it, anyway. If it belongs to anyone, it would be Sirius and any potential descendants he may eventually father,” Nizar replies.

Severus knows there is a look of intense distaste on his face. “Please do not mention that man and possible children ever again. I have made my peace with his first marriage, but I don’t need to dwell on that man breeding.”

“He’s actually intelligent, when he’s not being an idiot.” Nizar glances at a sign marked Church Street and steers them in that direction. “Yes, I’m aware of your opinion on that ratio.”

“Did he manage to get rid of that portrait of Walburga Black without removing an entire section of the house?” Severus asks when Nizar doesn’t volunteer anything further. It was a plot to make Severus ask the question himself, and he willingly fell for it because he rather hopes Sirius Black did muck it up that badly.

“No. He did all right.” Nizar smiles. “Granted, Black has absolutely no idea where he put the wall or the portrait, but as no one can find it anywhere else in the house, he’s calling it a success. Now Tonks can trip over that taxidermied troll’s leg all she likes.”

After they pass by a church, Nizar pauses in front of a blackened gate. Above it is a wrought-iron plaque that reads St. Jerome’s Cemetery, and beyond that…

Everything inside of Severus freezes up. He knows who is buried inside that graveyard, and he is not going in.

“You don’t have to. I was just curious,” Nizar tells him, swinging open the gate on hinges that shriek with the need for maintenance. “I’ll just be a moment.”

“I’ve never wanted to see what that mistake wrought.” Severus clenches his jaw and follows Nizar. “Perhaps I should.”

“Not if it’s bloody self-flagellation,” Nizar mutters.

“You are not one to talk about that right now,” Severus retorts. “Not after the way this month has progressed.”

“That isn’t self-flagellation, that’s depression,” Nizar argues. “It’s sort of funny, though. I was taunted by one walking corpse in 1234. I’m taunting another walking corpse now, and both of them are family. It’s like a terrible joke.”

Severus grimaces. Those sorts of jokes are only amusing to people like Voldemort.

Nizar skirts a large stone, pauses, and turns around to look at the inscription. “You were curious about Dumbledore’s sister. Here she is.”

Severus joins him on the other side of the large stone. It isn’t marking a single grave, but two—Ariana Theodora Simmonete Dumbledore and Kendra Rose Blishwick Dumbledore. The inscription meandering along the bottom of the stone reads: Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

“It seems Albus wasn’t the only one to be saddled with more than two given names.” Severus frowns over the choice of Biblical verse. It’s in a New Testament passage regarding the falseness of earthly wealth that Severus found to be contradictory as all hell. That was one of the reasons he gave
up trying to read the battered old library discard copy of the King James Bible and put it right back into the library’s book return slot. He still feels a bit badly for that poor Cokeworth librarian.

“Ariana was granted better options than Dumbledore. Theodora, a famous intelligent Empress, and Simmonete, renowned magician and Headmistress of Hogwarts in…” Nizar frowns. “I do believe she was Head of the school when James I became King of England after Elizabeth’s death. She did quite a bit to safeguard Hogwarts and her students from the anti-witchcraft laws of the time. I imagine Kendra would be their mother, given the dates.”


“There is probably a gossiping old biddy or crusty old bastard out there in Britain who knows.” Nizar smiles at the stone. “Aberforth, you complete liar. I wonder what other names your parents saddled you with that you’ve never admitted to?”

“I’m wondering at the lack of Percival Dumbledore’s grave, myself,” Severus says when he realizes that there are no other stones bearing the Dumbledore name nearby.

What does surprise him is coming across the marker for Ignotus Peverell, the dates and inscriptions all but washed away by the centuries. Severus didn’t exactly disbelieve Salazar’s story of the three brothers, but finding a grave for a man considered by most of Wizarding Britain to be a myth certainly drives the point home—the Peverell brothers were real, and so are the Deathly Hallows.

“And here would be an ancestor of yours.”

Nizar walks over to join him. “I imagine that with time travel and the adoption in play, it’s more as if he’s a descended distant cousin, not an ancestor. Or maybe it’s both.” He tilts his head at the condition of the stone, glances around, and then gets out his wand to fix it. “Salazar would be so much better for this. All I can do is restore what remains, not rebuild what once was. This stone used to be massive.”

With the remainder of the stone restored, the name, dates, and epitaph easily legible once more, Severus can see the shadow of what was once a truly massive square of marble. “Either he was well-liked, or someone wanted to be very certain a large rock would keep this man from digging his way out of the ground.”

Nizar chuckles. “I rather doubt it’s the latter. Let’s see…oh, those dates are nonsense.”

“Are they?” Severus does think that a wizard hiding from Death only managing to attain the still youthful age of seventy-six does seem a bit…off.

“When I started to recall things again, there were students in Slytherin who discussed Ignotus Peverell in…oh, the 1330s, I think,” Nizar says. “He was still spry at the time, doing creative work with Charms. They gossiped about how he took on so many apprentices to make up for the fact that he only ever managed to father a single child. Envious, the lot of them. He’d built quite the reputation for himself, and they wanted to be a part of it.”

“Slytherin students wanting to apprentice themselves to a Gryffindor.” Severus can hardly imagine the idea that such cross-House alliances are possible, though he is witnessing several of them unfold in Hogwarts right now. Even Andromeda is still often looked at on the sly, as if she’ll turn as vile as Bellatrix Black Lestrange at any moment.

“I would imagine certain ideas hadn’t entirely polluted the isles yet.” Nizar sighs but points at the
“Cadmus’s birthdate is correct, at least. Antioch graduated in 1227; Cadmus and his lovely dour face graduated in 1232. Ignotus was the youngest, graduating in 1234.”

Severus feels an unsettling chill that has nothing to do with the temperature. “The brothers were all present in Hogwarts while Utredus Gaunt was teaching Alchemy.”

“It makes me very glad to remember that Cadmus never bothered with those lessons.” Nizar’s brow furrows. “Maybe I’m right. Maybe this really is all my fault.”

It takes Severus a moment to realize what Nizar is saying. “Your fault? How in the hell is Utredus Gaunt your fault? If you refuse to allow Elfric to hold any sort of blame—”

“That’s just it, though.” Nizar scrubs at his cold-reddened nose and shoves his hair away from his face. “I still don’t remember the year. I just remember the event. I recall that Elfric was four years old, and Brice was five.”

Severus wills himself to patience. He has a feeling that a full two weeks of truly uncharacteristic moping are about to be explained. “That is when you adopted them?”

“Yes.” Nizar swallows. “There was a village somewhere near here—I don’t actually think it survived the centuries unless it now bears a different name. Godric might no longer have been Magical Earl over Somerset thanks to an idiot, but he still tried to look after Somerset’s people as best he could, especially the magicians. He knew there were two magical children in the village of Linden’s Woe, but the last message he sent with Hardwin was never answered. Godric’s falcon returned in a foul damned mood with the missive still attached to his leg. I had the spare hour where he did not, and told Godric I’d see to whatever mishap occurred.

“When I arrived in the village, I found that there had been an outbreak of some sort of disease. It wasn’t the Black Plague, but it wasn’t the pox, either. Perhaps it was some sort of precursor to the Black Death, but whatever the cause, the villagers had lost half their number and were terrified they would lose the rest.”

There are green and silver sparks dancing around Nizar’s eyes again. “I met some truly wonderful priests and monks during that time, Jonathan being one of them. The priest of Linden’s Woe, on the other hand, convinced his flock that to spare them the wrath of an angry Christian God, all they needed to do was lock up all the remaining families who were ill into a single building. Their entire families, whether or not anyone else showed signs of illness. Anyone who lived in those households. They imprisoned twenty-three people in that building and set it ablaze.”

Severus realizes his jaw is hanging open in shock. He knows, historically, that utter foolishness like this occurred, but this is a first-hand account from one who witnessed it.

“I had to choose between killing a willful murderer, or attempting to save those I could. That was a terrible temptation.” Nizar wipes at his eyes with his gloved hands. “I Apparated directly into the building with a Breathing Charm in place just to save time. It didn’t take me long to realize that smoke had already felled most of them. There were only three of those villagers left alive—a young woman named Joyse who’d been recently wed to a man who fell ill, and the two small boys she was sheltering. I Apparated them out of that burning home, taking us all straight back to Hogewáþ.

“I don’t think I had ever seen Godric so angry,” Nizar says. “I know he visited Linden’s Woe himself afterwards, but I never asked what he said or did.

“Once Helga helped them to recover from their time trapped in a burning house, all three of them became our students. Joyse had no idea she was magical, but it was magic she instinctively used to
keep herself and two innocents from the suffocation deaths the others suffered.”

“Those two boys were Elfric and Brice.” Severus waits for Nizar to nod. “And somehow you’ve
gotten it into your head that if you hadn’t saved them, Utredus Gaunt would never have existed. You
truly have worked yourself into a foolish mess if you are willing to disregard the lives your sons were
able to live because of you.”

“Not entirely foolish, Severus,” Nizar says quietly. “I wasn’t supposed to be there. Fate exists. What
if they were meant to die, and I only created the very circumstances that warped our world?”

If it truly were some sort of ridiculous fate that Elfric and Brice were to die at a young age, you
wouldn’t have been able to save them. Logic, Nizar. Do please retrieve yourself from the gutter long
enough to recall it.”

Nizar sniffs and wipes his eyes again. “Fuck you, too. As long as there is to be guilt and self-
flagellation, let’s go round it out, shall we?”

Severus glares at him. “I was hoping you would conveniently forget.”

The marker is at the rear of the cemetery, almost invisible despite it being daylight. The utterly
nondescript nature of the stone makes it difficult to notice. It’s a single plain square of drab grey slate
for both graves, just wide enough to touch two burials in the earth instead of being large enough to
cover both. It bears only James and Lily’s first and last names with their dates of birth and death,
accompanied by a ridiculous inscription. It doesn’t mention Potter’s middle name or their birthplaces.
It doesn’t list Lily’s middle name or maiden name at all.

Severus expected to be dealing with old guilt. Instead, he wants to murder someone. “Petunia,” he
spits.

Nizar looks unimpressed. “Even families will play at politics. I imagine that was the cheapest option
possible for Petunia to buy without the risk of others taking notice.”

“Are you going to do anything to this stone, like you did the other?” Severus asks. He would
consider the option himself, but his hands are shaking. He’s so enraged that Petunia could still be so
utterly spiteful towards Lily after she was murdered that he might destroy anything he points his
wand at.

“The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” Nizar frowns. “Is that also Biblical, Severus?”

“If so, I’ve no idea where. It’s not in the T’nakh.” Severus also thinks the inscription is fucking
stupid and desperately inappropriate, but it sounds very much like the kind of thoughtlessness Lily’s
sister is capable of.

Nizar’s expression twists before it becomes an unreadable mask. “Leave it,” he finally decides. “If
anyone is going to fix that level of disrespect, Petunia Dursley should do it.”

Severus raises an eyebrow. “Are you going to make her do so?”

Nizar retrieves his wand long enough to conjure a bouquet of violets before he bends down and
places the unwrapped bundle over both graves. “I might pay her a visit after Voldemort is dead. Or I
might have a proper magical stonemason correct it and then send her the bill through non-magical
means.”

“And destroy her credit rating within the United Kingdom when she refuses to pay.” Severus smiles.
“Vengeful Slytherin.”

“I know of no other kind of Slytherin to be.” Nizar straightens and then nudes Severus’s arm. “Let’s go.”

“Why violets?” Severus asks once they’re free of the cemetery and its countless, cheerless markers.

“In Greek lore, violets are the flower said to grow in the Elysian Fields, a part of the afterlife reserved for those who died heroic deaths.”

Severus glances at Nizar from the corner of his eye. “Honoring a sacrifice properly.”

Nizar shrugs. “I like violets.”

“Did you find this mysterious door you claimed to be looking for?” Severus asks when they’ve walked back through the square, using the footpath to proceed down the narrow lane where the Potter residence used to reside. Severus resolutely does not look in that direction, using the length of his hair to ensure that he can’t even catch a glimpse of it. He didn’t want to know then, and he doesn’t want to know now.

“Not yet. Got distracted by that statue.” Nizar pauses as the footpath ends a few meters away from the village’s last house. “The problem with trying to find a specific door one thousand years after the fact is that nothing is the same. The village that was once Griffon’s Door? Godric’s Hollow looks nothing like it. It isn’t even arranged the same way.”

“Then you are…”

Nizar glances at him. “I’m not guessing or wandering aimlessly, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

“I was not,” Severus says.

Nizar smiles and ignores the obvious lie. “I’m not an Earth-Speaker, like Salazar, but I learned on my very first visit to the Giant’s Dance—wait sorry, it’s Stonehenge now—that I’m particularly sensitive to the flow of magic. The stronger it is, the more I’m inclined to notice it.”

“That sounds either useful or distracting. Similar to an Elemental Magician, like Miss Lovegood, then?”

Nizar shakes his head. “An Elemental Magician is called that because they can speak to any element of the earth, and I do mean any of them.”

“Not just the four considered to be the primary magical elements. You mean anything on the Periodic Table,” Severus realizes. “Miss Lovegood never needs to speak with any of the radioactive elements, then.”

“Some of those words made no sense,” Nizar grumbles. “What is a Periodic Table, and please define a radioactive element in a way that is not me trying to discern how a non-magical radio could be active in what seems to be a dangerous way.”

“That definitely depends on some of the music it’s broadcasting,” Severus comments as they resume walking again—straight into the woods. Of course they are. At least his boots are sturdy, and he is not wearing anything made of silk today.

He nearly gets distracted from explaining when he can feel a faint sense of magic beneath his feet, like the distant chiming of tiny bells. Odd. Much like his Apparition to Godric’s Hollow, that is not
an ability he had before the war mage title was bestowed. “A Periodic Table is the non-magical listing for all the known scientific elements, those substances that cannot be broken down any further than they already are because they’re already in their simplest structural atomic form.”

“I want one of those tables, even if I would have no idea what most of it said.”

“I haven’t seen one in a while,” Severus muses. “I wonder if it’s been updated.” He follows Nizar around the hollowed-out bore of a large dead tree, ducks under an overhanging branch, and discovers that they now seem to be on a path. It has no tracks, no sign of human or animal footprints, and is covered by ground moss and dead leaves…but there is still a clear sense of it being an area that will never become overgrown. “What is this?” he asks. The sense of chiming bells in the ground is much, much stronger.

Nizar turns around in a circle, his head cocked as if listening. “It’s a pathway. A very strong magical line.”

Severus frowns as he looks behind them. “What the hell?” The tree they avoided is not there any longer. The path ahead of them is now a path behind them, as well.

“They do that,” Nizar says, unconcerned.

Severus reminds himself that he is not lost; he can bloody well Apparate away from this place. “A ley line. I don’t know if I’ve ever seen one before.”

“You’ve probably walked along one and never known. Many of the ancient roads were built over them. It was already cleared land, so why go to the trouble of building a road elsewhere?” Nizar makes a decision and begins walking in the direction they originally came from. Sort of. Severus rather doubts it’s the same direction at all. “What’s a radioactive element?”

“Certain elements break down over time. The amount of time it takes depends on the element involved, but all of the elements release varying forms of radioactivity when they do so. Some of it is entirely harmless…and is possibly used for dating ancient materials, if I’m recalling some natter in primary school correctly. Other types of radiation are generally harmless in short doses, while that same exposure to similar small doses from specific radioactive elements can kill you.”

Severus pauses as he realizes that he is still not defining this well enough. “Radioactivity being… emissions. Waves of that elemental breakdown. It can affect everything around it. Remind me to tell you about Chernobyl when I am not preoccupied by the fact that everything around us now feels like it is staring at me.”

Nizar slows down and takes Severus’s hand. The sensation of eyes boring into Severus from all sides abruptly eases, though it doesn’t disappear completely. “It’s all right. They don’t mean any harm. It’s a deterrent to keep away the foolish. Even the non-magical can feel that.”

“Who are they?” Severus asks, not certain he wishes to know. This is the most intense discomfort he’s ever experienced in his life outside of physical pain. Then his attention is caught by the hill rising before them. It looks like an old barrow that’s been completely overtaken by ground moss. No grass, leaves, or even dead branches litter the hillside. A tall oak tree is growing from the very top, its roots visible here and there as if the hill is being gripped and held by gnarled brown hands.

“Oh, just nosy neighbors,” Nizar answers his question in a blithe tone. “They’re probably curious about two visiting war mages.”

Nosy neighbors. Severus is choosing to ignore that. “That’s a door?” He’ll admit that he was
picturing something rather like Stonehenge’s three-stone balanced construction, if on a smaller scale.

“It’s rather more like it has the potential to be a door.” Nizar sighs. “A long time ago, there were many active doors. Humans in my time could not use them safely, but humans are not the only beings dwelling here. This door shared the fate of so many others.”

“You’re talking of fate again,” Severus says in annoyance.

“Yes, but not the same way. When magicians began to shrink in number, so too did the number of available Door Guardians—those with the skill and knowledge to guard an active door from those who really didn’t need to be messing about with one. Either some fool would figure out how to trip their way through a doorway and die messily, or they would invite something here that really didn’t belong out of complete, utter stupidity,” Nizar explains.

Severus rolls his eyes. Of course they would. He sees examples of that dunderheaded type of curiosity five days a week.

“Godric and his wife Sedemai were both of this region, and they were both Door Guardians, though they didn’t share the same tasks. When Godric no longer held this land under his direct protection, he and Sedemai had to turn an active door into an inactive one, as there was no one else who could take on the role. It wasn’t even safe to do so after they finally had their own children. Between the Church’s paranoia and the raiding, it was too dangerous.”

Severus stops staring at the hillside to glare at Nizar. “If that is supposed to be inactive, why is there such a presence of your unidentified they here to convince others to leave?”

“Because sometimes idiots are just intelligent enough to figure out how to make an inactive door active.” Nizar sounds incensed, but Severus doesn’t think he is the cause. “Let’s leave.”

“You had no plans other than finding the door?” Severus asks in confusion.

“I’m not a fucking Door Guardian. I’m not about to try to fuck with that!” Nizar looks appalled. “Just—no. Absolutely not. I only wanted to know if I could find it again.” Before Severus can say anything else, Nizar Apparates them both to the outer bounds of Hogsmeade.

It’s such an abrupt change of scenery that Severus feels a rare moment of dizziness. “Is there a reason why you were in such a hurry?”

“All right. Let’s go back and talk about fucking with a door in front of a lot of beings who would be very upset by the idea. Then we’ll linger and wait to find out exactly how they’d respond to a perceived threat, shall we?” Nizar retorts caustically.

“We absolutely fucking well will not be doing so.” Much like Helga’s mysterious spell, Severus no longer has any interest in finding out who that door’s they are. “Why Hogsmeade?”

“I missed lunch, and we have an appointment at two,” Nizar replies. “Besides, I want to bribe or blackmail Aberforth into admitting what ridiculous names he’s been hiding from the world.”

Lunch does sound appealing. At least Aberforth has proven that he is willing to feed them food that is not of dubious origin.

“Wait. What appointment? I’m not recalling any such thing.”

Nizar smiles. “I might have committed you to an act of tea.”
“Nizar: no. Not again.”

Nizar keeps walking in the direction of the Hog’s Head Inn, unconcerned. “Just think on how you’ll be able to witness two very different people attempt to learn how to levitate and most likely fail at it, over and over again, all while pretending not to be watching them.”

Severus struggles to keep frowning. “There are times when I really regret that you understand exactly what to say to convince me to do something I’d otherwise avoid—” He reaches out and grabs Nizar’s shoulder when Nizar tilts sideways. “I would also like to avoid witnessing you eating the dirt beneath our feet.”

“Oh. Yes. So would I. Is there somewhere to sit?” Nizar asks. “I need a moment.”

Severus steers him over to a bench. “Sit,” he orders, pleased when the instruction is obeyed without argument. “If you skipped breakfast, you will be running in terror from Poppy, because I will be the bastard who tells her you did so.”

Nizar leans over and rests his face in his hands. “Good news, then: I will not be running in terror from a healer today. That wasn’t the problem. I did just confirm a hypothesis, though.”

Severus glares at Nizar the moment he realizes what sort of hypothesis was tested. “Any sort of strong magic, not merely the resumption of a magical title. Any strong magic will attempt to fuel the Preservation Charms that still linger.”

Nizar nods without looking up. “That’s going to be annoying in short order. I live above one of the strongest concentrations of magic in Britain!”

“And you were going to visit another strong place of magic by yourself?” Severus asks in a scathing tone.

“What?” Nizar finally lifts his head to look at him in surprise. “No! That’s ridiculous. If you hadn’t chosen to join me, I wasn’t going to hunt for a fucking Door. I’d much prefer for everyone on this island to continue to think me intelligent.”

Severus releases a long sigh and leans back against the bench. “My apologies. That was an unfair assumption to make.” He glares at a pair of passing men in terrible copies of Fudge’s bowler hat until they hurry their steps and get the absolute hell away from Nizar.

“No, that was an entirely reasonable assumption to make. I really do insist that I’ve done truly stupid things. I just try to avoid them when they’re obvious.” Nizar clasps his hands together, elbows resting on his knees. “I didn’t expect to have a memory flash from something within the portrait. I didn’t even realize I’d forgotten Findláech’s death until I was recalling it.”

“Findláech?”

“Findláech mac Ruaídrí, Mormáer of Moray and High King of the North,” Nizar replies. “He was murdered by his own nephews in 1020 when they decided they wanted the throne. Findláech’s son Mac Bethad didn’t appreciate that very much. Findláech’s brother Máil Brigti had enough sense to flee the kingdom, but his idiot sons remained and thus didn’t last for long.”

“Mac Bethad?” All it takes is repeating the name aloud for Severus to realize who that must be. “You’re speaking of Macbeth’s father.” Shakespeare has dominated Britain for so long that it’s still easy to forget that Macbeth was a real king—

Severus feels his eye twitch. “You knew Macbeth. The actual Macbeth.”
Nizar begins to smile. “I should tell more people that. The face you’re making right now is really entertaining.”

“Please just let me be present when you inform Minerva that you knew one of the most famous rulers of Medieval Scotland.” Severus resists the urge to ask the question before giving in. “What was he like?”

“Mac Bethad was Findláech and Donada’s only child,” Nizar says. “He was loved and adored, and he loved and adored his parents in return. He could have been a spoiled child, but Findláech and his brother Máil Brígí were so unlike each other that Findláech felt like an only child himself, and thus understood what it was like to grow up that way. But I last knew Mac Bethad at age twelve, Severus. He was a good person then, but all I know of what he was like as a man came to my portrait on the lips of others. I do know that he married the widow of a man he killed and raised their child as his own son and Heir, which doesn’t speak of evil to me. At worst, it could be labeled convenience.”

“What was it you recalled about Findláech?”

“Oh.” Nizar sits up and runs both hands through his hair. “Partly how much Findláech’s death upset Godric. They’d been friends since childhood. Godric spent several nights alone in front of my portrait drinking, but that was before the others realized where he kept disappearing to in the evening. Then it was practically everyone drinking in front of my portrait. Findláech was our patron, and he was loved by Hogewáþ, too.”

Severus smirks at him. “Is that when you first decided to turn your potions laboratory into a liquor still?”

“Well, it’s not like any of them were sharing,” Nizar replies. “The other part I recalled is how the Founders were able to move the portrait. I remembered that they did so, but I didn’t know why it was so different when Gaunt did the same. They knew how to keep the magic tied to the frame—to me—without disrupting any of the charms, but…” Nizar’s brow furrows. “I think they could only do it because they were properly tied to the castle’s magic. I might be wrong, but I don’t recall anyone moving the portrait after Godric’s death. Not until he showed up and decided to ruin the next several centuries of my life.”

Severus decides that it’s definitely time to change the subject. “We’re going to be late for lunch. Are you ready to go taunt Aberforth?”

“That sounds infinitely preferable to wallowing.”

Severus rolls his eyes. “That is still not wallowing!”

Nizar stands up when Severus does, but he reaches out to claim Severus’s hand. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“Why?” Severus asks, sensing that the words were spoken for more reasons than mere sentiment.

“Because you grant me so many reminders as to why I refuse to regret.”
Chapter Summary

"Bet you're thinking Charlie's a goat."

Chapter Notes

Beta @mrsstanley who sorta-finished the semester; @sanerontheinside is in exams and should probably be sent booze or diabetic-friendly treats. <3 Cheer-readers @jabberwockypie & @norcumi approve of these many words.

Lunch is again a simple, filling meal laid out in that clean, warm, and well-lit back room. Aberforth is happy to see them right until Nizar starts to grin and prod the man about his other names. “Nizar, I’m not going to be talking to you about any of that.”

Nizar points at Aberforth with his fork. “That is the response of a man who does indeed have something to hide.”

“Do fuck off,” Aberforth says with gracious politeness.

Nizar smiles in response. “Nope, too nosy. It can’t possibly be as bad as Dumbledore’s collection of nonsense.”

“He’s right proud of them, too,” Aberforth grumbles.

Nizar tilts his head. “Not of Percival, he’s not. He’s very good at hiding it with that bloody twinkling, but he’s not fond of that part of his name.”

Severus gives Aberforth an intrigued look when the man glowers at Nizar. “That’s cheating. You gave me something I didn’t actually know about the smug pillock.”

“Did I?” Nizar stabs his fork into his minced pie in apparent unconcern. “How kind of me.”

Aberforth scowls the entire way through lunch, nursing a single bottle of mead and an apparent Slytherin grudge. “All right!” he finally bursts out. “My second name is bloody Kendrick!”

Nizar just looks at Aberforth. “And why is this a problem?”

“It’s me being named after my mother, that’s what!” Aberforth retorts. “It’s disgraceful, naming a son after a mother. Supposed to be the father and son, mother to daughter.”

Severus leans back in his chair when Nizar narrows his eyes. “Ah. Didn’t you once tell me that you were fond of your mother?” Nizar asks.

Aberforth isn’t stupid. He already knows he walked into a trap of his own making. “Aye, I did. Meant it, too.”
“And she was a clever magician? A good woman?” Nizar presses.

Aberforth glares at Nizar. “Yes, she was both.”

“Then do stop being both sexist and ridiculous,” Nizar bites out. “Honestly, you have spent too much time hiding in this fucking inn if you’re falling for that nonsense. You used to know better.”

“Still doesn’t mean I’m all that fond of it,” Aberforth mutters. “Who the hell has the name Kendrick, anyway?”

“Well, there was Cynric, second king of the House of Wessex in England,” Nizar replies. “Hard to do worse than to be named after one of the first ancestors of the royal family.”

Aberforth scowls again. Severus is beginning to wonder how many times Nizar caused Aberforth to lose his considerable temper. “Blasted walking talking bloody historical reference guide. How do you know that, then?”

“I needed to know the entire lineage. Cynric’s name was Old English, and might’ve been defined just for him, given it means royal power. Knowing the lineage made things in the English Court a thousand years ago a bit less fraught. Granted, the idiot on the throne had to pretend in front of his nobles that I wasn’t a magician, but that was not my problem,” Nizar says. “Him refusing to heed my advice? Also not my problem.”

“The entire lineage. At that time, you’re speaking of five hundred years’ worth of kings.” Severus raises an eyebrow. That sounds like an excessive bit of memorization for someone who wasn’t English nobility. “Why?”

“Because memorizing the male line for political clout was far easier than trying to figure out how I could possibly explain to the Council that yes, killing the King of England would be entirely justified,” Nizar replies.

Aberforth’s booming laugh drowns out Severus’s quieter, near-silent chuckle. “Now that is the man I once knew as a lad, speaking his mind proper.” Aberforth wanders off long enough to retrieve a tray for tea, though there is a distinct lack of biscuits. “All right, then. You win, Nizar. My third name is Wieland. What do you make of that?”

“Firstly, that you’ve been taught all your life to say it bloody incorrectly,” Nizar says. “Vee-lund. Germanic word, originally veh-lund. In Norse, it was Völundr. It meant one who was an unequaled smith or craftsman.”

Aberforth pours tea before he lights up a long pipe, but at least he casts a minor charm so the smoke floats backwards to escape up the chimney. “All right then. Aberforth. I’ve not once ever heard it as a name but for myself, so I’ve never known what it might mean.”

“That’s because it was spelled it wrong. Aberford.” Nizar picks up a cup of tea, blows across its surface, and takes a sip. “Wow, that kicks.”

“One hell of a black leaf,” Aberforth says proudly. “I go out to India at least once a year and bring it back myself.”

Severus picks up his tea and discovers that yes, it does indeed have quite the bite. Tea with Firewhiskey in it might be tamer. “Magical tea-growers?”

“Damned good ones, too. Figure out a decent trade, and maybe I’ll share a bit.”
“I’d rather find a trade of enough worth so that you’ll take me directly to the source,” Severus counters.

“Kill my brother and I’ll consider that a worthy trade,” Aberforth says.

Severus gives Aberforth a flat stare. “I’m not murdering the Head of Hogwarts just because the two of you have some sort of long-standing, ridiculous grudge.”

“Aberford?” Aberforth asks in clear dismissal of the current topic.

Nizar is staring at Aberforth in a way that Severus finds familiar. It’s the studious gaze of a man who has already picked apart a puzzle and is now trying to decide what to do with the completed picture. “It’s Old English as well. Eadburgh was the name of a village, and of course, ford was a bridge. *Ead* meant wealth, while *burgh* meant fortress. Altogether, your name means wealthy, protected stronghold of a powerful, unequaled craftsman.”

Aberforth snorts his opinion of that. “Well. That’s a bit more tolerable than I always thought.”

“It’s certainly more impressive than Dumbledore’s listings, especially as he was named after a twit,” Nizar says.

“Oh?” Aberforth straights in his chair, smiling. “Who is that, then?”

“Only for a trade, Aberforth.”

“Trade, hmm?” Aberforth looks at Nizar. “Is it worth it?”

“You’re the one who could use it to mock him. I suppose that depends on how much you value that sort of trade,” Nizar replies.

“Worth it,” Aberforth decides at once. “Go on, then.”

“Brian Wulfric might have been Hogwarts’ second Headmaster, but he was also a complete arsehole,” Nizar says bluntly, and Aberforth laughs. “To break it down further: Albus is Latin for white, or bright, and to this day I cannot stand that word.”

“Why?” Severus asks, though he suspects he knows.

“I’ve no idea. I don’t remember.” Nizar takes another sip of tea, making a face over its sharp bite. “Wulfric is a more modern spelling of Old English’s Ulric, and to be fair, that was a term for the power specific to a wolf. Brian is from a Brittonic word, *bre*, and it means hill. Percival…” Nizar smiles. “Percival was completely made up by a French writer in the 1100s. If it means anything at all, it’s *franceis* for piercing a valley. Dumbledore’s name is thus not only contradictory, it actually implies he’s a werewolf.”

Severus nearly snorts tea up his nose as Aberforth all but roars with laughter. He wipes his face with a napkin. “If I didn’t know better, I would be concerned.”

“I’m just wondering why parents stopped bothering to look up what these names bloody well mean before they slap them onto a—what did you call them? Oh, yes. Birth certificate,” Nizar remembers. “Though I did like Ariana’s.”

Aberforth goes still. “What about it?”

“Well, Ariana spelled properly is the Italian name Arianna, a translation of the Greek name Ariadne.
It means *most holy.* Nizar continues drinking tea as if Aberforth hasn’t gone utterly stone-faced. Severus never realized the term could be so apt. “In Greek mythology, she was the princess of Crete, daughter of Minos, and helped that utter idiot Theseus escape the Labyrinth. Then there is Simmonete, intelligent and respected Headmistress of Hogwarts in the 1600s, but Simmonete is also from the name Simon, which is most often thought of in regards to the Apostle now called Peter. Then there is Theodora, the most influential empress of the Eastern Roman Empire, and the feminine form of a name that means ‘gift of God.’”

Aberforth finally forces words past his clenched teeth. “That was a bribe and a gift, since I didn’t know quite a bit of that, either. What is it you’re wanting to know, Nizar?”

“Why did you never mention your sister?” Nizar asks quietly. “Neither of you do. We’re still not certain why Dumbledore chose to finally bring up her existence during my son’s funeral.”

“Did he?” With Aberforth’s grey beard and hair, he manages an excellent impersonation of a thundercloud. “He’d no right. None at all. It’s his fault she’s dead, and I’ll punch his lights out for a second time if he ever utters her name again!”

Nizar ignores Aberforth’s shout. “But you never spoke of her while you were at Hogwarts. She was still alive then, Aberforth. Why was she not in school?”

Aberforth stomps away. Nizar doesn’t move, so Severus waits. Nizar is very good at reading another’s body language; he’s convinced Aberforth is going to return.

He does indeed come back, bearing a bottle of corked Firewhiskey in his hand. “Anyone else?” he asks gruffly.

Nizar shakes his head. “Not me. I’m returning to Hogwarts at two o’clock.”

“I’m not drinking something that strong during a school term unless it’s in the privacy of my own quarters,” Severus says in refusal.

Aberforth pours a full serving of Firewhiskey into his teacup and then swallows half of it in one pull. “We were all fine, once, the three of us. Parents had us all at once, so we grew up together, grew up close.”

He finishes the first cup of Firewhiskey and pours a second. “Albus left for Hogwarts in autumn of 1892, was Sorted into Gryffindor, and immediately made a big success of himself. Most promising student Hogwarts had seen in a century, the Headmistress at the time wrote to our parents. We were all proud, but I knew I wouldn’t do half so well. Decent at Charms, but we knew who had the smarts in our family, and that was Albus and Ariana.”


“There are differing and useful types of intelligence,” Nizar insists, intensely displeased. Severus is suddenly and uncomfortably reminded of the few times Nizar chastised him for similar statements.

Aberforth looks just as discomfited. “I went to Hogwarts in autumn of 1894, and Sorted into Slytherin. Albus was quite pleased back then. Said that when Ariana joined us, she’d be in Ravenclaw, and between us all, we’d have three-quarters of the school conquered by Dumbledores. He meant it in jest, but it did make me feel a bit better. That maybe things would still be all right.”

The second teacup full of alcohol is swiftly ingested. “Ariana was ten years old in 1895, just one
year before she would’ve come to school. She was…all our parents would ever say is that Ariana was attacked by older Muggle boys. No details. Just that she was attacked, but—Nizar, it had to be worse than that. It destroyed her. My parents were so terrified of what would happen if they took her to St. Mungo’s that they all but retired from the world. Moved the entire family from Scotland to Godric’s Hollow down in Somerset. Mother and Father told everyone that Ariana had taken badly ill and would need to be schooled at home. Wasn’t uncommon in those days, of course, so no one else thought much of it.”

“Rape,” Severus says, the word dropping into dense silence.

Aberforth nods. “Aye. Probably. I never dared ask her. Ariana was all right most of the time, so long as no boys or men she didn’t know came near. No sudden noises. No one in a temper.”

“What was so terrifying about taking an injured child to a hospital?” Nizar asks.

Aberforth looks surprised. “They’d never have let her go, Nizar. Ariana couldn’t control her magic proper anymore. She couldn’t produce spells on command, and if she was upset, it was…it was often violent. They would have considered her an Obscurial and locked her away in the secure ward on the fourth floor of St. Mungo’s.”

“Locked away. Secure ward.” Nizar puts down his teacup and pinches the bridge of his nose. “What the fuck is an Obscurial supposed to be?”

“A witch or wizard believed to have suppressed their magic so that it manifests in uncontrolled, dark, parasitic-like ways that are a danger to everyone around them.” Severus recites the definition in a dispassionate voice, well aware of Aberforth’s continued upset. “Being locked away would have been considered a kindness in those days. The older methods of dealing with a witch or wizard who bore an Obscurus was to simply kill them and call it mercy.”

“All I am hearing,” Nizar says in an icy voice, “is that Wizarding Britain has forgotten how to care for those who have been wounded in body, mind, and spirit. That it is easier to lock them away for the rest of their lives than to, oh, talk to them. Treat them with kindness and dignity. Fucking help them.”

Severus resists the urge to scoot his chair back from the table as the air in the room turns heavy and thick. He has seen Nizar in full temper, and he knows exactly what to expect. “An Obscurus is considered a highly dangerous magical working.”

“There is no such fucking thing as an Obscurial!” Nizar shouts.

Aberforth crushes his teacup in his hand, spilling only a last remaining trickle of alcohol. “What?”

“No. Such. Thing.” Nizar takes a breath, and some of the weight in the air eases. “By the definition you’ve given to me, any magician who has suffered from a severe traumatic event, or repeated trauma, should be an Obscurial. Yes?”

“That’s generally considered the way of it. Fortunately, Obscurials are…they’re rare,” Aberforth says.

“They’re rare because the entire notion is complete bullshit,” Nizar retorts. “There is a seventh-year in Hogwarts right now who was sexually assaulted before she came to school. She isn’t an Obscurial. I’ve seen countless—and I do mean countless—children come through Slytherin House who should have been one of these so-called Obscurials, and they were not. They were hurt, scared children who needed help, and when I could, I made certain they received it.”
Nizar sighs. “Fuck, think of the most recent example. If ever a student existed who should most certainly have been an Obscurial simply based on Hogwarts events alone—if the idea wasn’t complete horseshit—that is Harry Potter.”

Severus flinches, unable to help it. He’d never once considered the idea that the child could have been an Obscurial, and it’s not a pleasant thought.

“Thought maybe that Horcrux bit might have prevented it,” Aberforth ventures, tapping on the right side of his forehead where the child’s famous scar was located. “Now that it’s known in the Order, I mean. Didn’t know it afore the locket incident in January.”

“No. Different magics.” Nizar rests his face in his hands. “Of course a traumatized magician, especially a child, is going to lash out if no one ever tries to help them in the way they need. If they lose too much of their own sense of self, their magical core will begin to manifest in ways that reflect the child’s feelings. It isn’t parasitic or evil. It’s the sign of someone who is suffering.”

Aberforth puts shards of his teacup onto its saucer and then brushes his hands clean of lingering bits of ceramic. “You’ve seen it, then. Magic lashing out like that.”

“Yes. When a magician has lost control to that extent, getting them back is difficult. Unless you know exactly what happened to them so you know what needs to be said to gain their attention?” Nizar drops his hands, his expression a blend of fury and grief. “Sometimes they’re fortunate enough to have a magician around who is capable of performing a powerful Stunning Spell that can break through the manifesting core of the one who is suffering. If they’re calm when they wake, we have a chance. Sometimes they die anyway.” He leans back from the table, crossing his arms over his chest. “Not without the attempt made to prevent it, but there are times when there is nothing you can do. That suffering magician commits suicide by means of literal self-destruction.”

Nizar looks at Aberforth. “When your parents hid your sister like that, keeping her away from everyone but family—that didn’t address the problem. Isolating someone who is in pain is one of the worst things you can do to them. I’m sorry she died. I’d have told you all of this if you had ever mentioned her.”

Aberforth nods and then swipes his sleeve over his eyes. Severus politely pretends not to notice. “Parents didn’t really help, no. My father, he lost his temper and went off after those Muggle boys, attacking them. Got sent to Azkaban for it, since he’d never admit to why he attacked them. Died there a few years later. I suppose he’s buried on that island, but I’ve never gone to Azkaban to see it. I think Mother tried too hard, though she meant well. Albus—he didn’t know how to speak to Ariana anymore. He did try, I’ll give him that, but Albus never really never treated myself or Ariana the same ever again. We slowly lost our closeness until it was like such had never existed at all. But me, I’d just…I’d talk to her, Nizar. Ariana liked that. She liked it when someone talked to her as if everything was going to be all right.

“Then came the year Albus was to graduate. I was in my fifth year. Ariana was with our mother, and something went wrong. We went home for Easter break to find Ariana a complete sobbing wreck and Mother dead on the kitchen floor. The accident had happened just that morning. All I could ever get from Ariana is that she’d wanted to go outside, and….”

Aberforth sighs. “My mother was probably upset, but she was still fool enough to tell Ariana that she wasn’t meant to go out, and Ariana shouldn’t ask for that, as look at what had happened the last time she’d gone outside.”

“Reminded her directly of the attack.” Nizar aims his wand at Aberforth’s shattered teacup and repairs it. “Gods.”
“Ariana was so frightened after our mother’s funeral. She believed she’d go to Hell for killing our mother. She was convinced she was damned.” Aberforth sniffs and drags his sleeve over his face again. “I asked if she’d meant to kill Mother, and she said no. Ariana only wanted to go outside. I told her that if she didn’t do it on purpose, God knew, and he’d sort it out when it was time. I promised her it would be exactly like that while Albus tried telling me off for lying to her. He was such a rotten Protestant in those days, believing in that eternal damnation shite the church likes to spin. I told him that the nonsense he was spouting wasn’t said anywhere in the good book, and he could go stuff it.”

“Who looked after Ariana after your mother’s death?” Nizar asks.

“That. Well.” Aberforth glances at the repaired teacup before decisively corks the Firewhiskey bottle. “Albus was seventeen, and that made him Ariana’s guardian, but he was all-fired about finishing school. I didn’t really blame him for that, not when there wasn’t much left to do but take the exams. I dropped out to take care of our sister. Never took those blasted O.W.L.s and never had to consider any N.E.W.T.s. I figured that when Albus came home, we’d take care of Ariana together. The three of us, just like it used to be.”

“And it wasn’t like that.” It isn’t difficult to see that being the result of a truly horrific mess. Severus’s parents were awful, but this is almost Shakespearean levels of dramatic disaster.

He regrets that thought just one minute later.

“Albus had fallen in with another boy named Gellert Grindelwald the previous summer, and I mean fallen as in fell into bed with the lout.” Aberforth scowls. “I couldn’t stand the prig, but Albus thought Gellert hung the fucking moon.”


“That’s something they’ve most certainly left out of magical history textbooks,” Nizar says in a dry voice. “Albus Dumbledore was once shagging the man who took advantage of World War II to wage a European magical war.” He glances at Severus. “If I ever hear you begrudge my taste in men again, I will attempt to smother you with one of Salazar’s silver-embroidered pillows.”

Severus grimaces. “Please pick something less ostentatious to murder me with.”

Aberforth rolls his eyes at them and continues. “Albus came home at the end of June after graduating, Gellert with him, and says that he and Grindelwald are going to off and travel.

“I bloody well saw red. I shouted at my idiot brother that his place was at home. I wasn’t even sixteen years old yet. What did I know about running a house? I still needed him, and Ariana definitely needed him!”

“Came to blows, did you?” Nizar asks, though he seems to have buried his rage. Severus wonders if they can find a convenient Death Eater for Nizar to obliterate later. God knows that Severus would find it therapeutic to do the same.

“Fight of the ages, seemed like at the time. I still couldn’t tell you who cast the first hex, and then it was all three of us going at it like rabid badgers,” Aberforth says. “But…it was all of us, losing our temper, right in front of Ariana. She lost control of her magic, and—” He halts, struggling for words. “Maybe it’s what Nizar said. Maybe it was that self-destruction bit because she lost her sense of self, but I’ve long thought that those two idiots panicked, and one of them cast the spell that killed her. We couldn’t tell, you see.”
Aberforth lowers his head. “There was so much magic in the air, and everything had been so fierce. The only thing I knew for true was that I hadn’t pointed my wand at my sister. Never had, not ever would.

“Point in Albus’s favor, he changed his mind about going off with Grindelwald. Gellert left in a snit while we were still in shock, trying to figure out how to tell someone that we needed to have a funeral for our sister. Then on the day we buried her, Albus said—hell, I don’t recall what he said. I punched him over our sister’s casket, breaking his beak of a nose, and left home. I’ve only ever spoken to him since then if it’s been about Order business regarding You-Know-Which-Twat.”

“I am truly sorry,” Severus says while thinking uncomfortable thoughts about Shakespearean drama. “Ariana sounds like she would have outshined her eldest brother easily.”

“Aye. She would have.” Aberforth glares at Severus. “I know you’re capable of keeping secrets. This is one of them to be kept.”

Nizar looks irritated. “But if the truth came out, he would not be able to use certain rumors against you. You turned a non-magical farmer’s goat bloody purple for a lark and paid the fine for it, and that’s been turned into perversion!”

Aberforth shakes his head. “Albus would say Grindelwald killed our sister, and there would be a lot who’d believe him, but there would be just as many who would wonder if it were Albus who’d done the deed. He may be a complete pillock, but he’s still my brother. I’ll not do that to him, Nizar. Not without a damned good reason.”

“And I hate that Dumbledore has never recognized your kindness in that regard, and has instead repaid it with cruel words and crueler rumors,” Nizar says. “You’re a good man, Aberforth. You deserve better.”

Aberforth’s smile is slight, but not grim. “I’m fine with my life, Nizar. I have a home to keep me warm, a business to keep me clothed and fed, and I’ve got Charlie and our family. Don’t need much else.”

Severus lets his lip curl up in amusement. “Charlie, the invisible one whom we never meet.”

“Bet you’re thinking Charlie’s a goat,” Aberforth rumbles.

“Of course not,” Severus scoffs. “In my experience, goats can’t cook.”

That startles Aberforth into laughing. “That’s true enough. CHARLIE!” he yells. Nizar winces at the sudden shout. “COME IN HERE!”

Severus will admit that he was expecting a man. He spends time in both worlds, but there are presumptive thoughts about gender correlating to names no matter where he goes.

Instead, a woman who is about three inches over five feet tall enters the room. Her hair is solid gray and stacked atop her head with multiple thin sticks shoved into it to keep it pinned in place. She’s Asian, perhaps fifty years old, and has a scowl that Minerva would absolutely envy.

“Professors Nizar Slytherin and Severus Snape, this is my wife, Charlie Dumbledore.”

“It’s nice to meet you, if strange. My husband, he does not socialize,” Charlie says. “My name is Chao Li, but I prefer Charlie. No one bothers Mister Charlie,” she adds, smirking.

“They would be fool to mess with a beautiful flow of water, regardless,” Nizar says.
Charlie beams at him in sudden adoration. “You speak Mandarin, Professor?”

Nizar looks embarrassed. “Sort of. I used to speak something from that region, Mrs. Dumbledore. It comes back here and there, but I don’t think I could converse with you properly.”

“That is too bad, and please, Charlie!” she insists. “You will come back and visit again. Aberforth is always in a much better mood when you do.”

“Charlie!” Aberforth protests, his cheeks turning an interesting shade of red. Severus files that bit of information away, amused.

Nizar glances at his watch and frowns. “Buggeration. I’m truly sorry,” he says as he stands up. “If we don’t leave now, we’ll be late for an appointment, and I’d hate to disappoint those waiting for us.”

“It is no trouble,” Charlie says, reaching out to clasp Nizar’s hand in a firm shake. Then she startles Severus by doing the same to him. He tries not to draw back in alarm; the idea of being touched by strangers is still very much ingrained revulsion.

“She’s right, though. Come back for a meal, every Saturday if you can. I get better information that way,” Aberforth says.

Severus leans close to Aberforth when Nizar asks Charlie something in hesitant, potential Mandarin. “Do the two of you, perchance, have children?”

Aberforth snorts. “If we do, Albus will be finding out when he’s off meeting our Maker, and not a moment before.”

* * * *

While Severus has office hours on Sunday for the Slytherins, Nizar occupies himself with trying to do something about his benighted bloody memory difficulties. In the applewood trunk from Galiena came the scrolls from what he may always think of as his time. Rowena, Godric, Sal, Helga, Orellana, Marion, Peregrine, Fortunata, Galiena, Elfric, Brice, and gods, so many others, all captured as moving images that look like paperbound Pensieve memories. However, the Burgos elves brought him the Recordari scrolls of those he has no memory of at all, the people of this time. Aside from Severus, Nizar has been curious who the child would have wished to remember by recording their images.

It doesn’t take long for each scroll to be pinned to the walls of his sitting room, scattered about like so much moving artwork. He recognizes most of those captured in moving memory, but others remain unfamiliar. Perhaps he once knew them all, but some likely graduated previous to this term.

Nizar finds the two scrolls of Lily Evans and James Potter right away, as they are so very different from the rest, faint and barely moving at all. He frowns at the scrolls before retrieving the leather-bound book of moving photographs, flipping through it until he finds exactly where the images came from. Those were not direct memories of events, but the recollection of two different photographs.

He can find all of the Weasleys easily enough. Ron Weasley is in many images, often captured with Miss Granger, who has a large collection of her own. The twins feature in several scrolls, but not as many as he’d expected. Nizar recognizes Bill and Charlie because of their presence in the Order of
the Phoenix. Arthur and Molly Weasley are sharing a scroll, a memory that occurred in their home’s kitchen. The remaining red-haired young man must be the mysterious Percival Weasley, who ostracized himself from his own family because he didn’t wish to follow Dumbledore. Nizar wonders what young Mister Weasley is like in person, and then has a twitch of premonition in the back of his mind. He’s going to find out, but he isn’t certain when. Interesting.

The child must have felt strongly about his Quidditch team. There is a scroll devoted to a recreation of the entire pitch and features six of the Gryffindor players flying about; Nizar assumes the man marked as Oliver Wood must have graduated. There are individual scrolls devoted to each player, too, a glimpse of them all when they were several years younger.

There is nothing of Miss Lovegood, which is disappointing and makes him judge his childhood tastes. Almost the whole of Gryffindor is represented, though it’s a single scroll with multiple people, or one individual on one scroll—nothing of the same sort of Recordari devotion that the Weasleys and Miss Granger earned. Longbottom has his own scroll, as does Lee Jordan, Parvati Patil in brilliant pink dress robes, and tiny Edward Black, who has grown a great deal since that particular recorded memory.

There are students of other Houses in the child’s year, such as Padma Patil, Susan Bones, Terry Boot, and Hannah Abbott, but not many. The Slytherins are a pleasant surprise; Daphne and Astoria are in one scroll together, sharing a table in the library. Blaise features in another one, flirting shamelessly with Adele. Nizar remembers that crush, an event that took place two years ago and was cause for much gossip in the Slytherin Common Room. Alas that Blaise was trying to compete with Adele Greenwood’s first love of academia, and never stood a chance.

Draco is another odd discovery. It isn’t the sort of image that implies a rivalry. Instead, his younger self seems to have caught Draco with his guard down. Nizar highly doubts Draco was aware of being observed by his favorite hated rival. At least now he doesn’t think Draco would mind so much, discovering that the child had chosen to remember him kindly. It makes Nizar tempted to deliver the one letter in the applewood trunk that bears Draco Malfoy’s name.

Cedric Diggory is recognizable because one of the public student boards was converted into a shrine of newspaper clippings and photographs in his memory. The scroll shows a young man who looks surprisingly Welsh, captured wearing the robes worn by a participant in the lunacy that was the Triwizard Tournament. He’s in a room within the castle, grinning at someone not pictured. There is also a scroll of Fleur Delacour in the same outfit, revealing how much she has matured in a year’s time. She’s pictured with a much shorter blonde child that looks too similar to Fleur not to be family. Viktor Krum is easily recognizable for not being able to keep his photograph out of the Quidditch-devoted section of the Daily Prophet.

Nizar is still sitting on the rug, observing the scrolls, when a belligerent yowl gains his attention. He glances over his shoulder to discover an oversized orange cat sitting in front of his closed door, regarding him with smug disdain. “Hello. And who might you be?”

The cat trots over and climbs directly into Nizar’s lap, butting his head against Nizar’s hand in clear demand. Nizar snorts and begins petting the cat, who purrs in satisfaction. There is a faint tingle of magic beneath his fingers, so this oversized orange beast is not just a housecat, but half-Kneazle.

A half-Kneazle who can apparently teleport through closed doors. “You must be Crookshanks,” Nizar says. Crookshanks’s purring gets louder. “I don’t suppose I could bribe you into teaching a litter of Kneazles to teleport as you did to gain entry here, could I? Or did you simply decide the door was in your way and ignore it? That’s what fucking Myrddin would do. That man had no notion of privacy at all.”
Crookshanks looks up at him and meows out a definite question. “What am I doing?” Nizar glances around at the scrolls again. “I’m confirming that there has to be a memory lurking about in the first place in order for an image to trigger recollection. I don’t recall these people in any context except what was afforded by the portrait, and by teaching them now.”

The cat nips at his fingers and glares at Nizar. “Oh, I’m sorry,” Nizar drawls out, amused. “I don’t recall you, either, though you don’t seem to suffer the same difficulty.”

The cat resumes purring. It seems acknowledgement was called for. “You know, Miss Granger is likely to be looking for you,” he says, and is ignored. Nizar rolls his eyes, retrieves his wand while still petting the stubborn cat, and casts his Patronus. “Miss Granger, please see me in my office. Your cat has wandered in and refuses to wander off again.”

“There,” Nizar says after his Patronus slithers away. “I win.”

Crookshanks thrashes his tail in a clear sulk, but he doesn’t attempt to bite Nizar. That still counts as a victory.

When there is a knock on the door about ten minutes later, Nizar checks the magic within his classroom. Granger is alone. Excellent. “Come in, Miss Granger.”

“Hello, Professor. Where is—oh!” Granger closes the door to his quarters and stares around. “I didn’t realize it wouldn’t be your office. There you are, Crookshanks! I’ve been looking for you all day!” Crookshanks continues to look smug, as if he accomplished a grand feat by avoiding his bonded magician.

“He turned up,” Nizar says, smiling. “By teleporting into the room.”

Granger huffs out a sigh and rolls her eyes. “Cats.”

“They do tend to be laws unto themselves, yes.”

Granger looks around at all of the wall-mounted scrolls, mouthing names as she identifies each person. “You made these?”

“Yes. Probably one thousand years ago,” Nizar says, watching as Granger bites her lip. “I only recall them in modern context beyond the portrait.”

Granger nods sadly. “You mean they don’t mean anything to you.”

“They’re interesting,” Nizar says, “and it’s nice to know more about how I used to think. But no, they only hold meaning for me because of why I know them now. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize, Nizar. That’s still not your fault,” Hermione says while studying the Quidditch scroll. Nizar doesn’t think she realized she called him by his given name rather than his title.

“Hermione.” Nizar smiles when she starts in place and looks at him in surprise. “I do believe your cat is plotting.”

“I… I did say I wanted to be friends, didn’t I?” Hermione says in a soft voice. “And then I didn’t say a single word to you outside of the levitation lesson on Saturday afternoon. I’m sorry—”

“And you also have nothing to be sorry for. I glanced at those letters, Hermione.” Nizar scratches Crookshanks’s ears when he is treated to a demanding yowl. “They would have been a greater shock than I realized, and there is no shame at all in needing time to adjust.”
“Needing time to adjust to everything,” Hermione murmurs. “Did they—did they help? Reading them, I mean.”

“They gave me a clearer idea of who certain people were,” Nizar says. “As for true recollection? There were some interesting flashes of events, but I think too much might be gone. Much of it was like reading about a stranger, though it was still nice to have more of an idea of how my life progressed.”

“I’d hoped it would be more helpful, but I suppose that isn’t completely useless.” Hermione’s eyes light on the portrait of the snowy owl when she lands on the branch in her frame. “Oh, my God—is that Hedwig?”

“It is. Go ahead. She’s not had her memory tampered with and will remember you.”

Hermione all but skips over to the frame, smiling at the owl. “Hello, Hedwig. You make a very good portrait.” The owl hoots in response and tries to butt up against her own portrait’s boundaries for attention. “It really is unfortunate that you can’t scratch a magical portrait, isn’t it?”

“Sometimes it does seem that way.” Nizar decides he should probably warn her. “There are two portraits of myself in this castle.”

Hermione turns away from the owl’s portrait, wide-eyed. “Two?”

“Two,” he confirms. “Painted in 992 and 995. There are supposed to be others, but they’re missing. Misplaced. Destroyed. I don’t actually know.” It seems as though those first portraits were fortunate finds. Their count is only up to twenty-four, and not all of them are identifiable. One is half-burnt, its magic destroyed, its occupants stilled and silenced forever. Considering the protections that were added to all of Hogwarts’ early portraits, Nizar suspects Fiendfyre to be the culprit. “There was one already in Salazar’s quarters, told not to wander about, and Salazar had the 992 portrait with him. I thought you should be aware, in case they decide to begin following you about.”

“That would be…that might be dangerous, though, wouldn’t it?” Hermione asks.

“No. They both know the Invisibility Charm. If you gain the sense that someone is following you and there is nothing but canvas about, it might be one of them,” Nizar explains.

“Invisibility Charm?” Hermione perks up a bit. “As perfect as an Invisibility Cloak?”

“Better, since you don’t have to worry about carrying a cloak everywhere you go,” Nizar replies. “Both portraits have been updated to be aware of what I know, but they were never erased of anything that came before.”

“That means they would remember me. Like Hedwig. It would be a bit like talking to you.” Hermione bites her lip. “I’m not certain I like the idea. I’d rather get to know who you are, not try to…to hang on to the past.”

“I did say I updated them. It would be a bit of a blend.” Nizar says. “If one of them finds you in an empty part of the castle wishing to talk and it doesn’t go well, you can ask them not to bother you again. They’ll respect your decision on the matter. They’re only portraits, Hermione. They might be curious, but they’re not as needy as real people.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Hermione decides, but she still doesn’t seem cheered by the idea. “And I’ll try to…to be better. About coming to see you, I mean. If I’m going to be your assistant next term, I should get used to that sort of thing, shouldn’t I?”
Nizar bites back a smile. She’s already set on the Defence Mastery, even if she has yet to admit it to herself. He isn’t certain if he’s capable of teaching her the whole of what she would need for a Magical Mastery of the Spoken Word, but it’s definitely something to think on.

“Your cat certainly seems to think so. Why else would he be here?”

“Probably because I’ve been mulling something over, and he decided to find the best person to help me figure out the answer,” Hermione replies. “Can I sit down?”

“Anywhere you like.” Nizar is not really surprised when Hermione chooses to sit on the rug across from him. “What is it, then?” he asks as Crookshanks abandons his lap and curls up with Hermione.

She bites her lip. “So, I did something sort of illegal last year.”

“The horror. Do continue.”

Hermione looks startled, and then frowns. “Well, Rita Skeeter. We’d just spent the entire term wondering how she was getting all of the information for her articles after Professor Dumbledore banned her from the school grounds. You—you know—you’d mentioned something about non-magical spying gadgets, electronic bugs, and I realized what she had to be doing.”

“Animagus,” Nizar guesses, and Hermione nods. “A small one, then, to avoid notice.”

“A bloody beetle,” Hermione growls. “A large blue beetle!”


“How?” Hermione blinks a few times. “It’s in one of the Transfiguration texts in the library regarding Animagi. It says insects aren’t impossible, but they’re rare.”

“No; bloody how?” Nizar repeats, scowling. “Insects and humans do not have the same brains or nervous systems, blood, eyesight, survival methods—any of it! How the entire fuck has anyone managed to Transfigure themselves into an entirely different phylon?”

“Oh.” Hermione looks thoughtful. “I wouldn’t know, then. The book didn’t say how it was possible, or even imply that it shouldn’t be. Maybe you have to Transfigure each physical aspect? Or maybe she’s not fully human, and it makes for easier Transfiguration into her Animagus form?”

“I’d wager on not fully human,” Nizar says. If Skeeter is full human and managed a fucking insect, he is going to be truly annoyed.

Hermione bites her lip before smirking at him. “You’re swearing in front of an underage student again.”

“Too angry, don’t care,” Nizar replies. “How does Rita Skeeter’s unusual Animagus form go along with your illegal activity?”

“Well…I caught her,” Hermione admits, “in the middle of spying on everyone right after the, uh—the third Task. After what happened in the cemetery.”

“Go on.”

Hermione nods, a bit more resolute. “I crammed Skeeter into a jar spelled to be Unbreakable, so she couldn’t change back to human. I told her that I’d let her out once she swore not to write another defamatory article for an entire year, beginning on twenty-fifth June 1995, or I’d tell everyone she
was an Unregistered Animagus. She might be a famous reporter, but those fines were designed with rich Pure-bloods in mind. She can’t afford to pay them. I didn’t let Skeeter out in London until the first evening in July. When she was human, she agreed to my terms. Skeeter wasn’t happy about it, but she did agree.”

“And by writing the war mage article, she violated the terms.” Nizar leans back to prop himself against the front edge of the sofa. “You don’t know whether to bring up the consequences of that violation now, or wait to see if she does something worse to earn the privilege.”

“That’s about the size of it, yes,” Hermione says, scratching Crookshanks’s ears. “If I get her in trouble with the Ministry now…”

“Fudge may well ensure she gets out of it. That may be why she was brave enough to write the article in the first place,” Nizar concludes. “It’s hard to enact proper bribery when the corruption allowing it favors your target. I’d suggest giving it time. There is a chance Rita Skeeter might write more nonsense, but you have until twenty-fourth June. That’s almost four full months to make up your mind.”

“I suppose it’s a stupid question, but you’re not upset that I blackmailed a reporter?”

Nizar sighs. “Do you recall what this reporter wrote about Miss Greenwood?”

Hermione flushes and drops her gaze. “It was awful.”

“Exactly,” Nizar says. “Your choice of blackmail is far closer to being legal than my desire to murder Rita Skeeter. Libel is also a crime in Wizarding Britain. I don’t know if that would be as satisfying as your blackmail, but once there is a different Minister for Magic in office, simple prosecution through the M.L.E. might be enough to rid us of Skeeter’s lovely writing. It might also reveal her status as an unregistered Animagus if the M.L.E. were thorough enough, and that solves both problems at once.”

“Would that work?”

“Possibly.” Nizar glances down at Crookshanks, gives the cat a significant look, and tilts his head. Crookshanks twitches his tail, somehow manages to appear even more smug than before, and gets up to trot a few paces away. “I mentioned that I took a look at those letters you read?” He waits for her to nod. “I wasn’t swearing in front of an underage student. I was doing so in front of a friend.”

Hermione jerks her head up to stare at him. “Oh!” Then Nizar is bowled over by Hermione’s lunging hug.
Nizar’s class of fifth-years on Monday morning is churning with gossip regarding Granger’s absence, along with Miss Weasley’s presence, until he explains what’s been done. “What? But—what about the rest of us?” Ron Weasley asks, looking put out at not joining Granger with the sixth-years. “We’re not doing well enough to be N.E.W.T.-level?”

Nizar smiles, amused by the question as well as the source. “Mister Weasley, do you wish to take your O.W.L.s and your sixth-year exam for Defence at the same time?”

Weasley blanches. “No! No sir, absolutely not, I am fine where I am, sir!”

“Anyone else?” Nizar asks, and receives many horrified headshakes in response. “I didn’t think so. Many of you are doing very, very well, but you aren’t ready to face that sort of increased workload.”

“And Granger is,” Draco says, looking speculative. That sounds less like a young man asking a question and more like someone who wants those reasons to be known.

“She is, yes. Miss Granger turned in proper, advanced N.E.W.T-level work for your first two essays. Both of those assignments were turned in early and both were many feet beyond the minimum sixteen feet requirement. Her dueling excels at a prodigious pace; her defence of herself and others is above fifth-year standard. Miss Granger is ready for N.E.W.T. class now, just as Miss Chang is ready for seventh-year’s studies, if not the N.E.W.T. itself, and has been moved accordingly.”

“So, I suppose that’s why Ginny is lurking in the back of the room grinning like a lunatic.” Thomas glances over his shoulder at the Weasley in question. She is indeed grinning with rather maniacal good cheer. Her seatmates, Longbottom and Padma Patil, look exceptionally proud of her.

“You would be correct, Mister Thomas,” Nizar says. “Miss Lovegood has also been moved to the place that suits her skill level, and will be here for your two-hour practical session on Wednesday mornings. For lecture, Miss Lovegood will not be present, as she’s in the midst of being tutored to learn how to grasp an entirely different form of magic than most magicians ever experience.”
“Because Lovegood’s an Elemental Magician,” Finnigan says, his brow furrowed. “What does that mean, exactly?”

“In magic—proper magic, not the watered-down nonsense you lot have heard about most of your lives—there are some who feel the elements. Salazar is an Earth-Speaker; he knows the earth beneath his feet, and he’s always been able to draw upon that strength, even when he didn’t realize he was doing so. There are also Water-Speakers, Wind-Speakers, Fire-Speakers, Lightning-Riders, Wood-Speakers, Sun- and Moon-Dancers, and other elemental recognitions that vary by culture. One with the title of Elemental Magician can sense all of those aspects. They can speak to all of the elements in the same way Salazar can speak to the earth. Miss Lovegood can literally see things you cannot, which is why some of you find her to be so very…different.”

“Not so Loony, then,” Miss MacDougal murmurs.

Nizar shakes his head. “No, and very few of you ever bothered to get to know her enough to find out. Assumptions are dangerous things to make, even among your allies, and especially those you think harmless. If Miss Granger is one of the most intelligent students in Hogwarts right now, then Miss Lovegood is one of the most powerful magicians in this entire school.”

Parkinson and a few others are wide-eyed. “That’s mental,” she whispers.

“At least she has more manners than Myrddin,” Nizar says, grinning at them. “He was the last Elemental Magician I met, and you’re well aware of his reputation.”

“Luna could be the next Merlin?” Richard yelps in shock.

“Fortunately for every single one of us? No,” Nizar emphasizes, and attempts to direct the lesson for the day back where it belongs. If Miss Lovegood adapts to her tutoring and decides to begin walking across the Black Lake, that is not Nizar’s fault and he will not be responsible for the number of jaws hitting the floor. Salazar is the one who told Miss Lovegood that she would be able to do so if she wished. Everyone can rightly blame him.

“Just one more thing, and then yes, we’ll all sit still and behave for whatever you’re about to throw at us,” Macmillan says after Nizar acknowledges him. “And I swear to every lady in this room, I’m not asking this to be gender-prejudiced.”

Nizar tilts his head, curious. “All right then.”

Macmillan looks a bit less likely to try to hide under his desk. “The only students you’ve shifted up in class levels—they’re all girls. I doubt you’d be the sort to ignore the rest of us, but I was just wondering why it’s all girls that are doing so well, but no boys.”

“I didn’t say that there were no young men doing well. They’re simply not quite where they need to be to succeed if they were to advance a year. Some of you are close, and no, I won’t tell you who.” Nizar smiles as several of his students groan in dismay.

“As to why those who are ready for such advancement are all female-gendered? Both in my time and in this one, there is an unfortunate aspect of our culture that many of us wish would kindly hurry up and die out. Women have to fight for everything they have from the very start, Mister Macmillan. Either they are coddled to the point of suffocation and stagnation, or their accomplishments are ignored in favor of male-gendered peers who performed second-best at the same task. Miss Granger, for example, has been fighting for her entire academic life for every acknowledgement she’s ever earned, and is still often derided for it.” Nizar glances at Blishwick and Dunbar, who at least have the grace to flush or look away. “Miss Chang, Miss Weasley, and Miss Lovegood are also used to
fighting that battle.

“When the young men in my classes prove to me that they know the material at an advanced level and can keep to that pace, then I will happily place them in the class that is best suited to their skills. Until that time? Yes, you’ve been outdone by girls,” Nizar says dryly, grateful to hear laughter that holds no trace of mockery at all.

The letter he’s expected to receive since last week’s meeting with Arthur arrives when he’s having lunch in his office, painstakingly transcribing one of his books—not a journal, but spell work—from Cumbric into English. Granted, he’s doing more writing than eating, but better than no eating at all.

A great grey owl does a decent enough job of navigating their way into the classroom, makes it through the office door, and then crashes into a bookcase before landing in the floor. Nizar gets up in alarm and finds a bird of advanced age flopping about woozily on the stone, a message attached to an arthritic-looking leg. “Dear gods, who is still torturing you by sending you out to deliver mail?” he asks, rightening the owl and checking it for damage. Except for exhaustion brought on by a long flight—and its age—the owl is fine.

Nizar carries the owl into his quarters and settles him onto Nygell’s empty perch before he opens the letter. “Oh, hello, Molly. I wonder if you tried to send me a Howler first.”

Dear Nizar,

It took me a while to be able to write this properly. I inherited the Prewett temper, and it takes me a bit to calm down if I get angry.

I was, too. Exceptionally angry.

Fortunately, I am married to a man who is patient enough to wait through my temper, and who will explain things sensibly once again when I no longer want to take my wand to someone’s backside. I could only see a teacher who was putting my daughter in danger. It’s been such a habit of Hogwarts to put our children in danger—all of our children!

Again, bless Arthur’s patience, and my apparent inability to send you a Howler. (You cheat.) He helped me to recognize that you intended quite the opposite. You aren’t trying to force Ginny into a situation that would endanger her. You’re doing more to ensure she can protect herself than anyone else I know, and sadly, that does include me. I’m too often intent on just bundling up my chicks and keeping them cooped up in the house, away from anything that can harm them, but life is not so kind as all that. They’ll all leave the nest one day, and all the coddling on Earth won’t stop the world from being there, waiting for them.

It won’t stop him from being there. She met that thing too soon, and I panic at the thought that she’ll ever have to do so again.

If I worry about anything, I suppose I will now fret that you’ll ensure that my daughter is more terrifying than most anything else. I’m not sure a girl who also inherited the Prewett temper should ever be that capable, but I’ve had four children all write to me complaining of how you plan to smother them with Ethics and Morality. I don’t think they were pleased when I wrote back telling them it sounded like an excellent lesson.

Please feel free to give extra portions to Fred and George.

—Molly Weasley
“I’ll be damned,” Nizar murmurs. He feels like he might have just beheld a written miracle.

* * * * *

Salazar has forced himself to rise early every day to accommodate the school’s insistence at having breakfast during a singular hour. It’s nonsense, treating everyone as if they’re meant to have the exact same schedules: eat at the same time, learn at the same time in the exact same fashion, be bedbound at the same time, sleep at the same time. He loathes this industrialized, militaristic idea of life, but changing that will likely prove to be a greater task than merely restoring Hogwarts’ original teaching structure and available lessons.

Maybe he should plan for that, regardless. Have the idea ready for next term. The late risers would bless his existence forever more.

“What are you thinking about, sir?” Luna asks him politely as she approaches.

“How much I’d rather still be abed, Miss Lovegood.” Salazar stretches his arms over his head and breathes in as a cold breeze blows in across the Black Lake, bringing the mineral tang of good water with it. “I hope you don’t mind that our private lessons will oft take place outside.”

“Not at all, Professor Salazar,” Luna replies, smiling. “I like to be outside. Many of my friends live out here.”

“Such as the Nargles you’ve befriended.”

Luna nods as the breeze catches strands of her pale blonde hair. “Most of them are sleeping right now. They’re waiting for the flowers to bloom in the spring—well, not the ones living in the mistletoe. They’ll be napping when the weather warms, I expect. What shall we do today, sir?”

“Whatever you like. The difficulty in lessons such as yours, darling Ravenclaw, is that you can see much of what I can’t,” Salazar says. “I can tell you of the Earth, and teach you what Earth-based magic is capable of, but for the rest? I can only repeat the words I’ve heard spoken by others like Myrddin, who saw the world the way you do. I can also tell you the words of my mother, a Water-Speaker, and of my dear Orellana, a Wood-Speaker. Perhaps it would be better to ask: do you have questions for me?”

“Questions for you.” Luna gains her peculiar little frown that is never an expression of displeasure. “I suppose I am curious about the magic attached to your brother, Professor Slytherin.”

Salazar grins. “There is quite a bit of magic attached to my brother, Miss Lovegood. You would need to be more specific.”

“Oh. Well, I can see the war mage magic. It’s attached to the land, just like it is for you, Professor Snape, and Adele. That’s how I figured out what I was seeing when you all came back to Hogwarts with bright new threads of magic. Then there is the magic individual to the nobility titles, like your connection to the Highlands, your brother’s connection to the Heights, Draco’s thread that leads to Wiltshire, Daphne’s link to Northumbria, Adele’s link to the Yorkshire Dales, Blaise’s thread connecting him to Worcester, Mister Black’s ties to London, and Professor Lupin’s link to Powys. Once I could look beyond all, that, there is also Professor Slytherin’s attachment to Hogwarts, which
is different from yours, sir. His is white, while yours is green...or maybe it isn’t white at all.” Luna tilts her head. “White is supposed to be composed of all the colors we can see.”

Salazar may have to contemplate swooning. Luna Lovegood is the first Pure-blood student he’s encountered with a solid grasp on non-magical sciences. It reminds him so much of the old days, when such concepts weren’t separate at all. “That is correct, yes.”

Luna looks startled, then pleased, as if she expected to hear otherwise. “Beneath all of those magical ties, there is a different sort of magic. It’s the same color green as your link to Hogwarts.”

Salazar raises both eyebrows. This is the most he’s ever heard Miss Lovegood speak in a single conversation. “And what do you think that green represents? He is of my family. Is it a surprise that our magic would shine the same?”

“Oh, it does that, too,” Luna responds, her eyes drifting up to regard the sky in dreamy delight. “But this is different. If you ignore the color, it looks like the same sort of magic attached to Hermani, and he was magically adopted. Is Professor Slytherin adopted, sir?”

Salazar shakes his head, smiling. “Elemental bloody Magicians. Yes he is, but that is the sort of thing we prefer to keep quiet. We were already related by distant blood before that adoption, but there are still too many fools who would claim that we aren’t brothers at all.”

Luna nods. “I know, sir. It’s why I’ve never said anything about Hermani’s adoption. If he doesn’t know, it would be quite rude of me to say. Oh, the Blibbering Humdingers are about!” she exclaims, offering the sky a wide smile.

“Blibbering Humdingers.” Salazar refuses to laugh, as it’s the only term she knows. “Describe them to me. What do they look like?”

“They look like wisps of air that can smile. They’re fog and mist, and they love stirring things up and about. They can make themselves into so many different sizes, too.”

That is a description Salazar knows well. “Those, darling Ravenclaw, are properly termed as wisties. They are Air Elementals.”

Luna’s peculiar frown returns. “Wisties. Wasn’t that word also used in a film starring many short bears dressed in leather?”

Salazar laughs. “Even filmmakers have to get their words from somewhere, Miss Lovegood.”

After Miss Lovegood’s private lesson, Salazar is off to find Minerva to deliver a gift the elves completed only that morning. His Lioness has a full schedule, but she always chooses to rest in the staff lounge after her second-years are done mauling objects instead of Transfiguring them. It’s an excellent means of calming herself before she faces her sixth-years and the odd feats that lot often get up to.

His brother still wins that contest for turning poor Leofric into a tree on accident. Salazar is waiting for the right moment to impart that lovely detail to Minerva, but such has not yet arrived.

Salazar catches Minerva’s eye before she can vanish into the staff lounge and beckons for her to follow him into an unused room off the corridor. He notes the window, the dust, and lack of furniture, and thinks it might once have been guest quarters, though the bathing room and privy are gone. Now, though, it is an excellent place to gift an item to someone who can be rather shy about that sort of thing.
“And just what are you up to, Salazar?” Minerva asks after pushing the door closed behind her. “I hope it’s not clandestine snogging. Ten minutes isn’t nearly enough time for that, I’ll have you know.”

Salazar grins. “I’m quite happily aware. I’ve a gift for you to complement your role as Head of House, Lioness, and thought you’d prefer to receive it in private.”

“You thought correctly.” Minerva smiles as her hand automatically reaches up to touch the watch hidden beneath her sleeve. “What sort of plotting have you been up to this time?”

“Truly, it was more the elves than myself, though I did need to remind them that such a thing was appropriate.” Salazar retrieves the silver crest from his coat pocket and holds it out to her with both hands.

“Oh!” Minerva’s eyebrows fly up as her eyes widen. “I’ve only ever seen that in a painting of my great-grandfather. Our family’s copy was lost a long time ago.” She takes the silver crest from him, holding it up to the light cast by the window to see it properly. “But this is not quite the same.”

“Well, one does recognize it when two powerful clans unite,” Salazar says. “While it might be traditional to claim the crest of your father’s House, the Irish Mac Conmhaoil line that migrated to Caithness is non-magical. That makes your mother’s magical branch of Clan Rôs just as important as the former.” Instead of one or the other, the elves conspired to make it proper: the crest is wrapped by the belt and buckle of the Scottish clans, but instead of an eagle or a lion, it is now a rampant griffon holding the four gold-plated annulets in each of its talons. The griffon is silver, like the crest, but its eyes are ruby. A twisted torse is just above the griffon, supporting a dexter hand holding aloft a juniper laurel that’s been crafted from vert-colored beryl. Upside-down silver Scottish thistle leaves wrap the belt and buckle from top to bottom. The upper part of the leaves above the juniper laurel host the Ross motto of _Spem Successus Alit_, while the lower leaves hold the Mac Conmhaoil motto of _Nos A In Aeternum._

“It’s beautiful, and almost as ostentatious as the Black family crest,” Minerva says as she runs her fingers along the inscription. “I thought the McGonagall motto was _Age In Aeternum_. Do Forever.”

“With this island’s shoddy Latin?” Salazar shakes his head. “It’s meant to say _We Are Forever. Age In Aeternum_ translates as _At Age Forever._”

“That doesn’t sound nearly as impressive,” Minerva agrees in a dry voice. “And the stones?”

“You hold Hogewâþ’s Southern Seat as Head of the House of Gryffindor, Minerva. That would be the seat’s scarlet ruby. The opal is for your dual Transfiguration Masteries. That particular stone is Slovakian.”

“Not an eagle or a lion, but a griffon.” Minerva looks pleased. “A heraldic symbol of courage, strength, leadership, and intelligence. Given my position, that seems coincidentally appropriate.”

“There are no such things as coincidences, Lioness.” Salazar feels a sharp pang as he says the words. He’s spoken them often enough, and always to those he cares for.

“I suppose not,” Minerva agrees quietly. “This, though—this crest is far too ostentatious to be wearing all the time. I notice you’re not wearing that crest of yours!”

Salazar flips open one side of his jacket, where the silver crest for his House is pinned in place on the inside. “One never knows when it will come in handy, especially these days. I simply choose not to share its presence with everyone else.”
“That sounds agreeable. I suppose if you carry through on your threat to introduce me to Queen
Elizabeth, I might have need of it,” Minerva muses.

“She does truly wish to meet you.” Salazar smiles at her. “I think the two of you would find that you
have quite a bit in common.”

Minerva nods and drops the new crest into her robe pocket. “Perhaps during Easter break, Salazar.
For now, we both have classes to teach.”

“That we do.” Salazar follows her from the room, already contemplating the class of fifth-years
awaiting him. They proved themselves to be his prickliest group of students, and it’s been great fun
to rile them up.

“How is Miss Lovegood progressing in her new private lessons in learning more of how to adapt to
her elemental magic?” Minerva asks.

“She’s proven an apt student as long as one keeps in mind that her distracted nature has due cause,”
Salazar replies. “But I am beginning to suspect there are a few others who might benefit from such
things. Not necessarily with myself, but they need that sort of personal instruction from someone.”

Minerva frowns. “Who?”

“Miss Applebee, your Hufflepuff Head Girl. She isn’t foundering academically, but in terms of what
sort of magic or life she should indulge in after Hogwarts. Mister McLaggen could use many lessons
in deportment and diplomacy before he utters the wrong thing to the wrong person and ends up dead
for it. Seamus Finnigan should spend time with an instructor to determine why his accidental magic
persisted for so long. That speaks of talent not being recognized and thus expressing itself any way it
can—yes, even with his newfound method of dispelling that extra energy,” Salazar adds when
Minerva smirks. “Mister Thomas is a distraction, not a teaching method.”

“Very well. Anyone else?”

“I worry very much about Mister Crabbe and Mister Goyle, magically, academically, and socially,
but unless they are willing to consent to tutoring, there is little to be done. Zubeida Khan is silent in
her classes due to a speech impediment she is desperately trying to hide, fearing Wizarding Britain’s
lack of acceptance for such things. We’ve no one here qualified to assist her and would likely need to
send for that sort of help beyond Wizarding Britain’s fucking borders.”

“Public hallway. Language, Salazar,” Minerva reminds him tartly. “You think we need a counselor
who is neutral for the school.”

“A trained one. Albus Dumbledore is old and has seen much, but that does not mean he understands
best how to deal with the things I’m speaking of. We especially need to think of those students in the
school who have close family members as enemies. That is not an easy life to live.”

Minerva nods. “I’ll think on it, and pass word on to the other Heads of House. Go terrify your
history students, Salazar.”

Salazar bows. “And off you go to make certain your N.E.W.T. students don’t turn each other into
new and interesting forms of life.”

To his surprise, one of his students has arrived early, and it’s Miss Granger. “Ah, crafter of the lethal
essay,” Salazar begins to say—just before the young woman leaps forward and nearly breaks him in
half with a hug.
“Thank you,” she whispers as Salazar tries to figure out if this is an embrace he should be returning, or if he should be fetching a crowbar. “For what you did for Nizar. Thank you.”

Ah. Salazar judges it safe enough to return her hug, albeit briefly. There are too many fools about who would misjudge the act and say terrible things of her if it were witnessed. “I didn’t know he’d made a decision. What did my brother say?”

Miss Granger takes a quick look at the classroom doorway, searching for overhearing ears, before answering. “He gave me letters. That he wrote…then,” she says in a low voice. “I read them all and gave them back for him to read, and he did, but I don’t think they were as helpful as I’d hoped they would be. I think it was like reading a book about someone else.”

Salazar resists the urge to sigh. He’d wondered if anything delivered by the Burgos elves would help, but it seems as if one of the best resources was as effective as the two portraits. Miss Granger is correct; rather than prompting any true recollection, Nizar says it’s like reading about someone else’s life. “I didn’t realize he’d done so. I was away for the weekend, Miss Granger. Business in London to tend to. But I’m glad he did.”

Miss Granger bites her lip. “You are?”

“I am.” Salazar smiles at her. “Time can steal away memory, too. I’ll admit to being a bit panicked when we first met on the eve of fifth January, but once that crisis was past, I recalled how often my brother spoke of you. Nizar missed you very much.”

Miss Granger lets out a brief sniffle before she flings herself into Salazar’s arms again. Salazar pats her shoulder and thinks it excellent that the rest of her classmates decided that today was a fine time to dawdle.

Or perhaps the staircases decided to have their fun and run distraction. That’s been known to happen, too.

* * * * *

Severus watches his N.E.W.T. classes closely on Monday afternoon, studying their brewing habits, the research they indulge in, deviations, experimentation, any hint of recognition for the why the whole of their work comes together from its individual parts—things that make one not merely a good brewer, but a student capable of mastering the art of Potions.

Miss Fairboune, Fleet, Rickett, Belby, Miss Edgecombe, Miss Johnson, Miss Applebee, Gupta, Miss Randle, Miss Fawcett, Kartik, Miss Bell, Miss Johar, Miss Chang, Carmichael, and Urquhart claimed places in N.E.W.T. Potions, but only because it is required for their planned careers. Miss Shetty, Miss Peebles, and Ichijoh selected Potions simply because Severus is their Head of House, and expected an easier workload because of it. They’ve since come to regret that decision, one they cannot alter until they bloody well graduate.

Some of them are just bloody Death Eaters in waiting.

The Weasley twins understand experimentation, the need to deviate from expectations, and Severus thinks they might even understand the why, given the things they’ve crafted from their horrifying imaginations. However, it’s beyond obvious that they’re not devoted to Potions as a craft, but to what Potions can do for them through the full scope of their endeavors.
That leaves him with Adele Greenwood and Ona Parangyo in seventh-year. Since it’s already mid-
February, he dismisses their candidacy. Given the mad fervor both have already displayed when it
comes to studying for their N.E.W.T.s, they wouldn’t give up their free time even if they were
inclined towards Potions.

Hermani Roshan and Kinjal Bhatia are both in sixth-year, with this term and the rest of the next term
remaining. Roshan isn’t seventeen until April, but Miss Bhatia turned seventeen a few weeks prior.
Both of have shown an aptitude for Potions that goes beyond mere rote performance, and both show
the beginning of understanding why potions work as they do. Without concerns for N.E.W.T.s in
their paths, they are ideal students to approach in regards to an apprenticeship for earning a Potions
Mastery. If they can tolerate him long enough for it, that is.

I’m making plans to continue teaching, Severus realizes, and is immediately, utterly confounded. He
is contemplating continuing teaching next term, and he is bloody well *apprentice-seeking*.

Severus comforts himself with the idea that Bhatia and Roshan are equally wise enough to flee from
the idea of an apprenticeship with him, even if he were to ask.

He isn’t going to ask.

He will probably ask them. He’s lost his bloody mind.

Severus also has no idea what possessed him to look for sympathy for his plight in Nizar. The man
laughs at him. For far longer than is bloody appropriate.

“I’m—well, I’m not sorry,” Nizar finally gasps. He’s stretched out along the sofa closest to the
fireplace, a wide smile on his face as he looks up at Severus. “But you brought up the subject as if it
were a fucking beheading about to take place, and you were the one choosing the executioner!”

“I have no idea how to teach an apprentice, Nizar!”

“No one does.” Nizar rights himself and curls up on the end of the sofa, patting the cushion next to
him. Severus grudgingly sits down after a moment’s deliberation. “Students are individuals, and
apprentices require a greater acknowledgement of that than is needed when teaching a group. The
biggest difference between teaching a class and teaching an apprentice is that you can’t go into the
situation with lesson plans at the ready. You won’t know what that apprentice will need from you for
weeks, if not months, after the arrangements have been formalized. They may know things you don’t
expect, or have questions you don’t actually know the answers to. My only real advice is to choose
someone whose company you can tolerate for long stretches of time.”

Severus tries not to grimace. That is a very, very short list. “I’d thought on Kinjal Bhatia and
Hermani Roshan.”

“I don’t know as much about Hermani Roshan as I’d prefer, as he’s not in my N.E.W.T class.
Kinjal…” Nizar frowns. “I don’t know if she has plans after Hogwarts beyond her arranged
marriage. I know her culture often prefers for a married woman to become the head of the household
rather than continue any sort of career, though I *think* the latter bit is becoming less expected. The
Patil twins certainly aren’t in any hurry to follow that path, but then, they were born in Britain.”

“You’re saying this is far more complicated than I had yet to contemplate.”

“It can be.” Nizar slumps down against him and lets out a pleased sigh. “Try to get to know Kinjal a
bit better. You’ve seen that she has the magical potential. The rest requires personal interaction.”

Severus growls under his breath. “I’m bloody terrible at personal interaction!”
“I don’t think so,” Nizar says quietly. “And I’m not saying that just because I’m courting you.”

“Oh?” Severus asks, his voice caustic to his own ears. “And what do you think it is, then?”

“I think you’ve encountered too many instances where it’s turned out to be a fucking trap,” Nizar says, “and too few instances where that sort of interaction has proven itself to be safe.”

His first reflexive response is to flinch as if he’s been struck. After that, he refuses to move, because he honestly fears he might run and never stop.

He does not like self-introspection. He does not like having parts of himself pulled out and held under torchlight for examination.

*Because what does Albus do when he’s done the very same?* Severus finds himself thinking. *He uses it against you, even if it seems to be done for all the right reasons.*

Severus draws in a deep breath. Nizar is not Albus.

“I’m certain you’re already aware of this, but you’re right.”

Nizar reaches over and takes his hand. “I don’t say it to be right.”

Severus swallows hard, hating the fact that his eyes are burning. “I’m aware of that.”
Twenty-One Reasons

Chapter Summary

Once upon a Founder’s Era, a young man started writing letters, ultimately resulting in hundreds of messages.

Three of those many letters were addressed to one Professor Severus Snape.

Chapter Notes

I was going to be good and hold off posting until Friday (betas still catching up and they deserve that chance). But it’s an ex-parent’s birthday today. It’s going to be another ex-parent’s "mother's" day soon. I feel like crap because the place I live in does not like my immune system and buddy I do not like it right back.

But the mate got back from NY today after helping upstate get power back. So that’s a plus. This one is another, if only because of the screaming.

(Credit as usual to @mrsstanely, @sanerontheinside, @norcumi, & @jabberwockypie for listening to me type random bullshit and put it into reading order. <3 )

He thinks his classroom has emptied of students on Tuesday morning until he turns around and discovers that Miss Granger is lingering. “Is there something you need, Miss Granger?”

Granger glances behind her to see if anyone is at the door. Severus scowls and flicks his wand to slam it shut. “Any time now, please. I have first-years to deal with in less than five minutes.”

“Er, yes, sir,” At least Granger has been squeaking less if he addresses her. “I suppose I was just wondering if you were going to do to me what Professor Slytherin did. The shuffling me forward into N.E.W.T. classes.”

Severus gives her a cold stare. “Absolutely not. You aren’t ready.”

“Oh, thank God.” Granger breathes out a sigh of relief. “I just wanted to be certain. Next year is still just fine with me, sir.” She then leaves him in blessed silence, which is excellent, as Severus is a bit busy with being horrified. The idea that Granger might try for two apprenticeships during her final years in Hogwarts is terrifying. If she does so, he has only himself to blame by challenging her with that damned potions book.

His Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff first-years behave themselves for the hour. Then his third-year Slytherins and Gryffindors arrive. The pairings seem to be getting a bit more random: Astoria Greengrass and Edward Black have joined forces; Romilda Vane has traded off for Sebastian Daley; Atsushi Takagi is sitting with Raza Mohammad; and Yuvraj Suri has somehow crafted an alliance with Reiko Sibazaki, whereas last term the two couldn’t stand each other’s existence.
The Carrow twins are, as usual, fucking infuriating.

He tells them all to clean up, leave the contents of their cauldrons alone, and return to collect the emptied cauldrons after lunch. It’s a relief when they depart, chattering like young students who still do not have to concern themselves with horror or death—except for Hestia and Flora, who scowl at every living being as if they’d personally like to murder them.

Severus checks their cauldrons as he walks along the workbenches, examining their contents before Vanishing them. He knows Pomona’s new curriculum has not had a chance to make any sort of improvement, but it seems as if he is discovering more successes than failures of late. Perhaps the lack of outright hostility is encouraging them, or time has made the others immune to the Carrow twins’ ineffective attempts to glare other people out of existence.

He goes back to his office to put away anything that won’t be needed until he returns to the room after lunch. He finds three numbered envelopes waiting on his desk, each bearing his name. He picks up the first one, curious, and finds it to be the same type of envelope that Nizar gave to Miss Granger. The printing of his name is neat and clear, but most certainly that of the child, not the adult; the second is similar. The third envelope’s handwriting is like the printing in Nizar’s journals, not his writing as it is now.

Severus gestures both of his office doors shut and sits down at his desk to open the first letter. Nizar did warn him, but Severus wonders why Harry Potter would have any reason to wish to speak to him. The letter begins with no explanation, not even of its date—something he would have found highly unusual if he’d received this missive with no foreknowledge at all.

4th January 991

Professor Snape,

I did something last year I was convinced I couldn’t do. You absolutely wouldn’t believe it.

So, just to be a contrary shit, I shan’t tell you what it was.

—Harry Potter

P.S. Oculus is bullshit. Throw out the damned turmeric and try again.

“I see,” Severus murmurs in amusement. “You felt the need to write to me just to be an irritant.” There is no doubt as to what the child is referring to. This is his creation of Sana Visio. It’s still galling Severus to know he wouldn’t have recognized the perfect substitution for turmeric on his own first attempt.

Removed from its envelope, the second letter is much thicker, seven pages long and covered in the child’s handwriting from the very first page to the very last. Severus frowns, feeling a hint of something lingering on the paper. Panic? No, not that. Potter was not the sort to panic even when he was tragically outnumbered, crashing a car into a tree, facing a werewolf, a dragon, or even Voldemort himself.
16th April 991

Dear Professor,

You have no reason to read this at all, but I hope you’ll at least consider it.

Look, I was right about that stupid Stone, I wasn’t eaten by a basilisk, and Pettigrew is the arsehole to blame for everything that wasn’t done by Crouch Junior. Just hear me out, please?

I think there is something very wrong happening in Hogwarts, but I’m definitely too far away to be able to do anything about it.

I don’t know how to get these letters delivered when I’m writing to someone over a thousand years into the future. Maybe the Burgos elves might help me. They live a long time, and they like my family.

Okay, yes, there’s a lot here that I’m not explaining, but one problem at a time. Worry about the date on this letter and the family bit and the elves thing later. I’m worried about 1995, or whatever year it is when you receive this.

Please do not let that be before 31st July. That would be so awkward.

Last year, I wrote to Hermione, even though that letter is right here on my desk. I discussed some of this in that letter, but I wasn’t really setting out to prove or disprove anything. I was tired, and it was mostly just mind spew. Idle thoughts.

I haven’t been able to let the idea go. If it’s paranoia when you only think they’re out to get you, except they’re always out to get you, that usually means you’re right.

I don’t want to be right about this.

I want you to read this letter, dismiss it as complete imbecilic nonsense, and carry on with your day. I just think, for varying reasons that happen to be related to, oh, keeping an eye on someone who is missing his own fucking nose, that you might be the best person to judge whether or not this is a stupid question.

Does Dumbledore actually want me dead?

Severus drops the letter onto his desk, staring at that sentence. He’ll wonder how the child could possibly have known about his task regarding Voldemort at a later time, but for now, those words are like an accusatory shout.

When he thinks he has control of himself, Severus picks up the letter again.

I’m not just pulling that out of my arse. I do want it to be, but when I try to write down reasons why it’s utter rubbish, all I seem to be writing down are reasons why it’s not.
1. It took me a while to pin this down, and I don’t think I would have been able to do it if I hadn’t bothered to master Mind Magic. No idea what it might be called in 1995, if it exists as a concept, but it’s bloody useful.

Anyway: Dumbledore gave me to the Dursleys before the sun came up on 1st November. It was still dark—I can remember that, all right? It was the same night my parents died.

No one knew Sirius had supposedly done anything wrong until that afternoon.

Dumbledore had hours to track Sirius down before Sirius found Pettigrew. Hours. Did he do anything to search? Because if he was in such a hurry to shove me off to live with a bunch of arseholes, I rather doubt it.

1.5. Dumbledore says he believes us about Peter Pettigrew still being alive. He made certain Sirius didn’t get kissed by Dementors, but Dumbledore is also Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot. The Magician’s Council. Why didn’t Dumbledore insist Sirius get a trial, then or now? Whether you like him or not, Sirius is an Animagus, and he is used to hiding, being overlooked, surviving. That’s useful spy material. Isn’t a spy more useful if they don’t have to hide from their allies, even if their allies don’t like the spy very much?

2. Something has to have been done to that blood protection from my mother’s death. Voldemort would never have been able to hurt me, Horcrux or no Horcrux, if that protection had been left alone.

2a. Sirius Black was my legal guardian, and Dumbledore had already foisted me off on the Dursleys. Dumbledore can claim that blood protection crap all he likes, but everything I’ve read on Blood Magic here? It doesn’t work like that. I didn’t need to be living with a blood relative. That blood magic protection was attached to me, and it would have gone everywhere I went, including with Sirius.

2b. When I got here, a really good Healer could tell that there was some of that protection remaining. After discussing it, the conclusion is that the creepy necromancy ritual Voldemort used in Little Hangleton shouldn’t have been able to damage an untouched blood protection to that extent. He shouldn’t have been able to hurt me. That means it was already damaged by something else.

2c. Dumbledore didn’t even bother telling me about the sacrificial protection until after I used it to kill someone. That’s convenient, right?

2.5. Who is powerful enough to have altered that sacrificial magic? Between being dropped off on the Dursley’s front doorstep in the dark and left behind, I didn’t come into contact with a single magician between then and Hagrid coming to find me on my eleventh birthday. Given what the intervening years were like, it definitely had to have been damaged before I came to Hogwarts.

3. Oh, yeah, the lightning bolt scar was a Horcrux. I have no idea if you know anything about those, but suffice to say, it is gone and that part of Voldemort is very, very, very dead.

Yes, I am still angry about the Horcrux!

3.5. I think Dumbledore knew about the Horcrux. I don’t have evidence to back that up. Sal says it’s Divination talent, but I can’t prove that. I’ll say it because the idea won’t leave me alone, but I can’t prove it.

4. I don’t know if you know anything about Vernon and Petunia Dursley, but—
Okay. This is still very hard to think, let alone write down, but if I’m listing out evidence to support a hypothesis, then I have to. I really, really don’t want to.

My childhood was a fucking nightmare. Lucius Malfoy treats house-elves better.

Severus feels a sharp pain in his hand. He’s clenched his left fist so tightly that his fingernails pierced seven sheets of paper and are jabbing into his palm. He can’t read any more of this without distancing himself from it.

Occlumency helps him feel like he can finish reading this letter without murdering anyone. Better.

An untouched sacrificial magic based on death (which, yes, is Blood Magic) doesn’t just protect the recipient from being harmed by the arsehole that the person doing the sacrificing was fighting against. It safeguards the person with that sacrificial protection from all forms of true harm until the magic reaches a point of being able to recognize that the recipient is able to safeguard themselves. The point at which that happens is different for everyone.

Leaving a toddler to cry for an entire day without seeing to their needs is harm. Starving someone is harm. Beating someone is harm. Making someone into a literal slave is harm. Hitting someone in the head with a fucking frying pan is harm. Withholding medical treatment is harm. Making them reside in a cupboard is harm. Only giving someone cast-off clothes that do not fit, that are not warm enough, is harm. Shoes with holes in the soles that let glass slice your feet is harm. Imprisoning someone in their room is harm, and yes, I mean that literally. Trying to prevent someone from going to the school their dead parents already paid for is harm. Taking away someone else’s rightful belongings is harm. Screaming at someone constantly is harm. Referring to someone by the word Freak all their life to the point where they don’t even know that Freak is not their name until a really concerned primary school teacher corrects you? Harm.

Trying to starve an owl to death is definitely considered animal abuse, but I just gave Hedwig most of my food. That summer sucked.

I think Dumbledore knew about every single bit of this.

That leaves me with three options.

A) He really is cracked enough to think that I had to live with Petunia to keep me safe from Voldemort.

B) He didn’t care.

Or C) Dumbledore wanted me to have the worst childhood imaginable so that Hogwarts would look like paradise, and Dumbledore would look like a benevolent savior. What’s a little bit of manipulation to make sure your war weapon will do everything you say when all of your war weapon’s other experiences are horrific in comparison?

What’s frankly terrifying is that I think C is most likely. He wants to win a war, after all.

5. Everyone in this time knows who Fawkes is. The phoenix belongs to Merlin, or Merlin belongs to the phoenix. One of those. Sal is certain that when Merlin dies, Fawkes wouldn’t give his loyalty to another man, not after spending the last five centuries with Merlin. Sal thinks Fawkes would give his loyalty to the school Merlin built. That means Dumbledore’s claims about Fawkes being his are
utter rubbish. Who would be able to argue with him, anyway? Dippet’s dead, Tom Riddle avoided the Headmaster’s office like it was a plague container, and of course anyone alive in 1995 who also attended Hogwarts would be used to seeing Fawkes around the school.

6. Why was it always you? Wait, that sounds rude. I didn’t mean it to be rude. I actually like being alive. Let me try again.

6.5. Quirrell/Voldemort and his stupid attempts to steal the Philosopher’s Stone. You saved me from falling from a jinxed broom. Not Dumbledore. You were in the air for the next Quidditch match to make certain Quirrell wouldn’t do it again. Not Dumbledore. You pried me off Quirrell. Not Dumbledore.

7. Chamber of Secrets: Dumbledore acted like he sent the Sorting Hat with Godric’s Sword to me using Fawkes’s help. At the time, I didn’t realize he never actually said that. He just implied it, and I went along with it. Why wouldn’t I? Young, trusting, and stupid.

7.5 How would Dumbledore even know there was a problem? Obliviated Gilderoy (good riddance) and Ron were stuck in the tunnel with no way to get anyone’s help. No one knew how to get into the Chamber but Ron and myself. And Ginny, I guess, but that wasn’t her fault. Dumbledore had zero ways of knowing where in the school I was.

I think Fawkes knew. I think Fawkes chose to do what he did on his own. Otherwise, why wouldn’t Dumbledore have come with Fawkes?

8. Dumbledore seems to be conveniently absent a lot, doesn’t he?

9. Third year, when everyone believed Sirius was out of his mind. Yes, he was actually out of his mind, but not trying-to-kill-his-godson out of his mind. If Dumbledore really doesn’t know that the many secret passages in and out of the castle exist, I will eat my new boots. He’s over a hundred years old. He went to school here. He’s lived here since ever. No one who has lived in this castle that long could possibly be that numb about passageways that are easy to find. He knew Sirius could get in, and he knew how, and he did nothing.

Why? Either Dumbledore knew already that Sirius wasn’t guilty, or he was assisting someone in helping me end up dead. If he knew Peter was in the castle and was letting me sleep in the same room with the actual murderer, then that was another method of helping someone make me dead.

10. Then there is the stupid shit with the Dementors on the Quidditch Pitch.

(There are no Dementors here. Not anywhere. No one has heard of them by name or description. It’s creepy.)

Everyone on my team said that Dumbledore saved me from falling, and then Dumbledore made the Dementors go away. I believe the second half—the Headmaster would be the one with that authority. But the first half? If he couldn’t be arsed to do that in my first year, why would he have bothered then? Yeah, I still think that was you. Hate me later, okay? Still writing.

“Actually, I would be telling you that you were correct,” Severus murmurs. The child is piecing things together in a way that is giving him chills. On their own, these incidents were suspicious, but otherwise seemed coincidental. At most, Severus thought Albus was using those circumstances to give the child harsh lessons that might prepare him for Voldemort. When put together, even in such haphazard fashion, with the lines drawn from one event to the next…
11. Dumbledore doesn’t do a thing to save an innocent man when he finds out (or knew?) the truth. He makes children do it. Again: did he even do anything to search for Pettigrew? The bastard rat had been living in Hogwarts every term for thirteen years! I could have found him based on what I know now, and I’m just sixteen years old.

12. The Triwizard Tournament is old. Really old. The rules-already-exist-here old. We all took Crouch Senior at his word when he said I had to compete. We took Dumbledore at his word when he agreed with Crouch.

I didn’t put my name in that goblet. Therefore it was not a legally binding contract. It’s in the rules, even if they’re really dull to read. What turned it into a legally binding contract is that the goblet assumed I was participating on bloody Barty Crouch Junior’s behalf by performing the First Task. That’s what it took. A legally recognized stand-in. At any point before the First Task, I could have gotten out of it if anyone had bothered to read the stupid rules.

12.5. Dumbledore knows those rules, Professor. I mean, I could be assuming more about his intelligence than I should, but if I was going to host a tournament known to make people dead in the past, I’d want to know its rules backwards, forwards, upside down, and sideways.

He wanted me to be in that Tournament. I don’t know if Dumbledore believed Voldemort to be the ultimate problem, but it bloody well turned out that way, didn’t it?

13. My arse those were not real spirits during priori incantamentum in the cemetery. Ghostly impressions cannot erect Shield Charms. I’m not sure why Dumbledore wants me to believe otherwise, but he does. What point does that even serve?

14. For someone who claimed to be so concerned about “Moody’s” behavior on the 24th when Cedric died, it certainly took an awfully long time for Dumbledore to turn up to save me from that insane bastard. I’ve seen you and Professor McGonagall in a hurry. You two do not linger. It wouldn’t have taken any of you ten minutes to catch up to “Moody” dragging an injured, spell-damaged kid back to the castle…unless Dumbledore deliberately waited until it had been long enough for Crouch to either kill me or do—

Okay, I don’t think Crouch Junior had enough sanity left to do much aside from making me dead. Going to Voldemort never seemed to occur to him.

14.5. Moody and Crouch must not act that differently if no one noticed that “Moody” was a Death Eater all along. What the hell is the real Mad-Eye Moody like? Because if that’s the same behavior, why would Dumbledore want him near kids?

15. We have a really disturbing trend of shit DADA teachers at Hogwarts. I thought another Defence teacher was going to eat his way through the table when I recited the credentials of everyone but Remus, but then he wanted to know if Remus has a Defence Mastery, and I have no idea. That didn’t really make him any happier.

16. Right, sorry, forgot: Riddle’s Diary was another Horcrux. Good thing basilisk venom destroys those.

17. My brother thinks there were seven of them, me included. Seven Horcruxes. Seven ways for Voldemort to not fucking die. We just don’t know what they are, though we suspect that Helga’s Cup is one of them. Rude.
If you never see me again, at least you know that there are five left. Basilisk venom and Fiendfyre are your friends. Unless it’s another living being you’d prefer not to make dead, then it’s Mind Magic removal.

18. Isolation, literally and figuratively. If you want someone to be able to fight Voldemort, you’d want them informed, right? You’d want them to know what they’re doing. You’d want them to be aware of what their enemy is doing. You’d want them to know that they have allies, and that those allies are safe. You’d want those allies just as informed, because that’s how allies are of the most use in a fight. If you take away all sources of information and isolate your weapon, what good is it doing anyone? What good does it do for the weapon, especially if your chosen weapon is a person?

You can fight someone blind, but you’re not going to do a very good job of it. People who go into battles blind usually die.

Dumbledore made certain that I was completely isolated after Voldemort’s return. No information. No contact with anyone. It isn’t as if I wasn’t still suffering or anything.

It makes no fucking sense at all to have done that.

19. If I hadn’t been rescued on my birthday, I—well. Shit.

If Dumbledore really does want me dead, the rest of that summer would have solved the problem for him nicely.

20. Why was Dumbledore happy when he learnt about Voldemort stealing my blood to lessen the sacrificial protection? It isn’t something Dumbledore said aloud, but I’ve reviewed that memory a lot and… Triumph. That’s a better word than happy. It was like Voldemort’s success was also his success, and that’s pretty much terrifying.

21. Dumbledore says he wants to win this war. To destroy Voldemort. From my point of view, I have to wonder if he really wants that at all.

There. Now you can crumple this up and toss it.

By the way, the more you terrify Neville, the more things around him tend to explode. Maybe aim that at Crabbe instead. At least Crabbe wouldn’t notice. Fewer explosions are preferable, right?

I just realized I can’t sign my name to this. That’s really funny.

Severus doesn’t find it funny. He’s a bit preoccupied with being infuriated.

He has to make himself open the last letter, which is not as ominously thick as the previous. Inside is only a single sheet, but reading it makes him feel like the world has turned to ash.

23rd Aprilis 1,015

The Kingdom of Muireb under the Reign of Findlaích mac Ruaidrí, High King of the North
I used to be happy here.

Maybe I will be again. I just can’t see that possibility from where I’m standing right now.

Staring into a mirror of late, I think I understand you a bit better than I did before. I know this expression, even if it’s been long years since I’ve seen it.

You know exactly what the worst sort of loss is like. It’s on your face, in your eyes, and snaps like lightning in your voice.

It’s sarding awful. No one should have to feel this once, let alone—well, I think I must have lost count by now.

I haven’t. I just like to pretend that I have, as the number is so very much unwanted.

I once asked Myrddin if I’d lost enough yet for his liking. I need to learn not to say shit like that. He’s five years dead and I think my next task after writing this letter is going to be wandering out to scream at his grave marker.

I should not be writing this, not given the gap of twenty-odd years that separates this letter from the last, but I’m utterly sloshed, pissed, far into my cups, whichever term you would like to use, so I don’t care.

Not certain I’m recalling modern English properly, either.

Tonight is perhaps the fourth time I can recall that I’ve dreamt of you, of all people. Not…that way. Not in a way that would make you uncomfortable, believe me.

Then again, maybe it would. I dream of you being happy. Gods know you never seemed to be fond of the idea.

I hope they’re not just dreams. I hope it’s that Divinatory spark.

Someone should be happy after everything that’s gone wrong, then and now. There is no reason why it can’t be you.

—Nizar Deslizarse

*         *         *         *

If Salazar were a younger man, Severus’s sudden arrival, combined with the palpable anger radiating from him, would have caused him to scramble for both his wand and a higher vantage point than a mere desk. Instead, he restrains himself to simply looking up, wondering what the bloody hell could have happened in the last few hours to turn Severus Snape into a storm cloud. “What’s wrong?”

Severus removes three ancient-looking envelopes from his robe pocket and gives them to Salazar. “These. Please ensure that no one else sees them until I return.”

Salazar frowns down at the first envelope. It’s Severus’s name and title, but in Nizar’s script. “What is in here?”
“Enlightenment,” Severus hisses, and then Apparates again. Salazar can tell by the way the castle’s magic changes that Severus has left the school grounds entirely.

“Yet when I ask for the same…” Salazar shakes his head. His little brother hadn’t mentioned that any of the letters he wrote one thousand years ago had survived, or that they were in such fine condition. Not until he’d also said that Miss Granger had received all of hers. Fortunately, such an act of trust came with the knowledge that not even a master of Mind Magic with a wand could best Miss Granger’s shielding. When Nizar chooses allies, at least he has always selected intelligent ones.

Nizar said nothing to Salazar about not reading those letters. Severus did not tell Salazar to keep his eyes to himself, either. Loopholes are loopholes and he will take advantage, every time.

The first letter is amusing. It’s very much his brother in a playful mood, and at a time when that was a rare thing, too.

The second letter causes the bottom to fall out from his stomach and land somewhere in the dungeons. “Oh, fuck me,” Salazar mutters, tucking the pages back into their envelope.

He casts his Patronus and addresses the Gorgon: “Minerva McGonagall, I’ve an emergency to attend to. Please inform my three afternoon classes that it’s their lucky day, as I will not be here to torture them with facts.”

He hopes he isn’t off to be preventing several murders.
If I took all the numbers off these houses and mailboxes, no one would know which residence is theirs.

I was gonna wait to post this until I answered the comments from last chapter, buuuuuut it's FRIDAY. It's tradition!

Kudos onwards to the beta crew!

Severus once chose to remain deliberately ignorant of Harry James Potter’s whereabouts, so he has never been to Little Whinging before now. If he did not know, then there was no means for Voldemort to discover the information. If he didn’t know, Severus would not need to lie to the Dark Lord if asked.

If he didn’t know, he didn’t need to think about Potter at all beyond Albus’s reassurance that the child was safe and cared for.

Which is it? Severus wonders as he stares at Number Four Privet Drive. Is Albus thoughtless, or was it all a deliberate plot to ensure that Trelawney’s prophecy was a success?

Does Albus actually want to win this war, or does he want to use it to his advantage in order to gain power?

That is a very Slytherin thought, but as he is dealing with a man who seems hell-bent on acting like one, Severus needs to give it utmost consideration. He isn’t certain how Albus would gain power from the events of this year, not after Fudge sacked Albus from every powerful position he held in Wizarding Britain’s society but for Hogwarts.

Except: they’re in the middle of crafting Fudge’s downfall. Albus may well have predicted that very outcome, and if Fudge is ousted from the Ministry, what does Albus gain? What does Albus gain by letting Potter die, whether it be at Voldemort’s hands or those of another?

Severus continues to stare at Number Four from the walkway on the other side of the street. If I took all the numbers off these houses and mailboxes, no one would know which residence is theirs. It’s an amusing thought, something he might actually indulge in when there is no one around to witness it.

Most of those walking through the irritatingly precise neighborhood ignore Severus, or offer him cautious greetings that he barely acknowledges. At one point, Arabella Figg wanders past, giving him a cautious look.

“Not. Albus,” he mutters.
Arabella pauses and lifts her shoe, as if curious to find out if she’s stepped on a pebble. “Blood in the water?” she murmurs.

“Absolutely not.” Severus hasn’t dwelled on his desire to make Petunia Dursley dead in some months, but he won’t murder her or Vernon Dursley. He’s visited Azkaban, and has no desire to rot there. “Truth on the wind.”

She puts her foot back down on the ground, her expression tightening into a brief flash of anger. “Good,” she whispers, and hurries on her way.

Arabella knew Potter was not safe. She would have told Albus.

*Either must die at the hand of the other, for neither can live while the other survives.*

The implications of that line of the first prophecy have always been clear, granted to Severus along with the knowledge of the child’s carrying of a Horcrux. Albus believed Potter had to die to make Voldemort vulnerable to death.

Nizar has never trusted Albus. It’s clear from that second letter that he once remembered why. He also wanted Severus to prove him wrong. If Severus is going to do so, then this is where it starts.

He already suspects that he is going to fail.

At five o’clock exactly, vehicles start arriving at Privet Drive. Like clockwork, they each turn into their respective drives to park. Their owners, male or female, emerge from the driver’s side looking weary or relieved, glad to see the end of their daily exodus from London.

Severus feels his lip curl up in derision. He has never understood why anyone would wish to live this way, beholden to an unchanging job, unchanging schedule, living in houses where each matches the other. Even the gardens vary not at all. He might be beholden to an unchanging job with a consistent schedule, but his students definitely make certain that Severus’s life is not staid in any sense of the word.

The last car to arrive turns into the drive for Number Four and parks in front of the house. Vernon Dursley emerges, red-cheeked and sour-faced—and indeed, as Nizar noted, the size of a British cave troll, though Severus has never witnessed a cave troll bothering with pleated trousers, collared shirt, and a necktie before. Dursley was not a handsome man when Petunia began to date him, but he might have been considered pleasant if his thoughts and behavior were not so damned vile.

Severus waits for all of the commuters to enter their homes before he crosses the street and walks up the path to Number Four’s precise and too-perfect front door. He debates for a moment before deciding that the shining brass doorbell will be more efficient than knocking.

Dursley must not have wandered very far into his own house. He is the one to open the door, already sans necktie. He gives Severus’s black trousers, black jacket, and high-collared white shirt a brief up-and-down glance that seems to satisfy some odd part of his brain. It’s the length of Severus’s hair that seems to throw Dursley off-balance, as if he can’t equate one to the other.

“Good evening,” Severus greets him while thinking, *Imbecile.*

“Yes, it’s that. Can I help you?” Dursley asks, managing to sound gruffly polite instead of overtly hostile. There isn’t even an angry spark in his eyes to suggest that he recognizes Severus at all.

“I am here to speak with Petunia Dursley,” Severus answers. “It is a matter concerning her sister.”
That gains him anger, if still not recognition. Dursley scowls and tries to slam the door in Severus’s face while yelling, “My wife has no sister!”

Severus puts his boot in the doorway, preventing the door from closing. Before Dursley can try to bruise his foot with another attempt, Severus slides his wand free of his sleeve, just far enough for Dursley to recognize the wand for what it is. “Yes, she did. Open this door, Vernon Dursley, or this house will soon be lacking a door entirely.”

Dursley’s eyes widen as he backpedals, throwing the door open so swiftly it thuds against the inside wall. “PETUNIA!” he bawls. “IT’S ONE OF THEM HERE AGAIN!”

“Oh, yes. Advertise it to the entire street.” Severus steps over the threshold, unimpressed. “Then again, considering the volume of your shouting, the entire neighborhood must know of your doings all the time.”

Dursley slams the door shut. “Now see here—” he begins to bluster.

Severus glances at him from the corner of his eye. “Shut. Up,” he hisses. Dursley rears back as if struck, thumping against the wall, mouth hanging open in wordless outrage.

Petunia emerges from a brief passageway along the stairs, presumably from the kitchen given the scents in the air. She’s dressed well, for non-magical styles of clothing, but is as rail thin as ever. “Vernon, what is it—you!” she spits, the hatred in her voice twisting her features from ordinary to utterly sour. “What are you doing here?”

“Having it made very clear to me that neither of you have any sort of grasp on basic courtesy or hospitality,” Severus replies. “I am here to speak to you of matters pertaining to your sister.”

Dursley finds his voice again. “Why—you’re that little Snape brat from down the road in Cokeworth! What’s filth like you daring to step foot into my house?”

“Thank you for proving my point in regards to your lack of courtesy.” Severus stares at Petunia. “Well?”

Petunia’s jaw is working, her eyes narrowed in revulsion. “Very well,” she finally says. “If it will see you away from here that much sooner. This way.”

“Dudley!” Dursley yells without leaving his place at the door. “Stay upstairs, boy!”

Severus hears a vague noise of unconcerned agreement. Dudley Dursley seems far more interested in whatever he is occupied by at the moment than in coming downstairs to greet a guest.

He doesn’t know if it’s a war mage’s senses or not, but lately he finds himself more aware of lingering magical impressions. The cupboard built into the underside of the stairwell, which has a lock on its door, absolutely radiates misery. It’s a tiny space that a child over the age of five wouldn’t be able to stand up in.

The ride to Frogmore was only seventeen days ago. It is no difficulty to recall what Nizar said to them while his hand was clenched around Severus’s fingers hard enough to leave deep bruises: *I do not like being confined in small spaces. I was fine until they darkened the bloody windows.*

*Why are small, dark spaces a problem?*

*I don’t recall.*
Severus clenches his jaw. That is one mystery easily solved.

The kitchen Petunia leads him into is spotless perfection, almost overwhelmingly white from ceiling to floor. It makes Severus recall Jane and Malcolm’s kitchen, which was clean but always held just a bit of clutter, signs that a family lived there and used the space often. Petunia’s kitchen looks as if it belongs on the telly as a stage backdrop.

Petunia makes a slight motion to indicate a chair. Severus declines without saying a word; he has no wish to touch anything in this house. It feels as if he’s attempting to swim through a slick of burnt oil just to stand inside this residence. It isn’t just the Dursleys, but a sensation of magic gone wrong. If that is part of the blood magic protection that Albus took from Potter and attached to the residence, then Nizar is correct. Once the magic’s ownership changed, it became as foul as the Dursleys.

Potter was never safe here. Intentionally or not, Albus ensured it.

“What do you wish to discuss?” Petunia asks with a sniff, putting a casserole dish on what looks to be an electric warming plate. She doesn’t offer any hospitality beyond the implied notion of sitting, but Severus would have refused that, also. “Be brief. I want you out of my house.”

“The day after Hallowe’en in 1981.” Severus takes a moment’s brief satisfaction in the fact that Petunia flinches. “I promised I would see to the welfare of Lily Evans Potter’s child, and protect him from harm. I trusted in another when he said that this had been done.”

“Dumbledore.” Petunia mutters Albus’s name as if it’s a curse. “We did exactly what he asked of us. Took him in, put a roof over his head, and dealt with his freak magic all the while. Why? Why would you care about that useless brat? My sister told me full well what you think of our kind,” she sneers.

“Albus Dumbledore is not the cause for my visit, and Lily was not entirely correct.” Though I certainly hate you and your troll-sized husband. “Harry James Potter was the child of my best friend. Why would I not be concerned about his welfare?”

“Best friend. Hah!” Petunia reaches over to adjust a setting on the warmer. “She broke it off with you. Cried about it all summer.”

If Petunia is hoping to hurt him, her attempts are pathetic. “Friendship does not work that way, but I doubt you would understand that. You and my mother are very much alike in that regard.”

Petunia glowers at him. “I’m nothing like your hideous freak of a mother!”

“But for the lack of magic, the resemblance is uncanny,” Severus replies in a bored tone. “However, she has the distinction above you of actually attempting to parent, even if she had no idea how to do so.”

“Get out of my house!”

“No.” Severus stares at her, letting frost wrap his words in a way that once sent lesser Death Eaters scurrying from his path. “Today I discovered just how little you valued that child, and that you did not keep your word to Albus Dumbledore. You did not safeguard Harry James Potter.”

Petunia crosses her arms. “We made him a part of this family, just as we were asked.”

“A part of your family.” Severus raises an eyebrow, letting the frost thicken. “Even I am aware of the fact that safeguarding a child includes caring for the physical, mental, and emotional well-being. You did none of those things. In fact, from what I can see in your eyes, you treated him like the lowliest
slave.”

Petunia takes several steps back until she’s trapped against her own kitchen countertop. “You stop it with that freak magic right this instant!”

Severus smiles and doesn’t react when she tries to take another useless step backwards. “I did not do anything. You hold no remorse, Petunia. No regret. There are some days when I truly do dislike the fact that I somehow developed ethics.”


“As you have none yourself, I am not surprised you would refuse to believe it possible of others.” Severus lets his expression go blank as he glances upwards. The bedrooms of the home are all upstairs. If there was an incident with bars on the windows, then at some point the Dursleys had to have conceded an extra measure of space to their nephew. “I at least had the decency to apologize to Lily, even if she was not willing to hear it at the time. Can you say the same?”

Petunia continues to glare at him in silence. That is answer enough.

Severus lowers his voice. “You have not even asked if Mister Potter is still alive. You are his aunt, and you have not asked. What sort of person are you, Petunia Dursley?”

Petunia averts her eyes. “He took off with that owl of his. He ran off, that’s all. That is what boys who are nothing but freaks and troublemakers do.”

“That does not change the fact that you did not ask.” Severus takes a step forward, amused when Petunia quails, her hands gripping the countertop in white-knuckled fear. “Show me his room, Petunia. Refuse, and I will make you.”

Petunia looks at him in mute fury before she leads him back to the staircase. Dursley is still standing by the front door, as if guarding it against other potential intruders. Severus grants him a disdainful sneer before mounting the stairs.

“If you’re here trying to get some idea of how to find Harry, I don’t know what you might notice that those blasted Aurors didn’t.” Petunia sniffs. “It’s beyond obvious that he isn’t coming back. We’re about to give the room back to Dudley, just as it was before those terrible letters came. It was Dudder’s room first, but we had to make…concessions.”

“Concessions,” Severus repeats, and then halts in shock at the sight of the bedroom door at the end of the upstairs hallway. An entire line of locks seal the bedroom door from the outside; a small cat flap has been installed near the bottom. The Aurors who’d investigated Potter’s disappearance had voiced disgust with the Dursleys’ behavior, but hadn’t mentioned anything about locks or flaps. It’s possible they simply didn’t recognize what they were seeing—or were foolish enough to forget that Potter’s wand, subject to the Trace, would not be of use for opening that door.

The second letter had mentioned literal imprisonment, but Severus hadn’t expected anything like this. He has no idea why the ridiculous number of locks used on this door is worse than the cupboard downstairs.

Petunia pushes the door open after she slides back the last bolt. “I’m not going in there until the cleaners arrive. It still reeks of that blasted owl.”

Severus pauses before he enters the room, strengthening his Occlumency barriers until they’re equivalent to dealing with Voldemort. “You do realize that if you attempt to lock me inside, I will simply undo the locks. There is no restriction on my wand.”
Petunia’s voice is getting shrill with impatience and anger. “Just get this over with! I need to serve dinner to my family.”

Severus gives her one more brief, warning look before he steps into the bedroom. Flipping on the light switch casts harsh yellow light cut through by shadow; the fixture is missing at least one bulb, if not two.

It is immediately clear that the Dursleys have touched nothing in this room since the Auror’s investigation concluded. Dust gathers on the three sparse pieces of broken furniture. The nightstand looks to have been scavenged from a rubbish pile. The chest of drawers is tilting to the side with one of its drawers missing. The bed is broken and slants at an angle from head to foot; the mattress on it is a castoff that even Severus’s own horrible excuse for a father would have found unacceptable. A threadbare quilt is balled up at the foot of the bed; the pillow is flat and ancient. Not even a bed sheet covers that soiled and spring-broken mattress. There is no carpet, just bare and unfinished floorboards. He sees no books, decorations, toys, knickknacks, or any other sign that a teenager lived in this room at all.

The only sign of occupation is the abandoned quilt, a sealed school trunk, and an empty owl cage sitting atop the chest of drawers. The door is hanging open, the water dish long evaporated of its contents. There are bits of dried owl treats left, but no container for them in sight—as if the child didn’t trust even that to be safe if he left it within reach of Dursley hands.

Observe. Only observe. If he does not restrict himself to the mindset he’d once employed to witness death without flinching, he might actually slip and kill these people.

Severus uses his wand to open a drawer rather than touch anything. Petunia lets out a derisive sound that does nothing to hide her sudden fright. The clothes within the drawer would not have fit that child in any of the four years Severus knew him. He levitates one of the massive shirts into the air, eying it speculatively. Goyle could wear that, or perhaps a few of the other students who insist on being the size of overgrown rugby players. A quick sweep of the drawers with a Sorting Charm does indeed prove the letter correct in another aspect, as none of those clothes are proper for a southern English winter, let alone a northern Scottish one.

He frowns. He knows that child had clothes that fit. He recalls seeing them on more than one occasion, even if said clothes were not of the best quality.

Were you Transfiguring these rags? Severus wonders, and immediately dismisses the thought. The only thing Severus and Minerva had ever publicly agreed upon in regards to Harry Potter during those first four years had been the fact that the child had been just like James Potter in a way that made Minerva wished to tear out her hair—he’d been terrible at Transfiguration. How James Potter ever became an Animagus is beyond their comprehension.

Nizar now excels at Transfiguration, even if he only bears a Mastery in the Metamorphmagus aspect. Severus wonders what particular lesson, or perhaps teacher, gave him the means to overcome James Potter’s lack.

There is a very good jinx on the school trunk’s lock to repel intrusion, excellent work for a student who had yet to begin his fifth year. It takes Severus a full minute to get past it.

Inside the trunk are school robes, scrolls, some textbooks from previous years, drying pots of ink, broken and intact quills, pencils, the missing owl treats, and Muggle clothing that would have fit during the child’s fourth year, all of it hidden away from the Dursleys. That child was purchasing his own clothing, most likely with Galleons converted to pound notes. He did so in a very frugal manner, buying it second-hand; none of it is even remotely new.
Severus clenches his hands on the edges of the trunk, fury temporarily overwhelming his own Occlumency. Damn Petunia Dursley and her holier-than-thou attitude, and damn this family. Thanks to Albus’s insistent meddling, Severus always knew more than he wished to about certain aspects of Potter’s welfare. A stipend was sent to this household once a month to cover the cost of the child’s living expenses, and it is beyond obvious that the Dursleys never spent a pence of it on their nephew.

He can’t decide if he is more enraged that the Dursleys stole from the child under their care, that they stole from the dead—that they stole from Lily—or if he is completely drowning in anger over Albus considering anything about these conditions to be acceptable.

Severus ignores Petunia’s toe-tapping signs of impatience and takes a brief glance at the scrolls, each holding the previous summer’s homework. Potter had completed every assignment already, most of it dated for the first week of July. That is quite a bit of effort for a single week, but he suspects neither of them did much sleeping after the night of twenty-fourth June unless potions were involved.

No. Even he is making the same blunder as the Aurors. The child had no access to potions for sleepless nights, not after leaving Hogwarts.

Isolated is not the correct term. Abandoned is far more suiting.

That is not helping to distract from his anger. Severus opens the last essay, the one he assigned to his departing fourth-years. He has to admit that it’s well done, especially as the child had no access to magical information unless it was already in his school trunk. This is at least an Exceeds if Severus were able to grade it in the manner he is free to do now.

No access to the magical world but by letter. There are no letters in this trunk.

Severus stands up and paces backwards until his shoulders are pressed against the dingy wall. He is familiar with the concept of hiding things. A jinx might keep a Muggle from opening a latch, but it will not save a trunk from the fury of a crowbar.

There. One floorboard near the bed is a mere hairsbreadth taller than its neighbors.

He kneels down and easily pries up the loose board, aware that Petunia is watching in utter disapproval. The available space holds the rest of the child’s textbooks from previous school years—nothing of Lockhart’s—a wooden flute, a torch with a pathetic, dying beam of light, two books on Quidditch, and a penknife that is definitely of magical make. Next to the textbooks are three wrapped Muggle protein bars, the sort one would find if they dared the overbright lights of a convenience store.

Severus has to calm his breathing before he collects letters, books, flute, and knife, dropping them all into the open school trunk. He isn’t leaving anything behind for the rot living in this house to claim, not when he is aware of the fact that the child will never be returning.

Salazar Slytherin, you have the forgiving tolerance of a saint, Severus thinks. The man had one thousand years to forget what his brother’s childhood was like, but still he came into this room, faced the harsh, unforgiving reminder, and did not leave the Dursleys dead and strung up on lampposts as a warning to others.

The trunk is sealed, shrunk down, and pocketed before Severus glances at the owl cage. He decides against it; when that bastard of an owl is in Nizar’s quarters, Nygell does not reside in a cage of any sort. Petunia can have the delight of disposing of the old cage.

Before Petunia can realize his intent, Severus is upon her, his wand touching the exposed skin at the
base of her throat. “Every living thing you touch will wither,” he whispers, all but baring his teeth at
her in restrained rage. “Everything, including your own son—unless your intentions are pure. Do
you understand me?”

Petunia stares down at his wand, wide-eyed with terror. “Define…define pure.”

It’s a very wise question to ask, a reminder that except for her hatred, Petunia had once possessed a
modicum of intelligence. “You can harm a child with overindulgence just as you can harm them with
utter negligence.” If Dudley Dursley once had two large bedrooms while his cousin had a cupboard,
it’s an easy supposition to make. “Think carefully on your intentions, Petunia. This curse will last for
the rest of your miserable fucking life.”

Petunia swallows. “You—you aren’t killing me? It would be just like you, freak.”

“If you are still attempting to anger me by using that word, it was a very pathetic attempt.” Severus
takes a step back. “Withering Curse, Petunia Dursley. If your child falls ill after you embrace him,
the fault is your own.”

Severus brushes past her when Petunia remains frozen in the doorway. He ignores the closed
bedroom door and the sound of a blaring telly behind it. Dudley Dursley is probably as unpleasant as
his parents, but he is still only a child. Children are more likely to choose to grow and change.

Adults, however…

Severus descends the stairs in his usual brisk manner. “Hello again,” he greets Dursley, and then jabs
the man in his significant gut with his wand before Dursley realizes he’s trapped himself in the corner
between door and wall.

Dursley freezes, beads of sweat already standing out on his face. “What do you want?”

“Petunia and I have already spoken,” Severus says, “though the tour was far more enlightening. I
thought I would depart, but not without first making my opinion known.”

“Now, see here,” Dursley starts to bluster, sounding remarkably like Cornelius Fudge.

“Silencio,” Severus mutters, not in the mood. Dursley’s mouth opens and closes a few times like a
comical goldfish. Then he glares at Severus in mute, red-faced rage.

“I’ve been considering what would be appropriate even before I stepped foot into this foul house,”
Severus continues. “The Curse of Incorruptibility is fitting, a bane for men like you.”

He gives Dursley a sharper prod. “Any work you perform, any project you build, any liaisons you
attempt to make—all of them will fail unless you are utterly honest in your dealings. If you steal, if
you cheat, if you are false, you will not prosper. I know it must be habit already, given that you stole
the whole of your nephew’s living stipend and used it for your own purposes.”

Severus smiles at Dursley, who is also doing a very good job of mimicking Fudge when he looks to
be on the verge of apoplectic heart failure. “You have a wife and child to support, Vernon Dursley.
You should be cautious in every business or social venture you undertake from this day forward.”

He lifts the Silencing Charm.

The blustering returns at once. “Now look, you! You can’t just go and do that!” Dursley shouts. “I
know from that freak’s time here that performing magic in front of normal people isn’t permitted by
your Ministry!”
Severus almost laughs in his face. “You were the caretakers of a magical child, Dursley. Underage magic performed by wand is not permitted outside of school. I am no student, and you’ve just been given a curse that will never end. No one will come from ‘my’ Ministry and remove it, as it is a curse that encourages improved behavior rather than the sorts of magical maladies or inappropriate actions the Ministry concerns itself with.”

“You can’t,” Dursley insists, as if those words mean anything at all.

“But I already have.” Severus steps away, wanting to avoid the reek of terrified sweat Dursley is starting to exude. “I’ve found that the best revenge is the sort that infuriates the recipient in a way that allows them to live with the results until the day they’re placed in a grave. Death is far kinder.”

Petunia makes it to the top of the stairs, wailing. “I did the best I could for him!”

Severus gives her a baleful look. “You did nothing,” he responds, frost returning to his voice. “Your parents were good people, Petunia Dursley, as was your sister. If they’ve ever observed you from the afterlife, I know with absolute certainty that Malcolm and Jane Evans would be completely ashamed of how you treated their only other grandchild.”

Severus turns his attention back to Dursley. “I wish to leave. Get the hell out of my way, or I will make good on my threat to remove your door.”

Dursley retreats backwards up the stairs so quickly he trips and lands on them. Severus gives the man one final, dismissive glance before he opens the door and escapes this foul house.

He doesn’t stop walking until he’s well away from Number Four, standing in the walkway at the junction of the next street. He feels like he’s on the verge of hyperventilating, but forces his lungs to patience, breathing until his chest no longer feels constricted. Then he belatedly remembers to return his wand to his sleeve, but no one seems to have noticed its existence.

He witnessed utter horror during the last Wizarding War. He instigated some of that horror himself. He can cope with the reality of Number Four Privet Drive, even if he is still struggling with his desire to wipe that house off the fucking map.

“I thought I might find you here.” Severus glances to his right to find Salazar standing on the walkway, close to the next house’s mailbox. “Feel better?” Salazar asks.

“No.” Severus swallows hard. “But neither do they. I would really like a drink.” He should not. He still fears a habit set one generation before him, but in this instance, drinking is something to do that is not performing murder.

Salazar walks over and slings his arm casually around Severus’s waist. He doesn’t flinch, though it’s a near thing. Severus has no idea when Salazar became one of the only people whom Severus not only trusts, but will allow the familiarity of touch without hexing them blind. Aside from Nizar, only Minerva and Poppy hold that honor, and that is by a dubious, scraping margin.

“Come on, then.” Salazar guides them both down the walk, away from Privet Drive. “There is a decent pub a few blocks from this cloned suburban hellhole. I would imagine you’ve not eaten since this morning.”

“Fuck.” He hasn’t; those letters arrived when the lunch hour was just beginning. Afterwards he was quite distracted from the idea of anything as mundane as a meal.

Salazar nods. “The pub it is, then. Don’t concern yourself with eavesdroppers; I’m employing that delightful privacy charm of yours.”
They’ve reached the next block when Severus thinks he has found words again. “How did you stand going into that foul fucking house last summer?”

“How did you stand it?” Salazar counters.

“Occlumency,” Severus replies, trying not to grind his teeth. “I haven’t had to employ it to such strength outside of dealing with Voldemort.”

“Mind Magic is exactly how I managed it, too, and still it nearly broke me,” Salazar admits. “The feel of that home and the condition of that bedroom were terrible enough. Be glad you did not see the weight he’d lost since Little Hangleton. My brother was justifiably concerned that I might be there to murder him, but I was a bit preoccupied with the idea of murdering the Dursleys.” His smile is not pleasant. “Alas, someone else has first claim on making that decision.”

That is probably for the best. Severus still stands by his words; death would be kinder than what he just granted to those two idiots. “Did you read those letters? The second one in particular.” It’s what Severus would have done if granted the same opportunity.

Salazar’s smile drops away. “I did, and fortunately it was not until I was away from the castle. Nizar and I both have a temper, Severus, but when mine is finally riled, I tend not to stop until it’s too late and there are bodies underfoot.”

“I almost feel as if I do not need to ask what you think of what was said.”

“It must be discussed, but later, and in specific company,” Salazar replies.

The walk to the pub gives Severus the time needed to sort through his own thoughts, putting things away to deal with at another time. By the time they’re seated in a booth in a dark corner, he feels some semblance of calm again. Being a master of Mind Magic has always been one of his strengths, and one of his greatest weapons.

The waitress who approaches their table is a natural blonde with stark black stripes dyed into her hair; she seems inordinately fond of eyeliner. “You’ve not been here in a while, love.”

“I’ve a job that takes me out of the country now, darling. Two pints of a good stout, if you please,” Salazar requests, glances at Severus, and adds, “Two baskets of fish and chips as well. I’m trying to keep it simple.”

“I’ll be sure and have the cook toss in a few extra chips in each basket, Saul.” She gives Salazar a wink and walks away.

The _Muffliato_ is restored when they’re not dealing directly with their server. Death Eaters understand the nature of Polyjuice, even if most of them would disdain to enter a Muggle pub. “You seem to have been here often.”

“I was all but camped out here for a time.” Salazar’s smile appears wistful. “I was waiting for Nizar to come along and step on a lovely Caterwauling Charm I left on the walk at Number Four Privet Drive. I didn’t know when he would appear, but I knew it would be after Hallowe’en. I stayed local, made a few friends, had more than a few pints…and tried to ignore the fact that I hadn’t seen my brother in nearly one thousand years. I didn’t know what would happen when that time finally came.”

Severus waits until the waitress drops off two pints of a very black beer. The taste is a blend of bitters, caramels, and fresh bread. Not his usual preference, but not entirely unpleasant. “I’m not certain how you could stand that, either.”
“Because I had to,” is Salazar’s simple, stark answer. “When you have no choice, you keep going. Keep walking. Keep breathing.” He tilts his head at Severus. “Had that charming family changed anything?”

Severus shakes his head. “Petunia confessed they were on the verge of reclaiming the bedroom, saying it belonged to their son.”

“What child needs two bedrooms in this age?” The smile that appears on Salazar’s face is too grimly pleased to be labeled a smirk. “What did you hit them with? I know there was magic involved, but not what.”

Severus lets out a long breath when the alcohol hits his body like a sack of bricks. “The Curse of Incorruptibility for Dursley. A Withering Curse for Petunia.”

“Oh, I like the sound of that.” Salazar’s grim smile has been joined by bright, gleeful anger in his eyes. “Lifelong?”

“Yes. Improve, or cause others to suffer and know that it’s your own fault. I could think of no better punishment for two people who’ve prided themselves on perfecting vile behavior.” Severus manages a terse smile of his own. “I wonder if Petunia will still be fool enough to give her son that unnecessary second bedroom.”

Salazar lifts his glass. “Clever man. I’ll drink to that.”

Severus knocks the heavy pint glass into Salazar’s, listening to the chime of good glassware. “I took his things. I don’t know if Nizar will ever want them, but leaving them would have meant their destruction.”

“That’s probably for the best. Better to let Nizar have the choice than to let idiots make it for him.”

Severus wonders if Nizar read today’s letters before delivering them. “For now, I doubt there will be interest. Later, perhaps. I’m far more likely to find Nizar with his nose shoved into a book written in Cumbric than I am to find him digging through an unfamiliar school trunk.”

Salazar chuckles just before their food arrives. “That would surprise me not at all. Nizar developed that habit with books at a young age and refused to ever discard it.” He takes a moment to flirt with the waitress again, expressing regret over the fact that he is now formally involved with another and thus unavailable. The waitress grins, unoffended; she tells Salazar to behave himself and treat the other lady like gold.

“My word on it,” Salazar promises, and then picks up their conversation as if it hadn’t been interrupted. “Eat a damned chip, Severus. You’ll fall on your face if you don’t feed that stout.”

Severus obliges him, amused. No one has needed to remind Severus to eat since he formally left Voldemort’s employ.

“What’s really on your mind? Aside from a quenched need for revenge,” Salazar finally asks.

Severus reaches for more food and finds an empty basket, a firm reminder that he missed lunch. A late tea after returning to Hogwarts might be a good idea. “I’ve still been adjusting further to what was, and what is. You believe Nizar may one day need to do the same if there is ever a restored whole of his memories. I’m trying to prepare myself for that, as well.”

Salazar gazes at him, the dominant green in his hazel eyes picking up a faint shine in the dim lighting. “It won’t change who he is.”
“No. That is something I do understand. But it might distress him,” Severus emphasizes, “like it did the first time.”

Salazar leans back in the booth with a second pint. “It might, yes. That’s a proper mindset to have on the situation.” He sighs. “If it wasn’t for what Gaunt did, I’d tell my brother to go sit on a surviving magical node to fuel the Preservation Charms into doing their jobs proper.”

“Nizar’s response to strong concentrations of magic tells me that is probably not the wisest solution,” Severus replies.

Salazar smiles. “He always did have to be a special pain in my backside.”
Chapter Summary

"Would this be the sort of discussion that involves, oh, a Withering Curse?"

Chapter Notes

Note: I am sick and can post fic if I wanna. *faceplant*

Note Note: Some people who are really concerned about certain curses should consult the dictionary's definition of wither. (I'd planned on joining that fun meta convo but there is apparently sick, and I'm gonna whine about it because it's also COLD and gloomy despite being the middle of May. No anger or calling out intended, just...check the dictionary. Severus plans too well to allow Petunia to leave a trail of bodies in her wake.)

Severus returns to Hogwarts in Salazar’s company, though Salazar quickly veers off in the direction of Minerva’s quarters. Severus finds it entertaining to contemplate the number of students who would still be appalled by their relationship—enemy sleeping with enemy. Minerva has no plans to inform anyone, though, and neither does Salazar. They’re enjoying the gossip too much.

Nizar told him that Miss Granger finally gave in and asked, in private, how a relationship between two people who used to hate each other was possible. Granger handled the explanation astonishingly well, but Severus is still of the opinion that Minerva has the right idea about letting others suffer their curiosity.

The classroom door has been behaving itself of late, at least where Severus is concerned, and appears as he approaches. He knocks when he finds the office door is already set with the S in the correct position.

A basilisk Patronus answers him instead of an opening door. The Patronus tilts its head to look at Severus, an identifying measure he didn’t realize Patroni were capable of. He has always sent a Patronus directly to a recipient, not used one as a butler. “Come in,” it invites in Nizar’s voice, and then vanishes.

The sitting room is empty of everyone except Kanza, who is once again stretched out in front of the fireplace, moping over the weather. He sympathizes; he left behind warmer weather in the south and returned to the north’s insistence on being bloody freezing.

He hangs his jacket, leaves his boots by the door, and walks down the hall, noting that every door is closed but for the added second bathroom. He goes into the storage room long enough to retrieve the shrunken school trunk from his pocket. For lack of any other idea, he leaves it resting on top of the storage trunk. Nizar can choose to store it as is, unshrink it, or set it on fire, to his preference.

When he leaves the room, Severus catches the sparkle of emerald out of the corner of his right eye.
He walks back to that row of new doors, facing the very dark wood of his own door. They haven’t discussed its presence in Nizar’s quarters since Nizar placed it there, but there is a new addition that Severus cannot recall seeing before now.

It’s very small, hiding in plain sight, and Severus has to peer close to make out any detail. The metal is burnished dark, the same color as the door. The design is still shaped like an S, but is of two intertwined basilisks in profile, one whose head faces up, the other whose head faces down. The green that caught his attention are two emeralds, not much larger than dust motes, serving as the basilisks’ eyes. It’s far more subtle than the metal on Nizar’s office door; no matter which way this one is turned, it will always look exactly the same.

“I can still get rid of it.”

Severus turns and glares at Nizar, who is standing there in only his shirt and trousers. He doesn’t even wear socks against the chill of the castle’s stone. “I’ve only just looked at the fucking thing. Are you in a rush to be rid of the potential for intrusion?”

Nizar tilts his head. “No, but I am well aware of how you feel about your privacy. That’s why the offer stands.”

Severus rolls his eyes. “How does this work, Nizar?”

“Only your hand or mine on that emblem will cause the magic within it to function,” Nizar says, which means Severus’s primary concern has already been addressed. “Even on this side, you’ll need to flip the basilisks for the door to activate. There is a match for it on the other side of the door, and it works in the same fashion.”

Severus nods. “Can others see this? Is it visible in the dungeon corridor?”

“They would definitely have to be looking for it. You’ve walked past it without notice for ten days now.”

He drops his hand from the basilisk design and scowls at Nizar. “I have not.”

“Oh, so you weren’t just ignoring it, then? I wasn’t certain.” Nizar grins. “Yes, it really has been there since the tenth.”

“God dammit!” Severus lets his head thump down on the door with a muted thunk. “I’d really prefer that I not be that fucking unobservant.”

Nizar sighs and walks over to him. “Severus, the past few weeks have been unbelievably hectic. When have we even had time to breathe, let alone observe changes to safe surroundings? If I thought you’d miss a danger on a foreign road, I’d be concerned, but you do tend to trust that nothing in my quarters will bite you. Well.” Nizar leers at him, bright-eyed. “Maybe not for instances of approved biting.”

Severus lifts his head from the door. “Yes, that is an approved exception. You cannot possibly have read those letters you sent me today.”

Nizar raises an eyebrow. “Of course not. They’re not addressed to me; they’re addressed to you. Why? Wait—where have you been today, and do I need to come up with an excellent alibi for your whereabouts?”

“I do like that you would be willing to provide such without question,” Severus drawls. “I went to Little Whinging, but no, an alibi isn’t necessary. Salazar would be willing to provide one.”
“Little Whinging,” Nizar repeats. “Why would you want to go there? Why would Salazar want to go back there? It’s like vileness personified by perfection!”

“Damn, I knew I forgot something! I was going to steal those fucking house numbers!”

Nizar bursts out laughing. “You know, I had that very same thought, but Salazar distracted me.”

“It’s dark. No one will notice if such a theft occurs.” Severus isn’t certain if he is actually serious about this. It sounds…fun. It also might be too much temptation, given the way he spent his afternoon.

“That depends entirely on you telling me why you decided to skip lunch and dinner to spend your entire afternoon and evening in that overly measured village.”

That’s fair enough. “I needed to speak to Petunia and Vernon Dursley.”

Nizar’s expression goes oddly flat and wary. “I see. Would this be the sort of discussion that involves, oh, a Withering Curse?”

“Did Salazar send a Patronus ahead to warn you while my back was turned?” Severus asks.

“No. Come here. There is something you need to see.” Nizar leads Severus back to his bedroom, where a pile of perfectly preserved but very old books are on the bed, along with a stack of paper and several of the Weasley twins’ Self-inking Quills.

“You own a desk, Nizar.”

“Yes, but sometimes it helps to think about a problem in varying locations instead of remaining rooted to one place.” Nizar retrieves a worn-looking book from a second stack. All of his journals are marked by the dates on the spine; this one has no writing whatsoever. Its only distinguishing characteristic is a strip of parchment marking a place near the beginning. “Take a look.”

After three vastly different letters, Severus isn’t certain he wants to know, but accepts the book. He flips it open to that marked place, noting the date. “Nineteenth February, 991. That’s earlier than the memory you showed us in the Pensieve.”

“That isn’t one of my standard journals—in fact, there is exactly one of these. It’s not of much use after 993, nor the journals either, as I started writing everything down in Cumbric.”

“Cumbric.” Severus tries very hard not to laugh at the vexed look on Nizar’s face.

Nizar shrugs. “I think it’s funny, too, if currently frustrating. However, this entry is early enough that it’s still written in modern English. The journal was Salazar’s attempt to prove that I had a minor talent for Divination. It was my attempt to prove him wrong. I didn’t succeed.”

“Writing down those flashes of insight?” Severus asks.

Nizar gazes at the journal, that odd expression appearing on his face again. “It’s not always flashes of insight. Sometimes it’s inspiration. On some occasions, it’s been images in my head. Sometimes it is also by dreaming, though that is very rare.”

Severus feels his grip tighten on the journal. “I see.”

_Tonight is perhaps the fourth time I can recall that I’ve dreamt of you, of all people._

_Someone should be happy after everything that’s gone wrong, then and now. There is no reason_
why it can’t be you.

“Severus?” Nizar is watching him carefully. “Please do not rip that book in half. I can repair it, but I’d rather not have it be a concern in the first place.”

Severus breathes out and gentles his grip. “My apologies,” he says, and reads the brief entry.

19th February Februarius (stupid Latin) 991

I'm writing this down because someone who I shall not name makes Such Faces if I don't record potential Divination dreams. I still say this one is not Divination, but the person making the Faces doesn’t agree because logic.

I should really not be writing anything down I'm still this fucking tired. Fuck Horcruxes, anyway.

He lowers the book to stare at Nizar. “Then this was just after—”

“The soul jar’s removal?” Nizar nods. “An entry in another journal mentions it happened on the fourteenth. Everything is a bit scattered, though. I’ve written clearer passages when drunk.”

“God,” Severus mutters, and keeps reading.

So: one dream from someone who has no business doing magic anything right now. I dreamed of Snape, of all people, visiting Number Four Privet Drive in Little Whinging. Why he would want to go there is beyond me. Why he would care is beyond my comprehension, even if I could think in a straight line right now.

Well, no, I do think he cares, but there is not wanting someone dead and actively doing something about it. This seemed rather, uh, proactive.

I hope I spelled that correctly. Right now that looks like a nonsense word.

Salazar thinks that if I’m right about the spy thing, then the spy is the most useful person to search for someone who suddenly went missing. (And didn’t even leave a note. I’m sure that went over very well with everyone. If they noticed.) That’s the logic part, but I’m still not convinced.

The idea of Aunt Petunia dealing with a Withering Curse, though—I’m probably a terrible person, but I really liked that. It’s too bad I didn’t get to see anything interesting happen to Uncle Vernon. Then again, Salazar is far too in love with the idea of the Withering Curse. Probably best not to give him any other Snape-levels of creativity. Salazar can learn to be terrifying all by himself.

He probably already knows how to be terrifying. He scared off the Moors when he was twelve years old because he turned a hill into a valley by accident, and Estefania repeated that story no less than three times over the holiday just so Salazar would either blush or flee the room.

I like my almost-sister.

I still say this is complete rubbish and my brain is taking a bender because of a Horcrux’s death, but there. One dream recorded that will probably prove to be of no use whatsoever, since I think I’m
“You dreamed that.” Severus closes the journal, not certain he’s willing to read further.

“Apparently. I don’t actually recall doing so.” Nizar takes the journal back, holding it in his hands. “Granted, given how that reads, I’m not certain I would remember it even if I did suddenly recall everything. Again: clearer passages when drunk.”

“Ignoring the second letter for now, which would be the reason why I felt a dire need to visit Little Whinging…” Severus has to swallow against a dry throat. He isn’t sure why the idea of speaking these words makes him nervous. “The third letter you wrote to me also mentioned that you’d dreamed of me, for what you suspected was the fourth time. Unlike this entry, you admitted to being utterly pissed. You also said that you’d dreamed of me being…happy.”

Nizar looks baffled. “I’m glad you were happy, but why would I write you a letter while utterly pissed?”

“The date was twenty-third April of 1015.”

Nizar flinches. “Ah. Yes. That would do it. Was it anything more specific than that?”

Severus shakes his head. “I’m not certain you were capable of specifics, even if you were capable of legible writing.”

“Right.” Nizar flips the book back open and starts skimming through pages. “Dates do not change in Cumbric if you’re using Arabic numerals,” he mutters, and finally comes to a halt about two-thirds of the way through the journal. “There. Twenty-third April. Oh, Cumbric, why did you decide to be such an utter bastard to me?”

“Nizar—”

“Shhh. I might be able to read…most of this, at least.” Nizar frowns and drops down to sit on the edge of his bed. Severus realizes after a few minutes that there is no point to standing in place like an idiot. He sits next to Nizar and watches him trace lines of unfamiliar text with his finger.

“Sometimes I think I have it back, but then I’ll stumble over a passage that proves me wrong. Tell me about Little Whinging, Severus.”

Severus glances at Nizar in surprise, though Nizar is still staring at the text. “Why?”

“As you’ve just read, I only know a fraction of it,” Nizar answers. “Besides, sometimes I think better if I’m trying to focus on more than one thing at a time.”

“All right.” Severus considers how to best summarize the visit without reawakening the vast rage he’s set aside. “You said the magic felt foul from across the street. It is far, far worse on the inside of that house. Your theory about the protective magic’s altered state was correct. Given what you’ve said, I think it might have protected the child from external threats while he was considered a member of the Dursley family, even if he was an unwanted family member. It would not have been useful for much else.”

“And Dumbledore did so.” Nizar isn’t asking a question, merely stating the truth of what they both heard Albus admit to doing.
“The child’s aunt and uncle were without remorse or regret for the way they had treated their nephew, and do not care that he is still considered to be missing.” Severus feels a growl try to build in his throat. “Petunia is convinced that her nephew ran off and refuses to concern herself any further.”

“Well, he most certainly did leave,” Nizar says.

“That isn’t the point. After seeing the conditions that child lived in, Petunia Dursley earned a lifelong curse that means anything she touches will wither unless her intentions are pure.” Severus is aware that his smile is not kind. “She was at least intelligent enough to ask me to define pure.”

“That sounds like a minor miracle.”

Severus hesitates, trying not to feel like he pried into someone else’s life uninvited. “I rescued the child’s things from that house. Another month and the Dursleys would have destroyed it all. I don’t know if you want any of it, but the trunk is in your storage room if you ever decide to investigate its contents.”

“I expect it will all be meaningless, but I do appreciate the gesture.” Nizar’s finger goes back up to the top of the page, retracing the words. “Anything else?”

“Vernon Dursley now has the absolute joy of bearing the Curse of Incorruptibility.”

Nizar lifts his head. “Cannot lie, cheat, or steal, or everything he attempts will fail?”

“That would be it, yes.” If Dursley is as much of an imbecile as Severus suspects him to be, Dursley may well bankrupt the family in short order. At least their child, one month older than Potter, will be seventeen in June of next year and thus capable of escaping a failing household.

“That’s a nice one. You’re punishing them with good behavior.” Nizar’s brow furrows before he turns to look at Severus. “Wait. You’re punishing them with enforced good behavior. You. What the fuck were these people doing, Severus?”

“You mentioned the whole of it in your second letter addressed to me,” Severus replies. “You wrote it down for a different purpose, but even summarized, it was…not pleasant.”

“Then the incident with the bars over the window needing to be removed by flying car was…what, a standard?” Nizar asks.

“No. That may actually qualify as one of the lesser incidents.”

Nizar nods and then places his finger back down on the dated passage. “Sometimes I wonder if I deserve everything that has ever happened to me,” he reads. “In my youth I left behind a responsibility, even if it was an unwanted one. Then I dream of a man who always seemed angry, always on the verge of rage and hate, and he’s smiling. If Severus Snape can find reason to be happy when anger follows him so closely, then I have no excuses for misery save for those which are pathetic.”

Severus takes the book from Nizar and closes it. “I am really not meant to be a gauge for another’s misery, especially when the circumstances are so very different.”

“I know.” Nizar leans against Severus to rest his head on Severus’s shoulder. “If I said I was pissed in the letter I wrote to you, then I was utterly sodden when I wrote in that journal. There is Old English, Catalan, Norse, and Latin intermixed with the Cumbric.”
Severus would very much like to avoid dwelling on a journal entry almost one thousand years old that mentions him by name. “Why not just apply the updating translation spell to everything you wrote in Cumbric? Unless the same magical restrictions against tampering with the library books are also attached to what you own?”

“No, there are no restrictions. That isn’t the difficulty.” Nizar sounds annoyed. “The problem lies in the name of the spell, Severus: Updating Translation Spell. It was designed to do its work over time as means of communicating changed. The spell supplies copies of existing texts in the dominant languages of the land where the books are housed. I could apply that spell to the Cumbric texts, yes, but no one is currently speaking Cumbric. There is nothing for the magic to latch onto in order to update the text. If I want these copied into English, I need to remaster Cumbric and bloody well do it myself.”

“I find it vastly amusing that you have all of your knowledge of Pictish back, and yet Cumbric, the dominant language you wrote in, continues to elude you,” Severus says.

Nizar sits up and rolls his eyes. “I learned that language once before, and I will learn it again. What else is in the other letter that has you so upset?”

“I’m not upset about this part, merely intrigued, as it’s in both the letter and that first journal entry,” Severus says. “By age sixteen, you had already discerned that I was still a spy for the Order. Unfortunately, you did not inform me of what leaps of logic you made to come to that conclusion.”

“I mention horrific things about the Dursleys in the same letter in which I discuss you being a spy.” Severus is treated to a narrow-eyed look of suspicion. “Where is this letter now?”

“With Salazar.” Severus glances down at the nail marks biting in to his left palm. “I’m really not certain if you should read it, Nizar. If I found it upsetting, then you might…I have concerns about the flashbacks that have been plaguing you.”

Nizar frowns. “Better that I have them in your presence than alone, yes?”

“You and your damned logic.” Severus gets out his wand and casts his Patronus. “To be delivered in Parseltongue: Salazar, I need those three letters returned, please.” His Patronus makes its favored flying spin in the air before vanishing. “I’m growing fond of the change, but some days I still miss my old Patronus.”

“Why was it a doe? You don’t really strike me as the deer type.”

Severus glares at him. “Yours used to be a stag. You have no right to cast aspersions on deer Patroni.”

Nizar looks confused. “Why a stag?”

That question makes Severus hesitate. “Because it was also your father’s Patronus.”

“Oh.” Nizar pinches the bridge of his nose before dropping his hand to his lap. “Hers was a doe, wasn’t it?”

Severus tries not to clench his jaw, but his shoulders still tense. “Yes.”

Nizar is silent for a moment. “My Patronus was not always a basilisk. It has changed twice, now that I know of that stag. What I thought of as my first Patronus is a creature we could never identify: a feathered serpent.”
“But not a iaculus,” Severus says, disturbed.

“No, not at all, though it was most certainly a draconic speaker of Parseltongue. It had no wings, but it did have feathers from snout to tail. It was very large as well, about half the size of my basilisk Patronus.” Nizar stares directly at the wall, his eyes focused on the silent ticking hands of the clock. “It changed to a basilisk after Elfric died.”

At least their Patroni ceased trying to mirror each other. “Because basilisks are protectors.”

Nizar nods. “All of my children were either dead or married, capable adults. I had no apprentice at the time. I didn’t even have Kanza yet. That was later in the spring. I devoted myself to my role, because that is what focus I had left.”

Severus is relieved when Rubinny Apparates into the room, the three letters clenched in her hand. She is also blushing like the brightest green flame of ignis fatuus. “Rubinny is sorry it be taking so long,” she says. “The Professor Salazar and the Professor McGonagall were—”

“Please don’t tell me,” Severus requests, holding out his hand. “Please never give me those details. Ever.”

Rubinny is quick to nod, causing the tiny silver chain around her neck to jingle. “Yes, Professor Snape!” She places the letters into his hand before Disapparating.

Severus hands the thickest envelope to Nizar, who accepts it warily. “What am I about to read, Severus?”

“The list of reasons why you do not trust Albus Dumbledore.”

Nizar gives the letter a baffled look. “Then I’m not reading it tonight. I might be tempted into killing a Headmaster, and then Minerva would flay the skin from my bones for forcing her into the Head’s role when she doesn’t want it. I’ll also need to speak to one of my portraits after I read it. I have no idea what I would have felt when writing something like that, and I suspect that might be just as important.”

Nizar tucks the envelope into the journal to hold it in place and then rests his hand on the cover. “It bothers me that I don’t know the person who wrote these letters and journals, Severus. The only thing that makes it clear that he is me and I was him are the events involved. A few days after that dream of your visit to Little Whinging, Galiena’s family was attacked by a Tempero-cursed werewolf. I did a much better job at recording the events of that day than I did of one random dream I didn’t believe was worth writing down.”

Severus would like to say that it doesn’t bother him, but it does. Not Nizar himself, but the nature of the arrangement, the vast amount of time involved—even if it was time used to return someone to the place he came from.

Instead of an attempt at consolation that would fail miserably, Severus gently turns Nizar’s head, feeling the rasp of stubble on his fingertips. Some of the tension bleeds out of Nizar when Severus kisses him, but Severus is surprised at how much better he feels, as well. Perhaps Little Whinging is still grating on his thoughts more than he would like.

“May I stay here tonight?” Severus asks, stroking Nizar’s temple, cheek, and jawline.

Nizar blinks a few times as he collects himself. “Of course. Any time you like. I’m not ready to sleep yet, but…”
“That’s fine.” Severus strips off his clothes for the day, discarding them on the floor. He would prefer a bath to wash off the lingering feel of being in a foul oil slick, but exhaustion strikes all at once. He slips beneath the quilt and then curls up around Nizar, who absently caresses Severus’s hair until Severus falls asleep.

* * * *

“Ah, Salazar,” Dumbledore greets him cheerfully, despite the nature of their meeting place. “Quite the interesting choice.”

Salazar glances around poor dead Myrtle’s favored bathroom. Some things he has forgotten; others he has not. He still recalls the very first time he saw this room while scrying in a silver bowl. “Given the reason I asked you to meet me this evening, I thought it quite appropriate.”

“I see.” Dumbledore’s irritating twinkle fades a little, allowing a bit of solemnity to show through that mask. “I suppose it has something to do with the Chamber of Secrets?”

“It does. Would you accompany me?” Salazar asks. “I realize it’s a bit late of a Tuesday evening for underground exploration…”

“Not at all. A man of my age does not find sleep easily.” Dumbledore peers at him after Salazar opens the passageway with a hissed request. “I do not think it finds you easily, either.”

“Some nights it’s easier than others.” Salazar puts his hand out when he realizes that there is a drop-off beyond the edge of the floor. “Wait. If this is the only way in or out…”

Dumbledore smiles like a commercialized St. Nicholas when Salazar’s hand on the stone and another bit of Parseltongue causes stairs to sprout from the walls, descending in a circular stairwell down to the bottom. “That does explain how Miss Weasley was able to return while possessed by Tom Riddle’s diary.”

“It does.” Salazar decides to admit to one truth, given he is on the verge of uttering a multitude of falsehoods in order to see a question properly answered. “This isn’t the original entrance.”

“I did think it quite odd that it would be so high above ground,” Dumbledore says as he edges his way down the stairs.

“I still find it odd.” Salazar sends a brief hint of magic ahead of them to light the stairs and the passage beyond. “The original entrance was in the first underground level. At some point after my leaving, the tunnel was utterly destroyed, caved in. This must have then been constructed to take its place.”

“Fascinating.” Dumbledore looks around with interest as they leave the stairs behind and enter the passage. “Then you must know of this particular location from Harry speaking of it.”

Salazar doesn’t need to fake his smile. “I did. I wished to come here to…to see to Jalaf. It isn’t right that the bones of an ally to this school should moulder in this cavern. However, there is a problem.”

Dumbledore doesn’t seem perturbed by the idea of a man wanting to give funerary respect to a basilisk. He chooses odd times to be properly observant of others’ feelings, and even worse times to forget such courtesy. “Oh?”
“Most of the things that respond to a Parselmouth in this school were designed by myself or Nizar, and have very simple commands. _Open_ and _close_ are the two most common instructions. With so few Parselmouths, why complicate things?” Salazar waves his hand at the doors ahead, locked and barred against further progress. “By contrast, these doors are not so simple.”

Dumbledore studies the emerald serpents, which are twined together to bar the doors. “I assume you’ve tried.”

“Oh, yes. I’d not have asked for your company if I were successful.” Salazar doesn’t volunteer to try again in Dumbledore’s company, and Dumbledore doesn’t ask it of him.

Salazar hasn’t actually asked those doors to open yet. He can’t stand the thought of entering that room alone, and would prefer to wait until Nizar is able to accompany him. The idea of Jalaf’s sacrifice still pains him too much, especially once he could recall its necessity.

“Only the Heir of Slytherin can open the Chamber of Secrets, my arse,” Salazar continues, forcing a bit of irritated cheer into his voice. “I built the Chamber beyond, but in my day, not only was the entrance in another location, there were no doors. There did not need to be. This was not a prison.”

“If it does not open with that simple request, how did Harry enter?” Dumbledore asks, but then he frowns. “I see. You believe Tom Riddle’s diary shade wished for Harry to enter the Chamber.”

“Young Mister Potter did relate that the young shade liked to drone on almost as much as the corpse-like version wandering about now,” Salazar confirms. “It wanted the challenge. It was too much like Voldemort not to see another Parselmouth as a threat.”

Dumbledore nods. “Then why am I here, if a Parselmouth cannot open these doors?”

“We’ll come to that. I also wished to speak with you in utmost privacy, and this is one of the most private places in the British Isles without chartering a boat and dropping anchor in the middle of the Atlantic.” Salazar turns around so that he can lean against the rough-hewn wall next to the doors. “You already know I retrieved Harry Potter the previous July. I wish to tell you what I found, and then I am going to ask you a question.”

Dumbledore’s eyes narrow. “I see. Go on, please.”

“At midnight on thirty-first July, 1995, I discovered a boy who was locked in a bedroom every evening after the dinner hour, whether or not that boy had been fed. The furniture was cast off and broken before it had ever been passed into his possession. He had no access to a washroom, so visiting the privy between the hours of eight at night and seven in the morning meant pissing in a bucket. He was literally being starved—and I am not exaggerating that in the slightest. He was suffering from the aftereffects of untreated damage from the Cruciatus Curse, which leaves numerous fractures in the victim’s bones, and that is aside from the lingering effects of the curse itself. He had severe post-traumatic stress that was being completely ignored by both the family he lived with and the magical world that was supposed to be looking out for his well-being.”

Salazar meets Dumbledore’s gaze, trying to keep the anger in his eyes to a dull simmer rather than flaming rage. “Knowing that you left a young man to suffer and starve, can you explain your lack of action to me?”

“People can change,” Dumbledore says at once, though he looks troubled. “It was my hope that Petunia Dursley would overcome her childhood selfishness and look after her nephew in a caring manner. I knew she was not performing her duties as she should, but before Harry vanished, I was not aware that their neglect was so severe. Harry never spoke of it aside from voicing his desire not
“And a boy’s desperate desire not to return home was not warning enough?” Salazar shakes his head. “Nothing I’ve heard excuses your neglect in this matter.”

“No, and it should not.” Dumbledore lets out a heavy sigh. For the life of him, Salazar can’t tell if it’s artifice, or genuine regret. “You are correct. I should have been more proactive in regards to Harry’s welfare. Though you did not inform us of your actions at the time of his retrieval from Little Whinging, I truly am grateful that you’ve protected Harry, even if is in an unorthodox manner.”

“And that’s why you’re not a smear on the wall,” Salazar replies. “You regret. You attempt to learn from previous mistakes.”

No matter if true or false, he will treat Dumbledore’s words as truth for now. If Salazar does otherwise, he will not accomplish the true purpose of this evening’s subterfuge.

“Some days I’m not so certain if it is ever really possible to learn, or if we keep making variations of the same mistakes over and over again,” Dumbledore murmurs.

Salazar nods. “Sometimes we do, but in this instance, I think it otherwise. I asked you down here because of the wand you carry, Albus Dumbledore. I want to know if the power you wield in secret can gain us entry to this Chamber.”

“I’m not certain what you mean,” Dumbledore begins to say, which includes a return of that infernal twinkling. It’s the most maddening method of guarding one’s thoughts that Salazar has ever encountered.

Salazar ignores Dumbledore’s protest. “It’s odd, the things you can see more than once over the years. Ignotus Peverell’s line is unbroken to this very day, and the Cloak he passed on to his descendants I saw once again with my own eyes on Harry Potter’s fifteenth birthday.”

He looks at the barred doors instead of keeping his eyes on Dumbledore. “The Stone with its unusual marking was held by a Peverell descendant named Fawcett who married a Gaunt, but it hasn’t been seen or heard of since the goblins fashioned it into a ring in the 1800s. Even they have no idea where the ring is now, and you know how goblins are in regards to keeping track of their crafts. The wand, though—the wand I last saw in the hand of one Gellert Grindelwald during the European Wizarding War.”

Dumbledore looks surprised, and perhaps a bit awed. Salazar has never been fond of the combination. “You’re aware that the Deathly Hallows are real.”

Salazar shrugs, smiling. “I’m older than the Hallows, Albus Dumbledore. They hold no surprises for me. How did you gain the Elder Wand? Did Gellert lose it to someone else before his final defeat?”

“No. No, not at all.” Dumbledore retrieves the Elder Wand from his sleeve and studies it under the light of the green-tinged torches. “I won it from Grindelwald himself. We dueled, and I won. I think, perhaps, that sentiment might have stayed his hand…or perhaps it is not as undefeatable as legend says.”

*I would wager on sentiment.* Salazar experienced the wand’s power firsthand, and he never wishes to repeat the experience. “Then you claimed the Elder Wand without the death of its previous master. As far as I’m aware, you’re the first to ever do so.”

“I did not want Gellert dead. I only wanted him to stop.” Dumbledore sighs and steps back in order to aim the Elder Wand at the barred doors. “Do you know of anything in particular I should
“Given the lack of instructions for later Parselmouths? I suggest sheer brute force. Hence the wand,” Salazar replies. He mentally digs in his heels; he has no idea what he is about to witness.

“Very well.”

Dumbledore does try. He makes such an excellent attempt that Salazar’s ears ring, his bones vibrate, and all of the hair on his body stands upright just from the sheer amount of magic in the air.

There is more than one reason why Salazar hates the Elder Wand, but that is an excellent example of why its existence is a terrible idea. This much power is not meant to be held by human hands.

That power enabled Dumbledore to blithely strip away part of the protective blood magic Harry Potter was given as an infant. The Elder Wand granted Dumbledore the means to attach that magic to the Dursley family’s residence in complete disregard of a dead woman’s final gift to a beloved child.

Salazar feels a stir of unease. What else has Albus Dumbledore done with the Elder Wand’s power?

Dumbledore eventually concedes defeat by lowering his wand. “My apologies.” He draws in a ragged breath. “I don’t believe that is going to help.”

“No. Apparently not.” Salazar breathes out a sigh that is perfectly misinterpreted.

“Is there not another way inside?” Dumbledore asks. “Can you reform the stone down here as you do the castle above?”

Salazar raises an eyebrow, aware that Dumbledore asks because he also wishes to see the Chamber. “I can do that, but it will take a very long time. If I form a new entrance too quickly, there is an entire castle above us that would suddenly be residing down here, and not in a pleasant fashion.” Salazar reaches up to brush one of the serpents guarding the door, feeling cool metal move beneath his hand as it reacts to his touch. “For now, it was enough to have made the attempt. I will simply have to take the long path on this matter.”

“I am sorry that I could not assist further,” Dumbledore says, sounding contrite.

Salazar nods. “You have my thanks, regardless of the results.”

“It was an interesting experiment, at least.” Dumbledore returns the Elder Wand to his sleeve. A great deal of the sense of lingering, weighty magic leaves the air. “Now, as we walk back to the stairs, might I ask you something?”

Salazar turns away from the doors and inclines his head. It’s to be a trade, then. “You may.”

“You said that you took a personal interest in Harry’s education,” Dumbledore says. “Do you think Harry is now capable of defeating Voldemort?”

Salazar clench his right hand into a fist, out of sight of Dumbledore’s prying eyes. “I think the proper question to ask is this: should Harry James Potter defeat Voldemort?”

Dumbledore glances at him in surprise. “Of course he should. That is why Lord Voldemort chose him in the first place.”

“That mysterious prophecy.” Salazar gestures for Dumbledore to precede him up the stairs. “Prophecies can be tricky, you know.”
“This one was rather specific, but I will rephrase,” Dumbledore says. “When do you think Harry will be capable of defeating Voldemort?”

Oh, the many ways Salazar could answer that question. “I think, Albus, that when Voldemort next acts directly against Harry Potter, he will come to regret the decision.”
Trust

Chapter Summary

“What have you stumbled into that is so baffling the three of you can’t figure it out?”

Chapter Notes

Re-hail the betas! @jabberwockypie, @norcumi, @sanerontheinside, & @mrsstanley!

Adele Greenwood considers herself an excellent student, if not stellar. She doesn’t often take top marks in her year, though she’ll readily admit that she’s usually distracted by learning the material, following along the paths that stem outward from a single lesson, and then suddenly she’s missed a deadline. She used to fret about not being top of her year until Nizar Slytherin’s portrait talked her down from a panic attack one night in her second term and explained that it wouldn’t be her marks that mattered from year to year, but those stupidly named O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s.

That caused her to stop sniffling and muster a smile. The names of those tests really are quite stupid.

“I don’t understand why the Sorting Hat didn’t just put me in Ravenclaw,” she’d said that same year, bemoaning her fate as a hopeless academic.

“Because you already love learning for learning’s sake,” he’d replied patiently as Kanza twined around his fingers. “You needed to learn other things, and the Hat put you in the best House to learn them.”

“But I don’t have any friends!”

Nizar Slytherin’s portrait had raised an eyebrow. “You keep looking to the family names your parents insist you socialize with. Alas, much as I love my Slytherins, most of those bearing those names in your year are utter twits.”

“Then…who?” Adele asked.


“They’re all—foreign!” she’d sputtered.

“And you’re a black magician who is fortunate enough to never have experienced the racism that is apparently rife in the non-magical world,” he’d countered. “I doubt they appreciate the racism they receive for daring not to be British-born magicians, but Indian, Japanese, and Kenyan.”

Adele had bitten her lip. “My parents won’t approve.”

“Whose life will you be living, Adele Greenwood? Yours, or theirs?”

The portrait asked harsh questions, but they were useful questions, too. Every time they had a
rubbish DADA teacher—all of them except Lupin—Adele went to his portrait for lessons. She was raised and trained as a Silver Spear, but there is more to life and defence than dueling. Adele learned that lesson the hard way before she even made it to Hogwarts.

In the meantime, she hates Sir Isaac Newton. He wasn’t the first non-magical to understand these laws, but he gets the credit, so she’s stuck with him for the moment. He’s the place to start comparing his three Laws of Motion to Golpalott’s three Laws of Brewing. They’re annoyingly similar, and yet different enough to make her think Golpalott and Newton used to get pissed in the same pub and compare notes. Newton published his work three years before the International Statute of Secrecy, so it isn’t outside the realm of possibility.

“Given that Golpalott was a Slytherin? No, it’s actually quite likely.”

Adele has her quill flipped around in her hand, point out for stabbing, before she realizes that Professor Slytherin has joined her at her favorite table in the Common Room. “Oh.” She breathes out and turns her quill back around to proper writing form. “How long have you been sitting there, sir?”

“Well,” the professor smiles. “I didn’t want to interrupt.”

“I shouldn’t get so lost in what I’m doing,” Adele murmurs, trying to re-sort her notes into an order that makes sense. “Especially if I’m to be a war mage.”

“You already are a war mage. There is no if involved.” The professor tilts his head at the book. “Not from Hogwarts’ library, I’m assuming.”

Adele pats the two-hundred-year-old reprinting of Principia Mathematica Philosophiae Naturalis. “I asked Professor Snape, and he suggested I request a copy through non-magical sources. I sent an owl to Madam Tyler, and she was kind enough to send this back to me on loan from the library at Frogmore. It already has a number of protective spells attached. I think there must have been at least one magician working for the royal family when it was purchased. I’m also not sure who taught Madam Tyler about owls, but I’m glad she knew how to respond. We don’t exactly have telephones here.”

“Which is quite ridiculous, as there is nothing that would prevent a telephone from working in this castle. Mobile phones, however... those might be problematic.” Professor Slytherin smiles again. “Salazar and myself made certain that Madam Tyler was versed in owl delivery, though in response, she is demanding that Sirius Black have a telephone line installed in the Black townhouse in London.”

“The Black family townhouse. With a telephone.” Adele imagines that her parents would react in utter horror at the idea. At least His Grace only has to contend with angry portraits. “I hope the lot of them are spinning in their crypts.”

“It’s a pleasing mental image, isn’t it?” That was, and is, another lovely thing about the professor. He’s never minded that Adele’s sense of humor sometimes veers odd or inappropriately dark.

“I hope His Grace thinks so, too.” Adele frowns as she realizes she’s being rude. “I’m sorry. I know you didn’t come down to the Common Room just to check on me.”

“In a sense, I did exactly that.” Professor Slytherin glances over at the fireplace, where a cluster of Baby Death Eaters from several different years are doing a very poor job of pretending not to be spying on them. “I’d like to speak to you privately, if you have the time.”

“Oh—Professor Snape is already expecting that this particular essay might be late,” Adele explains,
trying not to blush. “He said that he’s far more interested in reading what my thoughts are on the matter of Golpalott versus Newton than in receiving work that is perfectly on time. I can speak to you now, sir. Where?”

“Your Head of House’s classroom is currently empty, and I have standing permission to borrow it when needed. Is that acceptable?”

He is always so polite—so considerate. It took Adele too long to recognize that his behavior is normal, and that her parents’ behavior is…not.

She is deliberately not thinking about the letter she received from them just that morning. It will keep until tomorrow, when her classes end early in the day and she will have time to devote to its contents. She doubts her parents wrote of anything pleasant.

“That sounds quite all right, sir.”

Professor Snape’s classroom is quiet at night, even if there is a detention taking place. To Adele, it often feels as if the room is breathing, a deep hush of expectation. It makes her think far too many potions have decorated the walls.

Professor Slytherin circles the room once, his eyes alighting on seemingly random things. “Somehow, I’m not surprised.” The professor retrieves his wand from his sleeve and beckons for Adele to join him at one of the workbenches in the center of the room. “Más allá de los límites de este círculo, ningún oído debe entender nuestras palabras.”

Adele watches as a blue-lit circle of mist forms around them on the floor, rising upwards to become a globe that rounds over their heads. Once the globe is intact, it vanishes. “Beyond the limits of this circle, no ear must understand our words,” she translates.

The professor nods in recognition of her correct translation. “There is something I need to discuss with you, and I’d actually rather not. The need for extreme secrecy is one of those reasons.”

“But not a lack of trust in me, or I wouldn’t be here,” Adele surmises, and is granted another nod. “It can’t be that bad, sir.”

Professor Slytherin grimaces. “It’s very unusual. Ridiculous, really.”

“You don’t have to tell me, then.” If he can grant courtesy, so can she.

The professor selects a chair and sits down, so Adele does as well. “When I became a war mage, I was always the only one. Myrddin didn’t grant me an additional title; he passed his along to me. Salazar had been a war mage for Castile in his youth and understood the nature of the responsibility, but in regards to what it means to be a war mage of this isle, I was always alone.

“Now there are five of us, Adele. Five. Perhaps one day there might even be more. While there will always some truths we keep to ourselves, other secrets, if withheld, can destroy trust. We five war mages cannot afford a loss of trust in each other…so yes, I do need to tell you, especially as this is a truth the other three are already aware of. I must also ask you to give me an oath upon your magical title that you will not speak of what I reveal to anyone other than those few I declare are safe to converse with.”

“Can I refuse?” Adele asks, even though her academic curiosity is screaming to hear more.

“Of course.” Professor Slytherin hesitates. “I’d rather you did not, but that is not my choice to make. It’s yours.”
“What else is at stake, then? It isn’t just about my not revealing what you’ll say to me here. This is about something else,” Adele says.

Professor Slytherin smiles. “And that is why you needed Slytherin, Adele. That is a realization you wouldn’t have been capable of in your first years, and now it comes to you easily. Yes, there is more at stake. If you agree to that oath, then you’ll discover the whole of what we’re puzzling through on Friday evening.”

“Then it must be a difficult puzzle.”

He rolls his eyes. “If three Slytherins can’t bloody well figure it out? It’s one hell of an irritating, annoying mess. Friday will involve expanding the circle in order to see if anyone else can see what we’re so obviously missing.”

Adele realizes she doesn’t have a reason to hesitate. There is nothing, absolutely nothing, that her Defence teacher could say that would make her violate her oath. “I, the Lady Greenwood, swear upon the noble title linked to the Barony of the Greenwood that whatever secrets you entrust to me will be kept and upheld, else the title be sundered from my line forevermore.”

The professor gives her a miffed look. “You didn’t have to take it quite so far, you know.”

“Did so,” Adele replies sweetly. “You were saying, sir?”

“Right now, it isn’t sir. It’s Nizar. We are equals in rank, Adele.”

Adele feels her eyes twitch at the invitation. “All right, Nizar.” She still nearly chokes on his name. It seems entirely improper, even if he’s correct about their ranking. “Tell me what you need to discuss. I want to know about this puzzle!”

“And that is why I think it so important that you be there. I’ll risk this because I think we need you.” Nizar glances away while Adele’s face heats from the implied compliment.

“I’m listening, sir.”

Nizar places his hands on the tabletop, which causes the torchlight to catch on his silver family ring and turn it to flaming gold. “Imagine that one day you wake up to discover that you were once someone else, someone you cannot remember at all.”

Adele shudders. “I’d rather not imagine it at all. That sounds bewildering and terrible.”


“Adele?”

“I’m adopted,” he says abruptly. “Salazar and I were not born as siblings, though we are blood family. He formally claimed me by magical adoption when I was sixteen years old.”

Adele’s eyes widen. “I would never have guessed that. Never at all. He might be older than you, but you look so much alike!”

Nizar nods. “We always did. The resemblance is even more acute if Salazar shaves off the beard. He claims that we were always meant to be brothers. I don’t recall anything that would cause me to disagree with him.”

Adele pictures Salazar Slytherin’s appearance if he were to shave the beard and realizes that yes, she
still has a crush on a man who is far too old for her, and possibly involved with Professor McGonagall besides. It’s harmless, though, and if she indulges a bit, that is no one’s business but her own. “Who were you before the adoption, then?”

“That’s one of the current difficulties. Due to the adoption contract, I can’t claim that identity—I can’t think of myself by that name or refer to myself that way.” Nizar gets a photograph out of his robe pocket and slides it across the table. “You have no idea what sort of bribery it took to acquire this from the Prophet.”

Adele places her fingertips on the edge of the Wizarding photograph and pulls it closer. The image is of a very famous boy—or infamous, depending on the Daily Prophet’s mood. It’s a facing shot used for the Triwizard Tournament in the press last year; Potter is wearing the tournament uniform. She didn’t know Potter very well beyond seeing him in the halls, but Adele always thought he looked rather unhappy for someone who was dubbed a glory-addicted attention-seeker.

Then she looks closer, peering at the intensity of Potter’s gaze captured by photograph, the line of his forehead, cheeks, nose, and the shape of his chin. “Wait.” Adele glances up at Nizar. “You’re not serious.”

“I did warn you that it was ridiculous.”

“But—I—“ Adele stabs at the photograph with one finger. This is—this is amazing! “But—but who sent you back in time?”

Nizar sighs, a wry smile on his face. “Guess.”

“Your brother.” Adele feels an upwelling of pure glee. “He turned your timeline into a circle. Your brother did it, because he’d already done it! You’re you because you were already you!” she exclaims, and then starts laughing.

“I have to admit, that is not the sort of reaction I expected,” Nizar says.

Adele wipes at her eyes, still giggling. “Why? Who else knows? What did they do?”

“Professor Snape blew up a table,” Nizar says, which only sets her off laughing harder. That is very much her Head of House. “Remus Lupin and Sirius Black.”

“Because—oh.” Adele’s laughter abruptly dies. “The magical adoption. Sirius Black was your father, and now he can’t be.”

“No.” Nizar looks saddened by that. “Sirius didn’t take it well, not at first, but then he decided to be glad I was alive at all. It was… I’m told it was a very near thing. His—my surviving, I mean.”

“How bad—was it him on thirty-first July last year?” Adele asks, trying not to shiver. “Was it Voldemort?”

Nizar shakes his head. “No. It was the child’s surviving family.”

“The child’s?” Adele repeats the term, curious.

“It’s better to keep to that sort of distinction…and it’s easier,” Nizar admits.

What he then tells her in regards to last summer makes Adele’s blood run cold. It also makes her want to kill two adult idiots in as efficient manner as possible, but her Head of House already cursed
them. Now she’s angry with Professor Snape for getting to them first, and being so creative about it that she can’t even argue with the results. There is far too much proper vengeance about it all.

Adele slides the photograph back across the table. “Are you ever going to say something? I mean, are you ever going to tell everyone?” The school has been in an odd sort of holding pattern in regards to Potter’s disappearance, especially the Gryffindors.

Draco is going to be so disappointed. With the prospect of having a good Slytherin Quidditch team in the air next year, he wanted to fly against Potter as Seeker again, but without the intense desire to smash each other to bits on brooms. Draco wanted to do it right.

Nizar shakes his head. “I’m not that person, Adele. I was that child for sixteen years, yes, but even without being able to recall everything, I’ve been myself for over one thousand years. I don’t yet know how that child’s disappearance will be resolved, but I’d really rather it not be because they are equating him to me.”

“I understand,” Adele says, and she does, if not perfectly. She wouldn’t want to claim to be someone she couldn’t remember, either. There is so much time between them, too! Professor Nizar Slytherin is Hogwarts’ Defence Teacher, her Protectoris, a war mage forged one thousand years ago. There is no true way to compare that lost boy with the portrait-preserved man.

Well, she did watch Potter fly on a broom against a Hungarian Horntail last term. She can be perfectly polite and still recognize that Nizar is insane enough to do exactly the same thing, if circumstances were to require it.

Adele puts aside the whirling academic possibilities regarding time travel and pre-performed actions. “You wouldn’t tell me this unless the puzzle you mentioned is tied up with your previous identity. What have you stumbled into that is so baffling the three of you can’t figure it out?”

* * * * *

Wednesday is often the busiest day of Severus’s teaching week. He attends dinner to find that Nizar isn’t in the Great Hall. “And how was your day?” he asks Minerva and Salazar.

“I’ll kill them all myself,” Minerva mutters under her breath.

_Seventh-years_, Severus surmises. It was most likely the Weasley twins who led the charge into idiocy, but none of Minerva’s N.E.W.T. students seem disfigured or damaged.

Salazar glances at Albus’s chair, which is empty. “I had such the interesting conversation last night. I’ll tell you about it later. Nizar?”

“No idea,” Severus replies. Nizar was gone from the bed when Severus awoke that morning, a note left behind informing Severus that the lunatic he’s dating went for a run—not to the Heights this time—and would find Severus after classes in the evening. He doesn’t know if Nizar has read any of those letters yet, but if Albus’s chair is empty because the man is dead, Severus will shed no tears.

He starts on the seventh floor in his attempt to find Nizar after dinner, and much like seventh January, makes a full bloody tour of the castle before it occurs to him that he should have checked the Marauder’s Map from the start. He does get to scare the life out of a trio of first-years attempting to bully a smaller child from a non-magical home in a different House, assigning them separate
detentions with Filch, Minerva, and Filius respective to their various failings. Filch will enjoy having the Pure-blood in his clutches tomorrow evening.

Nizar is in his sitting room when Severus returns to consult the map. “Fucking finally,” Severus growls out. “I’ve been searching for you for an hour.”

“Were you?” Nizar looks surprised. “I wonder if that privacy spell has a side effect we never noticed.”

Severus regards him in silence for a moment. Nizar is seated in one of his chairs near the hearth, his bare feet resting on an edge of the coffee table. The three ancient letters addressed to Severus are separated from their envelopes; the most damning of them has been placed along the length of the table, page by page. “You’ve read them.”

“I did, yes. Before dinner this evening.”

He expected a bit more of a reaction than this quiet contemplation. “Is he dead?”

Nizar raises an eyebrow. “Do you mean Dumbledore? Not unless someone else decided they couldn’t stand the spangled prick and strangled the life out of him.”

Severus frowns. “After witnessing your reaction to Dolores Umbridge and her Blood Quill, I suppose I expected a similar response.”

“Yes, well, Dolores wasn’t master of the fucking Elder Wand,” Nizar replies. He props his elbow on the chair and rests his chin on his hand. “Though if it was foul language you were looking for, my portrait certainly voiced enough of it.”

Severus gives up and sits down on the sofa opposite Nizar. “Then what’s the problem?”

“A lack of information.” Nizar glances down at the letters. “Don’t hear me wrong. These were quite informative, but the situation is different.”

“You mean Albus isn’t actively torturing anyone,” Severus says, feeling his lip curl in derisive humor.

“Only mine and Salazar’s eyes when he wears those damned bright green robes.” Nizar turns his head to contemplate the fire. The light casts his features in sharp relief, painting his face in warmth and shadow. Instead of emphasizing his resemblance to the Potter line, or to Salazar, it’s a stark reminder that Nizar has always been his own person, with his own Slytherin way of viewing the world that even Salazar sometimes admits can be difficult to keep up with.

It’s also a sight that Severus finds…distracting. It’s as much Nizar’s features as it is the sharp intelligence burning in his eyes. “Your speech patterns are shifting again.”

“Are they?” Nizar blinks a few times. “Sorry. I suppose I should be upset, but instead I find myself thinking on what we need to know before we proceed. I refuse to confront Dumbledore until we’re certain on the why as well as the what.”

“If he meant you to be a disposable weapon, there is little he could say that would justify it in my mind,” Severus says flatly. “Not who you were then, and not now.”

“You mean to dethrone him,” Severus realizes. It’s something they had previously discussed, and Severus is still not opposed to the idea.

“Only if necessary,” Nizar corrects, shaking his head. “If we’d dethroned every useless ruler we encountered, there would have been such the power vacuum across Europe and Asia that it would have made the fall of Rome look like a bit of harmless dust blowing away in the wind. Powerful people have their uses, Severus. Sometimes it’s far more useful to discover the whole of their objectives and then…” Nizar wriggles his fingers in the air. “Neutralize the harmful plots, whether or not the harm is intentional, while allowing their beneficial plans to continue.”

Severus shifts in place, trying to cope with sudden, unexpected, ill-timed lust. That might have been the most inspiring bit of scheming he’s ever heard. “Do you think Albus falls into that category?”

“That depends entirely on what it is he’s actually doing.” Nizar abandons the chair to get up and straddle Severus, a wide grin on his face. “You do realize that I’m going to be required to plot aloud more often if I earn this sort of attention.”

Severus threads his fingers into Nizar’s curling hair, drawing him down until their lips brush together. “I very much look forward to it.”

* * * *

There is no opportunity to discuss the very long letter that Nizar once wrote to Severus in regards to Albus Dumbledore’s actions—or the lack of them. After a quick comparison of schedules by Patronus, it’s determined that none of them will have the chance to gather without other responsibilities getting in the way until Friday evening after dinner. Then Sirius Black and Remus Lupin can join Salazar, Nizar, and Severus.

Salazar knows that Nizar is contemplating the idea of inviting Miss Granger to join them. She has a perspective they lack, both in her youth and her earlier friendship with Nizar, and has voiced discomfort with Dumbledore’s methods.

All of them, even the girl of the thirty-two foot essay, are capable of excellence in regards to unraveling plots, but Minerva McGonagall is the woman who has stood at Dumbledore’s side the longest as a teacher, Head of Gryffindor House, and Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts. Salazar desperately wants her in attendance, but first Minerva has to prove herself capable of keeping her thoughts away from Albus Dumbledore. Fortunately, when they discuss his Lioness’s progress with Mind Magic on Thursday eve, the news is excellent.

“I left the ‘bait’ dangling out for anyone with Legilimency skill to discover if they attempted to get through the shielding I’ve created,” Minerva tells him as they lounge on the sofa in his quarters. “I know where Harry Potter is. I even did my best not to think of it as the lie I know it to be. No one noticed, Salazar. I even asked Severus to push for it, though I did ask he not yet use a wand. He admitted that he found my shielding bewildering.”

“Given what you chose?” Salazar feels his stomach try to turn over at the mere thought. Countless Quidditch players in the air, all of them flying in indiscriminate ways and patterns. Salazar had to excuse himself, retreat to the bathroom, and be ill the last time he’d tried to cope with Minerva’s shielding. “I shudder to think of what ideas you’ll have for your secondary layer of defence.”
“I’m still dwelling on the notion,” Minerva replies, frowning. “I believe Albus might have tried to read my thoughts on Tuesday afternoon when both you and Severus were absent from the castle for several hours without explanation. He seemed quite baffled by what he saw. I, however, am extremely angry!”

“That Dumbledore attempted to read your mind without so much as a by-your-leave?” Salazar nods. “He attempted to do the same to Nizar. My brother was kind enough to warn him rather than outright killing him for attempting such violation. He also did not let the old man look at his second layer of shielding, which is fatal to anyone trying to view it, as is mine.”

Minerva looks at him in surprise. “How can a layer of shielding be fatal?”

“It’s a basilisk’s unlidded stare, Lioness.”

“Oh.” Minerva seems intrigued. “That sounds like an excellent idea.”

Salazar laughs. “You and Severus are such delightful overachievers, Lioness. Severus thought the same, but I refuse to leave either of you in a state of Petrification for months while we wait for mandrakes to mature.”

“Then it requires looking at a basilisk’s unlidded stare by mirror.” Minerva purses her lips. “Because one must be able to visualize it to show it to another. How do you not then Petrify yourself if it works so well on an invading mind?”

Gods, but Salazar loves this woman’s intellect. “It’s your mental landscape, not another’s. Your own mind is not dangerous to yourself unless you allow it to be. Your mind is dangerous to others because you tell it to be.” Salazar puts down his goblet of wine. “Severus needs to try to break past your shielding with a wand. You need to be able to withstand harsher interrogation.”

“Why must it be Severus?” Minerva asks.

“Because, Lioness, in terms of ruthlessness? Severus is the best man for the job, and it is another’s ruthlessness that we most need to guard against.”

Minerva thinks on that before nodding. “Then see if Severus is available. I know you’ve a plot afoot regarding tomorrow evening. I’d like to be involved, if possible.”

“Beautiful Lioness,” Salazar leans over and kisses her before retrieving his wand. “I want the very same. I’m such a fortunate man.”

“If you are fortunate,” Minerva says quietly, “then I am blessed.”

Salazar can’t respond to that. They’ve discussed their time together exactly once since he revealed his fate to Dumbledore’s Order on Compitalia. He would rather give her more—give her everything—but she does not wish to dwell on what will be.

He never expected to fall in love again, especially not in the final year of his life. Perhaps the gods feel he reached too far, asked for too much, and this pain is to be his punishment.

Severus arrives ten minutes later, looking angered beyond his usual dark-eyed irritation. “My apologies,” he says stiffly. “I was trying to reassure Miss Greenwood, and it was a process.”

“What’s wrong?” Salazar asks as Minerva straightens up in her seat in concern. “Is it the magic still settling?”
“No. That part is thankfully done with. The problem is her fucking parents,” Severus growls. “They are very upset that their daughter is the legally titled and of-age Baroness over the Greenwood, and they have no title or control over her doings at all. They are attempting to…” His eyes narrow. “The phrase they used was ‘Bring her to heel like a proper Pure-blood girl.’”

Salazar raises an eyebrow. “Are the complete twits dead yet?”

“Don’t tempt me.”

Minerva scowls. “Is Miss Greenwood actually reassured, Severus? She is doing too well in school to let such backwards ideas affect her life, especially given the responsibilities she has accepted.”

Severus sits down on the other sofa once Salazar makes it clear that he is welcome to do so. “Assuring females from Pure-blooded families is not an easy task, particularly those Sorted into Slytherin. Their families tend to hold onto the oldest ideas the longest, even if they are foolish ideas that are not nearly as old and traditional as those idiots like to believe. However…yes, I believe Miss Greenwood will be fine. She was not cowed; she was greatly angered. She now has the right to declare them banished from the Greenwood, and I think she is sorely tempted.” He shakes his head. “I expected the worst of interference to come from the Greengrass patriarch, but he has been surprisingly silent on the matter.”

“Perhaps he will be less silent if he discovers where his youngest daughter’s affections lie,” Minerva says, smiling. “Or have you noticed how often Miss Greengrass spends time with Miss Weasley?”

Severus makes a derisive noise. “I hadn’t noticed, though I think the more important question would be: has Miss Weasley noticed? The Weasley clan does tend to be a bit oblivious in that regard.”

“I’m not certain,” Minerva admits.

“Though given Miss Weasley’s proclivities and Mister Black’s constant presence in their lives, Miss Greengrass might be claiming a Blood Traitor and a Muggle-born.” Severus looks contemplative. “I always did want to see Geronimus Greengrass drop dead.”

Minerva tries not to laugh. “Severus, that isn’t very nice.”

“That man was an unMarked Death Eater whose activities meant his first wife and eldest child were killed during the last war, and not once has he done a damned thing to attempt to make up for those losses,” Severus retorts. “I would not be offended if he decided to conveniently die and save everyone else the trouble.”

“Based on your own words, he hasn’t returned to Voldemort’s side,” Minerva chooses to say.

Severus rolls his eyes. “Neither has Igor Karkaroff. I rather doubt bravery is motivating Geronimus’s decision.”

The face Minerva makes in regards to mention of Karkaroff is a treasure. “I’m surprised Voldemort did not simply reach through the Dark Mark and cause his death, then. We know he bears it,” she says.

“No.” Severus’s anger turns grim. “No, Voldemort wants him found. He will be making an example of Karkaroff.”

“As if we didn’t see enough of that mess during the first war,” Salazar mutters, and then notices that Severus’s expression hasn’t changed. “Severus. He will not be doing such to you.”
Severus jerks his head up. “What? Oh, not that. I was dwelling on another thought.”

“Well, pray do not keep us in suspense,” Minerva says. “Is it a concern for the Order?”

“Possibly, if they can be convinced to concern themselves at all,” Severus responds in a return of his biting tone. “Geronimus is not the only unMarked Death Eater who refused to return to the fold. Since they did not return, I’ve no idea what their motivations for staying away are other than the obvious.”

“Fear would be my first guess, as well,” Salazar says. “I suppose between the two of us, we would be able to compose a list of those who might be in danger.”

“List.” Severus scowls at the reminder. “That fucking list!”

“Have I missed something since this was last discussed?” Salazar asks.

“Only the fact that it keeps growing longer.” Severus abruptly changes the subject. “Why did you invite me here this evening?”

Salazar tilts his head at Minerva. “I need you to properly test the Lioness’s mental shielding.”

Severus’s eyes widen. “You’ve come that far in only twenty-eight days?”

“Well, I do not yet have a second defensive layer,” Minerva says after a glance at Salazar. “However, Salazar finds my first defence to be, er, displeasing. Through his training, I also know what it is like to feel another’s mental attempt at intrusion, and if they’ve succeeded or not.”

Severus bares his teeth. “Albus made the attempt, didn’t he?”

“He did.” Minerva lifts her chin. “He did not succeed, else that man would never have stopped attempting to invade my thoughts. The bait that I placed behind that shield wall would be too tempting.”

Severus rises and retrieves his wand. “In that case, I simply must see what you’ve crafted.” He pauses. “Please tell me it is not like Miss Granger’s blasted books.”

Minerva stands up, surprise crossing her face. “Miss Granger knows Mind Magic?”

“Miss Granger, as in all things she attempts, is terrifying.” Severus says in a flat voice. Then, without warning Minerva at all, he points his wand and casts the incantation in silence. Salazar’s Lioness glaring at him, but quite wisely stands her ground.

Minerva is sweating by the time Severus lowers his wand, but Severus looks just as fatigued. “Salazar, you poor fucking bastard,” he gasps.

Salazar is feeling nauseous just from his awareness of what Severus faced. “Motion sickness is no man’s friend.”

“Indeed.” Severus eyes Minerva. “Did they all need to be flying Firebolt Fives, Minerva?”

Minerva smiles. “It means they are all equally fast.”

“Of course.” Severus returns his wand to his sleeve. “You need a secondary layer of defence. I was able to break through the first, though I will admit, it took persistence. I could also determine why Albus would be all but cornering you if he’d seen that particular baited thought.”
“I don’t actually know where Mister Potter is, of course.” Minerva picks up her abandoned teacup and refills it from the tray that Winky brought earlier. “It would not have been ignored if it had been noticed.”

“No. It would not have been.” Severus stares at her until she lowers the teacup. “Venomous Tentacula.”

Minerva blinks at him. “Excuse me?”

“This is your second layer of shielding. Use a wall of Venomous Tentacula,” Severus repeats with a remarkable veneer of patience. “You are well aware of what it can do, as you are one of the very few who has seen a death resulting from the plant’s venom. That means you are capable of making your secondary layer of shielding fatal to anyone who attempts to break through it.”

Salazar is very glad that he was not the one to suggest such a thing. The fire in Minerva’s eyes would have caused a lesser man to shrivel where he stood. “I should break this entire tea set over your head, Severus Snape!” Minerva puts the teacup down with a clatter. “However, I am also aware that you are correct. As much as I dislike the idea, it would be quite effective.”

“Work on it tonight, then, and throughout tomorrow,” Severus suggests. “Goodnight.” He Disapparates without speaking further.

Minerva sits down on the sofa and crosses her arms. “I am infuriated that he’s correct, you know.”

“I’m aware, and relieved the idea had yet to occur to me. I’d rather you not be setting me on fire unless it is by far more pleasant means,” Salazar replies.

“Does this mean that I’m to be invited to join in tomorrow’s mysterious shenanigans?”

Salazar rubs at his face. “It does indeed, but we’ll be performing one aspect of it tonight, as tomorrow needs to be reserved for other things. Follow me, please.”

Minerva sounds excited as he leads the way down the hallway in his quarters. “I’ve never been down here before but to visit the loo. Are you certain, Salazar?”

“Very much so, though my brother might strangle me for doing this without warning.” Salazar pauses with his hand on the door to his study. “Please do not kill my brother. He does not actually recall anything you’re about to witness beyond the facts of it, and even that did not occur until well after your association with him began.”

“Will I be tempted to beat him with anything?” Minerva asks.

Salazar smiles. “I do need him to be capable of thinking tomorrow, Lioness.” He pushes open the door before gesturing for her to precede him.

Minerva steps inside, glancing about. The very first thing she sees is the older portrait of Nizar hanging on the wall opposite the door. “Oh! Nizar looks very young in this painting. I didn’t realize you had one, Salazar. What year was it painted?”

Salazar is glad that by the time this portrait was painted, Nizar had already altered his hair and his eyes. He prefers being able to do this in stages. “That was painted in 995. It’s technically a match for the set of the four of us Founders that Nizar has in his quarters but for the fact that I was the one who had it commissioned. Nizar tried to refuse to have another portrait done. He claimed it to be too soon after the last one.” He’d been correct, but Salazar hadn’t wanted to wait the usual amount of time, not when his brother had changed so much in those three years.
The family resemblance is the next thing Minerva notices. “You both looked so very much alike, even then, and it’s delightful work. I do like magical paintings for their realism, especially as it was not a favored method of painting until much later.” She smiles. “Do you have others?”

“I have only one other of Nizar, though there is meant to be one of him with those portraits that were painted in 1015. He told me to sod off for the 1005 set—which may not matter, as there has yet been no sign of those portraits at all.” Salazar takes her hand and turns Minerva to face the wall near the door, where his brother’s other portrait is waiting. Unlike the 995 portrait, this one is awake…while apparently deciding to lounge on his own bloody ceiling. It’s quite a feat, given that there is no such thing painted on the canvas at all, but Nizar’s portraits have always treated paintings as if there are no rules but his own whim.

“Minerva, this is my brother in the summer of 992, painted when he achieved his Mastery of Defence.”

“Hello,” Minerva says to the painting, a bemused smile on her face. “Young enough not to have the sense to remain in your chair, are you?”

“One can only sit on a piece of furniture for so many centuries before it is exceptionally dull, Professor McGonagall,” Nizar replies.

“And so formal, too,” Minerva adds.

“Formal?” Nizar considers it. “Yes, I suppose that habit is still set for this portrait, isn’t it?” He pushes off the ceiling and lands in a graceful crouch on the bottom of the painting before standing up, brushing off the black robes he chose to wear for the portrait’s painting. “I take it we’ve achieved a desired end, Sal?”

“We have. I think you should demonstrate why I’m introducing the pair of you,” Salazar suggests.

“Hmm. Yes, better me than myself, since I recall the feel of that disastrous bird’s nest hair and he doesn’t remember it at all.” Nizar’s eyes are already changing as he shifts the length and color of his hair. “I am not bothering with my skin. I earned this color by virtue of sunlight and genetics.”

As much as Nizar looks to resemble Salazar, it takes very little to make it obvious that he resembles another just as much. He has his famous father’s similar features and stark black hair that always seemed to do whatever it wished, but it is his brilliant emerald green eyes that always made Nizar unmistakable.

“Hello, Professor.”

Minerva clasps her hands to her mouth, wide-eyed and silent. Then she swallows and says, “A personalized education was necessary, you said?”

“Well, it did turn out to be exactly that,” Salazar answers, “though neither of us knew of what I’d done. Not in the year 990.”

“He didn’t bloody tell me,” Nizar says, pointing at Salazar. “He didn’t lie, but he did conveniently neglect to tell me of his identity. To be fair, he had to.”


Nizar shoves his hands into his robe pockets. “Because I’m his past, and he was my future. You can muck about with quite a bit, Professor, but this was not one of those things. And it’s Nizar, please. I can’t answer to my former name by the terms set forth in the adoption contract.”
“Salazar Slytherin.” Salazar winces; Minerva is usually kind enough not to use his butchered family name as a weapon. “Do you mean to tell me that you went to my Gryffindor on his birthday and sent him into your past without so much as a—a bloody by-your-leave?”

“No.” Salazar feels his eyes burn. “I did not.”

“He asked, Minerva.” Nizar raises both eyebrows when she turns her steely-eyed glare back to him. “Salazar did what was done because it had already been done. Even knowing what the answer would be, he still asked. I recall this where myself does not—well, there was that bit of a flashback, but otherwise, I’m a proper record and myself is a broken one.”

Salazar frowns at the portrait. “Please do stop referring to yourself as broken.”

“Then you’ll want to take the matter up with myself, as that is what his updating of this portrait told me,” Nizar’s young portrait replies with a cheeky smile.

Minerva reaches out, her fingers trembling, but they stop just shy of touching the canvas. “It really is you, Harry.”

Nizar sighs. “I literally cannot say yes to that question, Minerva. Magical adoptions are binding, and someone forgot to leave in a loophole that would allow me to lie about my name.”

“Are you going to be letting that bit with the contract lie peacefully at any point, ever?” Salazar retorts.

Nizar smiles again. “Not ever! It’s far too much fun.”

“You overlooked that pertinent detail, as well, hermanito!”

“Yes, but I’d just had a Horcrux yanked out of my head a month previous. There could have been wording in that contract that would guarantee me to spend one-quarter of my life as a cat and I might not have noticed—Professor, please don’t cry. I’m not bloody dead!”

“But you’re not my student any longer,” Minerva says, wiping at her eyes with one hand. “And I did not get to see you become the man you are. I wanted that, you know—I would have adopted you in an instant if Albus had not insisted I leave you in safety.”

Nizar stares at Minerva. “Bloody Albus fucking Dumbledore!” he yells, kicking the chair in his portrait and sending it skittering beyond the bounds of the frame. “Please tell myself to kill that fucking prick!”

“No, Nizar.” Salazar has to take a moment to settle his thoughts. Much like the Dursleys, another has first claim to killing Albus Dumbledore. “Granted, we may need to prevent Minerva from doing such after tomorrow.”

Minerva wipes her face again. “You cannot possibly mean to tell me that there are worse things than this!”

“Still not dead,” Nizar says in a flat voice.

“Oh—I’m sorry.” Minerva sniffs and then retrieves a handkerchief from her robe. “I didn’t mean to—dear boy, this is very upsetting!”

Salazar is relieved when Minerva allows him to draw her into his arms, though she continues to face the portrait. “He missed you as well, Minerva. Very much. Nizar thought you’d be quite pleased to
discover that he mastered the Transfiguration of mice without creating terrible and unnatural mutations.”

Minerva releases a watery chuckle. “Yes. I am quite pleased by that, and the Metamorphmagus ability…but not an Animagus, Nizar?”

“You can be one or the other, but not both. I desperately wanted to be able to change my hair and my eyes. Reminders,” he adds when Minerva makes a curious sound. “Unpleasant ones. If I wanted to view my parents, I’d recorded their images on scrolls to serve the purpose just fine.”

“I didn’t know that.” Minerva says quietly.

“I’m aware. After you go speak to myself, he has a book in his possession you should ask for.” Nizar grins. “*Formar La Magia*, though you need to be able to read Old Castellano, Latin, and Greek. Translation spells really don’t help very much.”

“Nizar, you are the only one who found that book to be of any real use whatsoever,” Salazar reminds him.

Nizar shrugs. “Yes, but not one of you were inclined towards a mastery in Transfiguration aside from myself. Our first devoted Transfiguration instructor understood it just fine.”

“That is because they were also insane,” Salazar replies. “Minerva, you may stand here and argue with this version of my brother, or you can go and greet the other one with a bit more knowledge than you previously held.”

“Er. Yes.” Minerva dabs at her eyes again with the handkerchief. “Harry—Nizar. My apologies, dear. I absolutely do promise I will not make such a slip in front of others.”

Nizar shifts his hair and eyes back to his preference. “It does help if you’re not staring at a much more blatant reminder.”

Minerva nods. “Yes, I do think that will be helpful. Does—does Severus know?”

Nizar’s grin is wide and near feral. “Oh, he knows. Severus does prefer the version of me that isn’t capable of taunting him with four years of Hogwarts teachings, though.”

“I cannot begin to imagine why,” Minerva replies dryly.

When they go upstairs, Nizar is still dressed for the day but for his robe and a lack of socks. Salazar must have lost what tolerance for the cold he gained in those early days, as he can’t stand the idea of walking about barefoot on these stones unless he’s cast Warming Charms on every single one of them. Minerva spies Nizar and opens her mouth, as if to start chastising him. Instead, she bursts into tears before clinging to him.

Nizar stares at Salazar over Minerva’s shoulder while holding Minerva in an awkward hug. “What did you do to go and break the Gryffindor, Sal?”

“I am not the one who did the breaking. That would have been you,” Salazar says. “Specifically, your 992 portrait.”

“Oh! We’ve reached that point with Mind Magic,” Nizar looks baffled. “I’m having the realization that I actually prefer Severus’s response to this over crying.”
Minerva resolutely steps back and wipes her face down with a handkerchief that is swiftly becoming an abused bit of cloth. “And what reaction did Severus have, then?”

“Oh, he yelled at me and then Apparated downstairs to blow up a table,” Nizar answers. “Then he didn’t speak to me for two days. I can handle that. Crying just implies terrible things.”

“Lies,” Galiena’s portrait says. “You were a complete wreck and you know it, Father.”

“ Shut up,” Nizar says. “Please let me keep my wreckage to myself, dearest.”

Minerva smiles. “I’d wondered what had Severus in such a foul mood the week of the Winter Solstice. I thought it was Voldemort.”

“Oh, it was the noseless walking corpse, too. The timing on that week could have all been so much better.” Nizar shakes his head. “Have a seat, please. If there is going to be more crying, it may as well be done in comfort.”

“Nervousness. That is when your vocal patterns shift so obviously,” Minerva exclaims in triumph. “I’ve been trying to figure that out for months!”

“Being really angry will do it, too.” Nizar calls for an elf and a tea tray for three, plus a bottle of brandy on the side, purchased with his coin if there is none in Hogwarts. Salazar sits down on the sofa next to Minerva in relief, glad that so far he has survived this revelation with his teeth still properly within his head.

Nizar waits until everyone has tea, though Minerva has poured straight brandy mixed with milk and sugar into her cup. “Bearing in mind that I only remember you in the context of our first meeting this past November onwards, is there anything you’d like to know?”

Minerva slips off her boots so that she can curl up with her feet resting on the sofa. “Are you happy?”

“I’ll be happier when Voldemort is dead and Salazar is not, but otherwise? Yes,” Nizar replies.

“Nizar—” Salazar begins to say, truly displeased by what he’s just heard.

“Shut up, Salazar Deslizarse. If you can make deals with Death, then I can bloody well attempt to come up with something that means I can counter your badly worded fucking contract so that you do not drop dead when Voldemort does!”

“Now that sounds like my Gryffindor,” Minerva says while Salazar is busy gaping at Nizar.

Nizar smirks. “Your Gryffindor argued with the Sorting Hat, Minerva.”

Minerva inclines her head. “It still would not have changed your protective nature. I’m staring at that very proof right now.”

“Fair. Sal, relax. I am not going to volunteer to die in your place,” Nizar adds.

Salazar lets out a loud sigh of relief. “Thank the gods for that, then. There were times in the past when you’d have considered such!”

“It wouldn’t be an even trade, at any rate,” Nizar continues blithely, ignoring Salazar when he glares at Nizar. “Seriously, relax. We don’t have to worry about it until summer, anyway.”

“You know it will not work that way,” Salazar murmurs. Minerva reaches out to take his hand in a
“And I’d rather you not endanger yourself needlessly. Salazar is quite insistent on the idea that you deserve to have your life again, even if it is quite different than what anyone would have expected of Harry Potter,” Minerva says.

“As it should be.” Nizar sips at his tea, frowns, and pours some of the provided brandy into it. Then he looks up at the portrait frames in the sitting room. Galiena is present, if sleeping, but Brice and Elfric are absent, no doubt off attempting to convince other portraits to join them in mischief. “This is not to be repeated in front of my children, Minerva. The lack of recollection isn’t just the failure of the Preservation Charms from the painting being moved, but magical spell damage when someone cast a permanent Obliviation Spell against the portrait. Obliviscaris Omnia.”

“Oh,” Minerva whispers, and quickly drains the rest of her tea-flavored brandy.

“My recollection of my time in the portrait is spotty as hell until the end of the 1700s. I can recall my life after the magical adoption to a certain extent. I remember how I received my titles, I remember my family, and I remember teaching here, if not in specifics. But for Helga’s lack of children, the Founders are literally my family, if still distantly removed in two cases out of three. Myrddin was a complete prick.”

Minerva muffles laughter with her hand. “Two of his teeth, hmm?”

Nizar smiles and glances at Galiena’s portrait. “My daughter witnessed the event. Galiena, please wake,” he adds in Parseltongue, gaining the portrait’s attention at once. “Minerva wishes to hear about the time I punched Myrddin on your behalf.”

Galiena smiles at them. “Oh, yes. I stopped crying in a hurry when my father did that. It was amazing. That was when I knew I wanted him to adopt me in truth, rather than the informal way we’d gone along with up until that point.”

“He protected you from someone who was behaving dreadfully. That seems a sound reason in my book,” Minerva says staunchly. “And I do have to admit, it is very difficult to think of you in any other terms aside from who you are now, Nizar.”

“Good.” Nizar lifts his legs to sit cross-legged on the couch, cradling his tea in his lap. “That’s how it must be. Tomorrow you are going to meet the few others who know of my past. If I have it my way, they are the only ones who will know that with certainty until Voldemort is dead. I’ve no wish to out myself in any manner afterwards, either. I don’t like that sort of attention.”

“And if it happens, regardless?” Minerva asks in concern.

“Then I get to have fun baiting reporters and driving them mental.”

Salazar snorts. “Joyous Spencer is ever so fond of my brother already, him and his evasive ways. Granted, I don’t think I scored many points with her, either.”

Nizar looks directly at Minerva. “And…if I could safely bottle Voldemort up and keep him hidden away until the end of your time on this earth, I’d do so in a heartbeat.”

Minerva bites her lip. “Nizar, you must not delay his defeat on my account. Not when so much depends on it.”

“It isn’t just you. Salazar loves you,” Nizar counters, and Salazar feels his eyes burn with tears for the second time that evening. “He’s loved very few. Of course I’d attempt to grant you both that time
“Speaking of things one deserves…” Minerva pours herself a second cup of mere tea, leaving the brandy out of it, before she bluntly changes the subject back to prurient gossip. “It does interest me that a one-time Gryffindor and a Slytherin, two beings who spent the first four years of their association completely at each other’s throats, have managed to arrive at this point without death, dismemberment, or severe property damage.”

“Severus did blow up a table,” Nizar reminds her. “I’ve known him since September of 1971, Minerva. Putting aside the fact that I don’t remember being that child, the first twenty years of our association had nothing to do with that child at all. Dwell instead on how Severus might have reacted had that child not argued with the Sorting Hat, and Severus had to live with the indignity of a Potter in Slytherin House.”

Minerva leans back, blinking a few times, before she starts laughing aloud. “I think Severus might have honestly attempted to eat a textbook in sheer outrage.”

“And then contend with the fact that he would have been unable to keep spying,” Nizar says, and Minerva stops laughing. “If he’d treated that child any differently than he treated his other Slytherins, he would have lost all of their trust, not just the child’s. Dumbledore would have been without his leashed spy that much sooner. Such might very well have gotten Severus killed.”

Salazar grimaces, empties his teacup of tea, and recreates Minerva’s mix of brandy and milk. “I’m so glad you told that fucking Hat not to Sort you into Slytherin.”

“Contingency measure.” Nizar looks pleased. “It’s good to know I actually planned for that, then.”

“Please give me back the brandy,” Minerva mutters. After she’s topped off her tea, she says, “You do not trust Albus, do you? Either of you.”

Salazar meets Nizar’s eyes; his brother shrugs. “Yes and no, Minerva,” Nizar says.

“Fair enough. I feel that way some days, myself.” Minerva frowns. “What is inspiring this lack of trust?”

“For now…call it a character flaw.” Nizar sips at his tea and makes a face. His brother was never very fond of brandy, preferring the sweet wines of the coast or the chilled drinks in the south crafted outside of Moorish circles. “From one former Quidditch player to another, think of it in terms of tactics.”

“Tactics,” Minerva repeats. “Go on, then.”

“You of course do your best to keep your tactics hidden from the other team until you’re acting on them, preferably to the other team’s detriment,” Nizar says. “But you do not hide those tactics from your own teammates.”

“I am very used to trusting my allies, Nizar, and I’ve known Albus since I was a student.”

“It is nice to be able to trust one’s allies, yes.” Nizar smiles at Minerva. “And know that they can protect themselves from one’s enemies. In this case, however…Dumbledore knew about the Horcruxes, Minerva. He even knew that the child was a Horcrux. He was not pleased when I revealed the Horcrux’s existence, and especially displeased when I mentioned the child’s predicament. Why did he not tell anyone else in the Order?”

“You’re right.” Minerva’s lips thin as she thinks on Nizar’s words. “Not telling anyone about you—
the child—that I can understand, at least until a certain point. It makes no sense to keep the rest of the Order ignorant about the rest of the Horcruxes though. Not when we could then be taught how to discern and destroy them, as you demonstrated with the…” Minerva glances at Salazar, who merely inclines his head. He can cope with its mention. “With Marion’s locket.”

“Until I understand why he refused to share pertinent tactical information with his allies, there are certain things I will not trust to Albus Dumbledore,” Nizar says. “He has gained points by responding positively to Salazar, but there is a literal list of reasons why I am cautious.”

“A list. The same one Severus mentioned, I presume.” Minerva puts down her empty teacup. “Is this what tomorrow evening’s discussion will revolve around?”

Nizar nods. “Yes, and I don’t think it’s going to be a pleasant one.”

His brother escorts them from his quarters not long afterward, claiming that he really is going to be sleeping that night rather than wandering around like a sleepless ghost. Given the tired cast of his features, Salazar believes him.

Salazar Apparates himself and Minerva back to his own quarters. “You’re all right?”

Minerva hesitates before nodding. “I am. I am still…I’m still saddened to lose my boy, but I also feel so very grateful that you decided to be such a Slytherin meddler.”

Salazar smiles and kisses her forehead. “Lioness, it’s quite literally in the blood to be such.”
Number Eight Door's Lane

Chapter Summary

Sirius Black goes to visit Bathilda Bagshot late on Friday morning. It pretty much goes downhill from there.

Chapter Notes

Still props to betas: @norcumi, @mrsstanley, @sanerontheinside, & @jabberwockypie!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“‘You sure you want to go alone, mate?’ Remus asks him for the sixteenth time.

Sirius knows because he can remember every single instance, all of them in the last two bloody hours. “Yes. I’m really certain. I’m not going to the house, Remus. I was there on Hallowe’en night in 1981, and that was enough for me.”

Remus is still giving Sirius a look that says he doesn’t believe a word of it. Joke’s on him; it’s all true. “All right. Send a Patronus if you do something stupid, all right?”

Sirius nods. He’s only made the mistake of not doing so one time. Never again. “I will. See you at Hogwarts after dinner.”

Sirius Floos out of Twelve Grimmauld Place to the public Floo hub at King’s Cross for the Hogsmeade platform. The train running north has already gone for the day and the southbound won’t be in until after dark, so security is nothing more than a bored Auror trainee who half-heartedly points at wand at Sirius.

“Should, I, uh, arrest you?” the kid asks. Sirius thinks she’s nineteen if she’s a day, and already signed up to fight wars.

He really can’t comment on her life choices. He was just as stupid.

“What does your boss say about that, kid?” Sirius asks, refusing to move in any way that would signal going for a wand. He isn’t in danger; he can Apparate faster than this poor trainee can cast spells.

The kid looks miffed. “My name is Penelope Clearwater, thank you very much. I was a student when you were…visiting Hogwarts.”

“Visiting. Nice euphemism for being out of my skull, I suppose,” Sirius replies cheerfully. “Tell Kingsley I said hello, all right?”


“Sirius,” he answers her, and then Apparates straight to Godric’s Hollow. It’s a bit farther than he
wants to Apparate in a single hop, but he also doesn’t want to be stopped by every magician roaming around the safe Apparition zones in England.

Sirius leans against the tree and breathes out a sigh of relief when the non-magical villagers nearby don’t notice his arrival. The Disillusionment Charm on the tree held up pretty well, then. He was taking a chance by using it, but he, James, and Lily meant it to be permanent, a way for everyone to come and go without having visitors Apparating into the back garden while hoping nosy neighbors weren’t peering over the hedge.

Sirius glances at the piece of paper he’s holding. “Bathilda Bagshot, Door’s Lane, Number Eight. All right, writer of my most hated school textbook. Let’s give you a ring and see if you’re at home. In any sense of the word.”

He walks down the street and turns onto the lane. The daffodils are sprouting along with spring grass, adding a bit of color to what is otherwise a very drab part of Godric’s Hollow. Sirius recalls walking this way once with Lily and James when they were still engaged, exploring the place they were going to live in together. There wasn’t yet a prophecy to worry about, a Fidelius Charm, or a fucking traitorous rat. Just the three of them, living in a village as utterly unlike London as one can get without running off to live in Hogsmeade. Sirius loved Godric’s Hollow immediately, like a feeling ringing happily in his bones. This was Godric Gryffindor’s home, and Sirius was proud to be of that man’s House.

“Thank God,” Sirius mutters as he finally makes it to Number Eight, which is further down the lane than he expected. He didn’t come here for that sort of introspection. He doesn’t want it, not right now. He would run right over to his spouses’ broken house and sob over the threshold.

Number Eight of Door’s Lane looks ramshackle and unkempt. The garden isn’t too bad, but the house needed a spot of paint at least twenty years ago. If that roof weren’t tin, the shingles would all be lying in the grass. Sirius counts it good that the windows are all intact and the pile isn’t tilting to one side.

“Someone forgot their Structural Preservation Charms,” Sirius murmurs as he mounts the front step, two layers of old, weather-rounded marble. There isn’t a chime, but a string attached to a bell. He shrugs and pulls it. The bell rings far too loudly right next to his bloody ear, but the sound also repeats just as loudly throughout the house. If the lady is home, she’ll know she has a visitor.

Please be home. He’s so curious at this point about Albus’s fucking motivations that he might be too tempted to break in and rifle through everything.

After a good two minutes, Sirius hears someone shuffling their way towards the door. Then the weathered grey door swings inward on squeaky hinges, spilling sunlight into the foyer of the old house. The light illuminates Bathilda Bagshot in unforgiving detail: she has coarse, thick white hair messily piled up onto her head, piercing brown eyes that look borderline unfriendly, and enough wrinkles gathered on her florrid skin that it might be possible to hide Galleons in those deep folds. Her clothes needed to be updated about the same time as her house’s paint, and she’s wearing two different shawls, all of it drab.

When Sirius was a young arsehole, he would have mocked her for being so shabby. Now he just feels fucking awful for her. “Madam Bagshot?”

That gets him a bit more animation than the blank stare she’d been offering. “It’s Professor Bagshot if you’re being polite, young sir. Might I help you?”

“I was rather hoping you could help me, but I’m not selling anything,” Sirius quips, and earns
himself a smile. Door-to-door salesmen; Lily used to complain that they were the absolute worst.
“My name is Sirius Black—"

“Oh!” Bagshot’s voice rises in shock and joy. “Oh, I thought I recognized you, young Mister Potter!”

Sirius feels the bottom fall out of his stomach. “No. Uh, er. It’s still…it’s Black, Professor Bagshot.”

“But you did marry him, didn’t you dearie?” Bagshot cackles and waves for Sirius to step inside. Sirius steel
himself and does so, hoping the floor is solid in the house. He doesn’t want to discover what Bagshot’s basement is like. “When blokes and ladies marry, they take the other’s name!”

“We never could decide what to do about that, actually.” Sirius hangs his jacket on a free wooden peg. There’s a spot of dust here and there, but the house smells like lemon, beeswax, and a healthy dose of sage. “Lily solved the problem for us by taking both our names. Lily Juniper Evans Black Potter.”

“Isn’t that quite the mouthful!” Bagshot marvels. She neatly hooks him by the elbow and steers him into her small sitting room, which is a straight shot from the door. From there, a hallway leads to what looks like a narrow staircase for the second storey. A clean, airy kitchen is visible through an open archway; another room is marked by its closed door. “I haven’t had a proper visitor in too long. Can you eat cake, or do you have one of those conditions that make it difficult?”

“I—tea is fine. Biscuits. I can’t recall the last time I had…” He trails off. Right. Cake. He’d last had a cake with Harry during fourth-year, when Harry could get away from that damned Triwizard Tournament nonsense to visit the cave in Hogsmeade.

Sirius pulls himself together. “I imagine your cake is divine, but perhaps another day.”

Bagshot nods, appeased. “Tea and biscuits it is, then. Feel free to look about, if you like, but don’t you go invading my privacy, young Mister Black!”

“Cross my heart,” Sirius promises, smiling his most charming Black smile. She bustles into the kitchen, but it’s a slow sort of bustling that definitely speaks of advanced years. Sirius doesn’t know how old Bagshot is; he only knows she published *Hogwarts: A History* in 1936. One of the first printings of her book is in the Black family library, signed by the author herself in a firm hand.

Bagshot has a lot of pictures on her walls in expensive gilt frames, the first sign of wealth he’s seen in the house. Many of them are old Wizarding black-and-white photos, or the sepia tone that the magical world adopted well before the Muggles did. The paintings are more interesting, vibrant and colorful. He thinks one of them is a portrait of Bagshot herself, who was already white-haired when it was painted in 1942.

Sirius peers closer at one photograph that is of two young men in something closer to color, but not quite there yet. One is tall, thin, blond, and looks like a bit of an arrogant tosser. The other is not quite as tall, red-haired, delicate hands. They both have blue eyes. Body language—definitely a couple.

“Oh, I see you’ve noticed my great-nephew and his young man,” Bagshot says as she returns to the sitting room with a tea tray. True to her word, there isn’t a bit of cake to be seen. The biscuits might give him blood sugar issues, they’re so covered in icing, but he’ll cope.

“Great-nephew and his young man.” Sirius always likes seeing reminders that Wizarding Britain remembered to keep some aspects of the old gender considerations alive, even if they did a shoddy
job of it for a long time. “Why don’t you introduce me?”

“I’d like to.” Bagshot’s expression falls into muted dismay as she settles down on the armchair across from the table holding the tray. “He’s in Nurmengard. They’ll never let me see him, and they’ll never let him out. I blame myself, some days.”

Sirius stares at her. “You mean that this is Gellert Grindelwald.”

“My great-nephew.” Bagshot lets out a great sniff and pours tea with shaking hands. Nothing sloshes or spills, but he can tell it’s hard for her. “My youngest nephew’s son. My brother, he was Elemer Grindelwald, married to dear Soffia Blau, and they had Keve, Gellert’s father. Our mother’s family was Austro-Hungarian, but father’s family was from Imperial Germany. My mother and father knew there would be tensions between our families due to the way things were at the time, so they eventually moved us all to England. Godric’s Hollow was such a nice place to settle…”

Sirius sits down on the sofa across from her. He considers the dull cast of her eyes, picks up her teacup, and presses into her hand. “Drink this, all right?”

Bagshot sips at her tea like a robot in one of Remus’s spooky Muggle science-fiction novels. A bit of life comes back to her eyes, at least, and Sirius breathes out a sigh of relief. Merlin, this woman needs to be in a care home. If that isn’t possible, she needs someone here. She’s already a bit dotty, possibly well on her way to being truly senile.

“Do you like your tea, dear?” Bagshot asks, her desire to be a good hostess causing her to snap all the way back into being present.

Sirius smiles and takes a sip. “It’s excellent,” he lies. She boiled the leaves too long. “You were telling me that you were from Hungary.”

Bagshot nods, selecting a biscuit with a heaping helping of marzipan slathered over it. “It was still an empire back then, dearie. Father had left Germany to live with our mother in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. I was Bathilda Panka Grindelwald in those days. I’d married a good Hungarian man, Lél Bagshot, before we came to Britain. Lél bought us this house, and we lived here until he died. Spanish Influenza,” she says sadly. “It didn’t do much to us witches and wizards, but my darling was a Muggle. It took Lél from me before we’d even had children. After that, I found myself looking into history, or looking after the family’s young ones.”

“I’m very sorry. I—I do know what it’s like. To lose your loved ones too soon.”

Bagshot reaches across the table to pat his knee. “I know, dear. Gellert wasn’t always trouble, you know. None of them ever are, not at first. Even children choose if they’re going to be misbehaving little louts.”

Sirius tries not to wince. “Yes, they do.” He’d chosen to be a complete prick.

“Gellert was a very intelligent boy,” Bagshot says. “Good head on his shoulders. Hogwarts was a good school, but my nephew Keve insisted that Durmstrang was the school for all of his children. I didn’t much like the idea. Even in those days, Durmstrang had a certain reputation. Alas, I was merely Keve’s aunt, not his dearly departed mother, so off to Durmstrang Gellert went.”

Bagshot sighs. “Durmstrang wasn’t good for Gellert. It was a cold place, and I think it made him cold, too. He was expelled at age sixteen.”

Sirius whistles. “I’m—shocked to hear that.” From what he overheard as a child, it takes a hell of a lot to convince Durmstrang to eject you.
“It was a terrible blow. Poor Keve, he never recovered, thinking his brightest son was now a failure. I took Gellert in that year. I thought maybe he might need a nice change of scenery.” Bagshot chews on a marzipan horror-biscuit for a bit. “There were two other magical boys in Godric’s Hollow that summer, Albus and Aberforth Dumbledore. Albus was about to begin his seventh-year in Hogwarts. Such a bright, clever lad, that one. Aberforth and Gellert didn’t seem to get on well, but Albus and Gellert…”

Bagshot gives Sirius a heartbroken smile. “They were meant for each other, they were. They fit like marble puzzle pieces crafted by that Muggle artist, Michelangelo. Gellert was smiling again. He was shining again, and I thought, ‘Maybe he’ll be all right. Maybe Durmstrang hasn’t broken this one yet.’

Sirius stares at her before jerking his thumb over his shoulder. “The boy in that picture of Gellert—that’s Albus Dumbledore?”

Bagshot nods. “It certainly is. His family lived here in Godric’s Hollow for quite a while, you know. They moved here from Scotland back in…oh, 1895, it was. I was hosting Gellert during the summer in 1898, so I introduced Gellert to Albus on his seventeenth birthday. Oh, they were both smitten at once. I still have some of the letters they wrote to each other. Then they had a terrible spat the very next spring when sweet Ariana died. Gellert left England, and I never saw him again until he was in the newspapers, the declared enemy of all Magical Europe.”

“Christ.” Sirius sips at his ruined tea, uncaring of the taste. Grindelwald and Dumbledore? A couple? Grindelwald was supposed to have had designs on becoming a Dark Wizard while still attending Durmstrang, let alone afterwards!

“I tried to stay in touch with them both, Albus and Aberforth. Such nice boys. Such a sad, small family by then. Aberforth is a bit standoffish, but Albus still speaks to me. He was a good resource regarding Hogwarts when I wrote my book. You’ve read my book, haven’t you?” Bagshot asks.

Sirius manages a smile. “Of course. It’s very good.” That lie is a bit harder to force through his teeth than the one about the tea. “My family has a copy that you signed yourself. We value our history.” Nizar and Salazar are busy tearing the book to shreds for being inaccurate, but he doesn’t need to tell this poor woman that her research was all based on history that was manipulated and falsified back in the thirteenth century.

“Oh, bugger!” Sirius puts down his teacup. “I almost forgot one of the reasons I came to pay you a visit, Professor.”

Bagshot isn’t willing to let things continue until she’s fed him another of the marzipan-coated biscuits. He hopes his teeth forgive him. “What did bring you out here, then? Not my tea and biscuits, certainly.”

“No, ma’am. It’s…I found a letter from one of my spouses. From Lily. It’s dated September of 1981.” Sirius fishes an altered version of her letter out of his pocket and hands it over to Bagshot. This one omits Lily’s ranting about Dumbledore’s odd choices. It only mentions that Dumbledore wished for Lily to meet with Bagshot. “I was hoping you might remember what this was all about.”

Bagshot pulls a pair of tiny spectacles out of her robe pocket and drops them onto the end of her nose. “Oh! Yes. Albus mentioned that he thought it would be nice of me to provide the Potter family with a friendly face. It wasn’t to be, alas; Lily never came to the house, and then that terrible business with You-Know-Who occurred.”

“Yes, but—the house was under the Fidelius Charm.” Sirius chews up the biscuit to be rid of it. “No
one was supposed to visit the house except for their Secret Keeper, and even that was dodgy work, Professor. Why was Albus risking my family’s safety for you to go and visit them?”

“Oh, I don’t think it was such a risk as all that,” Bagshot says airily. “A young couple like that with their first child, they need a good matronly figure in their life. Albus was just being neighborly, same as I once did for him. Oh! Did you know that Albus and my Gellert were good friends?”

Sirius sits back on the sofa, biting back several dozen inappropriate words. This isn’t like that robotic distance. Bagshot’s eyes are still bright and merry, but it’s obvious she’s no longer sitting with him in 1996. Fuck. “I didn’t know that, no. I don’t suppose you kept any letters of theirs, did you? I’d love to see what old Albus was like back in those days.”

He doesn’t know if it’s going to work until Bagshot smiles and gets to her feet. “I certainly do, young man! You just wait here. I’ll fetch them for you.”

He finds the Gilded Iron Pub in the village square looking exactly the same as it did in 1980. He had good pints here with James and Remus when Lily told them she was pregnant. Maybe the beer will still be good.

“Can I get you anything?” a young man with a pencil behind his ear asks Sirius after he sits down.

Sirius rubs his face with one hand and sighs. “Stiffest beer you’ve got on draught that’s not liquor or illegal, and perhaps a good meat pie. Anything on special?”

“The mutton’s excellent today,” the waiter says with a bright smile. Sirius notices the tattoos
climbing both sides of the kid’s neck and approves. He has a lot of those, himself. He’s still trying to remember which ones he got for good reasons, and which ones he has for bad ones. Fucking Dementors.

“Mutton it is, then. Thank you.”

Sirius waits until he’s downed half a pint of beer strong enough to escape the glass and crawl down his throat on its own before he opens up the worn green folder. A cloud of dust puffs up right into his face. Sirius coughs, glances around, and then uses a quiet charm to get rid of it. That was rank dust, proving that not all of Bathilda Bagshot’s house is as clean as her sitting room and kitchen.

There are only five letters in Bagshot’s old folder. They’re all completely fucking horrifying.

This was Albus as a seventeen-year-old? The champion of the downtrodden, the leader of the Order of the Phoenix? Defeater of Grindelwald to end the European Wizarding War? Coordinator of the only real defence for Wizarding Britain during the last war? This?

He shouldn’t have drunk that beer so fast, not without the pie to go with it. He feels like he’s going to vomit.

18th January 1899

_Hogwarts School of Witchcraft & Wizardry, Scotland_

**Gellert,**

_Your point about Wizard dominance being FOR THE MUGGLES' OWN GOOD - this, I think, is the crucial point. Yes, we have been given power and yes, that power gives us the right to rule, but it also gives us responsibilities over the ruled. We must stress this point, it will be the foundation stone upon which we build. Where we are opposed, as we surely will be, this must be the basis of all our counterarguments. We seize control FOR THE GREATER GOOD. And from this it follows that where we meet resistance, we must use only the force that is necessary and no more. (This was your mistake at Durmstrang! But I do not complain, because if you had not been expelled, we would never have met.)_

—Albus

“Albus, you complete prick,” Sirius mutters under his breath. _For the Greater Good_ was Grindelwald’s rallying cry during the European War, and Albus coined it.

How many times has Sirius heard Albus Dumbledore say that they were acting for the Greater Good? How many fucking times, and yet he never put the pieces together? Sirius has a bloody eidetic memory, and he never noticed.

For the Greater Good.

Sirius shoves the letters into the folder, the folder into his jacket, and then bolts for the men’s toilet. He barely makes it before he’s losing beer, bad tea, and two horrific biscuits to a commode.
He washes his face and rinses his mouth at the sink before scrubbing his hands. It isn’t quite enough. Scalding himself in the shower at home for six hours might not be enough.

Sirius gazes into the smudged bathroom mirror. “Albus, you were going to use my son to win this war. I don’t know if you meant for Harry to survive or not, but you were still using a child as your tool. For your damned Greater Good.”

Nizar told him this in January, and Sirius heard him, but the belief wasn’t there. Not really. Saying it aloud makes it real, and it doesn’t help at all.

Right now, there is only one thing Sirius knows to be true. Dumbledore has shown by his actions on many occasions that he wants Tom Riddle defeated. Albus Dumbledore wants to end the war. The question to ask now is daunting in its false simplicity: why?

Sirius returns to his booth, finds his tattooed server waiting for him with the pie, and asks for it to be bagged up for takeaway. He can’t stand the thought of trying to eat lunch right now.

“You all right, mate?” the waiter asks in concern as he brings back a properly folded, stapled sack.

“I was reading my mail and got some bad news. Thanks.” Sirius takes the bag, pays his bill, and leaves a decent tip behind for a server who barely waited on him at all.

Sirius exits the pub, folder in his jacket and the bag clenched in his hand. He means to walk straight to the Apparition point, but he isn’t thinking about it beyond letting his feet carry him.

Too late, he realizes that a different habit took over. He’s standing on the walkway, right before the gate for the house on Old Oak Row.

Despite the damage it took in 1981, the cottage is holding up all right, even though it’s nearly buried in ivy. The stone walls were old when Lycorus Black was still young, the mortar magically reinforced when the cottage was built.

Sirius looks at the second floor, where the window and part of the wall was blown apart by the force of Voldemort’s rebounding Killing Curse. No repairs were ever done. The wind, rain, and snow have probably destroyed Harry’s old nursery. Someone did try to repair the blasted-open front door, but it’s a bad job. The wood is buckled, fit back together poorly, and the door hangs crooked on its hinges.

He tells himself that he isn’t going inside. He’s seen it. He doesn’t want to see it again.

Sirius puts his hand on the gate. The moment he does, a sign sprouts up from the tangled weeds covering the stone path leading to the front door. He stares at it, nonplussed, until the letters on the sign begin to make sense.

On this spot, on the night of 31st October 1981, Lily and James Potter lost their lives. Their son Harry remains the only wizard ever to have survived the Killing Curse. This house, invisible to Muggles, has been left in its ruined state as a monument to the Potters, and as a reminder of the violence that tore apart their family.

“The fuck is wrong with you?” Sirius hisses at the sign. That is one of the most sanctimonious bits of
false sentiment he’s ever read in his life, and he’s a fucking Black. It must have been approved by
Cornelius Fudge, though it definitely wasn’t Fudge who wrote it.

He does appreciate the graffiti, though. He was Muggle punk in the 1970s and he loved every
moment of it. All of the messages and well-wishing carved and inked into the sign and signpost
appeal to his loathing of rules created by and for “proper” society.

“I always did wonder what took out the Fidelius Charm, what with you still being alive.”

Sirius flinches and starts to draw his wand as he turns around. Rufus Scrimgeour is standing alone,
leaning on his cane, no wand drawn. He’s not looking at Sirius, but regarding the Potter cottage.

He makes himself put his wand away. He isn’t going to be making friends with the Aurors if he
starts hexing them just because the bastards make him nervous. “Rufus.”

“Sirius.” Rufus nods at Sirius before his eyes return to the blown-out second storey nursery. “What
brings you here?”

“I was in Godric’s Hollow to visit the pub I used to go to with—with James and Lily.” And Remus,
and Peter, when they could manage it, all five of them together in those rare moments before the war
got so much worse. “Then I was going to leave, and I just…” Sirius tries to unclench his fist and
can’t quite manage it. “Why are you here?”

“You put your hand on the gate. There is an old warning charm on it, placed back when you first
escaped Azkaban,” Rufus explains. “I thought it’d best be me to come investigate.”

“To arrest me?” Sirius asks. He again reminds himself that he can Apparate faster than most people
can draw their wands, and that does include Rufus Scrimgeour.

He hopes it does. Rufus was always a sly bastard.

Rufus shakes his head. “I won’t be arresting magical nobility. I’m not in the mood to commit political
suicide.” He hesitates. “I should have asked.”

Sirius frowns. “Asked about what?”

“Asked you about what happened then.” Rufus finally stops looking at the house to regard Sirius, a
vaguely puzzled expression on his face. “You don’t remember, do you?”

“Not until you decide to become a hell of a lot more specific, I don’t,” Sirius retorts.

“Oh.” Rufus sighs. “I was one of the Aurors who arrested you. Mid-afternoon of first November,
1981. I didn’t ask you a single question, Sirius. You looked to have lost your bloody mind, so it
didn’t seem worth the effort.

“I didn’t do my job proper at all. I let my anger at all those wrongs we’d seen do my thinking for me.
I always told myself afterwards that it didn’t matter. We were all dead certain you were guilty…right
up until Queen Elizabeth granted amnesty and a magical title to a fugitive. Everyone in the M.L.E.
heard my swearing in response to that, and it was swearing I kept at until I stopped to think on it.”

“Right.” Sirius is glad the house is at his back. The cottage has ancient, immobile one-way
Apparition wards on it that keep anyone from hopping into the garden or just appearing in the house
—one of the old Potters had a thing about manners. “And your thinking resulted in what, exactly?”

“Her Majesty’s no fool, is what I know. I’ve never met her, but I served during World War II, same
as she did, even if my service was on the magical side of things.” Rufus adjusts his grip on his cane. “If she thought you were innocent, there must have been a good reason for it. Well—that and magical titles won’t accept someone who’d violate others the way the Potter family was violated.”

“And the fact that I married them?” Sirius asks, feeling anger bubbling just beneath his heart.

“That, too,” Rufus admits, grimacing. “Don’t think much of that sort of marriage, but it’s not my business.”

Sirius grits his teeth. “No. It’s not.”

Rufus ignores his temper. “Kingsley told me that we’re all on the lookout for a dead rat. Course, no matter which of you it was, the Secret Keeper is still alive. I always wondered why the Fidelius Charm wasn’t still hiding this house. That’s part of the reason I was so damned certain it was you who’d done it.”

“You don’t know much about the old loyalty charms, do you?” Sirius can’t help a bitter smile when Rufus glares at him. “It isn’t that Peter told someone else the words for the Fidelius, Rufus. It’s that he told the enemy how to get in. It’s the betrayal that breaks a Fidelius Charm.”

Rufus spits on the walk. “Betrayal. Yes, I suppose that would do it.”

Sirius nods. He isn’t surprised in the slightest that Rufus has yet to apologize for any of it, but that’s the way the man works. He’ll explain himself and that’s all he feels is necessary. Rufus’s way of doing things used to drive James mental when he was still an active Auror. He always claimed that Alastor was easier to work with, and Alastor was already out of his God damned mind in 1978.

“I know you were here first. Hagrid told us so, back then.” Rufus is looking at the house again. “That was part of the evidence trail we were so blindly certain of. How did you know?”

“Albus didn’t tell you.” Sirius rolls his eyes. Somehow, he isn’t surprised. “Albus sent a Patronus to myself and Hagrid, Rufus. We were together at the time, looking into something one of the Macnairs had done. Hagrid told me to go on ahead. He’d catch up on the bike I’d lent him the moment Hagrid got more involved with the war, what with it being true that giants don’t Apparate. I Apparated straight here, found the Fidelius Charm gone and the door blown open, and…”

Sirius’s throat clamps shut. He can’t say it. He didn’t lose these memories. The Dementors could feast on this pain. It’s so clear in his head that he can see it as if it’s all happening again.

“I’ll be having a word with Albus, then,” Rufus says in annoyance. “We know it must have been fast. What with the wands being where they were, the bodies…that’s the other thing that seemed so damning. You were here first.”

The bubbling temper is gone, replaced by cold rage. “You mean Pettigrew had to have been here with Voldemort when he gave the fucking bastard the words to the Fidelius Charm. Peter would have seen it happen.”

Rufus spits again. “James was a smart lad, Sirius. He would have known the moment the Fidelius was broken, and he still wasn’t prepared for it. Too fast. All of it happened too damned fast.”

Sirius realizes he’s tearing a hole through the bag of takeaway with his fingers and tries to loosen his grip. “I have to go. Talk to you later, Rufus.”

“If you see Pettigrew—”
Sirius turns and offers Rufus a snide look that Snape would be proud of. “Don’t worry. I’ll leave Pettigrew to you.”

The Apparition back to the public hub at King’s Cross makes his stomach churn. Clearwater is still on duty, but at least this time she doesn’t draw her wand. If anything, she looks worried.

“Look like shit, do I?” Sirius asks.

Clearwater nods. “Like you’ve suddenly taken sick. Are you all right, sir? Er, Sirius?”

“Had a spot of bad news with a bad biscuit. Terrible combination, don’t recommend it.” Sirius takes a breath. “Is there powder available?”

Clearwater points at the smaller Floo and a jar of waiting Floo Powder. Sirius thanks her and then casts his Patronus. The sight of his own Animagus form has always bolstered his spirits, and God, but he needs that right now.

The words are harder, given that Nizar might be in company. “Nizar, I’ve stumbled over something that fits under the purview of your brother’s special project.”


Sirius sighs in relief, tosses in the powder, names his destination, and hops into the flame, hoping he won’t arrive and start dry heaving all over his son’s hearth. He stumbles out in one of his less elegant exits and is caught by Salazar before he can fall directly to the floor.

“Good gods, what have you gotten into? You smell like a dust bin,” Salazar says while taking the bag. “And you’ve brought bribery!”

“Have at it. I’ve already vomited once today, and I don’t think the pie would help.” Sirius flops down onto the nearest sofa and closes his eyes until everything stops spinning. “I thought Nizar would be here.”

“You’re early, and you mentioned needing to speak to me. If you wish for Nizar to be present…”

“No—well, actually, I just want to borrow the bathroom and scald myself in hot water for a while. Oh, fuck me.” Sirius gets the folder out of his jacket and passes it over, glad to be thinking of batty fucking Bagshot again. “An innocent visit to Bathilda Bagshot to discover why Albus was trying to convince Lily to let Bagshot visit the cottage in autumn of 1981? That part didn’t go so well. The rest of it was worse.”

Salazar pulls out the thin sheaf of letters. He reads them quickly, a dark frown growing on his face with each one. “My brother is fond of saying that seventeen-year-olds make mistakes. Do these words read as if they’re mistakes to you, Sirius Black?”

Sirius shakes his head. “Albus has sounded like that for as long as I’ve known him—well, without the Wizarding supremacy bit. The rest of it, that fucking Greater Good shit? That’s Albus all over.”

Salazar shoves the letters back into the folder. “I’m not certain if I should allow Nizar to see these. There are very specific rules that accompany his title, and some of what is written here violates what he must uphold as both Protectoris and as a war mage.”

“You think it’s that bad, then?” Sirius asks. He’d very much like to be told he’s overreacting.

Salazar settles onto the other sofa and stares at Sirius. “I still don’t know what Dumbledore’s ultimate
goal is beyond winning the war against Voldemort. As to what these letters will come to prove? I’ve no idea, though if it makes you feel better, Helga would have killed the man already.”

Sirius drops his head back and stares up at the ceiling. That doesn’t actually make him feel any better at all.

Chapter End Notes

Albus Dumbledore's letter is direct canon, taken from *Deathly Hallows*.

For that matter, so is that stupid fucking sign.
Chapter Summary

In which Aberforth proves that Slytherins really are that paranoid.

Chapter Notes

Beta hailing: @norcumi, @sanerontheinside, @mrsstanley, & @jabberwockypie!

Nizar resists the urge to beat a third-year with an essay. Again. “Miss Ollivander, I’m telling you that if you insist upon turning in this essay as it stands, right now, I will fail you and make you write it again. You may wish to reconsider your decision.”

“But why?” Miss Ollivander asks, her lip pushed out in a ferocious scowl. He’s seen some excellent Pure-blood scowls in his time, but when she is offended, Miss Ollivander excels at them. “My great-uncle is the best wandmaker in Britain!”

Nizar rolls his eyes. “I don’t care if he’s the best wandmaker in the entire world. Your great-uncle is still only one source. How many sources are you meant to be using when writing these essays, Miss Ollivander?”

Miss Ollivander looks to be pondering drowning Nizar in the Black Lake. “Four sources aside from our original Defence textbooks,” she finally grates out.

“Four is not one.” Nizar holds out the scroll. “Find more sources aside from Garrick Ollivander.”

Miss Ollivander snatches the essay out of his hands and flounces her way out of his office. Nizar contemplates banging his face against his own desk. He’s never met anyone as stubbornly spiteful as a Pure-blood teenage girl who believes she’s in the right—unless they happened to be a Black and a teenage girl. That was always worse.

Speaking of Blacks.

Nizar checks to see if anyone is lurking in his classroom or out in the hall before he retreats back to his office, flips the cast-iron S, and enters his quarters. Salazar is pacing the length of the room, looking distinctly unhappy. Sirius Black is resting on Nizar’s sofa, bemoaning his lack of being pissed.

“It’s two in the afternoon,” Nizar says. “What can you possibly have done that requires that much alcohol at this time of day?”

Sirius removes his gaze from his contemplation of Nizar’s ceiling to stare at him. “I didn’t do it! I’m not a—a bloody Wizarding Nazi!”

“Your parents would be so disappointed,” Nizar responds dryly. Walburga and Orion both had been far too fond of Grindelwald’s nonsense, though Regulus always claimed that Orion became a bit
more sane in later years. “Why are we discussing Wizarding Nazis?”

“I went to Godric’s Hollow before lunch to see Bathilda Bagshot regarding that letter I told you about,” Sirius explains. He looks pale, as if he’s recently been ill. “She’s Gellert Grindelwald’s bloody great-aunt.”

“Oh. You would have found out about Grindelwald and Dumbledore’s past association then,” Nizar realizes. “Aberforth told Severus and myself about it this past weekend, though it took bribery to get Aberforth to admit it.”

“I have a bloody photo of them in my robe pocket.” Sirius holds it out for Nizar to take. “Copied it while gaga Bagshot was off fetching evidence for me while thinking I was my own bloody grandfather.”

Dumbledore is easily recognizable in the photograph. He isn’t much older than the red-haired Gryffindor scamp who once snuck into the Slytherin dormitories for a midnight tryst. Grindelwald has sandy blond hair in a cut that wasn’t fashionable at the time, and his face looks like it was chiseled in granite. Nizar supposes Grindelwald might have been considered handsome to someone ignoring that deep-set frown and the ice in his gaze. “Charming.” Nizar gives the photograph back to Sirius, who grasps it only long enough to drop it on the nearest table.

Salazar holds out a green folder that smells as if it murdered dust and then mouldered in the remains. “You’ll want to read these.”

“These being…” Nizar opens the folder and leans back when a worse odor strikes his nose. The mouldering dust is kinder. “Letters. I see. It’s to be a theme on the day, then.”

“I liked yours better,” Salazar mutters, and resumes pacing.

“That is not encouraging me to want to read—” Nizar breaks off when he notices the signature on the first page. “Never mind. Give me a moment.”

Nizar closes the folder after reading all five letters. Dumbledore’s enthusiastic agreement with Gellert Grindelwald’s plans for the world is…unsettling. If these letters had not been written nearly one hundred years ago, Nizar would right now be tossing this school’s Headmaster from his own tower. “I need to leave for a bit to speak to someone. If you hear an explosion originating from Hogsmeade, it’s probably safe to ignore it. If an angry Scotsman storms the castle, just give him Dumbledore and he’ll happily depart.”

“Aberforth?” Sirius asks without rising from the sofa. Salazar has stopped pacing long enough to approve of the idea of consulting with Aberforth.

Nizar nods. “Sal, I know you have class at three. Please cover my remaining office hour and shut the classroom door afterwards. Back soon,” he says, and Apparates after tucking the folder under his arm to secure its contents. Aberforth mentioned nothing of this regarding his brother but for the youthful indiscretion with Grindelwald. Nizar needs to know if Aberforth was aware and said nothing, thinking it unimportant, or if Albus Dumbledore hid the whole of his original post-graduation plans from his younger siblings.

Hogsmeade has its usual quiet flow of magicians wandering about the village, which has a scrim of ice on the ground and makes Nizar wish he’d brought a cloak. At least Kanza is in front of the hearth, not wrapped around his neck in a stranglehold of protest.

Nizar still wants to see Hogsmeade when the students visit, hoping they grant the place a bit more
life. Castleview had been lively, all the time. Hogsmeade is almost dull in comparison.

Nizar reaches the Hogs Head Inn and pushes open the door to step inside, knocking the frost from his boots before crossing the threshold. Aberforth is at the bar, glaring at Mundungus Fletcher and an apparent partner in literal crime. There is only one other patron, a blonde woman with crystal-studded spectacles sitting at a table, glaring sullenly at a half-full bottle of Firewhiskey. Nizar has a brief moment of thinking he recognizes her, but then it’s gone. Someone he noticed within the Ministry, perhaps. Her lime green jacket is rather distinctive, but fortunately it’s not an eyesore.

“Hello, Nizar,” Aberforth greets him, his eyes still pinned on the other two. “Bit late for lunch, if that’s what you’re seeking.”

“I needed to speak with you, actually. You may break those two in half afterwards.” Nizar smiles at Fletcher and company as they hurriedly break off their meeting and escape the inn. “Or not. That’s too bad.” He notices the sullen woman give him a brief, assessing look before pretending to ignore him.

“Skeeter!” Aberforth yells at her. “You behave yourself in my inn, and remember the rules!”

Nizar raises an eyebrow. That is the woman who wrote a year’s worth of defaming articles about the child, and who then worked with Fudge to write a fictitious, damning article about Britain’s war mages? He expected someone a bit more vivacious.

“Of course I do,” Skeeter snaps at Aberforth. “Nothing I’ve heard or seen leaves this inn, even if it supports my writing,” she adds, glancing at Nizar.

Nizar smiles at her, an expression closer to the borderline snarl that Ratier Gibbon experienced at Malfoy Manor. “I’m a war mage, Madam Skeeter. Killing the deserving is part of the job. It’s simply too bad that the crime of libel is not punishable by death.”

Skeeter lifts her chin and sniffs haughtily. “Everyone likes a good bit of embellishment.”

“Tell that to the seventeen-year-old young woman you maligned, not to mention all the others who’ve suffered due to your lovely embellishments,” Nizar replies in an icy voice. “Please do my friend the favor of departing from his establishment.”

Skeeter narrows her eyes, but she snags the bottle of Firewhiskey, tucks it into her handbag, and makes her way from the inn with a decent attempt at courtly grace. “I will see you next week, Aberforth!” she chirps as she opens the door.

“Spare me the honor,” Aberforth mutters. “Did you have to frighten the lot of them off?” he asks in a growl after gesturing for Nizar to follow him into the back room.

“I only wished for Skeeter to leave, but that’s because I also wanted to fucking kill her,” Nizar replies after the door closes behind them. The fire burning in the hearth is pleasant, warming him after his trek over the frosted ground. “The other two made up their own minds.”

“Fletcher might have been getting useful information out of that other twat!”

“Might? Then you weren’t certain, and you usually know by the third word spoken.” Nizar sits down with Aberforth, placing the green folder on the table that normally holds their Saturday lunch. “I’d like for you to look at these. I need to know if you were aware of it.”

“That’s auspicious, then.” Aberforth takes up the folder and opens it, scowling the moment he spies the first letter. “I see.” He taps his wand on the tabletop, summoning a bottle of Firewhiskey and two
glasses. “You’ll want a shot of that to finish warming you, Nizar.”

Nizar would really rather not, but it’s something to do while waiting. Aberforth is not a fast reader, but it isn’t because his thoughts are slow. He likes to mull over the words, absorbing nuance and meaning that others might miss at first glance.

Drinking Firewhiskey still feels like attempting to drink a bonfire. Nizar has given up trying to become accustomed to it.

When Aberforth finishes reading all five letters, he closes the folder, but says nothing. Nizar tries to wait him out, but given the circumstances, his patience has limits. “You know, I’m really not certain how to react when you don’t respond at all.”

Aberforth puts the folder down on the table. “To answer your question: I didn’t know, not the whole of this. I can’t say I’m all that surprised, but I didn’t know.”

Nizar studies him. “Yet you don’t seem angry.”

“Angry?” Aberforth looks visibly startled. “I’m a bit preoccupied with terror, thinking on how those two would literally have taken over the entire bloody world if they hadn’t broken it off!”

“You really don’t think your brother would have abandoned that Wizarding Supremacy nonsense?” Nizar asks.

Aberforth shakes his head. “The only thing that stopped Albus from following after Gellert like a lovesick puppy is all down to what happened with Ariana. Well, and that utter twat Gellert not showing a bit of remorse or regret that our sister was dead. Had the bollocks to stand there and say that Albus didn’t have a thing to tie him down any longer—as if I didn’t matter.” Aberforth snorts. “Mayhap I never did.”

“No. I believe that you did matter to him, and that is ultimately why Albus Dumbledore stayed,” Nizar says. “I don’t think that makes him a good person, but he’s at least several steps away from mad wizard bent on conquering the Earth.”

“There is that,” Aberforth admits, but he still doesn’t look happy. “When it finally came down to it, Albus was the one to stop Grindelwald. All but had to threaten him into it, we did, but the shiny pillock succeeded where we’d failed.”

Nizar frowns. “I didn’t know you were involved in the European War.” There hadn’t been a hint of Aberforth’s presence during the war when it was discussed by students in the Slytherin Common Room.

“Aye, and on both sides of it, too, fighting alongside wizards and Muggles,” Aberforth replies. “The English, Irish, and Scottish groups of wizards didn’t work together very well, but we all fought in Europe just the same.”

“What about the Welsh?”

Aberforth snorts. “Wasn’t no problem there. The Welsh are a bit more polite about things, even if they hate you. I was with one of their groups when we saw that famous damned fortress of Grindelwald’s from a few miles off. Thought he’d gotten a bit too big for his britches, thinking he needed a place larger than Hogwarts all to himself.

“Only credit to Grindelwald I witnessed is that I’m certain he didn’t want to kill Albus. He didn’t want to lose that duel either, mind you…but he didn’t want my brother dead. That might be the only
And Albus didn’t want to point a wand at a former lover either, even if he was a former lover
turned Wizarding Nazi.” Nizar sighs. “If he was truly against what Gellert meant to accomplish, he
would have been there at the very start of it all, wouldn’t he?”

“Aulus always claimed he had duties to Hogwarts that came first.” Aberforth gives Nizar a
suspicious look and taps the folder. “Where did you find these old letters? Nonsense like this isn’t
just lying about. My brother keeps mum about him and Gellert for a reason, and I do the same.”

“It wasn’t me,” Nizar says. “Sirius Black paid a visit to Godric’s Hollow to speak with Bathilda
Bagshot regarding a different matter, and the subject came up.”

That finally sets off Aberforth’s temper. “THAT DAMNED OLD BUSYBODY BIDDY!” he
roars. “SHE’D NO RIGHT, NOT AFTER PUTTING THAT BLASTED PILLOCK NEPHEW
OF OUR LIVES IN THE FIRST PLACE!”

“I have no idea why she is handing out your brother’s personal correspondence!” Nizar snaps,
wondering if he’s about to be ducking flung chairs. “To be Grindelwald’s great-aunt, Bagshot would
have to be at least twenty years older than your brother. Perhaps she’s developed senility and thought
she was doing as she should?”

“Twenty years older? No.” Aberforth heaves out an irritated sigh. “Bagshot must be at least one-
sixty by now. Come to think on it, I’m surprised to hear she’s still living.”

“And not likely to be living well, given the scent of that folder,” Nizar points out.

“Probably not,” Aberforth says in a grudging tone. “I imagine Grindelwald might be the only living
family she has left, and they won’t be letting his arse out of Nurmengard to look after her.” He pours
a shot of Firewhiskey swallows it down. “Half the Order would never work with Albus if they knew
even a hint of this, Nizar.”

“I’ve no plans on telling them, either.” Nizar studies Aberforth, who looks sullen. “Aberforth, do you
refuse to come to Order meetings, or does Albus simply not tell you when they’re going to happen?”

“Both,” Aberforth answers at once. “Being fair, those invitations became less and less until I told
Albus to stop bothering back in the spring of ’81. I imagine if there is any sort of official list, my
name’s on it, but when things reconvened last summer…no. Wasn’t worth the guesswork, I decided,
even though Charlie would have supported me if I’d gone to join the fools in person. I send along
anything useful I overhear, but I let the others get on with sorting it out themselves.”

Nizar nods, thinking that Sal probably won’t mind if he issues the invitation. “How would you like
to unofficially quit the Order of the Phoenix and join an Underground, instead?”

“That Underground of your brother’s?” Aberforth fetches his pipe from his pouch and crams in far
too much tobacco compared to what he usually smokes. “Why would I want to do such a thing?”

“The Underground has just as much reason to see Voldemort defeated as anyone, and they value
intelligence from those credible enough to provide it without ever being noticed.” Nizar debates for a
moment, suspecting he might be igniting another powder keg of outrage. “And…I don’t trust your
brother.”

“Interesting, that.” Aberforth lights the pipe in a brief burst of wandless magic, which always
happens best when he’s well and truly angered. “Then you don’t think the Order is the best way to
defeat Voldemort?”
"I simply don’t equate Dumbledore and the Order as being one in the same. One is a leader and the other is a group, and while the leader might have founded the group, there are others who could do the job just as well," Nizar says. "Just because they’ve never been granted the opportunity doesn’t mean the potential isn’t there."

Aberforth blows out a jet of smoke. "There are plenty who’d say that the Order would fall apart without my brother. That he’s the only thing holding that bunch together."

"In that case, we may well already be fucked if Voldemort decides to start his war in earnest," Nizar responds. "Albus Dumbledore isn’t bloody Charlemagne. The Order shouldn’t be in such a hurry to emulate what happened to Charlemagne’s Empire after his passing."

"I feel similarly." Aberforth glances at the old folder before eyeing Nizar. "That bit your brother claimed, about fetching that boy from his home to keep him in better circumstances. Is that true?"

"Of course it’s true. Salazar wouldn’t have reason to lie about that." Nizar considers Aberforth’s expression. "Did you argue against the Little Whinging decision?"

Aberforth nods. "Thought it was a stupid idea to isolate a boy who might still be in danger, and it wasn’t like the tot had a wand at that age. Albus insisted it had to be that way. Took me a while to get him to admit why, and then my brother nattered on about sacrifices and protections. Once I realized the sort of magic he was talking about, I told him that it wasn’t supposed to work that way. Potter didn’t need to be living with a blood relative at all, not if we were discussing the same sort of magic. Albus insisted that he’d fixed it so it did need to be that way, but would never say how. Claimed I wouldn’t understand."

"I really want you present in my quarters for something a few of us will be discussing this evening." Nizar slowly spins his empty glass, watching the varying shades of reds, oranges, yellows, blues, and golds spin off the crystal to highlight the old wood of the table. "I want your perspective because I respect you. I’m just concerned that it may cause you to see your brother as a terrible man, and that isn’t a kind thing to do to anyone."

"Is he a terrible man, Nizar?" Aberforth asks.

"I truly don’t know. I don’t believe he is. I think Albus Dumbledore is an imperfect being, just like the rest of us, who has made questionable decisions on his own while believing there was no one else to share the burden of making those choices," Nizar replies. "You could argue that I’m a horrible person easily, Aberforth—I cursed a man to at least two millennia of living death in a burial mound because of the terrible things he did to others. It’s probably safe to say that your brother has never done anything so vengeful."

Aberforth frowns. "How terrible, Nizar? Is this back to those Christmas Day rumors?"

"It is. Years ago, there was a magician named Drugo who understood the whole of how Horcruxes were made, not the partial knowledge Voldemort possesses. He found a village named Baile Cholgain, home to one hundred fifty-odd souls. Drugo murdered half of them, splitting his soul in careful increments with each murder to turn the other half of the village’s population into living Horcruxes. Living slaves. Then Drugo killed my son when Brice fought against him."

Nizar idly considers another glass of Firewhiskey, but Mind Magic has always helped make this recitation easier. "There were ultimately only nineteen survivors of Drugo’s massacre. Those were not his first murders, but they were certainly his last."

Aberforth narrows his eyes. "Bit extreme on both parts. What did the Wizengamot of the time say
about your stuffing this Drago fellow into a burial mound without making him dead first?”

Nizar tries reaching for memory and finds nothing. “I don’t recall, Aberforth. I don’t believe I was
imprisoned for it. The Council might have considered it a balanced scale…or perhaps they
considered Brice’s loss to be punishment enough. I will say that you asked if I was punished,
whereas when I related this story to your brother, he didn’t ask that question at all.”

“No sure it would occur to him. Albus is used to thinking himself the ultimate authority on things,”
Aberforth mutters. He Conjures a small basin and uses it to tap out the remains of tobacco from his
pipe, filling the ashy bowl with gleaming, smoky embers. “I’ll be honest, Nizar: I’ve gotten into more
than my fair share of nonsense where things went to shit due to my trusting the wrong sorts for the
right reasons. I want you to show me that Potter is all right. I want to see him. You prove he’s safe,
and I’ll be with your brother’s Underground. God knows his lot might be more inclined to listen to
the things I have to say.”

“Safe is a relative term, and you know it.” Nizar narrows his eyes. “All right. You prove that you’ll
never utter a word of that child’s current status to Albus Dumbledore—or anyone else not named by
myself and Salazar, for that matter—and we’ll see about accommodating your request.”

“Proof.” Aberforth grins and gets out his wand. “I vow on my own wand that I’ll keep the Potter boy
safe from my brother, Albus Dumbledore, and anyone else who’d like to harm him, no matter the
reason or the means, else this wand I’ve carried since age eleven will shatter.” He tucks his wand
back into his sleeve. “I’m a mite fond of that wand, Nizar. I won’t be seeing it shatter easily.”

Nizar isn’t surprised that Aberforth was quick to make that sort of vow. Aberforth has always cared
for others, even if he later began burying it under a gruff, foreboding exterior.

He straightens in his chair, trusts his instincts, and hopes he isn’t about to make a disastrous blunder.
“Salazar went well and beyond his task of making certain that child was safe, Aberforth. You’re
looking at him right now.”

Aberforth doesn’t react but for a narrowing of his eyes. “And how does that work, then?”

“I was adopted into House Deslizarse in 991,” Nizar answers, “an event that happened because it
had already taken place. I would think the rest would be easy enough to figure out.”

“Huh.” Aberforth’s expression doesn’t change. “Yáng de yífú!”

Nizar doesn’t recognize the words, but he recognizes the feel. Household magic. An invoked
defence—

—and then everything is ice and the stiffness of frozen limbs, but he isn’t cold. This is…this is…

He can’t remember. He knows this spell, but he can’t remember.

Nizar can open his eyes, though. He blinks up at the ceiling, baffled. Same room in the inn. Same
fire behind him, but he can’t feel its warmth. He’s lying on the floor, not seated at the table.

What the fuck? Floor?

“So, before you off an’ kill me…” Aberforth is sitting on the floor next to him, shamefaced, his
cheeks flushed a dull, unhappy shade of red. He’s holding up the end of his wand, nothing more than
part of the rosewood handle with jagged splinters where the rest should be. “I do believe you now.”
Severus is halfway through his office hours before dinner when Filky Apparates into the room, startling Miss Dolohov into crushing her essay between her hands. “Miss Dolohov, it is merely a house-elf,” Severus says in a dry voice as his first-year gingerly starts trying to smooth out her scroll. “Hogwarts is full of them. What is it, Filky?”

Filky wrings her hands a bit, which is concerning. She has always been the least prone to dramatics. “The Professor Salazar is needing to see you upstairs, Professor Snape,” she says. “He is asking you to bring Fire in the Blood and Calming Draughts.”

Severus frowns. Fire in the Blood is a fairly common potion stocked in the hospital wing, used for frostbite treatment or potential hypothermic situations, but Salazar has his own Calming Draughts. He wouldn’t need more unless he’d just depleted his own store of them. “Very well. Tell him I’ll be there shortly.” Filky nods and vanishes. “Miss Dolohov, we’ll need to speak again at a later time.”

“That’s okay, sir,” Miss Dolohov says, but she bites her lip as she looks at her abused scroll. “Should I turn it in as it is or re-write it, Professor? I don’t want it to be late.”

Severus puts on a brief display of pretending to consider it. Seraphina Dolohov has been nervous and easily startled since returning in January, especially as rumor of Death Eater activity increases. He doesn’t wish to discover what condition she would be in if her uncle was free of Azkaban. “Re-write it. I do not need to attempt to read that unfortunate mess. Turn it in tomorrow morning. If I’m not in my office, you may leave it on the desk.”

“That you, sir.” Miss Dolohov quickly packs up the rest of her belongings and rushes out. Hopefully she will rewrite that essay with their discussion in mind. She has potential in Potions, as does her fellow first-year Cameron Boyle. He’d like to see them both recognize it.

The moment the door is shut, he casts his Patronus. “To be delivered in Parseltongue: Salazar, what am I treating?” None of them should have had opportunity to be dropped into a snowbank: Nizar is supposed to be in his office; Black was merely visiting Godric’s Hollow, which is far to the south; Lupin is a werewolf and doesn’t know how to be hypothermic; Minerva would be in her office right now. Unless a young idiot with a wand cast Glacialis improperly…

Salazar’s Gorgon Patronus is always startling, even if Severus refuses to react to the sight of it. “Not literal hypothermia, though I would not be offended if you brought the lot. Apparate directly to the seventh floor classroom if you would, please.”

There are three Calming Draughts already in his office, waiting to be used on panicked students. Severus has four Fire in the Blood potions from his own stores, on the off chance that Voldemort decided to have the Death Eaters meet on top of a fucking mountain—an event that thankfully never occurred.

Those collected, Severus Apparates directly to the classroom to discover Salazar waiting for him, but no one else. The classroom door is shut, a clear sign that students are not currently welcome. “Please explain to me why I’ve brought Calming Draughts when I know full well you brew your own.”

Salazar looks displeased. “Because I used all of mine, and it’s barely enough.”

“I see. You’re feeding Calming Draughts to someone in hopes that they become comatose.”

“I will happily settle for stoned.” Salazar reaches out and grips Severus’s shoulder. “I need you to
keep your bloody head on your shoulders, or if you can’t, then you damned well will bury whatever it is you’re thinking about the same way you’d have buried it before Voldemort’s lot.”

Severus narrows his eyes. “Why? And who am I about to wish to kill?”

“Aberforth, but Nizar asked us not to do so. Black and the delightful Chao Li are still in Hogsmeade, tearing the poor bastard a new arsehole. Besides, Aberforth managed to shatter his own fucking wand, and I’d judge that to be punishment enough.”

“How the hell—” No, Severus will wonder what Aberforth did to shatter his wand later. “What did Aberforth do?”

“He invoked a home defence spell called Yáng de yīfú. It’s Mandarin for Sheep’s Clothing, from the idiom a wolf in sheep’s clothing.” Salazar releases his grip on Severus. “It’s a hex meant for shape-changers.”

Severus meets Salazar’s hazel eyes and catches a brief glimpse of how much concern Salazar is actively attempting to bury. “Where is he?”

“In front of the fireplace,” Salazar replies. “Oh, and one of those bloody Calming Draughts is for me.”

Severus nods and gives Salazar one of the spare phials. “And what is his limit, as you’ve already given him several?”

“Only two more, else Poppy Pomfrey will try to kill us all.”

Salazar sends him into Nizar’s quarters on his own, which is not pleasing. If Nizar is going to have the same reaction to Fire in the Blood as he did to Potissima Sanguine Purificationis, Severus would rather have assistance in trying to cram a potion down the man’s throat. Salazar merely shakes his head in response to the silent request, but Severus doesn’t understand why until he’s standing in the sitting room with the door closed behind him.

Vibrating. Everything in Nizar’s quarters, including the floor beneath his feet, is vibrating. It isn’t like standing on the ground during a minor earthquake, no side-to-side movement. It’s far more mindful of electrical current suddenly being introduced to stone.

Only one of them at a time. One element of interaction. Salazar doesn’t wish to overwhelm someone who is already distressed to the point that the castle is responding in kind.

He thinks on Occluding to remain calm and then realizes he would rather not. That is a crutch he doesn’t need to rely on. He knows the man in this room, no matter what Aberforth’s hex has wrought.

Severus approaches the quilt-wrapped lump huddled in front of the fireplace. Upon closer inspection, he realizes that Nizar is also wearing a grey hooded jumper. “I didn’t realize you owned one of those.”

“It’s Sal’s.” Nizar’s voice is a halting whisper. “Sorry. Can’t speak well.”

Severus debates a moment before sitting down next to him. Kanza is curled up on the hearth, staring at Nizar from between two of her own coils. Nizar is hunched over, leaning towards the fire; his hood is pulled so far forward that all Severus can see of Nizar’s face is the end of his nose. “Can you swallow a potion without assistance?”
Nizar slowly lifts his hands, which appear normal but are wrapped in clean strips of bandage. Then he attempts to flex his fingers, revealing he can barely move them at all. “No.”

Severus shakes his head. He reaches out to take one of Nizar’s hands and draws in a hissing, shocked breath when he encounters icy flesh. “Is Salazar certain this isn’t hypothermic?”

“Yes. Side effect.”

“And the bandages?” Severus asks.

Nizar’s answer is slow and stilted. “Aberforth is lacking a mirror.”

Severus thinks on what he’d overheard Granger say about the child’s fierce desire not to resemble either of his parents. Between that and the name of the hex, Severus understands what he’s dealing with now. “Are you going to allow me to assist you, or will I be forcing potions down your throat?”

Nizar makes a faint sound, but Severus can’t determine the emotion behind it until he says, “Either.”

No matter what, make me drink it, Severus translates. He glances down at Kanza, whose snout has peeked out further into view. How the basilisk can make such a gesture seem hopeful, Severus has no idea.

The hex doesn’t just cause slow movement, but literal stiffness to accompany the chill. It’s difficult to help Nizar tilt his head back just enough to keep the phial from spilling. Nizar still loses the first dose when it’s almost immediately spewed back out in a sudden fit of coughing. “Hex,” Nizar rasps. “Try again.”

Severus nods while using his wand to clean up the mess. The only hint that any of the potion was consumed at all is a brief warming of Nizar’s skin.

Nizar keeps down the second phial, and then the third. Only when his skin is warmer does Severus dares to try one of the Calming Draughts. It’s tempting to use both, but he would prefer not to dose Nizar to the point of senselessness.

“Isn’t that enough of those?” Nizar asks after drinking it, this time managing to hold the phial on his own. He’s speaking more easily, but his voice is still terse.

Severus rests his hand on the floor. It feels significantly less like amplified power, but the stone is still vibrating. “Apparently not, but I’ll ignore that if you drink another of Fire in the Blood.”

“Fab,” Nizar grumbles, but drinks the potion without complaining. “Happy?”

“No. Stop hiding beneath that stupid hood,” Severus says flatly.

“Fine!” Nizar shrugs the quilt off his shoulder and yanks the hood back before crossing his arms over his chest. “Now are you happy?”

Salazar was right to warn him. It’s still a bit of a shock, even knowing what to expect. Nizar’s hair is stark black, with no hint at all that the sun ever lightened it, as are his brows and eyelashes. His hair seems shorter, but it’s those odd, spike-like curls that make it appear so.

Nizar’s jaw is clenched, his brow furrowed in utter resentment. “Well?”

Severus refuses to blunder. Not for this. “May I touch you?”

Nizar’s shoulders twitch as he visibly startles. “I—” He swallows before nodding. “All right.”
Severus reaches out and runs his fingers through Nizar’s hair. The feel of it is exactly the same, though the odd curls act as if they’re trying to trap his fingers. There is definitely some sort of magic at play, one Nizar had tamed to silence with his Metamorphmagus Mastery. “It does like to cling, doesn’t it?”

“I think it reflects mood,” Nizar mutters under his breath.

“How so?” Severus raises an eyebrow and pulls his fingers back from strands that are suddenly doing a much better job at grabbing hold. Interesting.

“When the hex was first cast. That mirror above Aberforth’s fireplace.” Nizar glances down at his hands. “Ex-mirror, anyway. My hair looked entirely normal but for the color. It didn’t start to curl like that until I realized I couldn’t change any of it back.”

Severus picks up a single lock of Nizar’s black hair, letting it curl around his finger. It seems almost entirely natural, that motion, but for the fact that it happened in reverse direction. “That child’s hair was a continuous disaster.”

“I’m really in no mood to be a continuous disaster.” The vibration in the floor lessens further. “Given the living conditions that letter describes, I’m surprised the child’s hair was not standing straight up from his scalp all the time.”

Severus thinks it safe enough to chance a request. “Nizar. Please look at me.”

Nizar turns his head, glaring at Severus. His eyes are a luminous emerald green, the color so bright it resembles the flame of the Deslizarse family magic.

It’s as Salazar has said, as the portraits all claimed. Nizar changed those two things about himself, and those two things alone.

Severus reaches out and traces Nizar’s cheekbone with his thumb. “You still resemble Salazar far more than anyone else.”

Nizar’s eyes narrow. “You aren’t just saying that?”

“Just saying—” Severus scowls. “Have I ever been the type to just say anything? You look like you,” he insists. There is no doubt that Nizar and James Potter would have looked quite a bit alike, but even his emerald green gaze isn’t as mindful of Lily Evans as it once was. Too much of Nizar’s personality burns in his eyes. “I would like to think that with far too many Calming Draughts in your system, you would be capable of seeing this.”

Nizar gives him a quick glance before his eyes slide down to Kanza. She is slowly uncoiling from her anxious pose to approach the edge of the quilt. When Nizar holds out his hand, she curls up in his palm and immediately looks indignant about the presence of bandages. “There was a mirror. In the portrait. Just one.”

“Was?”

“After Gaunt.” Nizar slowly spreads his hand apart so that Kanza can resume one of her favorite activities of threading her way through his fingers. “Kanza doesn’t know the year it happened, as she was more concerned with me at that time than with life beyond the portrait. Every day I would wake up and not recognize the person in the mirror. Every. Day.

“There is a limit to how much you can stand of that sort of experience before you simply can’t take it any longer. I destroyed the only mirror in the portrait. Turned the pieces to dust beneath my feet.
Buried them in the back garden. I didn’t see a mirror again until…”

“My quarters,” Severus finishes when Nizar trails off into silence. “In the bathroom.”

“I knew my reflection when I first saw it. I didn’t know my reflection at all.” Nizar breathes out a long sigh. “I know this is not terrible. But that is why I panicked.”

“And it had nothing to do with me at all?” Severus asks in a dry voice.

Nizar shrugs and glances at him again. “A bit, perhaps? I never had any wish to be that sort of reminder.”

Severus rolls his eyes and yanks Nizar forward until he’s wrapped Nizar in his arms, both of them stretched out in front of the fireplace. “Idiot.”

“Yes, we’ve established that.” It takes Nizar a few minutes to relax, but between the Calming Draughts and the heat of the fire, he’s fighting a losing battle. “You’re truly all right with this?”

“I was far more concerned with your causing this entire tower to vibrate,” Severus replies, glad that vibration in the stone has finally stilled. “If I can tolerate random appearances of a Gryffindor named Ozymandias, I do believe I can tolerate your hair trying to eat my fingers. I’ll no doubt be used to it just in time for you to return it to its proper color.”

“When this hex wears off in two days, I could turn it pink,” Nizar offers.

“Please,” Severus scoffs. “If you’re attempting originality, choose something metallic.”

“Mm. Bronze. There’s a goal,” Nizar murmurs while Severus thinks about varying forms of revenge against Aberforth.

Two fucking days. Severus has read enough material on Metamorphmagi by now to know that a Metamorphmagus has a natural inclination to hate stillness. Nymphadora Tonks is always moving, always fidgeting, or repeatedly altering her appearance if forced to remain seated. It was a constant distraction for other students (and for Severus) in those early Potions classes until everyone became accustomed to Tonks’s constant flux. Nizar especially does not like to be idle—he proves it often enough by going outside to literally climb the castle walls.

He realizes a moment later that Nizar has fallen asleep, lulled by warmth and by over a half-dozen potions competing to do their work. Then the door opens; Severus is already in the process of drawing his wand when Black drops the Invisibility Charm and reveals his raised hands.

“It’s just me,” Black says in a low voice. “Is he all right?”

“Too many Calming Draughts,” Severus replies, lowering his wand. He refuses to feel embarrassed for being caught on the floor, trapped beneath a sleeping man trying to tangle himself up in a damned hooded jumper. “I know your repertoire. Please tell me that you hexed Aberforth Dumbledore within an inch of his fucking life.”

“Didn’t have the chance,” Black says in clear regret. “His wife beat me to it. That woman is terrifying; I like her. Pretty sure she might actually be giving Aberforth a new arsehole rather than just threatening it.”

Severus scowls and puts his wand away. “He deserves it.”

“I’m not arguing.” Black stares down at Nizar, an odd expression on his face. “When he was still
Harry, he would ask about James. I didn’t really want to talk about James—about either of them. I always told Harry how much he looked like his father. Remus says I’m not the only one. He couldn’t name anyone who hadn’t done that. It was easier, right?"

Severus feels a flare of intense disquiet. “Or necessary.”

Black only nods in recognition of Severus’s former task as a spy instead of sneering at him. Disappointing. “We weren’t really looking at him. At Harry. Fuck, but if someone had done that to me for my entire childhood, I’d hate to be reminded of it, too.”

“I don’t think that is the only…difficulty.”

“Probably not.” Black shoves his hands into his robe pockets. “But we didn’t help, either. How many doses of Fire in the Blood did it take to beat back that fucking hex, Snape?”

Severus frowns. “Three. This will need to be treated again?”

“Salazar claims every four to six hours, about like non-magical ibuprofen. Whatever the hell that is.” Black sighs. “He went to brew more of it. I’ll go let him know how much we’ll need. You’ll…you won’t hurt him. I know you won’t, but…”

“Black.” Severus glares at him. “Hair and eye color does not change the fact that these are Nizar’s features, his personality, and his bloody temper. There is no mistaking this man for James Potter.”

Black lets out a brief, hollow-sounding laugh. “No. No, there’s really not.”

* * *

Nizar is feeling a hell of a lot more balanced by seven that evening, even if he still refuses to look into a mirror capable of returning his reflection. Fortunately, the mirror he moved from his office to the mantel above the fireplace has never done anything so mundane as reflect what’s right in front of it.

He breathes across the glass. “Great Hall.”

The pale grey fog clears away like ink spreading out and disappearing into water, revealing the Great Hall as the dinner hour ends. He doesn’t see Miss Granger or Miss Greenwood, though Minerva is still trying to escape the staff table. She looks to have been waylaid by Pomona, Charity, and Poppy, so he expects she won’t arrive until just before eight. Dumbledore is showing off his bloody blinding robes for a group of first-years who aren’t yet old enough to know that their Headmaster’s taste in color is abhorrent.

“I’ve been meaning to ask how that thing works,” Severus says as he exits Nizar’s study, holding the stack of papers meant to be duplicated for the others. Nizar is quite willing to let Severus handle that task, as he still feels completely fucking awful.

“You have to be keyed to the mirror for it to do anything at all.”

“It doesn’t reflect anything. Calling it a mirror is inaccurate,” Severus points out.

Nizar glances at him, but there is no sign of hesitation on Severus’s face. No hint at all that Severus is
distressed by Nizar’s appearance.

That makes exactly one of them.

“Whatever you want to call it, then.” Nizar returns his attention to the Hall. The Weasley twins are being attacked by Lee Jordan, whose braided hair is currently striped like a rainbow. That isn’t the charm attached to their magic brush; that’s the jinx they used on Severus’s hair last November.

Jordan’s hair is wet. No wonder he’s trying to kill the twins. He hopes Minerva enjoys handing out that particular detention—actually, he hopes it becomes a detention before it becomes a slaughter. Jordan will never be an exceptional duelist, but that young man is creatively vicious with a wand.

“If you breathe over the glass and request to see something by name, it will appear unless there is magic blocking it.” Nizar breathes on the glass again and says, “Salazar’s quarters.” Unlike the first time he’d tried that, he can now see Salazar’s sitting room instead of murky blackness. The torches are dim; Salazar must be off in whatever place he’s chosen to use for brewing. The latest doses of Fire in the Blood were brought while Nizar was having an unexpected nap, and he could tell just by a slight difference in flavor that they weren’t made by Severus.

“That’s an operating mechanism. You still haven’t explained how it works,” Severus says.

“Oh.” Nizar hasn’t thought on how he built the mirror in quite a while. “I don’t think I could create another right now. I don’t recall enough. I do know that it’s a bit of Scrying Divination, a bit of Blood Magic, some Geomancy, and possibly the obstinate stubbornness of me wanting the fucking thing to work as intended.”

“In similar fashion to your Singing Pensieve and the Recording Charm, then.”

“Probably.” Nizar blows across the glass again without voicing a location, which cancels the scrying aspect and returns the mirror to its grey-fogged state.

“How many Calming Draughts did Salazar give you before my arrival?” Severus asks him, holding up a single phial. Nizar suspects that it would have been the last dose he could have taken, though instead of a nap, he would have been bloody oblivious for several hours.

Nizar digs around in the hooded jumper’s front pocket, which seems to have been magically expanded, before he comes up with four empty phials that have a faint residual scent of a Calming Draught. “That many. It must have been five, then.”

“For someone your size, two should have been more than enough,” Severus says in disapproval. “Why five?”

Nizar places the empty phials on the mantelpiece for Salazar to collect later. “I worked up a tolerance. You can imprison someone with a Calming Draught. You stop caring what is being done to you because you can’t feel it the way you should.”

Severus sounds disturbed. “Was that done to you?”

“I don’t recall. It might have been a part of my Defence training, or perhaps paranoia.”

“Or your insanity with the bloody Cruciatus Curse,” Severus returns in a dry voice. “I’m surprised you’re still wearing Salazar’s jumper,” he says in a blatant change of subject. Nizar is glad; he doesn’t really want to speak of either things.

“It isn’t his,” Nizar says, holding up one arm so that the sleeve drapes over his hand. “Or it wasn’t
originally, at least. It’s too big—more your size. It’s larger than anything I own outside of that fur cloak. Thus, it’s perfect for bloody hiding in.”

Severus makes an annoyed sound. “Nizar. I’m a cynical bastard, but there is no one who will be entering this room this evening who will have any concern about your appearance beyond Aberforth’s fucking hex.”

Nizar blinks a few times and stares at Severus. “The others? Who said anything about them? I’m fucking well hiding from me!”

Severus frowns. “Why?”

“Does the color of your own arm hair currently make you feel panicked?” Nizar asks.

“I wouldn’t know. I’d burnt off most of it by age sixteen through various incidents with potions,” Severus replies in his favorite dust-dry tone.

“Lucky,” Nizar mutters, tugging the left sleeve down so that it’s fully covering his hand. He’d rather…not. At all. He will bathe fully dressed if need be just to avoid this feeling of intense dysphoria.

“Nizar.” Severus steps close to him. “Calm down.”

“I’m dosed up on fucking Calming Draughts!” Nizar protests. “I am calm!”

“You’re not.” Severus grasps Nizar’s face with both hands and kisses him.

“Okay,” Nizar whispers when he is eventually released. “I wasn’t calm. I’m also now very much distracted.”

Severus smirks at him. “That was the idea.”

It’s probably for the best that the Floo activates at that moment, forcing Nizar and Severus to step back, or Nizar might have blocked off his quarters and told everyone to bugger off until tomorrow. Sirius emerges first, dusting off his robes. “I warned Remus,” is all he has the chance to say before Remus joins them.

*When did I start thinking of them by first name?* Nizar wonders. He has no idea when he started doing so, or what changed to cause it. Last names were easier. Less confusing.

Remus is bloody well staring at him. “What?” Nizar snaps.

“Sorry.” Remus shakes his head. “I just had this odd moment of wondering what caused Salazar to shave that beard of his before I realized who I was actually looking at.”

Sirius looks far too pleased with himself. “I wasn’t specific.”


Nizar rolls his eyes and goes over to answer his own door when there is hesitant knocking. “It isn’t mine.” Even if he is kidnapping this jumper for the entire weekend.

His hand doesn’t want to grip the doorknob. Nizar grits his teeth and forces his fingers to curl properly around it.

It occurs to him as he’s opening the door that he could ask one of the others to do it, but that is the
sort of hiding he’s never been fond of. It’s one thing to try to control his own stupid feelings, but backing down from someone else? No.

Adele’s eyes widen when she sees him. “I thought you weren’t—”

“It’s a hex,” Nizar interrupts her. “An ill-timed one. Please come in.”

Adele walks through the doorway when he steps aside. “Oh! Hello, sirs.”

“You outrank me,” Remus says while Severus and Sirius try not to gape at her unexpected appearance. “I don’t think that counts.”

“It’s good manners, at least,” Adele counters. “You didn’t warn them, did you, Nizar?”

“No. More fun that way.” Nizar smiles when Severus glares at him. He’s been hexed; that doesn’t mean his brain ceased to function or his sense of humor obliterated itself. “If the other four war mages of Britain are present, the fifth one should be, also.”

“Nizar has explained it all properly.” Adele removes her robe and hangs it on a free peg. “About who he was before the incident last summer. I’m fine with it, of course. Professor Slytherin has been one of my instructors since I came to Hogwarts, if mostly by portrait. I barely knew Potter.”

“I see,” Severus finally manages, his eyes still narrowed. “I trust your Occlumency is superb, Miss Greenwood.”

“Of course, Professor,” Adele replies, and proceeds to glance around Nizar’s quarters with polite interest.

When Nizar next opens the door, it’s to admit Hermione. “Not a word,” he warns her.

Hermione’s eyes grow comically wide. “But you look—what happened?”

“That’s five words, not zero words!” Nizar shuts the door after making certain no one is waiting behind her. “It was caused by a hex designed for shape-changers. Metamorphmagi. It takes two days to wear off.”

“I was wondering what had happened,” Adele says, which causes Hermione to begin staring at her instead of Nizar. “Who hexed you?”

“A Slytherin idiot friend of mine. You’ll meet him properly in a short while.” Nizar looks between Adele and Hermione. “Please tell me we’re not about to have an academic standoff.”

“What—no!” Hermione looks startled. “I was just—because she’s a war mage, right?”

“And you’re here because…” Adele frowns. “No offence, but I don’t think you’re here merely because of that past friendship, not when he doesn’t recall. Is it the apprenticeship offer?”

“It’s both, actually,” Nizar answers. “She might know of things that happened that we don’t. Though, yes, I’d rather not need to continually hide part of my life from my assistant next term. It’s bothersome enough doing so when it’s the Weasley twins.”

Adele tilts her head. “I’m surprised they haven’t attempted to break into your quarters.”

“They have tried. They can’t figure out what they’re doing wrong. I’ll tell them after they graduate,” Nizar replies.
Salazar arrives next, though he simply Apparates into the room rather than use the door. “I’ve already warned Minerva, so that is one less difficulty to be facing this evening.” Then he halts mid-step and stares at Nizar, an undecipherable expression on his face.

“What?” Nizar asks. “I had enough of the staring on the first day of November, Sal. I’m not enjoying the extra attention now.”

“It’s that bloody jumper.” Salazar strides forward and hugs him. “It’s a bit of a reminder, is all.”

Nizar hugs him back, confused. “A reminder of what?”

Salazar releases him but rests his hands on Nizar’s shoulders. “There is not much difference between a hooded tunic and a hooded jumper. Granted, Helga always claimed it was a rather dull shade of brown, but it was the only bloody jumper you owned not made from polyester.”

Nizar blinks a few times before he leans back, gripping the sleeves of the jumper protectively. “I remember that tunic. Don’t you dare attempt to turn this one the same color!” He will cope with the idea that Salazar chose that fucking tunic and sent him off with it at a later date.

Much later. Preferably never.

“And yet it took us how long to convince you to be rid of it? You nearly drove Helga to despairing screaming,” Salazar replies.

Hermione lets out a sudden, choked-off laugh. “Enduring Shopping with a Viking,” she quotes from the letters.

Salazar grins at her. “Miss Granger, believe me when I say that the experience required endurance, else you were left behind in the dust.”
The official start of the evening meeting begins, bafflingly enough, with the Floo arrival of the barman from the Hog’s Head Inn. The big, grey-haired, bearded man notices Nizar and flushes almost violet. “You look like hell.”

“And whose fault is that?” Nizar asks, but Hermione thinks he sounds more resigned than angry.

“A man I’ve known for a century suddenly claimed to be someone else,” the barman mutters. “I take no chances, not when it comes to my family’s safety.”

Hermione is surprised by the mention of family. The man looks far too old to be having children… but then, magicians are odd for that. She’s still trying to figure out if the longer lifespan and fertility range will apply to her, as well.

“Proper Slytherin paranoia,” Professor Salazar says, even if he still looks unimpressed by the results. “I don’t blame you for your caution, though others will be less forgiving.”

The barman sighs. “Aye, well—I’m still sorry as hell, Nizar.”

“I’ll forgive you when the fucking hex wears off, and not a minute before,” Nizar responds. “For those who’ve yet to meet him properly, this is Aberforth Dumbledore, Albus Dumbledore’s younger brother of two years. He’s the owner of the Hog’s Head Inn, and was a Slytherin known to me when he attended Hogwarts.”

Hermione stares up at Aberforth Dumbledore. She didn’t know Professor Dumbledore had a brother, but now that it’s pointed out, she can see the family resemblance. It’s the eyes, really. Aberforth’s eyes are exactly like Professor Dumbledore’s, but not nearly as good-humored and twinkly. “Er, nice to meet you, sir.”
“I’m not a sir,” Aberforth replies gruffly. “I’m just Aberforth to you and Miss Greenwood there.”

“It’s Adele, please,” Adele says.

Hermione nods. “Yes, the same for me. I’m Hermione.”

“All right, then.” Aberforth goes and sits down in a chair without another word. That seems to be a quiet signal for everyone to do the same. Hermione finds herself seated next to Adele and Remus on the sofa furthest from the fireplace. Sirius takes the other chair, slumping down in it like he expects an inquisition. Professor Salazar, Professor Snape, and Professor McGonagall share the other sofa.

Nizar sits down on the hearth right next to the fireplace, huddling down in Salazar’s borrowed hooded jumper. “I need the warmth.”

Hermione tries not to wince. The more he explains of it, the worse the Sheep’s Clothing Hex sounds. Whoever created that hex must have been utterly cruel.

She’s surprised when Professor Snape leans forward, depositing eight small potion phials on the coffee table. Then he takes one, drinks it, and puts the empty phial back down with the others.

“Why Calming Draughts, sir?” Adele asks.

Professor Snape grimaces. “So that I may make it through this discussion without committing murder. If you are close to the personal nature of this situation, I strongly suggest indulging. The effects will wear off by midnight.”

Hermione is startled when Professor McGonagall snatches up one of the potions. “If Severus already thinks it necessary, then I know I’m not going to like a bit of this.”

“Fuck it,” Remus mutters under his breath. He takes one of the potions and shoves a second phial at Sirius, who gives it a frustrated look before drinking it dry. Aberforth taps his fingers on his armchair in aggravation before he finally takes one of the phials.

What makes Hermione certain she should emulate the adults is Professor Salazar choosing to take a Calming Draught. Professor Salazar is a Hogwarts Founder and over one thousand years old. If he feels like he needs that sort of assistance to stay calm—Hermione shivers. This can’t be good.

Adele picks up the last two phials and hands one to Hermione. “Bottoms up, Granger?”

Hermione manages a smile and taps their potion phials against each other in a tiny little clink of glassware. “Cheers.” The warmth floods her veins almost at once, soothing her thoughts. She’s always liked a low-dose Calming Draught; it leaves her clear-headed and analytical rather than glassy-eyed and on the verge of unconsciousness. She also refuses the opportunity to indulge almost every time, thinking it would be far too easy to find that state of mind addicting.

Professor Salazar begins to speak, and something about his tone has them all riveted at once. “We’re here because of a singular question my brother wished to know the answer to. At age sixteen, Nizar asked by letter of two different people: **Does Albus Dumbledore actually want me dead?** The list of reasons he wrote to accompany that question is daunting and disturbing.”

“I really don’t think—”

“Read the original version of that letter,” Professor Salazar interrupts Professor McGonagall, though his voice is gentle and his expression kind. “Followed by the recopied version with the information laid out in proper order. There are also several additions made in only a few short days, some written
Hermione tries not to feel nervous as she looks down at the first page. This isn’t the sort of meeting she expected when Nizar first asked if she would like to join them. It’s a lot bigger, a lot more world-changing, and she’s being trusted to take part. Right now, that is more daunting than any letter.

*This is not supposition, but admitted fact: Albus Dumbledore was certain that Harry James Potter had to die for Voldemort to be vulnerable to death, though it is uncertain if Dumbledore means it to be by confrontation or by other means. This belief is based on a Horcrux crafted by Voldemort that the child has not carried since the age of fifteen. Despite the Horcrux no longer being an aspect in play, Albus Dumbledore still believes—again, by his own admission—that a prophecy spoken in the summer of 1980 must be adhered to—that the child must still confront Voldemort in order to bring about Voldemort’s defeat.*

That Prophecy of the Chosen One is this:

“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.”

This winter, a second prophecy was given by the same Seer who spoke the first one. Albus Dumbledore has not been told of this prophecy.

“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.”

Hermione lifts her head, aware that she might have speed-read her way through the first page given that the others are still frowning over the words. “Er, this isn’t the second prophecy about Voldemort. It’s the third.”

Professor Salazar gives her a sharp look. “I knew there had been a second, but my brother refused to discuss it, insisting it unimportant. Do you recall what it said?”

It’s cheering that he believes her without question. “I, uh…” Hermione glances at Nizar. “Can I just use your other name to help sort of label when things happened?”

Nizar tilts his head and then spreads his hands, fingers splayed. Lack of concern along with permission granted, then.

“It was during third term, during exams in June of 1994,” Hermione says. “Harry tried to tell us the day it happened, but we were all a bit distracted by Buckbeak’s execution—at least until we stole the hippogriff, anyway.”

“You stole the hippogriff?” Adele blinks a few times. “Pansy’s right. We’re definitely keeping you.”

“Thanks,” Hermione manages, though Professor Snape looks less than pleased by the idea. No, wait; he’s actually glaring at Sirius and Remus. Allies or not, they are all three still being completely ridiculous.
Professor McGonagall is busy eying Hermione. “By abuse of a Time-Turner, Miss Granger?”

Hermione frowns. “I don’t consider it abuse when it saves two lives. Besides, I turned it in afterwards.” Professor McGonagall narrows her eyes before nodding in acknowledgement. “Anyway, after that, er, mess, Harry told us that Trelawney went funny during his exam for Divination.”

Professor Salazar doesn’t seem surprised. “Trelawney tends to have her moments of true prophecy whenever one is around who’s going to have a fair bit to do with it.” For some reason, that causes Professor Snape to glare at Professor Salazar instead. “What did she say?”

Hermione resists the urge to duck her head when she becomes the focus of so many adult gazes. This isn’t like giving an answer in class; the stakes are much higher. “This is best Harry could remember, given that it had been a few days: It will happen tonight. The Dark Lord lies abandoned by his followers. His servant has been chained these twelve years. Before midnight tonight, the servant will break free and rejoin his master. The Dark Lord will rise again with his servant’s aid, more terrible than ever before.”

“Well, that certainly happened to the letter,” Remus comments in a mild voice.

“Bullshit!” Sirius declares in response. “Chained, my arse! That fucking rat was spoiled rotten for twelve damned years!”

“Did it not occur to any of you three to tell a teacher about this prophecy?” Professor McGonagall asks.

“Of course it did.” Hermione jerks in surprise when a very familiar voice emerges from the portrait frame on the wall behind her. She cranes her head around to find that a new portrait has invaded Hedwig’s frame, one that looks like a slightly older version of Harry—though his hair is much longer and his eyes are the same grey-dominant green that Nizar favors. Definitely after the magical adoption, then. Hedwig is perched on his wrist, ruffling her feathers and looking thrilled by the other portrait’s presence.

“Unfortunately,” Nizar’s young portrait continues, “I told the person on staff who does not share very well with others.”

“You told Albus.” Aberforth Dumbledore immediately looks much more like the gruff, displeased man Hermione encountered during her single visit to the Hog’s Head Inn in October. “And Albus told no one else.”

“Not a word,” Professor Snape says, but now he’s scowling at the painting. “Will you please leave?”

“Not happening!” the portrait chirps back. “Myself can’t stand having me about, but if he’s invited me here, then there is a good reason for it. Namely, I remember this shit, and he doesn’t. Besides, it’s been quite a while since Hedwig and I have been able to do this. She missed me.” Hedwig proves his point by trying to head-butt Nizar’s portrait in the nose.

“Be useful, then,” Nizar says to his portrait. “How did Albus respond to word of that second prophecy?”

Hermione’s neck starts developing a cramp while waiting for the portrait to answer. She supposes it must be difficult, sorting through over a thousand years of recorded and stored memory, but he could at least hurry it up a bit!

“He was pleased,” Nizar’s portrait finally says. “Made an offhand comment about offering
Trelawney a raise in pay for attaining a grand total of two real prophecies in her career.”

Adele sounds scandalized. “Why would Professor Dumbledore be pleased about anything that would enable the Dark Lord to return?”

“That is very much the question of the evening, isn’t it? Was there anything else?” Professor Salazar asks the portrait.

Hermione thinks her neck might break from the strain by the time the portrait responds. “Yes, actually. He contradicted himself. Not then, but at the end of next term, after Cedric died.” Hermione winces; she doubts she’s the only one. “Albus Dumbledore’s opinion of the Priori incantamentum that occurred between mine and Voldemort’s wands was that those ghost-like forms who appeared were mere echoes. The dead are dead and do not return, whereas the previous year, he was quite willing to natter on about how the dead are always with us.”

“That was a chilling conversation to witness,” Sirius mutters.

“Why?” Nizar’s portrait asks in a sharp voice. “Because of the subject matter, or because that fucking arsehole literally made me talk about it?”

Hermione whips her head around to stare at Sirius, who seems to be slowly turning white. “What?” Sirius rasps.

“Literally. Made. Me,” the portrait repeats. “Mind Magic, Sirius. I didn’t want to talk about Little Hangleton, not yet. It had just fucking happened! That wasn’t good enough, so Albus Dumbledore forced me to do so. I didn’t even realize that was what he’d done until…”

“I cannot recall if you realized this occurred before this portrait was painted, or just after,” Professor Salazar says. “And we thought Helga was upset before that particular revelation.”

Remus reaches out and snags Sirius by his robe, yanking him back down before he can finish standing. “No, Sirius. We didn’t come here to murder Albus Dumbledore.”

“Maybe you didn’t!” Sirius retorts, hands and voice both shaking. Except for his improved appearance, it’s like seeing Sirius Black in the Shrieking Shack for the first time all over again. “He did that—right in front of me! I didn’t even—I didn’t even notice! I trusted Albus, and I just let him —!”

“Ease down, Sirius,” the portrait says. “If you had protested too much, Dumbledore would have made you let it happen. As you said, you trusted him.”

Sirius is still white-faced with potion-muted rage. “I’m a Black, which means I was raised as a bloody Occlumens! I don’t trust anyone that much!”

“Sirius.” Nizar’s portrait sounds angry. “June of 1995. I’d just gone through the worst night of my life, but when Albus Dumbledore ordered you to leave to do his bidding, you didn’t hesitate. You left. Yes, you would have let him.”

Sirius buries his face in his hands. Hermione feels awful for him, and is turning around to snap at the portrait for being unkind when the portrait says, “Just like Severus didn’t hesitate to out Lupin as a werewolf on Albus Dumbledore’s order.”

“What?” Remus whispers. “Albus did what?”

Nizar glares at his portrait. “I didn’t even know that. How did you?”
The portrait shrugs. “Word gets around, Myself. I do talk to the Founders’ portraits, you know. The important part is that it’s true.”

“It is, yes.” Professor Snape looks like he might be trying to hunch further down out of sight on the sofa. “I thought of it as being granted permission, but the irritating portrait is correct. It was an order.”

“What was the bloody point?” Sirius asks, scowling. “I’d already outed Remus while hallucinating thanks to those fucking Dementors. The damage was done! Why make it bloody worse?”

“Not quite done. In 1994, Albus Dumbledore might still have been able to talk Fudge into keeping his idiotic mouth shut. Why, then?” Hermione glances over to find Nizar looking perplexed. “Why would he—oh! Oh, yes. Of course he would need to help the curse on the Defence position continue to do its job. You’re already bloody cursed!” Nizar snaps at Remus when Remus looks confused. “You might actually have been the only person aside from myself capable of retaining the Defence post with Voldemort’s curse still in place.”

“But—why?” Remus asks plaintively. Hermione supposes she can’t blame him for that. She’s feeling a bit dumbfounded, too.

“Albus already believed You-Know-Who was coming back,” Aberforth rumbles. The angrier he gets, the less he resembles Professor Dumbledore. “He’d be wanting his werewolf spy in prime position to act when that happened. You being fired from Hogwarts, outed for being a werewolf? The packs living outside the law would eat that up and welcome you in.”

The portrait still sounds annoyed. “If the lot of you are going to sit around and plot, you’ve got to learn how to bloody well communicate! You chose a terrible time to get stoned off your arse!” he adds. “It should be you telling them this, not a fucking portrait!”

Nizar makes a faint sound of agreement. “Not my decision on the timing.”

“Oh.” Adele is a bit pale when Hermione looks at her, but Adele is staring at Nizar. “Professor Dumbledore really would kill you if he thought it would stop Voldemort, wouldn’t he? He’d do it himself if he thought that’s what it would take.”

“Probably,” Nizar replies, which turns Hermione’s insides into a twisted knot. “But we’re not going to be telling Albus Dumbledore that his supposed prophetic key to winning the war is sitting at his staff table.”

“I still refuse to believe that Albus would be that callous,” Professor McGonagall says, frowning. “Of the rest? Of a certainty, I’d believe it. I’ve experienced his attempts at manipulation for myself. Of outright murder? Albus? Never. I’m more concerned with the idea that there are now two prophecies that discuss your dying. The first prophecy says it could be either, but this second one—that says both!”

“Prophecies are tricky, darling Lioness.” Professor Salazar is rubbing his bearded chin with his hand. “Death does not have to be the literal process, though it is concerning. I’d rather we focus on what purpose Dumbledore could have for wanting to achieve his ends through my brother’s death—and perhaps discerning what his ends actually are.”

Remus flips through the rest of his copy of the rewritten letters. “This looks…complicated.”

“It is that,” Professor Salazar agrees. “You might wish to finish reading it.”

Hermione reads quickly through the copy of Harry’s original letter to Professor Snape. It bounces around quite a bit, but she always followed her friend’s scattered thoughts well enough. Besides, it’s
a much-expanded version of the letter she received, so it’s familiar.

Then there are young Albus Dumbledore’s five letters written to Gellert Grindelwald. Hermione feels utterly chilled after reading them. They sound so…so racist.

She trusted Professor Dumbledore. She’d thought him to be a great wizard from the moment she first read of his name and accomplishments in *Hogwarts: A History*. To see him from this other side, to see what he really thought of people like *her*, makes her feel like everything has just been turned upside down.

There is so much more information added to the rewritten summarization of the other letters that it’s been broken up into parts. Hermione worries at her lip and begins to read them.

1981, Chief Warlock, & Little Whinging

1. Dumbledore gave the child to the Dursleys the night of Hallowe’en, just after his parents’ deaths. His legal guardian, recognized in both the Wizarding and Muggle world, was Sirius Black, not Petunia Dursley. There are legal protocols on both sides to be followed, and those protocols were ignored.

2. Sirius Black retrieved his son from the house in Godric’s Hollow and passed him into safe hands—Rubeus Hagrid. Hagrid told others; this was ignored in favor of believing Sirius Black, supposed Secret Keeper, was the traitor. If he had betrayed the Potters, his own family, then his rescue of the child, the threat Voldemort most feared, makes no sense at all.

2.5. Remus Lupin was the legally recognized godparent of Harry James Potter. No one except Albus Dumbledore was aware at that time that Remus Lupin was a werewolf. There is also no logical reason to have denied him custody of his legal ward. (Granted, the godparent in question would have refused, but that is idiocy discussed another day.)

3. There were nearly sixteen hours between the Potters’ deaths and Peter Pettigrew faking his death. No one searched for Sirius Black except for the M.L.E., and no one checked him for any sort of curses or spells that might have altered his behavior upon his arrest. (Kingsley provided the M.L.E. record, attached.) Sirius Black has testified to Kingsley Shacklebolt that he was hit with a hex so powerful that he has no recollection of the time between finding Pettigrew and awakening in Azkaban weeks later. He suspects he would have laughed at the incongruity of Pettigrew being the traitor, but not to the point of losing his grip on reality.

4. Dumbledore was Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, the one who decides when prisoners go to trial, both during the latter half of 1981 and through the spring of 1995. Why did he not call for Sirius Black to have a trial? Severus was told by Dumbledore on 20th December 1995 that he regrets not doing so, but that is regret, not reason.

5. Dumbledore has to know of all the secret passages in and out of this castle. He schooled here and has lived here ever since—that’s over one hundred years. He had to know that Sirius Black could get in, and how, but Dumbledore did nothing to block those passageways. He either knew Sirius Black wasn’t guilty, or he thought to assist in the process of making the child dead.

5.5. On the thought that he believed Sirius innocent, if Dumbledore knew Pettigrew was in the castle, he let the child sleep in the same room with his parents’ betrayer, another method of assisting another in making the child dead.

6. What was done after June of 1994 to search for Peter Pettigrew? Kingsley Shacklebolt is unaware of any M.L.E. action taken in an official capacity, and was not asked in an unofficial capacity either. At age sixteen, I could have found Pettigrew based on what Dumbledore knew then; if I could do it, why couldn’t Dumbledore?

7. Dumbledore is not the one who acted to save Sirius Black from the Dementor’s Kiss in 1994. He
was Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot and Headmaster of this school, and acted as if he was helpless to stop the on-site execution of Sirius Black. This is not so; he had the power to demand Fudge adhere to Sirius Black’s sentence, which was imprisonment, not execution. He had the power to remand Sirius Black to the M.L.E. Fudge was overstepping the bounds of the law, and Dumbledore allowed it. Instead of Dumbledore using his power, he made two children with a Time-Turner save Sirius Black. While they were competent, anything could have gone wrong.

7.5. Sirius Black is not the only person arrested during or after the last war not to receive a trial before the Wizengamot. Then Head of the M.L.E. Bartemius Crouch requested multiple trials (More documents attached, bless Kingsley’s patience). The requests were denied by the Chief Warlock due to the “obvious guilt” of the suspects.

8. Dumbledore altered the protective blood magic protection left on Harry James Potter from his mother’s sacrifice. Without altering the magic, the child did not have to live with a blood relative; the protective magic was attached to him. Normally, this cannot be done.

8.5. Dumbledore succeeded in altering that protective magic because he bears the Elder Wand.

Hermione re-reads that a few times. “The—the Elder Wand is a myth!”

“I hate to disappoint your offended academic sensibilities, but it’s quite real, Miss Granger.” Professor Salazar gives her a sympathetic look. “As are the other two Hallows.”

“Won that wand from bloody Gellert Grindelwald during the war, I imagine,” Aberforth growls. “God knows where that blighter got it from.”

Hermione looks to Adele. “Nursery tale?” she tries, hoping for a bit of reality.

Adele shrugs. “Professor Salazar is older than the story of the Deathly Hallows, Granger. I’d trust him on this.”

“Great,” Hermione murmurs, her heartbeat picking up and doing uncomfortable things in her chest.

Dumbledore used the power in the Elder Wand to attach part of that sacrificial magic to a residence that did not belong to the child, and thus changed its nature so the magic protected the household, not the child. Those in the household could then harm the child all they liked without repercussions of any sort.


9.5. Dumbledore was informed about the bars over the windows. He did nothing about this obvious sign of abuse on the part of the Dursleys. Hermione Granger has informed me that the younger Weasleys told Arthur and Molly about the child’s living conditions during that particular summer of imprisonment. Arthur and Molly reported back to their children that Dumbledore assured them he would make certain things were “better” in the future. That did not happen. Worse, when asked directly about this situation just this past week, Albus Dumbledore lied to Salazar. He claimed to be unaware that the child’s living conditions were so foul. Severus recalls that Dumbledore joined the Aurors investigating the child’s disappearance on 31st July 1995, and thus would have known exactly what sort of imprisonment/living conditions the child dealt with until that day. Albus Dumbledore mentioned those terrible conditions to no one on staff, and to no one in the Order of the Phoenix.
10. The child was isolated from the magical world, figuratively and literally, from 1st November 1981 through 31st July 1991, and then during every summer until 31st July 1995. The child was left uninformed as to what his role could/should be, was undereducated, remained unaware of his full list of allies, and unaware of his known allies’ safety. Those allies were also undereducated and uninformed. There are no benefits to anyone in this situation unless you require your weapon to be blind.

10.5. Abandonment fosters resentment, especially when abandonment coincides with nightly imprisonment and that continuing lack of privations.

11. Three possibilities regarding these childhood conditions:
A. Dumbledore truly believes the child had to live with the Dursleys to keep him safe from Voldemort, even though this was not true until he created those very circumstances.
B. Dumbledore did not actually care.
C. Albus Dumbledore wished for the child to have the worst childhood possible in order for Hogwarts to be viewed as a paradise, and for Dumbledore himself to be viewed by the child as a benevolent savior in order to manipulate the child for his own ends. (I firmly believe it to be C.)

12. With the Horcrux removed from the child and thus altering the Prophecy, why does Dumbledore still insist that a child is their only weapon to use against Voldemort? There are other reasonable options, but just this week Dumbledore asked Salazar when the child would be ready to face Voldemort. Not if. When.

Headmaster & the Order of the Phoenix

13. All staff in this school excepting Nizar and Salazar deSlizarse were hired by Albus Dumbledore, or Dumbledore was their patron for hire during Armando Dippet’s tenure as Headmaster of Hogwarts. Anyone employed by Dumbledore who does not wish to follow along with Albus Dumbledore’s plans could, prior to the restoration of Hogwarts’ Charter, be sacked for their dissenting opinion. Possible victims of this arrangement are Professor Cassius Thorn, Professor Herbert Beery, Professor Talis Freemont, and Madam Beryl Adams.

13.5. Those who have had other debts crafted that tie them not to Hogwarts, but to Albus Dumbledore himself are Rubeus Hagrid, Severus Snape, Sibyl Trelawney, Remus Lupin, Sirius Black, Charity Burbage, Mundungus Fletcher, Andromeda Tonks, Elphias Doge, Arabella Figg, possibly Bathilda Bagshot, and formerly Aberforth Dumbledore. (He ceased concerning himself with goat rumors.)

14. Albus Dumbledore did not like discovering what the Head teacher’s true role in Hogwarts is meant to be. He has not discussed it since that time with anyone who resides within the castle but a few of the portraits in the Headmaster’ Tower. He was not pleased that the older portraits agreed with the Charter. (Godric’s portrait within the Tower was quite informative.)

15. Albus Dumbledore has encouraged the House rivalries among both students and staff. He has gone so far as to tell the Head of Slytherin that we sort too soon under circumstances designed to create doubt, and to sully Slytherin House as a whole. He has had similar, if more subtle, conversations with the other Heads of House to malign both Slytherin House and Severus Snape. (Minerva, you will not set Albus on fire at breakfast tomorrow.)

16. Albus Dumbledore literally bribed me to the tune of 978 Galleons. Yes, I purposefully left him believing that without Hogwarts, I was both homeless and penniless. That will be less convincing now that the war mage news has spread throughout Wizarding Britain, but it was fun while it lasted.
Professor McGonagall lets out a snort of sudden laughter. “He paid you to hang on the wall. He literally paid you to hang on a wall for nearly one thousand years.”

“He’s a cheap fucker,” Nizar says, which only makes Professor McGonagall all but chortle with glee.

Hermione exchanges a knowing look with Adele. Their professors are lunatics.

17. Members of the Order of the Phoenix are continually excluded from Order meetings without justification given: Arabella Figg, Aberforth Dumbledore, Elphias Doge, Rubeus Hagrid, Olympe Maxime, Filius Flitwick, and Oliver Wood, along with those members who claim a reserve status and will only become active members if war breaks out. Even reserve agents need to be aware of what’s happening to be effective fighters in a war.

18. Albus Dumbledore has made no arrangement for the payment of the Brae Elves of Hogwarts per the recovered contract the Brae Elves have with the school. (This situation has been rectified by Salazar, but no one has informed Dumbledore, as we’re curious if he plans to act on the contract at all.)

18.5. Yet he is still paying Dobby the Elf his requested one Galleon per week.

19. Remus Lupin is not a good spy. (No offence, Remus, but you’re terrible at it.) Albus Dumbledore might be attempting to craft believable circumstances for the werewolf packs to be inclined to adopt a man publicly outed as a werewolf, but without credible behavior from Remus Lupin, it seems more like Albus Dumbledore wishes to deliberately alienate the wolf packs by sending a recognizable spy among them.

20. Albus Dumbledore has taken no real action in regards to either house-elf rights (Miss Granger’s S.P.E.W. campaign and Dobby the Elf’s free status) or werewolf rights. Dumbledore could have held up the educated werewolf, and no students harmed, as proof that it was safe for young werewolves to school at Hogwarts.

“No students harmed. Of course.” Professor Snape sounds very bitter and snide, the way he used to speak before term resumed in January.

“Now, wait just a minute. Technically, that was my fault,” Sirius says. “If I hadn’t been a prick, that wouldn’t have happened.”

Professor Snape looks infuriated by Sirius’s logic. “Point,” he grudgingly admits. “But there is still the incident in June of 1994.”

“Actually, you could argue that moment was caused by adult idiocy based on the sudden and dire need to get revenge on a traitor and make him very dead,” Remus says musingly.

Professor Snape stares at Lupin. “I really do hate that I find that to be an acceptable reason.”

“Only because it’s me, Severus,” Remus replies. Professor Snape glowers at Remus until Nizar picks up a pillow and throws it directly at Snape’s face.

Nizar looks mortified. “Sorry! I’m—shut up!” he yells at his portrait, which has fallen down somewhere in Hedwig’s painting and is howling with laughter. “I didn’t mean to hit you in the face!
It’s that damned hex!”

“That’s early. Two doses of Fire in the Blood is definitely not going to be enough.” Salazar retrieves three corked phials from his robe and passes them along to Nizar.

“It was worth the experiment. Except for the part where Severus is going to kill me for that,” Nizar says. Hermione sees him struggling to pull the cork from the first phial and fights the urge to leap over and help.

Professor Snape waits until Nizar has swallowed all three doses of the potion. “It was actually funny,” he says without a trace of humor on his face. Adele muffles a sudden giggle.

*Bloody Slytherins!* Hermione thinks in near-despair.

“What incident are the three of you discussing?” Professor McGonagall asks crossly. “I’ve no idea at all what you’re talking about aside from the unfortunate event of an unmedicated werewolf loose on the grounds in June of 1994!”

Sirius looks confused. “What? Of course you know what we mean! You were my bloody Head of House, Minerva!”

Professor McGonagall raises an eyebrow. “I’m afraid I don’t know. Someone do please enlighten me.”

“That idiot tried to kill me with a werewolf in our fifth year,” Professor Snape says in a dry voice. “He was stupid enough to brag about his lovely idea of a prank to James Potter, which is why I’m not deceased.”

Professor McGonagall stares at them in wide-eyed disbelief. “Sirius Orion Black. You did what?”

“In my pathetic defence, my home life did not really prepare me much for the idea of murder being too far to go for the sake of a prank, considering my own relatives thought that to be a complete lark,” Sirius says. “But Albus made it worse.”

“How?” Professor McGonagall asks in a strangled voice. Hermione wishes for a book to put over her head. When her Head of House finally explodes, there might be flying debris and vicious Scots Gaelic involved.

“He gave Black a week of detention,” Professor Snape informs her. “And that was all.”

“I thought he was going to bloody well punish *Snape* for that shit,” Sirius adds. “And I’m not exaggerating in the slightest, Minerva. Albus blamed Snape more than he blamed me. I deserved to be bloody well expelled for that.”

“And rightly so!” Professor McGonagall declares in a shrill voice. “Right now I find that I don’t know who to be more angry with—with you, or with Albus for never telling me about a serious incident that involved students of my own House!”

“Choose both and move along,” Nizar suggests. Hermione glances over at him to find Nizar is slumped against the wall, glassy-eyed. “Oh, Salazar figured out how to combine Fire in the Blood with a Calming Draught,” he explains when he notices Hermione’s worried look. “I’m going to be figuring out how he did so when I’m a bit less…hmm. Stoned is probably the most apt term.”

“You look it,” Hermione says, relieved to find something to smile about before she has to face the list again.
20.5. We retrieved public copies of the recent vote regarding werewolf employment, and it being made illegal in Wizarding Britain. Albus Dumbledore did not vote yay or nay. He abstained.

21. There are listening spells in the basement kitchen of 12 Grimmauld Place where the Order of the Phoenix meets. Sirius Black did not place them there, nor did any other member of the Black family. Their purpose is unknown.

**Hogwarts Events**

22. Albus Dumbledore is conveniently absent on many occasions when he should not be.

23. Hogwarts has a disturbing trend of terrible DADA teachers at Hogwarts. This cannot be due to the curse Voldemort placed on the position, as that merely limited a teacher to one term of residency before the curse would create circumstances to eject them from the post. The other part of the curse only interfered with a student’s ability to learn within the DADA classroom. These chosen terrible Defence instructors left students even more vulnerable to the latter part of the curse, and left them undereducated in regards to all forms of Defence—such as manipulation through word and through Mind Magic.

24. Albus Dumbledore told no one that Harry James Potter’s protective magic existed until the child used it to kill Professor Quirrell. He used an eleven-year-old child as a lethal weapon and showed no remorse. (I asked the portrait. Dumbledore didn’t regret Quirrell’s death or the child’s hand in it at all.)

24.5. Albus Dumbledore meant for the child, Ron Weasley, and Hermione Granger to seek out that stupid Philosopher’s Stone. The traps catered to their strengths: flight, strategy, logic, basic magical knowledge, and a friendship with Rubeus Hagrid, a man with an inability to keep secrets. (The portrait informs me that Dumbledore also returned a certain Invisibility Cloak by secret means at a very convenient time.) Quirrell’s only true difficulty lay in getting past the Cerberus, and in the puzzle of the Mirror of Erised.

25. Why were four children sent out into the Forbidden Forest when dead unicorns were turning up? That is blatant endangerment of young, untrained magicians.

“I didn’t know until the next morning,” Professor McGonagall says angrily. Hermione glances up to see fiery red spots of anger burning in her cheeks. “I sent them off for a long detention with Argus Filch, not a trip into the blasted forest! Argus and Rubeus gave me conflicting answers when I asked who’d countermanded my instructions. Rubeus claimed Quirrell. Argus claimed Albus. Neither would recant on the claim, and I’ve never known what to think of that.”

Hermione looks back down at the list, trying not to bite her lip. It’s nice to know her Head of House wasn’t trying to kill her with that detention in the Forbidden Forest while a unicorn killer was about, but Professor McGonagall had still gone far overboard in regards to how many points she’d taken—

Or maybe that was part of Professor Dumbledore’s entire baffling setup. Hermione and Harry (Ron and Neville also) had only just become accepted by the other students in their House. Maybe they’d even been on the verge of making more friends. Losing their House one hundred fifty points had seen Harry, Hermione, and Neville completely ostracized by all of Gryffindor for the rest of the term. It’s the worst point deduction for a single incident that Hermione has ever heard of occurring the
entire time she’s been at Hogwarts. In much-belated retrospect, first-years out of bed after curfew tend to average ten lost points. Not fifty per student. Hermione should know; she’s handed out those point deductions herself as a Prefect.

Hermione looks at Professor Salazar, waits until he’s staring back at her, and carefully lets the thought peek out from between sheets of her book shielding. She isn’t certain she’s doing it right until Professor Salazar’s eyes widen. Then he nods, glancing at Professor McGonagall with a thoughtful expression. They’ll likely discuss that in private, but Hermione doesn’t mind. If something really important comes from it, someone in this room will tell her.

26. Severus Snape saves that child’s life on at least four different occasions, and during three of those occasions, Albus Dumbledore was present and capable of doing the same. Jinxed broom, Quirrell, Dementors on the Quidditch Pitch, sudden case of werewolf. Albus Dumbledore is often present when others require saving, but he ensures that others handle the situation instead of himself.

27. Fawkes is loyal to the school, not to Albus Dumbledore. It was the phoenix’s decision to take the Sorting Hat with Godric’s sword to the Chamber of Secrets. Dumbledore later implied that he made those decisions, but he had no way of knowing where the Chamber of Secrets was at that time, and he had no idea that anyone aside from Ginevra Weasley was in danger. Why did he claim credit for this rescue?

28. The child did not have to compete in the Triwizard Tournament. It wasn’t a legally binding contract until the child acted in Barty Crouch Junior’s stead during the First Task, whereupon the Goblet of Fire recognized Harry Potter as Barty Crouch’s legal stand-in for the tournament. Albus Dumbledore is aware of the rules of the Triwizard Tournament, but he agreed with Tempero-cursed Bartemius Crouch and allowed an undertrained magician to compete.

29. Why did it take so long for Albus Dumbledore (with Minerva McGonagall and Severus Snape) to catch up to “Moody” when he took off with the injured child at the conclusion of the Triwizard Tournament? There is at least a ten minute gap between the child being taken away by an insane Death Eater and that particular rescue. Dumbledore claimed that he acted right away to save the child from imposter-Moody, but in actuality it was ten minutes. A lot can happen in ten minutes.

29.5. Crouch and Moody must not act differently if no one noticed that imposter-Moody was a fucking Death Eater for an entire term. Why would Albus Dumbledore want the real Alastor Moody anywhere near children? The only thing wrought by that decision was an investigation by the Ministry, headed by Dolores Umbridge, who tortured students and interrogated staff with impunity from 1st September through 1st November.

30. Albus Dumbledore has a bad habit of reading others’ thoughts without permission. It’s one thing to do so if a student is in danger. It’s quite another to do it to an adult who is not.

31. I believe that Albus Dumbledore informing me of the first prophecy was meant to be a diversion. Why hide it from everyone else, but not from me? I refuse to hide it now, even if I don’t understand what sort of diversion it was meant to be.

32. Via portrait record: Why was Albus Dumbledore happy when he learnt about Voldemort stealing the child’s blood to lessen the sacrificial protection? Dumbledore said nothing aloud, but the memory has been reviewed often. Triumph would be a better term. It was as if Voldemort’s success was also Dumbledore’s success, which makes a confirmed two events in which Dumbledore was pleased by Voldemort’s victories.
33. Why did Albus Dumbledore plan to arrange the actual torture of Harry James Potter with Mind Magic lessons conducted by Severus Snape, who the child didn’t trust? You cannot teach Mind Magic without trust. Albus Dumbledore is supposedly capable of teaching this, but instead was crafting a situation for the beginning of the 1995-96 term that was doomed to messy, volatile failure. Why did Albus see the need to instill further mistrust between the child and Severus? More importantly, what was Albus Dumbledore going to do when those lessons failed? Help? Hindrance? Would he play the role of the Disappointed Taskmaster, reinforcing the belief that the child-weapon needed to continue to keep the benevolent savior-type happy? (Yes, I’m that much of a pessimist.)

“He really fucking ordered you to do that?” Sirius asks, incensed.

Professor Snape nods. “He did. I was still attempting to figure out how to best sabotage those lessons so that they would end quickly. I might not have liked the child at the time, Black, but I have never wished to torture anyone.”

“But you would have just…done it. Because Professor Dumbledore said so.” Adele looks worried. Or maybe horrified. Hermione resists the urge to sigh in frustration; Slytherins are so very hard to read!

Professor Snape regards Adele with a steady, inscrutable gaze. “Miss Greenwood, not only is Albus Dumbledore my employer, but he has the means to see to it that I rot in Azkaban for the rest of my life. All he has to do is retract his testimony given to the Wizengamot regarding certain events during the first war. Yes, I would have done it.”

“Then if we were to ever challenge Professor Dumbledore regarding any of this, we would have to be…” Adele frowns. “Secure. We would require the means to convince the Wizengamot of your wartime position in a way that is not in doubt.”

“Oh or we could just do what we’ve done for me—royal pardons work wonders,” Sirius says, and Adele nods her agreement. Hermione is still contemplating all the insane difficulties involved if they try to do anything about this. She wants to beat her head against the wall in frustration, and they’re not even done yet!

Horcruxes

34. Albus Dumbledore did not tell the Order of the Phoenix about Voldemort’s Horcruxes. There is no evidence that he ever intended to do so.

35. Albus Dumbledore knew there were multiple Horcruxes, and he knew the child was a Horcrux. (Portrait informant: I think that moment of triumph I observed was Dumbledore realizing the Horcrux connection. He planned to use it somehow, but how is unknown.)

35.5. Note that there were seven total Horcruxes, but that number is now down to two unknown Horcruxes in unknown locations.

36. Without knowing that Potter’s Horcrux was no longer an issue, Albus Dumbledore did ask if the Horcrux could be removed from the child. However, asking the question does not mean there is intent to see it done. Dumbledore was infuriated when the child’s status as a (former) Horcrux was revealed, yet he expressed no regret over the other Horcruxes’ destruction.

37. Salazar suspects that Albus Dumbledore knows where one of the two remaining Horcruxes are
“The Lestrange Vault,” Professor Snape says when Professor McGonagall asks. “I have a vague memory of a trip to the Lestrange Vault in Bellatrix Lestrange’s company. I have never, ever wanted to be alone in the same room as that woman, nor be trapped in a bank vault with her. However, the memory has been tampered with. I don’t know if Bellatrix was Obliviated afterwards, but I certainly was, most likely by Voldemort himself.”

“Paranoid,” Remus observes.

Professor Snape merely nods. “I was trusted enough to escort Bellatrix to her vault to oversee the hiding of what was likely a Horcrux, but not trusted enough to retain the memory of what the item was, or why I’d gone in the first place. I didn’t remember that this had happened at all until a recent visit to Gringotts.”

“Speaking of trust.” When Hermione turns around in her seat, Nizar’s portrait is stroking the top of Hedwig’s head. “Dumbledore once ‘accidentally’ left out a Pensieve memory in a cabinet for myself to stumble into—and I do mean stumble, since I had no idea what the hell a Pensieve was at the time. It was of several Death Eater trials, including Karkaroff’s testimony.”

“Was it.” Hermione jerks back around, alarmed by the flat, angry tone of Professor Snape’s voice. There is rage in his black eyes as he stares at the portrait. “The whole of it?”

“It certainly was. Including Dumbledore’s reiteration of your status as a spy during the war,” the portrait says. He glances at Professor Snape. “I’m going to guess by the expression on your face that he never told you he let that little secret slip.”

“He did not,” Professor Snape grates out.

“He’s like that, isn’t he?” Nizar’s portrait says, glancing round the room. “Dumbledore can carry on telling you an absolute goldmine of personal things about other people without their consent, yet he will keep the strangest of secrets for unfathomable reasons. He’ll lambast allies who would have been good-hearted and loyal while praising those allies who’ve often made questionable choices.”

“What does all of this mean, then?” Aberforth rumbles, looking quite a bit like an angry thundercloud.

“I don’t know what it means,” Nizar says. When Hermione glances over at him, he’s still glassy-eyed, but his speech isn’t slurred. “I could easily craft a list ten times longer than what you hold in your hands extolling all of the things Albus Dumbledore has done right!”

“He cares for this school a great deal, and her students.” Professor Salazar leans back in his chair, his eyes narrowed in thought. “Albus Dumbledore regrets choices he made that did not turn out as well as he’d hoped. He believes in giving people a second chance to change their ways. These are all very good character traits to have. Albus is also very good at political maneuvering. From what I’ve witnessed in the past few years, that has become quite an important talent to have to run this school and keep the bloody Ministry at bay. However, he has a limited line of sight when it comes to those he feels deserve those second chances, and often those chances become a debt owed to Albus Dumbledore. He does not treat well with one-quarter of the students of this school for reasons that are still unknown to us, as I don’t believe it has anything to do with Tom Marvolo Riddle’s presence in Slytherin House.”

“No. That would be my fault, if it’s to be a blame at all,” Aberforth says, scowling. “I Sorted
Slytherin two years after he Sorted Gryffindor, and in those days, it didn’t matter. When we parted ways after my fifth year, though…it would be easy to blame a House for our division instead of what really happened. Tom Riddle being a Slytherin just made that idea worse.”

Hermione leans forward curiously. “What did happen?”

“I wouldn’t forgive him for being thoughtless, for creating the situation that led to our sister’s death,” Aberforth answers. “You read those letters about Albus and Grindelwald. Albus and I had a younger sister, Ariana, who had…difficulties. One day the three of us fought in her presence, and she was so upset she lost control of her magic. I think one of those two idiots panicked and killed her.”

Hermione covers her mouth with both hands, shocked. She didn’t know Professor Dumbledore ever had a sister!

“I had no idea,” Professor McGonagall murmurs. “No idea at all. He never speaks of her. Does he want her forgotten?”

“Course he does,” Aberforth responds, brow still furrowed in anger. “If people found out about Ariana, they’d find out about Albus and Gellert, and that wouldn’t look so good for him, would it?”

Adele rests her hand on Hermione’s shoulder before speaking. “Do you really think it was Professor Dumbledore who killed your sister, Aberforth?”

Aberforth shakes his head. “I truly don’t know. Never have. I won’t claim he did when I’m not certain. Albus, though, he didn’t understand why I was so angry with him. He said it was Grindelwald we should both have been furious with, what with the way Grindelwald instigated that entire mess. I was furious with both of them, Hermione, but Albus could only see that his younger brother didn’t want a damned thing to do with him. Wasn’t long after that when the first of those ‘inappropriate charms on a goat’ rumors began to circulate.”

“Do not forget those who bring you joy,” Professor Snape mutters.

“What was that, sir?” Adele asks. “I think I’ve heard Professor Slytherin say that—when he was still within the portrait, I mean.”

Nizar nods. “I have. Why did you bring it up, Severus?”

“That damned gravestone.” Professor Snape is now scowling in a way that would send first-years fleeing from his path. “Ariana Dumbledore’s grave is inscribed with a Biblical verse: Where your treasure lies, there will your heart be also.”

Professor McGonagall looks surprised. “You think it’s literal. You think he buried his heart with his sister.”

“Perhaps not his literal heart, but I think I understand what Severus means,” Professor Salazar says. “Without bringing your heart into the matter, your view of others becomes fundamentally flawed. Albus Dumbledore would be looking at everyone through the lens of his successes and failures alone. It is possible he would not be able to comprehend any longer that people change and grow, and talent alone will not keep them at your side. It takes effort to convince people to follow you if you truly care for them. The appearance of caring? That is much easier to manage.”

“If it’s merely the appearance of caring, then he is quite convincing,” Professor McGonagall says testily. “I don’t believe that it’s merely the appearance.”

“Nor I,” Professor Salazar admits. “Too much does not fit together. Remus?”
“Sorry, I—I think I’m still stuck on the werewolf vote. That Albus would abstain is…” Remus shakes his head. “I think I’d be more comfortable if he’d voted yes to the werewolf restrictions. At least then I’d know where I stood with him.”

Adele looks at Hermione before she holds up the bundle of papers that make up the letters, revised list, and Kingsley Shacklebolt’s provided reports. “I’m still not certain I understand the why of all of this.”

“Because we’ve spent months trying to figure out his motivations, and they make no sense at all,” Sirius replies in a flat voice. “We know that Albus wants to defeat Voldemort and end the war. It’s what he’s done to accomplish that goal that doesn’t align with how he claims to want it to happen. Albus speaks of how he wants everyone to live and thrive, but he would willingly sacrifice my son to defeat Voldemort and consider it an act made for his idea of The Greater Good.” It’s easy to hear the capital letters when Sirius speaks those words.

Aberforth is competing with Professor Snape for terrible scowls. “Then what’s the point of any of this? I’ve always thought Albus a pillock and a twit, but this—there are terrible things written here that he’s done, things I can’t defend even if he is my brother. What the bloody hell is he trying to accomplish?”

“Professor Dumbledore holds the Elder Wand,” Adele says in a wary voice. “If Voldemort were weakened and vulnerable to death after his planned sacrifice of—well, however he meant it to happen. If Professor Dumbledore was the one to actually kill Voldemort, ending another war just as he ended the European Wizarding War, he would gain the sort of prestige that many Slytherins only dream of. Professor Dumbledore would have the utmost respect of Wizarding Britain.”


“Oh, good fucking gods!” Nizar suddenly exclaims. Hermione looks over in alarm to find that Nizar has plastered his bandaged hands over his face. “Estefania would have my head!”

“What? What is it?” Professor Salazar asks, expression and voice suddenly intent and focused. “You’ve had a thought, hermanito.”

“Yes, and that thought is that I’m an idiot,” Nizar retorts, lowering his hands. “It’s been right in front of me this entire time, but it didn’t occur to me at all because of the way he’s stacked this fucking deck. Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts. Head columnist for Transfiguration Today. Acknowledged Grand Sorcerer. Holder of Magical Masteries in Transfiguration, Alchemy, Mind Magic, and possibly a Magical Mastery of the Spoken Word. Founder and leader of the Order of the Phoenix. Member of the Wizengamot, sitting in the Dumbledore family seat. Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot. Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards. A famous partnership with long-lived alchemist Nicholas Flamel. Defeater of Grindelwald. Famously known as being the only wizard Voldemort fears.”

“He does not currently hold two of those titles,” Professor McGonagall reminds them.

“Yes, but once Fudge is out of office, it’s extremely likely that he would regain them,” Nizar says. “Adele is correct. If one were to add Defeater of Voldemort to that long list of accomplishments, Albus Dumbledore would gain the sort of political clout that creates empires. He would be the most powerful magician in Wizarding Britain.

“It’s a fucking coup d’état.”

Hermione feels her brows drawing together in perplexity. “It’s…it’s a political coup? All of this? It’s
“Not nothing, Miss Granger.” Professor Salazar has a disturbed expression on his face. “If Albus Dumbledore were to gain the full might of such political strength, the office of the Minister for Magic would be meaningless. It would be a leadership role in name only, as all the real power would be held by Albus Dumbledore.”

“Aberforth?” Nizar looks a little bit better, as if that sudden realization helped him throw off the worst of the Calming Draught’s effects. “This is why I asked you to be here. Tell me that I’m wrong.”

Aberforth runs his fingers along the dog-eared edge of the letter bundle, staring down at the pages. “I can’t. I think you’ve stumbled onto the truth of it. Didn’t want to think my pillock of a brother was as bad as I’d always quietly thought, but all of this is…this level of ambition, Nizar. Albus has always been like this. I can’t tell you that you’re wrong.”

“It certainly fits perfectly well with his Greater fucking Good rubbish,” Sirius snarls.

Aberforth nods. “Aye, it does. Albus and his thinking he knows what’s good for all. Him doing this—Albus would have say over everyone’s doings, just like he’s always wanted.”

Remus looks dejected, as disillusioned as Hermione feels. “It isn’t a crime to be ambitious. Right now, Albus is guilty of nothing more than blatant manipulation and willful endangerment of others, and those aren’t crimes we’d be able to convince a Wizengamot to convict him for. Even though his name has been dragged through the mud by the Prophet, Albus is still respected. No one would believe a word of this.” Remus hesitates. “I’ll be honest and say I’m contemplating killing him myself for what he put my godson through.”

“Take a number and get in the fucking line. Me first,” Sirius growls. Hermione decides she isn’t going to point out that he resembles his grandfather Sirius Orion Black II’s portrait quite a bit right now. The one who was mad as a hatter.

“But—why this?” Hermione asks, struggling to understand. “Why would Professor Dumbledore go to all this trouble to be the most powerful wizard in Britain?”

“Because he couldn’t do it in 1945.” One of Aberforth’s massive hands is curled into a fist, but oddly, he doesn’t resemble a thundercloud any longer. That’s cold anger, and probably far worse than his temper. “Albus didn’t bloody well know how.”

“So he watched Tom Marvolo Riddle instead,” Adele realizes. “Because he did do it.”

“Aye. He watched, and he learned,” Aberforth says. “Albus started putting it all together in earnest back when Voldemort began his war. By the end of 1981, my brother was one of the most powerful wizards in Britain, but he hadn’t managed to be top of the heap. You-Know-Who was still out there, even if a lot of folks didn’t want to believe it. Barty Crouch was a powerful voice for the M.L.E. before he switched over to International Cooperation. Cornelius Fudge was gaining popularity for being Minister for Magic when the war was considered ended. Amelia Bones was already famous for being a fierce Auror and one of the only remaining members of the Bones family. She was shifting her focus to the judicial side of things in a way that we all knew would mean success. The Malfoys had gotten off clean, and they were still one of the highest-ranking families in both wealth and social standing.”

“In short, hefty competition,” Sirius says. “And he couldn’t even hope to compete with James, Lily, and Harry. Not when the entire fucking country was losing their minds over their heroes who
stopped Voldemort.”

Hermione bites her lip. Sirius sounds all right, but there is so much heartache in his eyes when he mentions Nizar’s parents. “What do we do, then? I—I don’t want to be ruled by the sort of person who wrote those letters to Grindelwald. How do we stop him?”

“First, we make certain he doesn’t gain back those two lost positions,” Nizar says. “We encourage the next Minister for Magic to hold a vote for a new Chief Warlock or Chiefess Witch of the Wizengamot. Phrase it as a means of avoiding stagnation or similarities to Fudge’s regime.”

“I doubt the Mugwumps would grant Albus Dumbledore his original title back after that loss of confidence in their leader,” Professor Salazar points out. “Being a mere member would not give him the same sort of power base, though he would immediately attempt to earn it back.”

“And, of course, there is preventing Albus from defeating Voldemort,” Remus adds. “It’s quite obvious that Albus is not going to be the one to do so, anyway.”


Remus shrugs. “You did carve a hole in the side of his face, Nizar. We know who’s going to win that particular fight when it happens.”

Nizar looks unimpressed. “I don’t want to fight him. I just want to kill him!”

“And what of leaving Albus in charge of this school?” Professor Snape suddenly asks. “I have not trusted him with the care of my Slytherins in quite some time. I am certainly far less inclined to trust him with any student’s welfare after discovering that he uses his position as Headmaster more for politics than educational concerns.”

“I believe that restoring all the Heads of House to their rightful duties will help mitigate any further damage Albus Dumbledore could attempt in that regard.” Professor Salazar is frowning in a way that makes Hermione nervous. “As it is, we could not oust the man from the Head position unless all four Heads of House were to agree on it. It’s in the Charta, something the four of us added when we realized that someone would need to act as the school’s primary representative just to handle all the bloody politics.”

Adele frowns. “Then…why not tell them? We could just show them all of this! Professor Flitwick is extremely protective of his Ravenclaws, and while I’m not very fond of Professor Sprout for all these years of Slytherin prejudice she happily indulged in, she does care for the Hufflepuffs.”

“No.” Nizar’s eyes aren’t glassy; now they’re glimmering in a way that makes the emerald green of his eyes more vibrant. “Unless Filius Flitwick and Pomona Sprout agree to be tied to the castle’s magic, as is proper for a Head of House, they aren’t hearing a word of this. Until they’ve proven by magical ties that their loyalty is to Hogwarts and her students before anything else, they cannot be trusted not to take their concerns to Albus Dumbledore.”

“Protectoris,” Professor Salazar murmurs. It sounds less like he’s naming Nizar and more as if he’s…acknowledging an order? Hermione bites back a frown. Nizar outranks the Founders? That is definitely something she has to ask him about later.

“As I told Severus a few days ago, powerful people have their uses. If we neutralize Dumbledore’s ambition to gain control of Wizarding Britain, then Hogwarts is already in possession of a Head
Teacher with the political connections needed to deal with the fucking Ministry,” Nizar says. “Much as we’d rather ignore the Ministry of Magic entirely, right now we are not in a place where that is wise or feasible.”

“Can we literally neuter Dumbledore?” Sirius asks. “I’m really fond of that idea right now.”

“So am I,” Professor Snape mutters.

“Keeping Albus’s political power limited won’t be that difficult,” Professor McGonagall says. “I think we should also concern ourselves with convincing Pomona and Filius to take up their rightful ties for the Northern and Eastern seats of Hogwarts. I’ll tolerate Albus through the rest of term, but I do not want him overseeing this school come first September!”

Hermione tries not to wince. Convincing Professor Flitwick might not be difficult, but convincing Professor Sprout may take a miracle. “Is there anything else we can do? I mean—we have to do something!”

“Of course we could do something, Hermione. I could throw the spangled bastard from the highest tower of the castle this very evening…if I wanted to commit political suicide, that is,” Nizar adds in a deceptively light tone. Hermione tries not to wince in response. He’s used that voice in class when someone has done something particularly stupid.

“You’re a Slytherin they’re already terrified of.” Adele sighs. “They’d lynch us all, every Slytherin of Hogwarts, even if they only lynched us with ink in the Daily Prophet.”

“Yes.” There is no mistaking it; those are definitely sparks in Nizar’s eyes. “This school is on property that is now an official part of the United Kingdom, but it is also a recognized part of Wizarding Britain, and belief is a powerful thing. That belief limits what a war mage can do right now, no matter what our conscience or the magic of the title demands. However, it’s beyond obvious that Dumbledore would use his new position as benevolent dictator to enact true harm across the whole of Britain. If he carries out his political coup, there will be five of us to stand against him, and we will succeed, regardless of the wand he holds.”

“No matter what, Dumbledore has to attack someone in a way that’s undeniable, or succeed in his coup before we can do something about it.” Sirius rolls his eyes. “Fucking politics. I hate this shit.”

“What about the…what about your role as Protectoris?” Hermione dares to ask.

“That is also tangled by this situation. The one person we know with absolute certainty that he was harming was me,” Nizar replies. “That is no longer the case. For everyone else within this castle, he isn’t actively harming anyone, Hermione. He’s manipulating them, and while that is often worse, it’s as Remus said—we can’t prove it to the Wizengamot. I still can’t toss him from the top of a tower, much as I…”

Professor Snape narrows his eyes, looking fierce and angry. Hermione is coming to realize the expression is yet another mask. “Nizar?”

“The magic of my title has been demanding I toss Dumbledore from this castle the moment I read those letters,” Nizar finally says, his hands clenched into tight fists.

“I’ve been feeling a bit twitchy about it, myself,” Salazar admits.

“A thousand years ago, there would have been no consequence save the inconvenience of needing another Head Teacher. It’s like dealing with the problem of Æthelred all over again.”
Adele lifts her head. “How is this like King Æthelred, Nizar?”

“Æthelred II was one of the weakest kings of the Wessex line, even though he ruled longer than many of his predecessors. He made decisions that constantly endangered England, but England was already politically volatile after the assassinations of his father and elder brother. To remove that fucking idiot from the throne would have destabilized the kingdom entirely. Cnut might have been the son of an invader, but at least his claiming of the English throne stabilized the entire North Atlantic.” Nizar sighs in aggravation. “It’s the same problem with Dumbledore. Can’t stand his existence, can’t fling him from the nearest tower.”

“But that doesn’t mean we need be complacent.” Professor Salazar offers them a grim smile. “There are many ways to undermine someone’s political strength without resorting to Fudge’s blatant and idiotic tactics. I’ve a fair bit of practice at that.”

“Then that is part of what we do,” Nizar agrees. The sparks are gone, leaving behind green-tinged frost. “We wait. We watch. The war against Voldemort will give Albus Dumbledore ample opportunity to demonstrate to Wizarding Britain what his ultimate goals really are. That is what will give us the means to move against him.”
Chapter Summary

Minerva loudly loses her temper, and nobody copes well with anything except for the lack of murder and keeping the property damage to a minimum. For now.

Chapter Notes

Beta props to the usual crew: @norcumi, @jabberwockypie, @mrsstanley, & @sanerontheinside

Hermione thanks Winky after the house-elf Apparates her to the cog door in front of the Gryffindor Common Room. Fellona is already asleep, snoring on her settee.

“It is being no problem, Hermione Granger,” Winky says, and then she wrings her hands. “Oh, Winky is a bad, bad elf…”

“You absolutely are not,” Hermione insists, her wandering attention suddenly caught by the elf’s fright. “What makes you think such a thing?”

Winky ducks her head. “Winky heard that Hermione Granger used to make hats for the elves. As gifts. The Hogwarts elves did not know they weren’t being given clothes, so they wouldn’t take them.”

Hermione blushes. “I—yes. It was rather impolite of me at the time.”

“Winky would not mind receiving a hat,” the house-elf whispers. “If Hermione Granger is still making them.”

“You—you want a hat? From me?” Hermione blinks in astonishment.

The house-elf nods. “Winky has never been given anything before except—”

“I saw what Barty Crouch did to you,” Hermione says softly.

Winky nods and brushes a tear away from her eye. “But now Winky is allowed to choose. Winky would like a hat from someone who is giving it for nice reasons.”

On impulse, Hermione kneels down and hugs the startled house-elf. “I will be glad to make you any sort of hat you like.”

After Winky shyly requests something in dark green that will stretch to cover both of her ears, Hermione nudges Fellona awake with a bit of Old English and enters the Common Room. Everyone has gone to bed for the night except for Ron, who springs up from the sofa the moment he sees her.

“There you are!” Ron exclaims. “I was bloody worried, I was! I knew you said that meeting about
the apprenticeship bit would take a while, but it’s going on midnight!”

“Is it?” Hermione glances down at her watch and finds that it’s after eleven-thirty. “Oh. I suppose… I suppose we lost track of time.”

“Hermione.” She looks up to find Ron giving her a worried look. “You didn’t… he didn’t hurt you or anything, did he? I mean, pretty sure at this point that Professor Slytherin wouldn’t, but you don’t look happy at all—”

It seems to be the sort of evening for Hermione to fling herself at people and hug them. Ron makes a startled sound, but then hugs her back just as tightly. “I’m all right, Ron,” she says, which is almost the truth. “I’m just really tired. I think I’ll go up to bed now. Thank you for waiting up for me.”

Ron grins when she steps back. “Yeah, well, what are mates for? Good night, ’Mione.”

“Night, Ron,” Hermione replies, smiling, and then climbs the stairs for the girls’ dormitories. She pushes open the door for the fifth years, unsurprised to find everyone else asleep. She gets ready for bed in a slow sort of daze before crawling under the covers.

Hermione stares up at the four-poster’s velvet ceiling before she curls up on her side. Tears start wetting her pillow almost at once.

She trusted Professor Dumbledore. She’d trusted him absolutely. He made her feel like she was worth something, no matter how many times the three of them stumbled into trouble. Dumbledore was the one to tell them they’d done the right thing—and they had, she didn’t doubt that at all—even when everyone else was screeching for her to be punished, expelled, get rid of the Mudblood, along with every other horrible thing she’s heard over the years. She believed that Professor Dumbledore wanted the best for all of them. She’d believed he would protect Harry.

She’d trusted him.

“How could he?” Hermione whispers, and feels like her heart is breaking all over again.

* * * *

Minerva remains after Miss Greenwood, Miss Granger, Sirius, Remus, and Aberforth have departed for the evening. She is still furious with Sirius Black, but it’s pointless fury. That dangerous nonsense happened in 1975, over twenty years ago. It does do quite a bit to explain Severus’s loathing of Remus’s placement on the staff for the 1993-94 term, as well as his hatred of werewolves.

Odd, though; that hatred has seemed much less present of late. Minerva isn’t certain if the cause is the very fragile peace between Remus, Sirius, and Severus, or if there is some other facet at play—like Nizar’s temporarily titled Taming Potion and its successful use.

“I’m reminded that I’m meant to ask you for something,” Minerva says.

Nizar glances up from his spot on the hearth. She finds herself wondering if he intends to sleep there, as well. “A portrait being a busybody?”

“The very one who graced us with his presence this evening,” Minerva replies. “Your portrait said it was a book called Forma La Magia.”
“My portrait is an arsehole,” Nizar says, retrieving his wand. Minerva does her best not to stare at Nizar’s hair, or at his bright green eyes, which are now a perfect match for Lily Potter’s eyes. He still so resembles his father, but that is an opinion she won’t be repeating.

The book Nizar Summons is older than those she is used to seeing from his personal collection. He double-checks the inside cover before Summoning a stack of paper. Instead of loaning her the original, Nizar duplicates the book using the available paper and passes her a new copy.

“I really must learn how you do that,” Minerva says in complimentary approval, opening the book. It smells like new paper and old dust both, an intriguing mix. Then she discovers the language barrier. “This will take some time to read, won’t it?”

“I am sorry about that.” Nizar is running his hand along the leather cover of the original, his fingers stopping to trace the leather cord binding it all together. “It’s written in what is now called Medieval Spanish and Vulgar Latin, but the rest is Koine Greek, not Medieval Greek. Annoyingly, you can only cast one translation spell at a time on a document, or the words start to get irritable and wander off into other languages you didn’t ask for.”

“I see. I will do my best, as I’m quite curious as to what overcame your Transfiguration difficulties.” Minerva tucks the book into her robe pocket. “How are you, Nizar?” she asks in a quieter voice.

Nizar holds up his hands and flexes his fingers. “Just a bit stiff. Perpetually chilled. Both are tolerable compared to what it’s like without the bloody potion.” He glances up at her. “Why?”

“There is to be an Order meeting tomorrow in London. Albus announced it to those members of staff who were present for dinner, and we’re meant to pass the message along to the rest of you.”

“An Order meeting?” Salazar joins them, a glass of his favorite magically crafted vodka cradled in one hand. “I thought that wasn’t scheduled until the first Saturday of next month.”

“As far as I’m aware, that one is also still to happen.” Minerva resists the urge to sigh in frustration. “At least this time Albus was thoughtful enough to schedule the meeting in the evening. The last Quidditch game of the season is tomorrow, and I will not be missing it!”

“Not when it’s Slytherin against Gryffindor.” Severus gives her a smug look. “I can hardly wait.”

“Please. You’re going to lose, and you know it,” Minerva retorts.

“Ah. So I get to think of a charming and legitimate excuse not to be present for either,” Nizar says.

“You could always use a glamor for London,” Severus suggests.

Nizar shakes his head. “No, Grimmauld Place is warded against them.”

“But not against Multa Facies Sucus.” Salazar’s tone entirely too innocent not to be mischief in the making.

“Polyjuice.” Severus frowns. “Can you use Polyjuice on yourself to be—well, yourself?”

“There is no reason it can’t be done,” Salazar replies. “I’ve never tried it, but then, I’ve never needed to.”

Nizar braces himself against the wall to stand up from the hearth. “Sal, tell me you’ve access to a supply of Polyjuice.”
Salazar raises both eyebrows. “Myself, have access to a multitude of prepared Multa Facies Sucus when I’ve already been known to sneak into Order meetings under the guise of someone who couldn’t make it to London?”

“Salazar, I have no idea what the Sheep’s Clothing Hex will do to someone who isn’t a shape-changer, but I’m not above finding out!” Nizar growls back.

Salazar laughs. “I’ll be back in ten minutes,” he says, and Disapparates on the spot.

“Will it work?” Minerva asks. “I’d hate for you to risk yourself needlessly. If we told the school and the Order you were ill, Poppy would certainly help to convince them. She remains direly concerned about your exposure to modern pathogens.”

“It’s not really a risk. Polyjuice works as it does because the hair you use remembers the appearance of the person it was taken from at the time it was taken,” Nizar answers. “I’d just need to use hair from before the hex was cast, and that’s easy enough to retrieve from the bathroom.”

“At worst, nothing would happen,” Severus says. “Except for the juvenile opportunity to make terrible jokes about tasting yourself.”

Minerva glares at him. “I did not need to consider such things, Severus Snape!”

Severus gives her a bland look. “He started it.”

Nizar shrugs in response to her questioning look. “It’s true; I did.” He shoves his hand through his hair and then pauses in the midst of drawing it back out. He brings his hand forward, revealing that several locks of his hair have wrapped around his fingers. “Dear gods, how did I ever get a comb through this mess?”

Minerva has a terrible difficulty biting back her smile. “In your early years, it never once looked as if it had seen a comb in its life.”

“I’d imagine not,” Nizar says, still trying to eye his own hair in suspicion. “It probably kidnapped the fucking things!”

“Aunt Petunia cut all of it off once,” Nizar’s portrait says, making a renewed appearance in one of the portrait frames. Galiena leans against him, a happy smile on her face. “She shaved it down to the scalp. It grew back overnight.”

“And what was Petunia’s reaction to such a thing?” Severus asks.

The portrait grins, but there is a hard, angry edge to it. “She screamed bloody murder and refused to look at me for the entire day. Aside from my confusion on how my hair could simply grow back, as well as the accompanying punishment, her reaction was fabulous.”

Minerva no longer feels like smiling. What the original letter from Harry described was completely awful, and it really does make her wish to set Albus on fire—and that is without considering this political coup he seems to have in mind. “How old were you, dear?”

“Oh, perhaps seven?” the portrait considers it. “Possibly eight, as it was during the summer. They didn’t acknowledge my birthday and didn’t believe in having calendars on the walls, so if I lost count of the days, I often wouldn’t know how old I was until school resumed in September. It helped to rummage up enough returnables to buy a digital watch second-hand, but I didn’t manage that until I was nine.”
Nizar scowls. “Every time that portrait opens his mouth and talks about Privet Drive, I have to convince myself that the curses you left behind for those two idiots are punishment enough.”

Minerva gives Severus a startled look. “You cursed them? You complete idiot! If the Ministry ever finds out—”

“They’ll do nothing,” Severus interrupts her. “I cursed Petunia and Vernon Dursley with lifelong enforced good behavior, Minerva.”

“Ah. My apologies for overreacting.” Minerva thinks on it for a moment. “Can we curse them further?”

“Vernon Dursley has the Curse of Incorruptibility, and Petunia Dursley is suffering the Withering Curse. Don’t you think that’s enough?” Severus asks in an innocuous tone.

“Withering Curse.” Minerva frowns. “Are you certain that’s appropriate, Severus?”

“She loves that oversized son of hers,” Severus says in disdain. “He’ll never suffer more than fatigue or the inclination to pick up minor sicknesses if Petunia forgets herself, but those moments should be reminder enough for Petunia to watch her thoughts. However, I do feel a bit badly for her plants.”

“What about other people?” Minerva asks, still trying to decide if she’s satisfied with that particular curse. The effectiveness of the Withering Curse is the terror it creates in the one who causes those minor illnesses in their loved ones. The victim is deliberately left to wonder how much worse it could be, but there are other options for enforcing good behavior that the Ministry will overlook.

“Petunia loathes touching other people,” Severus replies, smirking. “She always has. The curse will only come into play if her touch is deliberate. Petunia Dursley will either learn to care properly for her child, or she will never touch another living thing again for fear of what might happen. Personally, I don’t care about either outcome.”

Salazar’s return prevents Minerva from commenting further. “I brought enough for all of Saturday, if it works. If not, then the potion will simply have to linger under its Preservation Charms until it’s useful for something else.”

Nizar leaves the sitting room and returns with a single strand of curling brown hair clenched between his thumb and forefinger. “Let’s see it. We already got the horrible joke out of the way while you were gone.”

“I’m so disappointed.” Salazar pulls out a phial of Polyjuice and removes the glass stopper. If Minerva is remembering her potions correctly from M.L.E. stealth training as well as her long-ago schooling, that is the perfect amount for the standard hour’s dose.

Nizar lowers the strand of hair into the open phial and drops it into the liquid. It immediately shoots out tiny golden sparks before the potion turns a dark forest green with a hint of metallic shine.

“Gold?” Salazar looks baffled. “There should be nothing left of that. Not after the adoption, and especially not after you’d earned your Defence Mastery.”

“The protective magic.” Nizar takes the phial from Salazar and gives it a gentle swirl. “That might prove inconvenient later.”

Salazar stares at his brother for a moment before he slaps both of his hands over his face. “That house! Albus Dumbledore attached part of the sacrificial magic to that fucking house in Little Whinging!”
“And it still remembers me, as I’m present in the same time period.” Nizar rolls his eyes. “The moment the opportunity presents itself, I’m stealing the fucking Elder Wand from Dumbledore so that it can be undone.”

“If that fails, I’ll burn the house down for you,” Severus offers. “What?” he continues when Minerva gives him a disapproving look. “It isn’t as if the fools aren’t insured against such things.”

Minerva sighs. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but please do attempt to steal the wand first.”

“Cheers,” Nizar mutters. He swallows the potion, but his face twists up in displeasure. “Oh, I never wanted to drink sandalwood!”

Minerva notices Severus’s rather prompt blush. He scowls when he sees her looking and shakes his head warningly. Minerva raises one eyebrow, the corner of her mouth quirked up. She might not be a Slytherin, but she certainly knows when to take a bit of information and save it for a more interesting time.

“That’s an excellent result,” Salazar says, returning her attention to the matter at hand. Nizar looks as he normally does, without the faintest hint that Aberforth was fool enough to hex him earlier in the day. “As long as it holds for the full hour, you won’t need to craft interesting excuses for not inflicting your presence on everyone tomorrow.”

Nizar’s shoulders slump in relief. “Thank you for becoming a paranoid spy in your dotage, Sal.”

“I’m not old!” Salazar retorts indignantly.

“No, and I’ll hereby be taking Salazar off with me to give him opportunity to prove it,” Minerva says primly. Nizar looks amused, but Severus is quietly infuriated by her inflicted revenge. “Good night to you, and I do hope the potion holds for the full hour.”

“Gods, so do I,” Nizar replies fervently. “Oh, and remember that you aren’t allowed to kill Dumbledore when the Calming Draught wears off.”

“I have more self-control than to do that in public!” Minerva insists, and then they’re Apparating.

The moment they arrive downstairs, Salazar releases her hand long enough to veer right towards the mantelpiece. Minerva keeps her favorite brandy there, warmed by the heat from the hearth below. “You might wish for this,” he says.

Minerva removes her hat, her robe, and begins pulling the pins from her hair. “Did I miss something during that—that—

“carn fuilteach mòr!”

“I know you’re frustrated when that’s the worst that comes pouring forth from your beautiful mouth.” Salazar hands Minerva a tumbler almost full to the brim with brandy. “Miss Granger used Mind Magic this evening to alert me to something a bit unusual.”

“More so than the rest?” Minerva sighs and holds up one finger. He waits with bemused patience as she quaffs half the brandy, finding it as warming as the anger that’s been stirring her blood for the past hour. The Calming Draught must be near to wearing off. “Let’s hear it, then.”

“Those ridiculous points. How many does a student stand to lose if they’re a younger year out of bed after curfew?” Salazar asks.

That isn’t a bit of what she expected. “If this is about that detention in the Forest again—”
Salazar raises an eyebrow. “The question answered first, Lioness.”

“Ten points,” Minerva says after a moment of irritation. “Twenty to thirty, if they’re repeated infractions or dangerous circumstances.”

“I thought as much.” Salazar raises the glass of vodka he’d brought with him. “Taking fifty points each from three different first-year students for a first infraction seems a bit harsh, then. As does giving children caught out of bed a detention meant to last all night. Does that not create the opposite impression in regards to children and where they’re meant to spend their evenings?”

Minerva opens her mouth to argue…and realizes that she can’t. She hasn’t ever given that incident a thought until this evening, not beyond her irritation that her instructions were countermanded. Fifty points taken from each student—and only from her Gryffindors! She hadn’t taken a single point from Malfoy, even though he’d been guilty of the same infraction. If she were to strip fifty points from three of her own House, Malfoy wouldn’t have been spared. She certainly would have…well, what had she said that night?

I’m disgusted. Four students out of bed in one night! I’ve never heard of such a thing before.

Absolute rubbish; she taught the bloody Marauders. They’d done far worse, and lost fewer points for it.

All three of you will receive detentions—nothing gives you the right to walk around school at night, especially these days, it’s very dangerous—

Why? There would have been nothing within the castle during that time to endanger the children except Hagrid’s overgrown Cerberus, and all the children knew that particular corridor (she’d thought at the time) was out of bounds.

I’ve never been more ashamed of Gryffindor students.

God, but that’s even worse. Minerva can’t believe she said such a thing, such a dreadful, hurtful thing. It’s no wonder Mister Potter had no trust in her word after that. She’d stripped it from him, and then let him be taken out into the Forbidden Forest with a bloody unicorn killer on the loose! Worse, she’d put no trust in his word regarding the stone, and that had nearly gotten him murdered by Quirrell and Voldemort! What on Earth had been the matter with her?

“I’ll tell you two things that you were never privy to, as I can tell you’ve recalled those troubling inconsistencies,” Salazar says while Minerva stares at him in horrified shock. “There was indeed a dragon involved that evening. Rubeus Hagrid ‘won’ a dragon’s egg during a suspect card game—a game played with the disguised and now delightfully departed Professor Quirrell. My little brother, Miss Granger, and Mister Weasley convinced Hagrid that to keep such a thing in a hut made of wood was a terrible idea. Young Mister Weasley convinced his brother Charlie Weasley, already employed as a dragon-keeper, to come fetch the infant dragon before it quickly outgrew the hut, the grounds, and possibly tried eating the squid in the Black Lake. Feel guilty if you must, but it’s for an event long past.”

“I punished them for helping another,” Minerva whispers.

“It’s the why that you should be more concerned with, and it’s the reason I was so insistent you learn Mind Magic, my love.” Salazar reaches for her glass and puts both his and hers down on the table. She’s surprised to note that they’re empty. “When my brother returned to his bed that morning, someone had been into his room and into his bed, returning a certain Invisibility Cloak, which had been forgotten on the top of a tower in his and Miss Granger’s haste to see a baby dragon safely
away from Hogwarts. A note pinned to it said only ‘Just in case.’ There is one person aside from yourself who had such easy access to the tower at night, and to the Gryffindor dormitory…and who knew that my brother would not be abed.”

Minerva stares at Salazar in mute astonishment. Then she shrieks in outrage, shattering both tumblers on the table and the bottle of brandy on the mantelpiece. “THAT BLOODY OLD FUCKING CONNIVING BASTARD! I’LL HAVE HIS HEAD ON A PLATTER AND HIS HEART PINNED TO MY BREAST!”

Salazar raises both eyebrows. “I’d wager the platter would be decorative, but the elves would be so displeased if you were to stain your lovely robes with the blood of fools.”

“They’re elves!” Minerva retorts. “They’re skilled at removing inconvenient stains!”

Albus did to her what young Harry—Nizar’s portrait—told them of this evening. Albus made Harry recite the tale of Little Hangleton using Mind Magic, and he altered Minerva’s own thoughts in regards to Mister Potter, Miss Granger, and Mister Weasley. Possibly he did so in regards to Mister Malfoy and Mister Longbottom, as well. Given the care Mister Potter had for his father’s Invisibility Cloak, she wouldn’t wonder that Albus made certain Mister Potter forget the Cloak that particular, dragon-saving evening, as well.

Albus meant for that detention to happen. He meant for Mister Potter to confront a unicorn-killer in the Forbidden Forest…because he either knew or suspected that it was Voldemort. Her employer placed an eleven-year-old boy into danger to confirm a hypothesis. Minerva does not want to think such things of Albus, but she has been confronted this evening with far too much evidence to the contrary.

Sirius and Miss Greenwood are correct. Albus would have allowed Voldemort to murder Harry. Based on the prophecy…dear God, Minerva thinks Albus was attempting to ensure it from the very start.

“Salazar—”

Salazar puts a single finger over her lips. “While I do feel similarly in regards to your desire to rend him limb from limb, Lioness, it’s best to adhere to my brother’s advice on this. Trust me when I say that it is far more satisfying to witness your adversary hoist themselves by their own petardo.”

“Petard,” Minerva repeats, trying desperately not to smile.

“‘Twas our word first,” Salazar replies. “Besides, I’m an old-fashioned man with a fondness for a good explosion.” He wraps his arm around her waist. “And now that we’ve that conversation out of the way, there is one more awaiting us in London.”

“Oh. Oh, dear. Wait, Salazar, my robe—” Minerva begins to say, but the lout has already Apparated them both to the basement kitchen of Twelve Grimmauld Place. “Slytherin!” she declares, slapping him upside the head the moment he loosens his hold around her waist.

Salazar bows to her. “My apologies, though I find not a thing wrong with your choice of gowns.”

“We’ve seen you in your bloody dressing gown, Minerva. My suits are far less dignified than that dress.” Minerva turns around to find Remus giving her an odd look. “Though I’ll admit, I’ve never seen your hair down before.”

Minerva narrows her eyes and brushes her hair back from her shoulders. “I’m old-fashioned, Remus,” she says, mimicking Salazar’s words spoken not one minute before. “What sort of
conversation am I to take part in that is being kept secret from the others? I’m not fond of secrets within secrets, not given the mistrust it generated during the war.” From the way Sirius is pacing the length of the kitchen, she doubts good news awaits her.

“It’s less about secrets and more about not pointing out an error in the accounting discussed this evening,” Salazar replies. “Oh, and it’s to keep my brother from turning the Headmaster into so much atomic scatter, and to keep Severus from simply poisoning the prick. I don’t wish to see either of them in Azkaban when there is no evidence in existence to exonerate them aside from what’s in our own heads.”

“What error in accounting?” Minerva asks, frowning. “I thought an admirable job was done of a horrific task.”

“An error that I noted days ago,” Salazar answers. “I asked Sirius Black and Remus Lupin not to voice it this evening, as it would be better to discuss it in private.”

“The first day of November, Minerva.” Remus pulls out a chair and sits down at the kitchen table. Minerva gives a slight shake of her head, in no mood to sit. Sirius doesn’t sit, either, but at least he stops pacing the room. “It wasn’t in the early hours of that morning that Harry was left on the Dursley’s doorstep like a bloody milk bottle, but late that night.”

Minerva feels an intense pang of unwanted surprise. “Oh—yes, you’re correct. I’ll confess it’s been long enough, and I’m old enough, not to have noticed. I remembered the date being first November, and utterly disregarded the rest in spite of my role in it all.”

“My brother has no gap in his memories between Hallowe’en night and the night of first November—originally, he did not,” Salazar amends. “When there is no memory, not even the recollection of dreams, it speaks of magically induced sleep.”

“Exactly.” Remus fidgets with an abandoned teacup.

Minerva realizes what was missing from the evening and decides it best to sit down, after all. She breathes out anger and shock before speaking. “Albus had me watch that family from dawn on the first until his arrival late that night. Ostensibly it was to determine if Lily’s sister was fit to care for the boy, but when I said that the family would be the worst place to leave Harry, Albus insisted that it had to be them. Of course by then, word had been sent to me by Arthur of Sirius’s arrest that afternoon, so I had no argument I could give that might have swayed him.

“Nizar is correct. It’s option C. Albus never intended to give Harry to his godparent—not to either of you. He always meant for it to be the Dursleys.”

“It was the perfect setting to create a child grateful for the slightest bit of kindness, even if it was false kindness designed to hone a weapon for war.” Silver sparks dance around Salazar’s eyes for a moment. Minerva watches the shine of his magic before she realizes that only centuries of experience prevent Salazar from killing Albus Dumbledore.

Minerva reaches up to rest her hand on his arm. When Salazar looks down at her, there is rage in his eyes, but it’s accompanied so much pain it feels as if it could steal her breath.

How odd it is to think, once again, that only six months ago she thought of Salazar Slytherin as nothing more than that vile-looking human in the Entry Hall portrait. Nothing more than an old wizard with a hatred of all who were not Pure-blooded in Wizarding Britain.

It’s still such a relief to know how wrong it all was.
“There is another aspect of this, and it is one I would rather I not be addressing at all,” Salazar says.

“Oh, God, it’s worse?” Sirius shakes his head. “I already want to off the old bastard.”

“Then I would be ingesting several Calming Draughts before tomorrow’s Order meeting, were I you. I’ll certainly be doing the same.” Salazar crosses his arms. “My brother brought up this point, as he thought, given a certain conversation in Chiltern Hills, that the act was out of character for you. On Hallowe’en in 1981, why did you hand your child to Rubeus Hagrid in order to pursue Pettigrew? As you yourself said, Lily Potter made certain you knew of your obligations to your child.”

“I—” Sirius’s brow slowly settles into an angry frown. “No. He couldn’t have known. Peter was an Occlumens, just like any Pure-blooded child raised by paranoid Pure-bloods.”

“Pettigrew was shit at Mind Magic,” Salazar counters. “I encountered his weaknesses in it myself, and worried that the task of Secret Keeper had been given to one such as he.”

Minerva swallows. This rage isn’t a suffocating heat, but a cold lump of rock beneath her breast. “You know, between all of us, I’m certain we could rid the world of Albus and no one would ever know his fate.”

“Tempting as it is, that is another’s decision to make, Lioness,” Salazar murmurs. “And we will abide by his decision for now.”

“You’re saying that if someone with a mastery in Occlumency and Legilimency had encountered Peter, they could have discovered that he was James and Lily’s Secret Keeper, just like you did,” Remus says, paling. “Someone like Albus.”

Salazar nods. “I believe Albus Dumbledore knew that Sirius Black was not the Potters’ Secret Keeper. I believe he knew it to be Pettigrew. Whether he intended to act on this information if Pettigrew never betrayed them—”

“Could Albus have made Peter betray them?” Remus asks, looking hopeful.

“No, and you already know why,” Salazar responds gently. “Pettigrew lived in his Animagus form, which is not easily influenced by another’s thoughts or magic, for twelve years. He spent all of that time away from Albus Dumbledore’s influence. When he returned to his human form, his first act was to rush to Voldemort’s side. No, Remus Lupin: Pettigrew chose to betray your friends.”

“It still means Voldemort could simply have yanked the information out of Peter’s head,” Remus says.

Salazar rubs his face with one hand. “He could have, but I don’t believe he ever tried. Voldemort also fell for the ploy that Sirius Black was the Potters’ Secret Keeper, and thought the rat nothing more than a convenient spy. I’m not certain when Pettigrew informed Voldemort of the truth. None of the Underground were there to witness it, nor was Severus.”

Sirius suddenly lets out a choked sound. “No, it wasn’t Peter that was manipulated. It’s like Nizar’s portrait said tonight about what I would have let Albus do. You think Albus convinced *me* to—to be inclined to chase after a traitor when the time came.”

“I do, yes,” Salazar confirms. “For what it’s worth, I am sorry.”

Sirius waves off Salazar’s apology as he begins pacing again. “It wouldn’t have mattered if I’d fallen into a trap of Peter’s making or not. With all the rumors of a traitor in the Order, and everyone thinking me their Secret Keeper, especially with my marriage to Lily and James still a secret…I
would have been judged guilty by the Wizengamot. I would have been conveniently out of the way, just as Remus was already conveniently convinced that he was too dangerous to raise a child.”

“I tell you that I long suspected Albus Dumbledore to be manipulative for his own gain, but all that I’ve learned in the years since the last war taught me that Helga, Godric, Rowena and I—we’d comprehended almost none of it compared to the revealed whole.” Salazar lets out a brief sigh. “Calming Draughts tomorrow. If you have none in this house, or none strong enough for a werewolf, let me know before the Order meeting begins. I’ll send an elf to you with what you’ll need.”

“That isn’t the only thing, is it?” Sirius halts in place to stare at Salazar. “It’s that damned Invisibility Cloak.”

Minerva is surprised when Salazar flinches. “Yes.”

“What about the Cloak?” Remus asks, confused. “I’ll admit I always wondered how Albus got ahold of it in order to gift it to Harry in his first year—”

“One of the very last letters I received from Lily.” Sirius clenches his jaw. “She told me that Albus asked to borrow it from James for a few days to study it. Something about curiosity regarding a theory. James would have just—he wouldn’t have given a bit of thought about Albus’s real intentions. Maybe Albus really did want to study James’s old Cloak, but he took away one of the only things that could have hidden at least one adult and a baby from a Dark Lord wanting them dead.”

Remus eyes the teacup and then flings it into the sink, letting it shatter against the old cast iron. Minerva winces away from the harsh sound. “You think that was deliberate, too,” Remus says in a flat voice. “No doubts at all.”

“No doubts at all.” Sirius blinks a few times, his eyes glistening in the candlelight with unshed tears. “As Salazar said, mate: the evidence for all of it is nowhere but our own heads. If I have to satisfy myself with a political hanging, then I will, but I’ll hope to God all the while that Albus slips in such a way that someone makes him fucking dead.”

* * * *


Nizar stops fiddling with the timepiece on his wrist, but starts tapping his fingers against his knees again instead. “I’m bloody nervous,” he says under his breath. “I don’t like sitting out in the open, relying only on a potion!”

“If you somehow miss a dose, you know the Invisibility Charm, you panicked idiot,” Severus replies. “Please allow me to focus on the game, if only so I can yell at them all later for losing in horrific fashion.”

“They are playing rather pathetically, aren’t they?” Nizar says in commiseration, looking up at the sky over the Quidditch Pitch. Draco is actively looking for the Snitch, hoping to end the game in a win for Slytherin before the Gryffindors rack up too many points. Crabbe, Goyle, and Montague have all fouled at least once already in Gryffindor’s favor. Severus isn’t certain why Pucey bothered to fly when he so clearly isn’t interested; there is a reserve Chaser who could easily have taken his
place. Bletchley is doing such a poor job that he’s helped to knock the Quaffle into the goal hoop rather than keep it away. Warrington is the only player aside from Draco flying even semi-decently.

“If I didn’t know they were already terrible, I would demand Rolanda halt the game to find out who poisoned the lot of them,” Severus replies. Next year. Next year will be better. He won’t have to tolerate utter dunderheads as players. There will be no spy politics that force Severus to endear himself to Death Eater families by coddling their idiot offspring.

Draco has all but outgrown the Seeker position by suddenly growing taller as spring approaches, but has been one of the team’s better players since autumn of 1992. Severus wonders if Draco has the talent to be a Chaser, instead. Draco is certainly going to be the team’s captain next year, and on his own merits rather than Death Eater appeasement.

“I’m sacking them,” Severus finally declares aloud.

“All of them?” Nizar asks curiously.

He pretends to think for a moment. “Most of them.”

Severus hates seeing his House lose the Quidditch Cup, but Gryffindor takes the game honorably by two hundred points. Draco is able to snatch the Snitch out of Miss Weasley’s path to prevent it from being even more of a slaughter. Severus hears Miss Weasley yell at Draco afterwards, but there is no hint of malice in her words. Draco is grinning back at her, so if she is insulting him, it must be…well, sporting.

Nizar is a terrible influence for blasted puns.

“Four from Gryffindor’s lineup are graduating at the end of term,” Nizar says. “Gryffindor and Slytherin will both be essentially starting over next year. That will be interesting to watch.”

Severus takes a moment to be quietly, viciously glad that Nizar is talking as if he’ll be here to see it. As if Voldemort will not be a difficulty at all, a minor setback to solve during the summer rather than a lingering dread. “I’d like to see Draco try out for Chaser.”

“Unless she has a growth spurt, your reserve Seeker will likely take that position for herself. Astoria loves it,” Nizar adds. “Millicent should try, too. She could outfly Miles any day.”

“I don’t think what Miles performed today should be considered flying at all.” Severus reaches out and grasps Nizar’s hand. He doesn’t normally do so in front of the students or staff, but today he feels…something. He isn’t certain what the sensation is beyond an odd sort of delight that they’re discussing Slytherin’s next Quidditch roster together.

Severus stands by his opinion that relationships are ridiculously complicated, but he is willing to admit that this is not always a bad thing.

“Maybe Atsushi.” Nizar speaks as if Severus isn’t doing anything out of the ordinary, though his gloved fingers have curled around Severus’s hand. “It’s always good to have at least one Chaser who is smaller and faster than the others.”

“I’ve yet to see him fly. Can he?”

Nizar nods. “He flies at home during the summer, and on visits to the family estate in Japan. His older brother Yuuta was bragging on Atsushi before he graduated last term.”

Yuuta Takagi is a reminder of how much Severus missed due to Albus’s insistence on his role as a
spy, and how he needed to adhere to Albus’s strict standards. It’s a relief to once again realize that he doesn’t ever need to concern himself with those standards again. “Theo has potential as a Chaser as well, if we were ever able to pry him away from his books.”

“I’d rather a subpar Chaser than someone who doesn’t want to do it at all,” Nizar says. “I sort of want to beat Adrian with Miss Granger’s thirty-two foot essay and ask him why he bothered.”

“Tempting. Beaters?”

“I have been a rotten influence regarding puns, haven’t I?” Nizar grins, checks his watch, swears, and then retrieves a phial from his cloak pocket. He swallows it down, grimacing. “Gods, why sandalwood?”

Severus knows exactly why sandalwood would become a flavor component of the potion, but says nothing. Maybe one day he’ll mention that Nizar walked in on Severus when Spiritum Veritatis had just finished brewing, but he still isn’t quite ready to discuss it. Much like three certain words, it feels too intimate and too soon.

“Why the potion, Nizar?” Charity asks. Nosy woman.

“Aberforth hexed me on Friday,” Nizar says in a dry voice. “For old times’ sake. It’s a lingering feel of hypothermia that requires potions to counter it until the hex wears off. I’ve already had my revenge.”

“Oh?” Filius asks, probably hoping to help drown out Lee and Minerva’s teeth-grinding, amplified cheer over Gryffindor’s victory. “What was that, then?”

“It was something Chinese and rather fierce. He’ll be days thinking on that hex,” Nizar says in a light voice. Severus nearly chokes from the effort to keep from laughing. From what Black and Salazar told him, Charlie is also making Aberforth sleep in the woodshed for a solid week. With the family goats.

Severus leans in close and speaks the words directly into Nizar’s ear. “I really do love how you can tell everyone around you the absolute truth without telling them anything useful at all.”

Nizar shivers. “You did say you find my babble entertaining.”

He idly considers killing Albus Dumbledore merely for scheduling a meeting on a day that Severus would otherwise be free to Apparate Nizar down to his quarters. “I still do.” He sits back and resumes speaking in a normal voice. “Do you wish to have lunch after I finish eviscerating my Quidditch players?”

“Only if it’s upstairs,” Nizar says, shivering again—this time from the cold wind that blows in over the stands. “I need to go sit by the hearth and remind myself that it isn’t a good idea to climb directly into the fireplace.”

“That doesn’t sound good. Is there anything I can do, Nizar?” Poppy asks before she leaves the stands.

Nizar shakes his head. “I’m already taking a potion for it, Poppy, but thank you. If it gets worse, I know how to come to you and whinge properly.”

Poppy grants him a pleased smile. “See that you do, Nizar.” She moves along to follow after Charity and Pomona, who have been talking nonstop since the end-game announcements ceased.
Nizar stands up when Severus does, but he gives the pitch one more speculative look. “If Cassius were to change certain beliefs… Cassius and Terence. They could be excellent Beaters.”

Severus considers it. Both young men are of similar height and weight, though he doesn’t know Terence Higgs’ capabilities with a bat. He does know that Higgs is the better flyer, and that might help to compensate for Warrington’s lack—or encourage him to be better. “That sounds promising.”

Severus expects the whinging from his Slytherins on the Quidditch team, as they always have a long list of excuses and accusations to make in an attempt to justify their God-awful flying. Draco hasn’t been participating in the whinging, but Severus still causes the resulting session to take longer by choosing to make his announcement midway through Bletchley’s pathetic tirade.

“I don’t want to hear it. I’ve listened to your excuses for years, and not yet has an excuse ever availed you a victory over Gryffindor. Your terrible playing is your own fault,” Severus says in a cold voice. “Mister Malfoy, you did well. Mister Warrington, if you wish to remain on the team, you will spend your summer learning to be a better flyer. Mister Pucey, Mister Bletchley, Mister Goyle, and Mister Crabbe: consider yourselves sacked from the Quidditch team as of this moment. Unless a miracle occurs, none of you will be welcome to return to the team next term. Mister Montague, the only thing saving you from a similar sacking is your fortunately timed graduation.”

That earns Severus a verbal explosion from five angry Slytherins, which he endures while Draco and Warrington stare at each other in shock. Next time, Severus resolves, he is sacking terrible Quidditch players somewhere that is not the team’s locker room.

By the time Severus escapes, it’s been over an hour. He thinks he’s finally free of them until he hears his name being called. He sighs and turns around to find Warrington running to join him. “What is it, Mister Warrington?”

“I—just—did you mean that, Professor?” Warrington still manages to sound wary even while trying to catch his breath. “That I would be welcome to remain on the team if I become a better flyer?”

Severus regards Warrington until the young man flushes and stares at the ground. He isn’t certain, but suspects that this might not be about Quidditch at all. Not entirely, at least.

Cassius Warrington turned seventeen before the winter break and now bears a certain Mark on his arm, hidden by his Quidditch robes.

Seventeen-year-olds make mistakes. Severus had once done the same.

“I stand by my words, Mister Warrington. Please do not disappoint me.”

Warrington is pale when he looks up. “Er—I’ll try not to, sir. Uh, thank you.”

Severus inclines his head and resumes his walk back to the castle. It’s now two o’clock, lunch is over, and the Order meets at four. He’d like to bloody well eat something before he’s forced to endure Twelve Grimmauld Place.

When he enters Nizar’s sitting room, Nizar is indeed seated at his hearth. He’s also wearing the oversized hooded jumped again. “I put a warming charm on it,” Nizar explains. He’s cuddling Kanza in his hands; she is pleased there are no longer bandages to mar the experience. When Nizar removed the strips of bandage that morning, there wasn’t even reddened skin to mark where deep gouges had been the night before, but there had been no hint of dittany on the discarded bandages. “What took so long?”

“There was an excessive amount of whining about how unfair it is to suffer the consequences of
one’s actions.” Severus hangs his cloak, removes his boots, and joins Nizar at the hearth. Once he’s seated beside him, Severus peers closer in surprise. “You didn’t take another dose of Polyjuice.”

Nizar’s smile is strained, but still genuine. “I don’t want to drink sandalwood when it’s not necessary. It’s not as bitter as the real thing, but it’s definitely not my favorite flavor.”

“You do realize that if you wished to imbibe Polyjuice until the hex wears off, I wouldn’t blame you at all.”

“I would,” Nizar says quietly.

“That’s because you’re an idiot,” Severus replies, to Nizar’s amusement. He lifts Nizar’s right hand while Kanza is busy investigating Nizar’s left hand. “Who treated your injuries yesterday evening?”

“Oh, I made a new friend while I was busy panicking. He’s a young beekeeper. Magical bees producing magical honey, one of the best healing substances you can find without brewing potions.” Nizar wriggles his fingers. “He’ll be coming to Hogwarts next year. His name is Temujin Li.”

“Temujin.” Severus resists the urge to plaster his free hand over his face. “Aberforth and Charlie named their son after Genghis Khan.”

“Auspicious, right?” Nizar smiles. “That one is going to be a terror, and a Hat Stall.”

Severus frowns. “Another one? For which Houses?”

“Slytherin, Ravenclaw, and Gryffindor,” Nizar says. “I usually know who will Sort where. If I can’t figure it out, that poor sodden Hat isn’t going to know, either. I want to see if Temujin can make the Hat cry.”

“You take too much delight in torturing the Sorting Hat, Nizar.”

Nizar makes a faint sound of agreement. “I haven’t eaten yet. Any requests?”

“None other than it being substantial enough to last through this afternoon’s meeting.”

“I’ve been thinking about last night,” Nizar says after lunch is done with. Severus was preoccupied as well, and doesn’t have the faintest idea of what he ate other than its lack of poison.

“So have I. Which part are you dwelling on?” Severus asks.

“Dumbledore’s planned political coup.” Nizar rests his crossed arms on the table. “I’m not fond of the fact that we’re both doing such a thing.”

Severs raises an eyebrow. “There is quite the difference between a political coup used to gain control, and a coup used to restore a proper governing balance.”

“I know,” Nizar says. “Perhaps I just really do not like doing anything that resembles any of his plotting.”

“It doesn’t resemble it at all. You’re not attempting to gain powerful positions in every facet of Wizarding Britain. You didn’t even ask for the title Queen Elizabeth granted you, and I’ve yet to see you declare yourself the evil overlord of the bloody Heights of Brae.”

Nizar laughter is brief and near-silent, as his own often is. “Evil overlord. No, I’ve never been the type. It’s too much work, I wouldn’t enjoy it, and everyone would want me dead. I prefer it when only most people want me dead.”
“Hence, teaching,” Severus notes, amused.

Nizar raises his teacup. “It does seem to work out that way. If Dumbledore doesn’t try to run a meeting for the entire fucking night, would you perhaps like to do something in London?”

Severus feels a moment’s pleasure that he still isn’t entirely used to. “Did you have anything mind?”

“I asked Salazar about cinema, and if it was always a method of gaining a migraine. He suggested finding a venue that has a smaller screen to compress the picture. Better image quality, he says. Oh, and he suggested sitting in the very back row.” Nizar swirls his teacup and gives it a curious look. “Odd.”

“What?”

“Tea leaves slipped into the cup on the last pour,” Nizar murmurs. “The odd part is that they’re suggesting I’m soon to meet a Necromancer.”

So much for a pleasant feeling. Now Severus just feels chilled. “Firstly, I think tea leaves are rubbish except for the making of tea. Secondly…does Voldemort count as a Necromancer?”

“He might think he is, given the number of Inferi you mention he’s made.” Nizar shakes his head and places the teacup upside down on his saucer before lifting it away. Severus doesn’t see anything useful beyond a few globs of wet black leaves. “I don’t think it’s anything to do with Voldemort. Oh, and tea leaves as a scrying tool is not entirely rubbish. The problem comes about with those who think every single scattered leaf is an impending sign, when in truth they tend not to be very talkative unless the tea-making process from beginning to end is performed as a ritual.”

“Those last two sentences were more informative than anything Professor Thorn said in his entire tenure at Hogwarts.” Severus feels his shoulders relax. Not Voldemort. He can handle the idea of another Necromancer suddenly putting in an appearance as long as— “Are they a danger, this Necromancer?”

“This reads more as if they’re the one in danger. Or foundering in some way that no one is seeing to.” Nizar puts the teacup back down over the mess of leaves. “Cinema?”

“Twelve Grimmauld Place, first, but I’m not opposed to another film as long as it isn’t bloody Shakespeare.”

“It’s still not my fault that you took my brief mention of a humorous concept and ran off to the library to indulge your curiosity.” Nizar grimaces when he stands up. “Stupid hex.” When he reaches into his robe pocket for the next round of potions, Severus stops him with one hand on his arm. “What? What is it?”

“You’re much calmer today,” Severus murmurs. “I didn’t want to press things yesterday, not when you were reliant on Calming Draughts.” He cups Nizar’s face with both hands and kisses him.

Nizar goes utterly still for the first moments before Severus feels him begin to relax. Severus takes that as invitation to deepen the kiss—thorough enough to leave nothing in doubt, but not so involved that they forget to attend to matters in London.

“I—I’m not complaining. I think.” Nizar blinks a few times, looking dazed. “But what was that for?”

Severus runs his fingers along Nizar’s face, tracing soot-black brows as he looks into emerald green eyes. “I will be entirely honest: I prefer you to look the way we’re both long used to, but I won’t turn away if you suddenly looked like this for the rest of your life. I am fond of more than just your
appearance. If you didn’t have a brain in your head, it would have been a very short acquaintance.”

Nizar gently wraps his hands around Severus’s wrists, but doesn’t pull Severus’s hands away from his face. “I’ll also be honest and say that I do not want to look like this for the rest of my life. But it does…it means a lot to me that you would say that, as I know that you mean it.”

“I do,” Severus agrees. Then he smiles. “Even if you spent the next five years hiding in Salazar’s oversized jumper.”

Nizar rolls his eyes. “It’s a non-magical weave. I’d wear out this particular jumper long before five years could pass.”
Chapter Summary

Everyone likes to forget that Andromeda Tonks raised a Black-blooded daughter.

Chapter Notes

Ever-present-beta-hailing: @mrsstanley, @norcumi, @sanerontheinside, @jabberwockypie!

(I wasn't going to post today because I'm REALLY tired and I need to switch back to once-a-week postings so that I have a significant backlog for upcoming shenanigans, but I'm really tired and couldn't resist. So there. That is my wafer-thin excuse. *g*)

Nizar tells Severus how to find a new Disillusioned part of the public garden opposite Grimmauld Place as a means to Apparate in, and then allows Severus to take them both. He could Apparate on his own, but it would be draining, and Nizar has already spent almost twenty-four hours feeling too fucking cold.

“You’ll like what he’s done with the place,” he says as they cross the street. Twelve Grimmauld Place appears in its usual rolling fashion as the Fidelius Charm responds to their knowledge of the townhouse’s presence.

“I don’t care what Black has done to the house as long as that shrieking harpy of a portrait is still conveniently lost.” Severus raps on the door the appropriate number of times to gain entry without having to wait for someone to let them in. Nizar follows Severus inside, noting at once that it’s even brighter than before.

Severus is silent for a minute as he stares at the changes. “Fine. I was wrong.”

Nizar glances around to see what’s changed since the previous weekend. Aside from a continued lack of troll’s leg and unwanted portrait, there is enough sunlight streaming down over the stairwell to tell Nizar that Sirius must have placed a skylight above—which probably involved some interesting magical conversations with the attic. The introduction of natural light in a space that would otherwise see none of it highlights that everything has been scoured from top to bottom. The walls have been stripped, revealing brighter wallpaper previously covered by gloomy, blackened, and torn Victorian patterns. The biggest change is immediately obvious: all the woodwork from floor to ceiling is now a gleaming natural red-gold polished with beeswax. The smell is invigorating, a good replacement for the constant scent of mold and dust that plagued the townhouse on Nizar’s three previous visits.

“Hello, Nizar. You’re the first to arrive—” Black breaks off to stare at Nizar as he takes the final steps down the stairs. “You Polyjuiced yourself as…yourself. I wouldn’t have bloody well thought of that.”
“Listening charms, imbecile,” Severus growls.

Black shakes his head. “Not now, there aren’t, and not again unless Albus replaces them. I’d be concerned about their presence after he arrives, at least until I have a chance to roam the house and get rid of the latest batch when the meeting is done.”

“He keeps putting them back, doesn’t he?” Nizar asks.

Black scowls. “He does. The basement and every public room on the ground floor and first floor. At least I have Geomancy to blame if Albus ever admits to those damned listening spells just to find out why they keep getting destroyed.”

“It’s a convenient natural side effect.” Nizar gestures at the nearest door. It lacks the blackening aspect that highlights the runes, but is otherwise a perfect match for his wand. “Cherry? Really? Have you spent your week Transfiguring wood?”

“Not my decision in the slightest. That’s what was lurking beneath nearly two hundred years of dust and filth. I like it a lot better than age-blackened varnish.” Black finally nods at Severus in greeting. “Snape.”

“Black.” Severus gives Sirius an impassive look. “Do tell me you’ve improved the basement kitchen.”

“It’s clean, at least,” Sirius replies. “It was the least offensive thing in this place, so I’ve been saving it for last. I’m trying to figure out how to make those stairs less of a snapped neck waiting to happen. You should go up to the parlor,” he says to Nizar. “You woke up the family tree, and now it’s trying to take over.”

“This I need to see.” Nizar brushes past Sirius on the stairs, aware that Severus is following him. “Have fun convincing the others that they’ve actually come to the wrong house.”

“Mind reader,” Sirius responds, sounding a bit gleeful. Nizar hopes he enjoys confounding Dumbledore. Right now, every single thing they do that Dumbledore doesn’t expect feels like a minor victory.

“He wasn’t joking.” Severus tilts his head up as they enter the parlor to gaze at the branches that are now crisscrossing the ceiling. The Black family tree is no longer confined to one wall with a few branches trailing over the edges, but wraps almost the entire parlor. The only thing it hasn’t tried to sprout upon is the floor. The wallpaper, once a murky blend of dull blues, is now the brightest blends of spring yellows and greens; faint splashes of gold and silver hint at flowers. With the windows scrubbed clean, the lighter walls, and brighter floor, it’s like standing in an entirely different room.

Nizar reaches out to run his hands over the tree, which feels properly textured and alive beneath his hands instead of flat and dead. The lineages for those who married into the family light up in gold leaf even more quickly than before. “It no longer begins with Lycorus, Phoebe, Alexia, Eduardus, and Hesper, the first children born in this house. It’s all of them.”

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“It must have rearranged itself to put everyone in birth order.” Severus is eying the centermost part of the tree trunk. “The Black Prince is here, as is the Countess of Kent, with their son, Edward Plantagenet of Angoulême, Earl of Kent—the first Edward Black. The tree seems to have lost interest in tracing the royal line beyond Edward’s grandparents, but it’s quite particular about the child that began this family.”

Nizar studies the portraits in that particular cluster. “I’d forgotten what Edward Black looked like.
Those grey eyes have been dominant in the lineage for a long time now—oh!” He stares at the name connected in marriage to the first scion of the House of Black. “That explains quite a bit.”

Severus frowns at the portrait of the bright blue-eyed, dark-haired young woman next to Edward Black. “Elenora Peverell of Castleview. The first Edward Black married a Peverell.”

Nizar reaches out to tug on her portrait, causing Elenora Peverell’s lineage to light up. “Edward Black married a great-granddaughter of Ignotus Peverell.” In life, the man had delicate features, near-black hair, and brown-gold-green eyes that remind Nizar of photographs of James Potter. “I don’t even want to attempt to count how many generations separate that very distant connection, but it still means we’re blood family.”

“I’d been wondering who your blood magic could have detected in London from the moment we discovered that Salazar was in Surrey on eighth December,” Severus says, “and for all the fucking mystery, it was just Sirius Black. Albus was certain it couldn’t be Black setting off that bloody device of his, but with the family tree in poor condition last summer, Albus wouldn’t have seen this.”

“I hope Dumbledore continues not to notice,” Nizar murmurs. “If Dumbledore refined that device so it stopped detecting Sirius, the only person it would point at aside from Voldemort is me.”

“And he is intelligent enough to recall that it did not point at Salazar—and neither did your blood ritual,” Severus realizes. “Why is that?”

Nizar rolls his eyes. “Because he’s bloody cheating. Sal is hiding from that sort of detection magic. He couldn’t ignore something as direct as the Blood Summons, but otherwise, he may well be invisible. I’d do the same, but Dumbledore is already aware that the device notices me. If it suddenly stopped, I’d find myself having to answer irritating questions—” Nizar breaks off. “No. We’re still wrong. The tree isn’t incorrect, but Sirius Black and I can’t be blood family any longer. Winter Solstice.”

Severus gives him a sharp look. “Black wasn’t summoned. The Blood Summons didn’t affect him.”

“No, and he would have whinged about it long before now if it had.” Nizar frowns at the many branches of the tree before placing his hand on the line for Elenora and Edward. “Brighten only the lineage that led to the birth of Sirius Orion Black III.”

Nizar watches as the gold lines spread down and then out, tracing the direct line of descent. He follows it without taking his hand from the wall until he finds what he’s looking for. “There. That’s the break. This is when the Potter and Black families ceased to be related.” It didn’t take very long, either. Only four generations after Edward and Elenora—generations in which only one birthed child bore a child themselves that lived long enough to sire the next Black—there is a set of three portraits rather than two.

“Triad marriage.” Severus frowns at the portrait of two men and one woman—Caelum Black, Orion de Mafoi, and Lady Lyra of Northumberland. “Their only surviving child bears the Black family name, but Orion was the father, not Caelum.”

“Legally and magically, the child was a Black. Their marriage was a proper magical bonding. It wouldn’t have mattered who fathered the child.” Nizar taps on the portrait of that grown child—also named Edward—revealing a man with brown hair and the lineage’s famous grey eyes. “Those eyes came from Caelum, not Orion. It’s the same reason my children could all speak Parseltongue after the magical adoption—binding magical recognition of will and intent.”

“If those sorts of traits are passed along, then Pure-blooded Wizarding society is truly fucking stupid
to have abandoned magical adoption,” Severus mutters.

“I’ve said that for at least a century now.” Nizar frowns, wondering if the tree will do what he asks. “Show me any others who bear Peverell blood on this tree.” To his relief, the tracing gold lines disappear. Only three new portrait frames far from where they’re standing glow in stark relief. “Charlus Potter, James Potter, and the child, and all three of them related to the Blacks only by marriage.” He raises an eyebrow. “Does no one know how to perform a proper triad marriage any longer?”

“Perhaps in other countries, they might. You should hide as Salazar is doing, regardless,” Severus suggests while gazing that the three gold-lit portraits. “It would be an honest claim to say you were hiding from Voldemort.”

Nizar snorts out a laugh. “You’re absolutely right. Not only could I claim that, it’s something I should have done the same day I ensured that Voldemort couldn’t repeat the Blood Summons. I adore your brilliant paranoia, and once again I point out that sometimes I do truly stupid things.”

Severus smirks at him. “It is nice to know that you’re not perfect in your scheming. It makes me feel as if I have a chance at keeping up.”

Nizar grins back. “Oh, you definitely have no trouble at all keeping up. In fact, I most often have trouble keeping up with you.”

Severus squeezes his eyes shut. “You fucking bastard. Please do not make me consider those activities while we’re in this damned house!”

“Revenge for such things mentioned before Minerva last night,” Nizar replies. “As long as we’re hiding from busybodies, would you like it if I hid you?”

Severus starts to answer and then hesitates. “No. If someone is ever foolish enough to take your offered bait, I’d very much like for you to be able to find me, if only to help me clean up the mess.”

Nizar swallows down worry, concern, and sparking rage, reassuring himself that it most likely would be about cleaning up the mess. “All right. We are back to the original mystery, though.”

Severus nods. “Who the fuck was in London that night aside from you?”

“Quaerite me sicut sanguis sanguinem meum. Sed sanguine est non Voldemort. I seek the blood of my blood, but not the blood of Voldemort.” Nizar wanders along the family tree, following the line of Caelum, Lyra, and Orion’s son. “Voldemort isn’t his real name. I wonder if I should have referred to him by his birth name.” He draws the dagger from his boot and knocks the hilt against the wall three times, listening to the resulting sound.

“What are you doing?” Severus asks, curious.

“Changing my wording—oh, the tapping against the wall was to check and make certain there is nothing in this room that would interfere with the spell.” Nizar stabs the pad of his left forefinger. “I hope this doesn’t stain the floor. Quaerite me sicut sanguis sanguinem meum. Sed sanguine est non Tom Marvolo Riddle.”

A single drop of blood spills over the side of his finger and lands directly on the floor next to his boot. Just one.

“One drop for one person. Not two.” Severus frowns as he watches Nizar clean the blade and put it away. “Your blood magic doesn’t recognize Voldemort’s chosen name, only his birth name. Then in
“I think the spell might have been trying to recognize Tom Marvolo Riddle and Voldemort,” Nizar says. “We do place a great deal of importance upon names, but in the walking corpse’s case, Voldemort is less a name and more of a title.”

“Then why does goblin magic not recognize Voldemort at all?” Severus asks.

“Given all the legends regarding the Green Folk and names, I’d imagine their magic looks upon Voldemort giving up so much of himself as a rejection of his own name.”

Severus waits until Nizar has used his wand to remove the drop of blood from the floor, scouring it clean to leave no useful traces behind. “But you’re not certain.”

“Salazar is hiding with no descendants left to his line, magically confirmed. I have no living descendants, magically confirmed. Petunia and Dudley Dursley are hidden behind the blood wards that are attached to that house in Little Whencing. Without them, there is only me. I don’t know of any other explanation.” Nizar raises an eyebrow. “Oh! I do realize now why the two related Dursleys would stop being detected by that device Dumbledore created.”

“The child left that home, and…” Severus glances towards the doorway, but Nizar hasn’t heard the front door open since they entered the room. “The magical adoption.”

“The sacrificial magic hides the family because Dumbledore anchored part of it to the house. The device pointed at the house while the child lived there, as it was the child’s blood the device was crafted for in the first place, but after his departure? Dumbledore isn’t Slytherin enough to have left loopholes to account for willing rejections or magical adoptions.”


“Not in the same way it once did. There would have to be a willing reclaiming of that house as a home, and that will never happen.”

Severus retrieves his pocket watch and frowns as he notes the time. “It seems as if no else plans on being prompt.”

“More time to look at this mess, then.” Nizar turns his attention back to the family tree until he finds one of his primary concerns, Alexia and Hesper. Two of Lycorus’s siblings now have spouses and families with traceable lineages. Alexia’s husband took the name Black instead of keeping his own name of Svenbeard; Hesper took her husband’s name of Kahlbridge, but her children are named Black. They all have the family’s grey eyes, making Nizar wonder which of them their current Gryffindor Edward Black is descended from.

Before Nizar can follow the lineages, he’s distracted by the portrait of Phoebe Theia Black. “There you are, and properly marked, too.”

Severus joins him as Nizar points out the portrait, which now has a birthdate of 1810 and a date of death in 1940. “That would make her the longest-lived Black in centuries,” Severus says.

“I’m glad she did well.” Phoebe’s dark hair is cut short enough that it curls up underneath, and she has a delighted smile on her face. She’s wearing a dress with a very low bodice, revealing sparkling rubies set in silver that emphasize her grey eyes. There is a marriage on the tree for Phoebe that now connects her to a blue-eyed woman whose name sounds American. Malinda Barnes has a pile of blonde hair coiled up on her head in the more traditional fashion of the day, but that is most certainly

December…”
a man’s tailored jacket she’s wearing. Their two sons bear the Barnes’ family name; the lineage of Black-Barnes is a gold-lit addition if Nizar touches their portraits.

Eduardus’s portrait shows how much he and Phoebe continued to resemble each other, even as adults. Now that Eduardus is no longer burnt off the tree, he’s linked in marriage to a man from Ireland named Sylveste Abbott. The portrait has long ginger hair and golden-brown eyes, and he keeps staring at Eduardus in utter adoration. Unlike Phoebe and Malinda, they have no descendants.

“Phoebe married an American crossdresser, and Eduardus married a non-magical Irishman,” Nizar says of the two Blacks.

“Both of them married someone the family didn’t approve of.” Severus rolls his eyes. “Who burnt them off the family tree?”

“Lycorus, no doubt. He was in charge of arranging his siblings’ marriages after their parents died, and the bastard insisted that the family motto was to be taken literally. *Always Pure* was meant to apply to the family’s intentions, not their blood.” Nizar pauses. “Right, I didn’t recall that before. I’d mention it to Sirius, but it would be a politically terrible idea to reclaim a family motto that sounds like it espouses an ideal of blood purity I’d like to see made dust.” He smiles at Eduardus’s portrait when it notices him and waves in greeting. “I wonder if Lycorus managed to burst into flames when Eduardus and Phoebe decided they had other plans.”

“Nizar, some days you actually make me regret the fact that my mother’s parents are dead, as it means I can’t force them to endure your company.”

“I’d apologize for the lost opportunity, but then we’d both have to endure them again.” Nizar wanders over to a row of shelves mounted to the wall with the least amount of tree branches. There are pictures in silver frames that had been absent the last time he saw this room, and the moment he recognizes the occupants, he understands why. “Severus.”

“What is it—oh. I see.” Severus reaches out and grabs Nizar’s hand tight enough to restrict blood flow. “I didn’t realize Black had anything like these.”

“I saw a few photographs last weekend, but not these.” Nizar watches James and Sirius running around Lily in one photo, which reveals she’s already several months pregnant. The cavorting ends with James latching onto her from behind to embrace her; Sirius drops to one knee and wraps his arms around the swell of her stomach.

Nizar has a photo of James and Lily in wedding clothes, but Sirius has one that is of all three of them formally dressed and posed for their tri-marriage. Another one shows Lily in her wedding gown, her arm wrapped around the waist of an older, grey-haired woman in a blue dress who shares Lily’s emerald eyes.

“Jane Evans,” Severus says in a low voice.

“You were right,” Nizar says, watching as Jane smiles bashfully at someone not in the photograph. “She does look to be kind.” Next to the photo of Jane Evans is also a picture of Lily, James, and Sirius standing with a man who has gold-brown eyes and wispy white hair atop a frail-looking body. Despite his obvious ill health, the old man is beaming with pride. “Is that Malcolm?”

Severus nods. “When he was younger, he still had enough color left to his hair to reveal that he is the reason Lily was a ginger.”

The next framed photograph is again of the wedding, possibly a celebration afterwards. Remus is
atop Sirius’s back, clinging on for a piggyback ride and looking entirely too tall to be doing so, but Sirius is laughing. On the other side of the photograph, Lily is doing the very same to James. Clinging to her shoulder is a rat, no doubt an Animagus named Pettigrew.

They all look so happy. Nizar could develop further hatred for Pettigrew and Voldemort based on this photograph alone.

The one beside it is startling in how much younger they are, everyone still wearing the uniforms and striped ties of Hogwarts students. James, Lily, Sirius, Remus, and Pettigrew are gathered in front of the Quidditch stands, grinning like loons. Even Pettigrew looks very un-rat-like, more like the happy teenager he must have once been. The Lily in the photograph keeps stealing James’s glasses and perching them atop her head while Sirius poses next to her. Remus repeatedly picks up Pettigrew and swings him around, making the other laugh in silence.

“Why bother?” Severus asks snidely of Pettigrew. “There are ways to remove individuals from magical photographs. It can’t alter the record of the photograph’s actions, but at least you don’t have to look at them any longer.”

“A reminder.” Nizar runs his thumb along Severus’s hand, which makes Severus recall himself and loosen his grip. “Sometimes you doubt what came before. You doubt yourself, your memory, your judgement. Putting a photograph here, though—Sirius and Remus can remind themselves that despite all of the shit he did later, Peter Pettigrew was once a good person. It’s a reminder that the past wasn’t a lie.”

There is another group photo in which the Hogwarts students are at least a year younger. This one includes two students that Nizar can’t identify until he peers closer and recognizes certain features. “Neville’s parents?”

Severus nods. “Alice Max and Frank Longbottom. They were a year above us in school. I probably forgot to mention it; I came back from winter break of my last term to discover that Max and Longbottom had become engaged during the holiday. Augusta Longbottom spent the next three months shrieking in public about being thwarted. She’d had her heart set on her son marrying higher in society than a Max. Martha Rosier, I believe.”

“Oh, she wanted to marry her son off to a Death Eater. That would have gone over so well at family dinners,” Nizar drawls. “Was Madam Longbottom paying no mind to the war at all?”

“I believe Madam Longbottom’s response to the last war was to bury her head in the ground. Then her son and daughter-in-law’s participation left her no choice but to pay attention,” Severus answers, but his eyes are locked on a photograph of a black-haired toddler riding a tiny broomstick. The broom hovers just high enough for the toddler’s toes to brush the grass. James Potter is lying in a spread-eagled heap on the ground, glasses askew, laughing while the toddler flies rings around him. “That is one terrible habit set early, I see.”

“Blame Sirius. The toy broomstick was his idea,” Nizar says.

Severus’s lip curls up in a faint sneer. “And then he replaced it with a Firebolt.”

Nizar looks at him in surprise. “Is that where it came from?”

“I didn’t say?” Severus gives Nizar a gentle nudge with his elbow. “My apologies. I should have. I suppose I considered it obvious, given the broom’s mysterious arrival and its bloody price tag.”

“It’s fine.” Nizar watches a calico-patterned cat saunter into the photograph of the flying toddler.
“What happened to their cat? I’ve never heard a thing about a cat.”

“I’ve no idea. Perhaps it fled after Voldemort—” Severus refuses to finish the sentence. Instead, he reaches out and gently touches the glass that protects the photo of Lily and Jane. “I’m glad she was happy. I still question her taste, but…I’m glad she was happy.”

“Want to go downstairs?” Nizar offers. If Severus spends any more time reflecting on the past, he might kill the first person to utter a foolish statement.

Severus releases Nizar’s hand and steps away from the photographs. “Please,” he replies, but does take a moment to swallow an unaltered Calming Draught first. Nizar wonders how many Calming Draughts that Severus, Minerva, Salazar, Remus, and Sirius are all going to consume before Dumbledore is somehow dealt with.

The kitchen is as spotless as Sirius claimed, without a hint of cobwebs, dust, mold, or decay. The area where Kreacher the house-elf slept has been entirely rebuilt as an open pantry. The cabinets and cupboards have been cleaned and rubbed down with beeswax; their glass panes must be crystal given the way they reflect the candlelight. The table is several shades lighter after being stripped of old varnish, revealing solid English oak. The floor is gleaming, decades of dirt properly removed. To Nizar’s surprise, it’s made of solid marble tile, not the slate he’d previously thought.

Tonks is already waiting downstairs with Andromeda and Ted. Fleur and Bill are seated together, staring around with wide eyes at the changes. Mundungus Fletcher is running one finger down the clean cabinets in a way that doesn’t bode well for the servingware inside.

“It’s like being in a completely different bloody house!” Tonks says cheerfully in greeting. “Isn’t it lovely?”

“It no longer resembles a death trap,” is Severus’s faint praise before he sits down in a chair close to the fire burning in the hearth. Nizar bites back a sigh of relief and sits down in the chair that is directly before the fire, grateful for the warmth at his back. Stupid hex.

Dumbledore’s meeting must have been arranged with too little notice. Teachers are often available on weekends, but not everyone is free on a Saturday afternoon. Kingsley is present, as is Alastor and Hestia, but Emmaline, Sturgis, Dedalus, and Arthur are absent. Minerva and Salazar arrive with Molly and Charlie, who’s dragging along a blond man whom Nizar recognizes by Recordari scroll as Oliver Wood. Remus and Sirius don’t come downstairs until Dumbledore arrives, five minutes late to his own meeting. Nizar considers it a distinct improvement when he notices Remus willingly sit next to Tonks rather than Tonks having to stalk him.

Nineteen members of the Order of the Phoenix are present out of the listed twenty-seven who are supposed to be present, and that does not count those whose reserved status will only become active during open war. Nizar wonders what topic Dumbledore is going to address while using their small gathering to subtly imply the issue is of little importance.

He finds out almost at once. “The Underground has approached me with a grave request,” Dumbledore announces after he is seated. “Salazar has rightly pointed out that there are unMarked followers of Voldemort who did not rejoin the Dark Lord after his return on twenty-fourth June of last year. It has also been noted that there are Marked Death Eaters who have fled Britain in order to escape Voldemort’s pending vengeance against them, which will likely involve being tortured.”

“There is no likely about it.” Severus’s tone is flat in a way that has nothing to do with a Calming Draught. “Voldemort said in very specific terms that he will do exactly that. He wishes to make an example of them before their deaths.”
“There is a reason those like Geronimus and Anastacia Greengrass have not left their homes since last June,” Salazar adds. “They’re relying on their wards to protect them, and for now, those wards hold. That may not remain so. The only reason their children are still in Hogwarts is due to being transported directly to the front gate by a family house-elf. That option is no longer available to them.”

Minerva looks surprised. “I didn’t think Anastacia had ever been a Death Eater. Or is it—oh. Yes. She would be an easy target to gain Geronimus’s attention. The Greengrass sisters have Hogwarts’ protection, but she does not.”

“You’re wanting us to, what, protect former Death Eaters?” Alastor asks, scowling.

“Former being the key word, yes,” Salazar replies, affecting an innocent air. “Do you not do so already?”

Alastor glares at Severus, who stares back, unimpressed. “Suppose we do,” he admits. “How many are there?”

“That we know of with certainty? Urith Avery, Marguerite Davis, Igor Karkaroff, Phillip Macnair, Nicola Macnair, Tristan Parkinson, Gamelin Rowle, Geronimus Greengrass, Anastacia Greengrass, and Florentia Selwyn,” Nizar answers. “Florentia is concerned that her father will use Tempero on her in an attempt to force her into Voldemort’s service. The last I was aware, she and Gamelin were both hiding in Cornwall.”

“Good for her,” Bill says. “Florentia always struck me as more sensible than that lot. I knew her in Hogwarts. She was always decent, no matter what kind of squabbling the Houses were getting up to.”

“Tristan Parkinson and Marguerite Davis, though—I find I have a great deal of newfound sympathy for Pansy Parkinson and Tracy Davis,” Oliver adds, frowning.

“Save your sympathy in regards to Miss Davis,” Severus tell him. “She is happily following along in her irritating father’s footsteps to the point where I am grateful that she is underage. Miss Parkinson is aware of the rift between her parents and is making plans to avoid them until they either divorce or attempt to kill each other.”

Charlie winces. “Ow. Not all that surprised, but ow.”

Andromeda curses under her breath, so soft Nizar can’t make out the words despite their vicious sound. “How many are within Hogwarts now that were fool enough to accept the Dark Mark?”

“Seventeen,” Minerva replies. “And I’ll not name them, either. If they are within Hogwarts’ walls, they are not with him.”

“But the moment they decide to join him, we need to know.” Kingsley sighs. “I don’t want to wage a war against children.”

“The body count from the last war all but guarantees that there will be many young faces among the Dark Lord’s followers,” Dumbledore interjects in a sharp voice. “We will help those who turn away from Voldemort, but we cannot ignored that these young witches and wizards are of age. I’d much prefer it to be otherwise, but they have made their choice.”

“On a different note, I have heard back from those of mine who can safely move in and out of Voldemort’s Court without endangering themselves.” Salazar looks amused and a bit smug. “My brother called it correctly. Voldemort thinks Nizar a legitimate target to eliminate, but of myself? He
refuses to believe any of it. I’m a trick, a trap, a bit of nonsense designed to distract. I never realized it could be so entertaining to be thought a charlatan.”

“Well, you do make an excellent distraction. Oliver hasn’t been able to stop staring at you since we got here,” Charlie says, grinning.

“Shut up!” Oliver hisses, elbowing Charlie in the ribs. “You didn’t warn me, and you’re still a wanker!”

“Those in danger, either for being Death Eaters on the run or not wanting to be forced into becoming one—how many of them are we certain of?” Kingsley asks. “I can ask Rufus to assign Aurors to look after them, and make certain that those with homes and safe houses receive extra wards backed by the Ministry, but if I spread the M.L.E. too thin, it endangers us all.”

“Nicola and Phillip have never been interested in what Voldemort has to offer. Their danger lies in the fact that their brother is a Death Eater, and they’ve taken on the guardianship of a Death Eater’s child,” Nizar replies. “Aside from Florentia and Anastacia Greengrass’s innocence, all the others are unMarked or Marked Death Eaters who refused to return to Voldemort’s service. Even if they never act as allies to the Order, they don’t deserve to die.”

“I disagree in Karkaroff’s case. God knows where the imbecile has fled, but he would turn in his own mother if it meant saving his skin,” Severus says in distaste.

“We’ll approach the Macnairs and the Greengrass families first, then,” Kingsley decides. “Nizar, I’m assuming you’re in contact with Selwyn and Rowle. Please ask if they would be willing to accept official Ministry protection.”

Nizar nods. “Consider it done.”

“I’d try to corner Marguerite and Tristan in the Ministry, or any other public place,” Sirius suggests. “Sending an owl to their respective homes isn’t a guarantee that they’ll be the ones to read that letter. Urith, too—if you can find her, anyway. She was good at hiding in Hogwarts.”

“Nizar,” Nizar glances over, confused by the odd tone of Severus’s voice, and finds the man staring at him in concern. “You do not look well.”

Shit. Nizar tries to check his watch to see if he misjudged the Polyjuice dosing time and discovers he can barely move his fingers. “Oh. Well. That’s…” He means to say not good, but his jaw locks up, and he can’t get the words out.

“Oh, Goddammit!” Sirius bursts out. “There were spells in this fucking house designed to increase the power of a jinx, hex, or curse. I must have missed the ones down here when I was getting rid of the others. Nizar, I’m so fucking sorry. Salazar, take him upstairs. I know I cleared everything on the upper floors.”

“What sort of hex?” Molly is asking in alarm as Salazar helps Nizar to stand up. Nizar is glad Salazar for Salazar’s presence; his knees are all but refusing to bend. Fucking Blacks and their fucking paranoia!

“It’s a hex designed to freeze a shapeshifter’s ability to change, and it is not pleasant in the slightest,” Salazar answers her. Nizar’s feet hurt with every step they take until he’s steadily cursing through his clenched teeth.

“Who the bloody hell did that?” Alastor demands to know.
Salazar ignores Alastor’s attempts at interrogation and Tonks’s sudden panic, all but bodily hauling Nizar up the basement stairs. “Nizar?”

“Some. Place. Private,” Nizar answers as they reach the ground floor.

Salazar nods, pulling Nizar’s arm over his shoulders. “Don’t sneeze,” he warns, and gently levitates them to the first floor, avoiding the next flight of stairs.

It takes a ridiculous amount of time to finish a single sentence. “Don’t think I could sneeze right now.”

Salazar takes them into a bedroom that has been stripped of any personal items, leaving it clean and furnished, ready for guests instead of a permanent inhabitant. Nizar sits down on the edge of a settee placed in front of the large bed, feeling the same way he did after the hex was first cast.

Salazar helps him to drink the first phial of Fire in the Blood, and still he nearly spews it all over the floor. Stupid fucking hex.

Nizar is feeling a lot closer to normal after the second dose. “Might as well grab the other one as well,” he says, not willing to say Polyjuice in a room that might have been reintroduced to Dumbledore’s listening spells.

Salazar nods and retrieves the phial of Polyjuice from Nizar’s robe pocket. “Close enough not to matter, really.” he mutters, yanking off the stopper when Nizar’s fingers refuse to grasp it properly. At least he can drink it on his own, and doing so calms some of his increasing panic over the idea of being exposed by failing Polyjuice, or being unable to bloody move because of Aberforth’s housewarding hex.

Stupid. Fucking. Hex.

Salazar picks up Nizar’s hand, turns it over, and presses his fingers to the underside of Nizar’s wrist. “It would normally be far too soon, but I think you’ll be needing another dose of Fire in the Blood now. That is quite a bit of nasty spellwork downstairs. It hides so well I didn’t even notice its presence.”

“I imagine one would have to be of the Black family blood to be able to sense those spells, much less remove them.” Nizar swallows the fourth potion, glad that it washes away the lingering taste of sandalwood in his mouth. “Well. That was an unplanned and unnecessarily fucking dramatic.”

“You’ve always had a talent for finding trouble, hermanito,” Salazar replies, smiling. “I’m just grateful this was more of an inconvenience than true harm—fucking fuck, Nizar!”

Nizar shakes his head in confusion as he realizes that Salazar’s expression has drastically changed. Sal is gripping his wrist in a near-panic. “Nizar, please speak to me rather than staring at me.”

“What happened—oh, hello migraine that I most certainly did not need,” Nizar mutters, squeezing his eyes shut. “Sal?”

“I cast a privacy charm the moment I realized you were having a flashback,” Salazar says. “I suppose one of your flashbacks is to be expected after the magic in this townhouse had its way with the magic already affecting you, but it was not pleasant to witness.”

“It’s not pleasant to wake up and realize you’ve lost a few minutes, either. How long did it last?” Nizar asks, opening his eyes to massage his temple with one hand.
“Less than two minutes.” Salazar looks grim. “And it was nothing like the seeming fit when it came to your recollection of Obliviscaris Omnia.”

“That’s because it was blank. A blank flashback, Sal.” Nizar swallows when his throat feels too dry. “Unlike the incident with Edonya’s portrait, I don’t recall anything when they happen. I’ve had a few since the Gaunt recollection. Severus and I think those moments are blank not because the memory is missing, but my actual ability to recall was damaged by Obliviscaris Omnia.”

“And you’re just now telling me this?” Salazar asks in frustration.

“It only now occurred to me that I’d forgotten to tell you!” Nizar retorts. “You’re not the one dealing with fallout that is seven hundred sixty-one years old, and I’d very much like for these damned flashbacks to perhaps be less bloody dramatic!”

There is a sharp, warning rap on the bedroom door before Tonks pushes it open and enters the room. Her wand is clenched in her hand, her hair is solid white, and her lips are pressed into a thin line of worry. “Are you all right?” she asks after a moment’s hesitation.

“I am now.” Nizar thinks about it and then pats the settee next to him. “Plenty of room.”

Tonks comes right over, sits down, and hugs him even as her hair starts to gain color again. “¡Eso fue espantoso! Era como verte congelarse sin el hielo.”

Nizar keeps forgetting that Tonks is fluent in Castilian. “Es un hex de mandarín. Se llama ropa de oveja. Dudo que alguna vez tengas que lidiar con el maleficio, si esa es tu preocupación.”

“A bit, yeah. You’re dealing with it, Nizar,” Tonks replies as she sits back. “¿Cómo lo tratas?”

“It’s a potion called Fire in the Blood,” Salazar answers. “A basic hypothermic treatment, simple enough to acquire. Most healers carry at least one phial with them as part of their emergency kit. ¿Cómo es que eres tan fluido en Castellano?”

“Dad was born here in Britain, but his family is from Spain.” Tonks smiles. “My grandparents moved back there after Dad finished at Hogwarts and married Mum. He grew up speaking proper Castilian, so he made certain I did, too.”

“It is nice not to be the only odd Spaniards wandering about Britain,” Nizar says. “Are they already done downstairs?”

Tonks nods. “Just wrapping it up. They’re trying to figure out how to contact the ex-Death Eaters you mentioned without offending their own sensibilities. I’m pretty sure Professor Snape would prefer to hex them all.”

“That’s his default response at all times, Tonks,” Nizar returns dryly, and she laughs. “¿Qué otros idiomas hablas?”

“La revanche de maman sur papa était de m’apprendre le françai. Fleur all but latches onto me after Order meetings so she has someone to talk to who doesn’t mock her accent.”

Nizar sighs. “Un jour, les Anglais et les Français vont se souvenir d’arrêter de se detester. What a stupid reason to mock someone’s accent.”

Tonks’s eyes widen. “I might not mock hers, but I might yours! What the bloody hell was that?”

Salazar starts laughing. “That is what happens when you force the northern English and the Scots to
adopt *français* as an academic language for several centuries. It has its own unique flavor.”

“It’s also the reason why Severus will never, ever admit that he can speak French, as I inadvertently passed on that same accent to him,” Nizar says, and Tonks starts giggling. “I’ll give you fifty Galleons if you ever get him to admit it in public.”

“You’re on,” Tonks declares, shaking his hand to seal the deal. “And your hands are still bloody freezing!”

“Trust me; that’s an improvement,” Nizar replies. “If I don’t have to go back down into that stupid kitchen, then there is gossiping to do. How is it going with Remus?”

“Oh, that one!” Tonks scowls, her hair turning a fiery red intermixed with golds, yellows, and shades of orange. “He’s now an acknowledged war mage, and still Remus is concerned that dating me would ruin my career!”

Nizar rolls his eyes. It seems they’re back to the spinelessness, at least in regards to courting. “I’ll strangle him.”

“Remus Lupin tends to be overly cautious,” Salazar says, a kinder opinion than Nizar expected. “If he turns you down, Nymphadora Tonks, the fault is most certainly not with you.”

“He does care for you,” Nizar decides to say, even if he’s still thinking about magical strangulation.

“And I’ve told him I’ll take a Muggle job if they boot me out of the M.L.E. for dating a werewolf!” Tonks huffs out an annoyed sigh. “Dad is Muggle-born. He would certainly be able to help me get one. I just don’t know what to do to get that man to look at me proper!”

“Stop beating around the bush, tie him up, and have your wicked way with him?” Salazar suggests, grinning. “As long as Remus Lupin is not still protesting the occasion, of course.”

Tonks blushes. “That’s a bit too forward for my tastes. I should probably go downstairs before the lot of them panic about you—”

Nizar reaches out to snag the hem of her robe sleeve. “Wait a moment.”

“What?” Tonks gives him a curious look, though Salazar is narrowing his eyes. It must be a bit obvious that he might be up to mischief.

“Would you hold still for a moment?” Nizar asks. “I’d like to cast a brief spell. It won’t hurt, and it won’t affect you at all. It’s…evaluation.”

“Assessment of possibility,” Salazar clarifies for him. “He’s correct. It won’t affect you at all.”

Tonks gives them both a curious look. “That’s fine with me, then. No setting me on fire, though.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever actually done that to anyone.” Nizar draws the first rune in the air, pleased when it holds its shape, but the spell is immediately obliterated by Tonks drawing back in alarm. “That is not what it means to hold still!”

“You didn’t warn me you were going to start drawing glowing symbols in the air!” Tonks retorts. “What is that?”

“Pictia Magia and Geomantia Magia,” Nizar replies innocently. “They’re only runes, Tonks.”

Tonks glares at him. “If I start glowing when those things do, I’m going to charm a wardrobe into
eating you.”

“I do not actually wish to go to Narnia, thank you.” Nizar grabs Tonks by the hand. “Hold bloody still this time!” he orders, and draws the first glowing green rune again. It’s a bit troublesome that he’s working more on instinct than memory, but intentions in magic matter. The second rune chimes in his head, a sign that it’s working well with the first.

The third rune, drawn through the other two, emits a clear, audible tone like a perfectly tuned wind chime. Nizar grins. “I was right.”

Salazar looks ready to bury his face in his hands. “I truly despise the fact that I do not recall what any of that meant.”

“Well…” Nizar lets go of Tonks, who checks her hand for any glowing marks. “It would be a lot harder for your career to be ruined by dating a werewolf if you also happened to be a war mage.”

Tonks’s eyes grow wide as her mouth falls open. Then she squeals and flings herself at Nizar, bruising his ribs when she hugs him. “You really think I could?”

“That was the entire point of the spell!” Nizar exclaims. “Though to be honest, I thought you could before. I just thought it worth confirming before saying anything.”

“I could! I could be a bloody war mage!” Tonks leans back on the settee, swinging her legs back and forth like a happy toddler while her hair changes its way through a multitude of bright bursts of color. “Wait—I’m only twenty-three. I’m too young, aren’t I?”

Nizar gives her a baffled look. “Tonks. I was seventeen.”

“Oh.” Tonks blinks a few times and then tries to strangle him with another hug. “When?” she asks when she releases Nizar, looking happier than he’s ever seen her. “When would it be?”

“I’d have to get back to you on that part. We don’t exactly just drop in on Queen Elizabeth and ask her to appoint another war mage. There are social niceties to observe. Politics.” Nizar thinks it will help quite a bit that Tonks is Sirius’s first cousin, if twice removed.

Well. Once- and twice-removed, not to mention they’re also second and third cousins because the Black family tree forgot how to fork with Lycorus’s branch. Bloody Walburga and her shit spousal choices.

“That’s fair enough,” Tonks says. Then she decides Salazar needs to be subjected to one of her assault-hugs.

Severus appears in the doorway a moment later, raising an eyebrow. “Salazar, you seem to have acquired a Metamorphmagus growth that is not your brother.”

“I have at that,” Salazar agrees cheerfully. “Are we free to leave?”

“We are.” Severus looks irritated. “Salazar, there is a woman looking for you who is already verbally chewing things up and spitting them out in Scots Gaelic. I thought you might appreciate the warning.”

Salazar stands up after Tonks lets him go. “Gods’ sake, did they muck the rest of it up that badly?”

Severus’s irritation becomes an outright sneer of derision. “I believe it’s more as if some of us are paying more attention to the way certain words are being spoken by others.”
“You mean Professor Dumbledore,” Tonks says in a glum voice.

Nizar, Salazar, and Severus give her equally intrigued looks. “I didn’t know you were aware of his way with words,” Nizar says.

Tonks blows out a huff of air that stirs the greenish-gold fringe over her forehead just before her hair turns black-violet. “I’m no great politician, but my mum is Andromeda Black Tonks. She’s the elder sister to one of the most infamous witches in Wizarding Britain for following You-Know-Who. She hears what Professor Dumbledore says and doesn’t say. Mum’s right sick of it, but right now, Professor Dumbledore is our means to get rid of Aunt Bellatrix’s favorite Dark Lord.”

“And if it came about that such was no longer true?” Salazar asks.

Tonks shrugs. “She’d bolt and look for the next best means of survival. She’s a Slytherin, Mum is. She isn’t into any of us dying for lost causes. She’ll be thrilled to hear of me becoming a war mage.”

“What.”

Nizar has to swallow back laughter when he sees the expression on Severus’s face. “Yes, really. She’s beyond qualified, and has the right sort of potential.”

“I see.” Severus looks at Tonks. “Please do try not to trip over the edge of a rug when meeting Her Majesty, Nymphadora.”

“I’ll do my best, but I know better than to give any promises on that matter, Professor,” Tonks replies with a smile.

Severus’s eye twitches. “Nymphadora. I have not been your teacher since bloody 1990.”

Tonks smirks back at him. “When you start properly calling me Tonks, I’ll call you Severus, and not a moment before. I’m off to terrify Remus by telling him! You lot have a good evening!”

“She puts so much effort into making you forget she’s a Black woman until she drags the evidence of it out and shoves it all in your face.” Salazar reaches out and hauls Nizar up from the settee. “If you’re still thinking of a film this evening, I suggest avoiding the one titled Johnny Mnemonic.”

“Oh?”

“The story is interesting, and the depiction of Newark in the States is fairly spot-on, but you’re missing half the terminology,” Salazar explains. “It’s also quite the means to pick up a migraine if you’re unprepared for the light show.”
Untapped Potential

Chapter Summary

He is important. His job is important. He is important.

Chapter Notes

I know I said I was going to only be posting once a week while the move was going on, and right now I don't know if this counts as a late Tuesday or an early Friday posting but I have finally hit the point of stress where I could crawl under my desk with a handle of vodka and sob my way through a bag of eating just straight up Dixie Crystals brown sugar. So. I AM POSTING FIC. FIC IS NORMALCY. (Please, rental place, give me a confirm or a denial tonight so I can call the next motherfuckers in line about a place to stay, okay?)

Beta-hail: @jabberwockypie, @mrstansley (who is starting to feel better!), @sanerontheinside (who is in PARIS, sulk), & @norcuni!

“How many of them interrogated you over the hex?” Nizar asks once they’ve escaped the townhouse.

Severus scowls as they walk, causing quite a few pedestrians to veer out of their path. “The entire bloody lot of them. Fortunately, our nosy Headmaster overheard what you told Filius and Pomona. Albus was quite willing to inform everyone as to your physical condition and continued health… while also taking the time to utter a conveniently timed joke about goats.”

Nizar makes an amused sound. “Of course he did.”

“And…Black asked me to pass on an apology for not making certain the house was stripped of those sorts of spells,” Severus manages to say.

“He’d already apologized. I’m not certain why he felt the need to do so again, unless it was merely to annoy you. Where are we going?”

Severus would not put it past Black to have done it for exactly that reason. As it is, the existence of those spells does explain why, prior to the Mark’s removal, Severus had always left Grimmauld Place in a foul fucking mood. “There is a cinema in walking distance. I don’t know if the screens are the size that Salazar had in mind, but it’s large enough to have variety. Yes, I cast Warming Charms on all of your clothes. Cope.”

“I’m warm and thus coping admirably, thank you.” Severus sees Nizar look at him out of the corner of his eye. “You have no idea what any current film offering is even remotely about, do you?”

“No at all.”
The movie posters mounted to the wall outside of the cinema are less than informative. Severus can’t recall if movie posters were useful when he was a child or not, but he also had a telly in the house broadcasting movie trailers. It’s likely he never noticed.

“Hey! Othello!” Nizar says with a wide grin.

Severus glares at him. “Did I not say no bloody Shakespeare?”

“Spoilsport.” Nizar tilts his head at a poster that seems far too Edwardian. “Sense & Sensibility. Isn’t that Jane Austen?”

“When have you had the chance to read Jane Austen?” Severus asks.

“Oh, I still haven’t had the chance to read it for myself, but Aberforth liked her books. Lots of societal politics. Les Misérables I’ve heard of, but if I’m reading the poster correctly, this particular film is entirely in French.”

Severus shakes his head. “I’d rather not spend the entire movie interpreting if I don’t have to—Nizar, that does not mean you should immediately point at the movie with the bloody Spanish title!”

“But it’s Castilian!” Nizar looks far too enthused by a film that merely happens to have a Spanish title. “And it looks interesting.”

“Actually…” Severus reads the details on the poster for Desperado. “I think this is an American production. Even if they speak the language, it will be Español, not Castilian.”

“I can still understand that, even if there are some interesting differences. Besides, apparently the hero of the story is looking to kill a lot of people. I can watch two hours of someone killing the deserving in a fictional setting.”

Severus has to admit, it’s a convincing argument. Nizar’s classroom and its built-in safeties that prevent grievous harm gave Severus the first opportunity in years to cast spells at another and find any sort of joy in it. Enjoying someone else’s fictional revenge has a similar appeal.

The film proceeds exactly in that fashion, and is entertaining despite the body count. To Nizar’s disappointment, the majority of the dialogue is in English, not Spanish.

Then a child is harmed onscreen. Nizar grips the armrest of his chair so tightly that Severus can hear it cracking.

“Nizar, do not break that chair. Don’t,” Severus hisses under his breath. He hopes that fictional child survives. This theatre does not need to be on fire, and he does not want to deal with the Ministry today.

Fortunately for this dubiously constructed building, the child lives. The two main characters also survive, though they’re fool enough to discard their only means of self-defence.

No, they change their minds and go back for it. Sensible.

Nizar drinks another dose of Polyjuice before the lights brighten the room. Then he stands up and walks out without waiting for Severus. He glances down, notes that he was correct regarding the cracked armrest, and follows. He finds Nizar standing on the walkway outside, hands shoved into his coat pockets and seemingly ignoring those passing by.

Severus joins him, the sea of pedestrians surging around them as if they’re rocks blocking the
incoming tide. “Nizar?”

“Should’ve gone with Jane Austen.” Nizar’s eyes are darting around as he tracks people from one side of the road to the other. “I’ve never been fond of stories that treat allies as if they’re... as if they’re bloody disposable. If your goal isn’t to get everyone important to you through the battle alive, what’s the fucking point?”

“A question that others should ask themselves far more often, I think.” There is little else Severus can say to that. Not in public, at least. “Dinner?”

“Can we go home for that? I really don’t think I’m capable of dealing with anything else in London today.”

Severus nods. “I had no plans. What are you in the mood for?”

Nizar grants him a faint smile. “Hiding in my quarters, food, music, and trying to use you as an effective blanket.”

“That is acceptable.” If Severus can be someone’s bloody stuffed bear, he can probably manage a blanket, as well.

* * *

Percy Weasley straightens his robes after Apparating to Hogwarts’ front gates. He can do this.

He is important. His job is important. He is important.

Percy pushes open the gate and tries to ignore the sense of homecoming. It’s been utterly soured by Bartemius Crouch’s death at the hands of that mad escaped Death Eater, and especially by what came afterwards.

There are several students wandering about, taking advantage of it being Sunday and the fact that Scotland decided to try on the abnormal bit of being ten degrees warmer than freezing. Percy keeps an eye out; there are four heads of Weasley ginger on these grounds that he would prefer to avoid at all costs.

Of course, that means he almost runs directly into his sister when he rounds a bend in the path and finds her snogging a shorter blonde girl. “Ginny! What do you think you’re doing?” Percy demands, temporarily forgetting that he is supposed to be at odds with Weasley ginger.

Ginny breaks off kissing the blonde girl, who is, to Percy’s shock, wearing Slytherin colors. His baby sister doesn’t screech or tell him off. Instead, she looks him in the eye, raises her chin, and says, “I do not have to explain myself to you.” Then she grabs the wide-eyed blonde’s hand and stalks off.

Percy stares after her. “All—all right then.” His sister is into girls. Slytherin girls. His sister has... Ginny’s grown an awful lot in the last year.

There is a house-elf in a green tea towel with gold trim standing in front of the Entrance Hall doors when Percy crosses the courtyard. The brown house-elf gives Percy a studious, up-and-down inspection that makes Percy feel oddly naked. “Who is you being?”
“I’m—you’re a house-elf and you’re—” Percy grinds his teeth. Hogwarts is eccentric and he knows this. “I’m Percy Weasley, Undersecretary to the Minister for Magic, here to see Professor Nizar Slytherin.”

The house-elf tilts his head. “All right. You are no danger to this castle,” he announces, and then Disapparates.

Percy scowls. Him, a danger to this castle? That’s ludicrous.

“Mister Weasley,” Professor McGonagall greets him in a cool voice after Percy makes it into the warmth of the Entrance Hall. “What brings a representative of the Ministry to Hogwarts this fine day?”

Why could you not have been teaching right now? Percy thinks plaintively. He’d much prefer to have arrived on a weekday, with the act of teaching keeping his former Head of House occupied, but no—Cornelius Fudge had insisted that it must be today.

Percy squares his shoulders. “It is Ministry business, Professor. The Minister has sent me to speak to Professor Nizar Slytherin regarding a private matter.”

He doesn’t think it’s his imagination that Professor McGonagall seems amused. “Very well, then. We must not keep the Minister waiting. Follow me, Mister Weasley. The Defence classroom is not where you once knew it to be. That is now the History classroom.”

“I see,” Percy manages, wondering why he isn’t insisting that she refer to him by his proper title of Undersecretary. He earned it, by God!

Instead, he asks the first question he can think of. “Did Professor Binns depart?”

Professor McGonagall purses her lips as they climb the Grand Stair. “I’m afraid you’ll be wishing to avoid Binns, Mister Weasley. He has not taken well to being sacked from his position as the school’s history teacher.”

The walk to the seventh floor is far too long not to at least attempt polite conversation, even as he realizes he’s out of practice at it. No one in Minister Fudge’s office ever really wants to converse. “Er—who replaced him, then?”

“Salazar Slytherin. It’s been quite educational for all involved,” Professor McGonagall answers.

“Uh, yes.” Percy still isn’t certain what to think of that, though the Prophet recently seems convinced as to the authenticity of the man. “Minister Fudge is of the rather strident belief that said individual cannot be Salazar Slytherin.”

Professor McGonagall glances at Percy from the corner of her eye. “Minister Fudge also had a man executed within the walls of this school without due process of law, Mister Weasley.”

“He—he was a Death Eater.”

“Yes,” Professor McGonagall agrees. “One who had not been sentenced to execution.”

Thank goodness they’ve reached the seventh floor, and that is where the professor halts. “Continue on down that corridor. You’ll recall the tapestry with the dancing trolls—the door you require is opposite the tapestry.”

Percy frowns. “Professor McGonagall, there is no door in that corridor.”
She only raises an eyebrow in one of her infamous moments of dismissal. “I assure you, Mister Weasley, there is indeed a door there.”

“Thank you for the escort, Professor,” Percy says, trying to decide why he feels so entirely baffled.

“Good day, Mister Weasley.”

Percy does indeed find a door opposite the dancing troll tapestry. He stares at it, nonplussed, before finally giving in to the inevitable quirks of Hogwarts and knocking. The door swings inward at once, though when he steps into the room, he sees no one present to have opened it.

“Over here. Office,” Percy hears in a pleasant tenor. Bit of a scratch to it that sounds normal, not like illness, one Percy thinks might even out if there was singing involved.

He does make it his business to know these things about voices. He deals with quite a number of individuals in the Ministry who always remain unseen.

The classroom itself looks normal by Hogwarts standards. The office Percy walks towards seems positively archaic in comparison. The man within that archaic space has brown skin, sun-streaked, curling brown hair that is fashionably long instead of the scraggly look that Bill always manages at that length, and is wearing an embroidered green robe that would probably sell for a small fortune in a shop.

The Minister did an excellent job of describing the man. “Professor Nizar Slytherin.”

Slytherin finally glances up. “And you are not a student accosting me during weekend office hours, but you are most certainly a Weasley. Given that I’ve met all of the siblings but one, I assume you must be Percival Weasley.”

Percy nods. “I am, sir. I am sorry to interrupt your weekend, and your office hours you are providing to your students.” Most of Hogwarts staff avoided offering such except for the Heads of House. Percy approves of that sort of dedication when it is not required.

“That’s all right. It’s been a remarkably quiet day.” Nizar turns away from the book he was looking at, which has normal-looking dates but text that appears utterly foreign. “How can I assist you, Mister Weasley?”

I’m important; my job is important. Percy clears his throat. “I’m here on behalf of the Minister for Magic.”

Slytherin cocks his head. “The Minister couldn’t be bothered to visit on his own behalf?”

“Er—” Percy does his best not to flush. “He insisted he was occupied by other matters.”

“You mean he was busy panicking,” Slytherin translates.

Percy curses in his head. He should have worded that better. “I couldn’t say, sir.”

“I imagine not. What can you say, then?” Slytherin asks.

Percy is intelligent enough to realize that he was in over his head the moment he walked into this room. He should have done more research, especially given Madam Bones’ intriguing actions of late. Nizar Slytherin is a consummate politician with none of Minister Fudge’s blustering, loudness, or evasions; he was born to nobility and was recently also granted English title by the Queen herself.
“What is the Queen of the United Kingdom like?” Percy finds himself asking, and immediately feels like an idiot.

Slytherin doesn’t seem to find the question stupid. “Quite nice, thankfully. Kind. Very much a grandmother. She likes dogs. Wants to see the whole of her kingdom safeguarded, magical and non-magical parts alike. I’ve always been fond of sensible rulers.”

Right. Sensible. Percy lifts his head, lowering his shoulders so that he stands properly. “I’ve been sent on behalf of Minister Fudge, as he is asking you to cease your false smear campaign and leave him in peace to do his duty.”

Slytherin smiles. “What false smear campaign, Mister Weasley?”

“The one you are running to—the one that sees letters flooding the *Daily Prophet*, *Witch Weekly*, and even the bloody *Quibbler*, all of them from concerned parents or outraged citizens of Wizarding Britain who are calling for Minister Fudge’s removal from office,” Percy says in a single breath.

There. He did it.

“*Witch Weekly* and *The Quibbler* are doing the same?” Slytherin looks surprised. “I hadn’t noticed; I don’t subscribe to them. I might have to change that pending immediately.”

“Will you end your false smear campaign?” Percy asks, trying not to sound desperate.

Slytherin is definitely amused. “Mister Weasley, I teach Defence at this school. I have classes from morning until evening every day except Friday, though I try to make myself available during the day on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. You see, the education of students within these walls is very, very important to me, as is their safety. As the titled defender of this school, I live by those ideals.”

Slytherin’s smile vanishes. In an instant, he is completely terrifying. “If I’d been free of my portrait frame when your self-important Minister came into this school last year with a Dementor, a being he used to murder another in cold blood—an act that also endangered students within this school—there would have been nothing left of the foul little prick for anyone to find. But that doesn’t answer your question.

“I will not be ending my false smear campaign, Mister Weasley. You see, not only is it not false, it isn’t mine to end,” Slytherin says. “What Minister Fudge is contending with is the fire of hundreds of parents who had no idea their children were endangered over and over again by that man’s actions, or his lack of them. That is the anger of citizens who feel that not only has Fudge broken their faith and trust, but fear that Fudge might then decide that they need to be visited by a Dementor without the Wizengamot’s involvement. You must really enjoy working for that man to be comfortable with all of this.”

“I’m not!” Percy bursts out. “I’m absolutely not fine with any of it, not since those letters started pouring into the blasted newspaper! I’d rather do something useful, but I’ve no wish to sacrifice the success I’ve attained in my life.”

“Why would you be doing that?” Slytherin asks in a mild voice, as if people shout at him every day. Percy reminds himself that the man is a teacher. They probably do.

“My parents strongly believe that aligning with Dumbledore’s Order of the Phoenix is the only way win against…against You-Know-Who,” Percy says stiffly. “I realize that if Harry—that if Mister Potter wasn’t lying about his return, then You-Know-Who is an active threat. They just do not see
what I see!"

Slytherin holds up one hand. “Wait, please.”

Percy still flinches when the classroom door at the other end of the room shuts when Slytherin flicks one finger “Er—”

“We need privacy, and I need to send for someone. Do you mind?” Slytherin asks.

“As long as it’s not Dumbledore,” Percy finds himself saying, and winces.

“You need not worry on that front.” Slytherin retrieves his wand and casts the Patronus Charm. Percy feels no shame at all in the fact that he immediately backs away from the serpent filling the entire room. “Salazar, I need to see you in my office, please.” The basilisk vanishes, to Percy’s intense relief.

Slytherin gives him a curious look. “Can you cast the Patronus Charm, Mister Weasley?”

Percy shakes his head. “N-no. Not for lack of the attempt, Professor Slytherin. The only teacher who tried to teach it was Professor Lupin in my seventh year, but he had to do so much to prepare us for the N.E.W.T.s at end of term that we could only spend one lesson on them.”

“Yes, except for Remus Lupin’s presence, the Defence standards were really…lacking.” Slytherin gives Percy another up-and-down look that seems to be judgment without the associated weighing. “It is very difficult to cast a proper Patronus if you have no truly happy thought to focus on.”

“I am happy!” Percy protests at once. “I was Prefect in this school, Head Boy, scored perfect Outstandings on all of my N.E.W.T.s, became secretary to Bartemius Crouch Senior before his unfortunate death, and I am Undersecretary to Minister for Magic Cornelius Fudge!”

“That is quite an impressive list of accomplishments, but accomplishments do not necessary make you happy,” Slytherin counters. “There is not a damned thing wrong with ambition, but when it is ambition without soul, what good does it avail you?”

Percy has no idea what to say to that. “I—"

He is fortunately saved from needing to speak by Salazar Slytherin’s arrival…by Apparition. Within Hogwarts. Percy makes a gurgled *meeping* sound and then slams his mouth shut.

Salazar Slytherin is dressed in all black, wearing Muggle denims and a t-shirt with an odd rainbow triangle on the front, but there is no mistaking the sense of power and prestige radiating from him. Percy suspects both Slytherins could wear rags and they would still be unmistakable.

“Oh, you have to be a Weasley,” Salazar Slytherin says as he notices Percy. “That hair is mistakable, as are those Prewett features. Why am I seeing a non-student Weasley in your office, brother?”

“Salazar Deslizarse, this is Percy Weasley, current Undersecretary to Minister for Magic Cornelius Fudge,” Nizar Slytherin says to introduce them. Salazar Slytherin merely looks intrigued. “He has some interesting opinions about his employer…and about Albus Dumbledore.”

“Does he?” Salazar Slytherin gives Percy the same sort of up-and-down study that his brother just performed. “Hmm. Terrified of Voldemort’s return and wanting naught to do with Dumbledore’s Order, I take it?”

“How do you know?” Percy asks, hoping he doesn’t sound rude.
“The topic has come up often lately by those who share your concerns.” Salazar meets Percy’s eyes. “I’d offer to shake your hand, but you already look to be on the verge of fainting. I wouldn’t want to encourage such.”

“I—I would not—” Percy sputters, and then thrusts out his hand, scowling. “Pleasure to meet you, sir.”

The corner of Salazar’s mouth turns up in a faint smile as he accepts Percy’s hand. Percy tries not to whimper at the feeling of strong magic attached to the man.

Salazar drops his hand in obvious distress. “Oh, bloody hell—I loathe your schooling. You’re an Earth-Speaker and a Necromancer waiting to happen!”

Percy’s eyes widen. “I have no wish to be of that improper sort!”

“Please do not insult my youngest child and my youngest niece,” Nizar Slytherin states in a flat voice. “Nor my brother for that matter, as he is the Earth-Speaker while both of our youngest children were the Necromancers. An Earth-Speaker is an earth-aligned Elemental Magician. A practitioner of Necromancy is a master of restoration. Do you know how many things to which that applies that are not dead bodies, Percy Weasley?”

“Uh—” Percy wiggles his fingers, trying to rid himself of that remaining sensation of shock and tingling energy. “I’m…I’m sorry. I’m not aware.”

“Many.” Nizar Slytherin sighs. “But we’ll concern ourselves with your desperately untrained status at another time. I asked my brother to come here because he has a solution to your problem.”


Salazar Slytherin leans against the wall. “I realized long ago that Dumbledore’s Order was limited by its very nature. During the first war, the cold war, and the war that is resuming, I’ve headed something called the Underground. It is admittedly a play on the London tube system, as we are also a means of rapidly exchanging people and information below the sight of others. We’re spies, Mister Weasley, and while we sometimes feed information to the Order if they’re the best ones to act upon it, we are quite used to fighting this war on our own. If you want to assist in stopping Voldemort while avoiding Dumbledore, we’re not only a useful option, but your parents are aware of the Underground’s existence. Not who is in it beyond myself, of course, but they know of us and approve of our goals.”

Percy angrily draws himself up. “Is this some ploy to trick me into reconciling with unreasonable people?”

Salazar Slytherin rolls his eyes. “Your reasons for abandoning a loving family are your own. You’re an adult; you can choose to fix that mess or let it lie for the rest of your life. This is about your desire to be useful, and I imagine you want to be useful in a way that lets you retain your position in the Ministry.”

“That is…true,” Percy admits grudgingly. “And if I refuse?”

“Then we never had this conversation.”

Percy swallows. “Will you Obliviate me, then?”

Salazar Slytherin looks surprised. “No. I reserve that spell for the worst of circumstances. A charm, Mister Weasley. You would not have your memory erased; you would simply not think on what
we’ve discussed unless I were to address you again on the very same matter. Not thinking on a memory makes it a very difficult memory for another to find.”

Percy’s mouth twists. That isn’t nearly as terrible as Obliviation. If he were to trust these men, anyway. “Well—that is a better security measure than anything I’ve heard out of Dumbledore’s Order.”

“Those security lapses concern us, too, but we can only do so much,” Nizar Slytherin says. “It’s a decision that you must make before leaving here. However, in the meantime, I’d like to introduce you to a real Necromancer, and maybe bash away at a few ridiculous beliefs.”

Percy nearly jumps out of his skin when the office door closes behind him. “I’m not sure—”

“Hence the discussion,” Nizar Slytherin says in a dry voice. He gets up from his desk, faces the door, and does something Percy isn’t allowed to witness. When Nizar opens the door again, it isn’t the classroom, but a sitting room.

“How did…that…” Percy decides to stop gawping as Nizar escorts him inside. “Wizarding space?”

“Absolutely. I’ve a magical mastery in Geomancy, Mister Weasley.” Nizar turns him so that he is facing three portrait frames. “How is your Old English?”

Percy blinks a few times. No one has ever really had need of that skill in the Ministry, but it was quite useful within Hogwarts’ library for conducting research in his N.E.W.T. years. “Quite good, actually.”

“Excellent. My son’s portrait is terrible at modern English. Elfric!” Nizar Slytherin calls. A moment later a dark-haired, dark-eyed boy with pale skin, definitely a teenager but not yet grown, appears in the frame. “Elfric deSlizarse, this particular ginger is—”


“Oh—” Percy nods. “Hello to you,” he says, and hopes that his words are not an abominable mess.

“Wait. You are a Necromancer?” he asks in disbelief. This is no adult wizard. This is a kid.

“I was painted this way at fourteen, but my portraits were kept up to date,” Elfric replies, smiling. “Yes. I’m a master of what you’d call Occlumency and Legilimency, properly Mind Magic, but I’m also a Necromancer, one who most often repairs damaged magical strongholds, nodes, ley lines, and so on. Sometimes we do raise the dead if one stumbles over someone newly deceased with survivable injuries so long as there is a decent Healer nearby. Most of the time, though, it’s tiny little details, accomplishments that others benefit from but usually do not notice. Being a titled Necromancer is usually fame enough. Or infamy, dependent on the century.”

“He is what you were not, Elfric,” Salazar Slytherin says to the painting. “He’s an untrained Earth-Speaker with a Necromancer’s potential.”

“An Earth-Speaker who could also be a Necromancer.” Elfric the portrait stares at Percy. “Please, you stubborn prick, you have to agree to learn. There are none of us left on this island! Do you have any idea how much damage there is lying about out there that needs repairing?”

“I—no?” Percy’s head is spinning. All he assumed out of his afternoon was a fruitless visit and then a return to Fudge’s office to inform him that Nizar Slytherin would not be ceasing the smear campaign. Percy knew it was nonsense, but the Minister has been acting erratic for the last two weeks.
“Wait a moment. Betisa!” the portrait yells. “Come here! We have company!”

The next portrait appears in the frame with Elfric, a grown young woman with green eyes who looks quite a bit like Salazar Slytherin. “Hello,” she greets him in modern English, frowning. “Percy Weasley. What brings you back to the castle?”

“He’s an untrained Earth-Speaker with Necromancer potential, Betisa!” Elfric the portrait explains, all but bouncing with excitement. “Percy, this is my cousin Betisa Slytherin, the only other portrait of a Necromancer in this castle.”

Percy stares at the portraits. “I—pleased to meet you.” It is very, very difficult to cling to the dreaded image of a Necromancer, not when he’s faced with an overenthusiastic puppy of a portrait child and one of the most beautiful women he’s ever beheld.

“Oh. Dearest stars,” Betisa murmurs. “You need a teacher. You cannot let that potential fade. If the war mages are ever called upon—the damage to the weave of the land can be terrible, Percy Weasley. You would be sorely needed.”

“I work for the Ministry,” Percy says in a faint voice.

Betisa is miffed. “There is absolutely no reason why you cannot do both.”

“Father, I think we broke him,” Elfric says after a minute when Percy says nothing.

Percy finds himself sitting on Nizar Slytherin’s sofa, cradling a shot glass filled with Firewhiskey and taking careful sips. “This—uh—this isn’t what I expected of this visit.”

“No, you were expecting a pointless errand, a brief discussion, and returning to Fudge to listen to a desperate man rant and rail at the injustice of a populace who demands he be held accountable for his decisions and actions.” Nizar looks tired, not nearly as alert as he’d been in his office. Percy finds himself wondering if it’s a front he puts on for his students so they don’t worry about their teacher.

“It is exactly that, and you need to learn Occlumency immediately,” Salazar says, startling Percy. “It’s eye contact, Percy Weasley. Your thoughts are quite loud if you’ve never learned to keep them to yourself.”

Percy drops his eyes back down to his glass. “Oh.”

“And you learn fast. That’s a good sign,” Nizar tells him.


“Exactly. If you still want to work within the Ministry, I suggest you abandon the sinking ship that is Cornelius Fudge and apply yourself to assisting Amelia Bones. You have good credentials, and she is in excellent standing. Even if she does not take the office of Minister for Magic after Fudge, Bones will still hold a seat on the Wizengamot and thus be in a position of power.” Salazar Slytherin sighs. “For fuck’s sake, lad. Has anything ever made you happy in your entire life?”

Percy jolts up, remembering at the last moment not to look either of them directly in the eye. “Of course! I…once. I was, once. My older brother Bill, he’s a Curse Breaker for Gringotts. Charlie, he travels the world working on dragon reserves. They don’t make very much money, but they’re happy with what they do. I thought, ‘I don’t want to be like them. I want to make something of myself. To be…’”

“Wealthy,” Nizar finishes in a soft voice.
“I grew up poor and I’m tired of it. There is no reason our father couldn’t have advanced further, made more of himself!” Percy finds himself shouting.

“And thus you reveal that your father has you utterly fooled.” Nizar is smiling when Percy glances at him. “Arthur Weasley is a very sly man, and he’s done such a good job of hiding it that no one in his own family has noticed. He’s a spy for the Order of the Phoenix, Percy. He is the hapless fool that everyone in the Ministry airs their secrets around, convinced as they are that he’s below their concern, that he’s too stupid to understand what they speak of.”

That makes such perfect sense that Percy is completely outraged. “But—but he could have bettered his position and continued to do that very same thing!”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not,” Salazar replies. “Sometimes the decisions that come from the top are so very important, but often it’s the little pieces from below that create the clearest image, that contribute the most useful information. Having a spy in both places is the wisest course of action, a role Dumbledore foolishly thought he was fulfilling until the Minister proved that Dumbledore could be sacked from that position. Dumbledore may gain that seat back, given that the Wizengamot seems to be in no hurry to elect anyone to replace him, but even if he does, who will confide their secrets to him, Percy Weasley? Dumbledore makes his business too well-known. It’s the spy who never tells others of their true intentions who will always succeed where blatant showmanship fails.”

“You really want me to help you.” Percy takes the final sip from his glass, feeling it burn his throat all the way down. “Even though I’ve said terrible things in support of Fudge, and said terrible things to my family?”

“You are not the first young man to make that sort of mistake, Percy,” Nizar says. “You won’t be the last. Right now you simply have to realize that making one decision doesn’t prevent you from making another.”

“Ah. Yes.” Percy bites his lip. “My baby sister was kissing a girl!”

Salazar starts laughing. “Oh, the horror of it!”

“Astoria Greengrass?” Nizar asks.

“Yes!” Percy bursts out. “I remember her now—yes, it was definitely her!”

“HAH! Severus owes me money,” Nizar declares with a wide grin. “He was convinced that Edward Black would be first.”

“You’re betting on who my sister is going to snog?” Percy almost wails in dismay.

“Ginny Weasley has made a point this year of making her opinions known to everyone, whether they’re wanting to know them or not,” Nizar replies. “Given that there were only two options, and that, oh yes, this is a long-lived staff habit? Yes, there were wagers involved.”

“Long-lived staff habit?” Percy asks weakly.

Nizar glances at Salazar. “From day one?”

Salazar glances up at the ceiling and sighs. “From the moment the little blighters entered puberty and onwards.”

“They did it to me, too,” Nizar confides while Percy tries not to gape at them.
It takes another glass of Firewhiskey for Percy to be able to say, “All right. I’ll spy for your Underground. I’m not telling Mum and Dad yet—I don’t think that’s necessarily a very good idea. I don’t know what’s going to happen, what with the Minister’s…behavior. I’ll even learn about Necromancy, though I’m not so certain I want to be a Necromancer.”

Nizar nods. “I’d let you borrow my painting of Elfric, but to be quite honest, I think I would panic.”

“I’ve another of Betisa,” Salazar says. “And she is the one who can speak modern English rather than Old English. Her portrait can accompany Percy for now, as there are certain types of magical learning where you want no chance of uncertain translations. However, the Earth-Speaking? The only person on this island I know who is both an Earth-Speaker and trained for it is myself. You’ll have to continue to put up with me.”

Percy is still wondering what just happened to his entire life. “Well, you’re going to be my other employer. I suppose I can tolerate that.”

“Tolerate, he says.” Salazar smiles, which deepens the lines at the corners of his eyes and around his mouth—in a pleasant way, not a fearful one. “You’re quite a bit like your uncle Ignatius. The Weasley one, not the Prewett who is your great-uncle. I think you’ll get exactly what you want from life as long as you’re willing to open your eyes to its whole, rather than staring at a mere aspect of its parts.”

“And for gods’ sake, come up with something that makes you happy. You need to be able to cast a Patronus,” Nizar adds, scowling. “Aside from the usefulness a Patronus has for passing messages, there is the very real possibility that it may save your life one day.”

Percy thinks about Dementors and shivers. “Right. I’ll, uh. I’ll work on that.”

Much like the sofa and the Firewhiskey, somehow Percy is on his feet, his robes straightened, and a canvas rolled up under his arm. “Take very good care of her. That portrait is of my last child born in this castle,” Salazar instructs him. “Now off with you. She’ll be instructing you in Mind Magic first, for your safety. You might know it as Occlumency.”

“Oh—yes. Very well, then,” Percy replies. He finds himself in the Floo and promptly back in his own flat in Diagon Alley. He puts the rolled-up canvas on the table before his ratty sofa and then collapses on it facedown.

Percy wakes up sometime later and drinks two glasses of water to deal with the taste in his mouth, not to mention the mild headache brought on by good Firewhiskey. He writes a missive to the Minister, letting Fudge know in simple terms that the visit to Hogwarts did not go well. He thinks on making suggestions and then decides not to. Fudge always ignores them, anyway.

The letter is attached to Hermes, who hoots his pleasure at having something to do. After Percy sends the owl on his way, he unrolls the portrait and casts careful sticking charms to place Betisa Slytherin on his wall. “Uh. Hello again.”

Betisa’s portrait smiles at him in response. Her green eyes aren’t the same color as her father’s hazel gaze; it’s much more vibrant. “Hello. My father mentioned Mind Magic. I assume you’re interested in beginning?”

Percy grabs his only armchair and drags it over. “I suppose so.”

* * * * *
Nizar is too worn out from the process of relearning the fucking language to celebrate when he picks up a Cumbric text Sunday afternoon and can read it without difficulty. Besides, that was only the first step. The second is just as important.

“Galiena, dearest?”

Galiena’s portrait jerks upright from an unplanned nap. The portrait of the ginger kitten from several storeys below lets out an indignant yowl as it falls from her lap. “Oh! Good afternoon, Father.” She peers closer at him. “You still haven’t rested, have you?”

Nizar smiles, knowing it’s only a continuance of observed displeasure. “I have a question for you. I know that you still speak Pictish, but…” He hesitates, hating to admit it. “I can’t recall if you spoke Cumbric.”

Galiena grins at him. “Of course I do, Father,” she says in Cumbric. “If I was going to learn one language of the north, why would I not have learned them all?”

Nizar feels tension leave his shoulders. “I understood that,” he replies in kind, though his words don’t sound quite right. Galiena gives no indication of a lack of understanding; it’s probably just his accent making his speech of the old tongue seem odd. “The Updating Translation Spell requires Cumbric to be an active spoken tongue. I can cast the spell on my books if we keep using this language along with modern English.” He can set those spells on all of the Cumbric books, leave the necessary materials nearby, and the spell will do the work for him without any further effort needed.

“That’s excellent, Father! I’m so glad it will work.” Galiena glances down and pats the kitten to apologize. “Perhaps the books should be stored in the sitting room, then? If they’re close to where the language is spoken, it will give the spell’s magic more to work with.”

“Good idea.” Nizar calls for Dobby, Winky, and Filky, explaining what sort of shelves he’d like to add to his sitting room and asking if they’re willing to scour the rubbish room aspect for what he needs.

“We can be doing that, Professor Slytherin,” Filky says with a firm nod.

“Is it only being one set of shelves the Professor Slytherin is needing?” Winky asks.

Nizar gazes around his sitting room. Even with the expansion of the room, he’s never had very much wall space available due to the furniture and the portraits. “Fuck it. I’ll make a wall wider.” He holds out his arms. “Two sets of shelving. No matter if it needs to be mounted on the wall or sit upon the floor, it must be this wide, please.”

“We’ll be doing that at once, Professor!” Dobby assures him, and all three elves vanish.

While waiting for the elves, Nizar expands the wall beyond the table. After thinking about it, he expands the wall between the window and the entry to the hall, the section where the fireplace originally resided. “There. It’s starting to feel crowded in here.”

“You always did like to have quite the barren living space,” Brice agrees as he turns up in his frame. “Uncle Salazar told us it was a habit set from your childhood.”

“When? Then, or now?” Nizar asks.

Galiena and Brice glance at each other. “I believe it was both,” Galiena says, frowning. “It is harder
to recall if the recording of my early years is true, as I did not mind your habits and therefore didn’t concentrate on them so much.”

Brice nods. “It’s the same for me. It was simply part of who you were. Uncle Salazar definitely mentioned it this time, though. Oh, and I speak Cumbric too, Father,” he adds in Cumbric.

Nizar rolls his eyes. “Why did neither of you say anything?”

“Because Elfric is the teacher, Father,” Galiena reminds him, smiling. “Neither myself or Brice had the patience for it.”

“And Elfric is the lazy shit who did not learn Cumbric.” Nizar rolls his eyes. “Of course. You both still could have been speaking it in order to facilitate the spell!”

Brice grins. “You didn’t ask!”

“Bloody Gryffindor-taught troublemaker!” Nizar retorts.

“That reminds me.” Elfric climbs his way into his frame, as if emerging from some hidden cavern. Given the odd magic that intertwines all of the portraits in the castle, he might be doing exactly that. “The Brae Elves and their contract, their original Hogewáþ contract, was written in Cumbric,” he hisses in Parseltongue. “Why would Aunt Rowena’s Updating Translation Spell work on that contract, but not on your books, Father?”

Nizar begins Summoning all of the Cumbric texts into the sitting room from their various locations in his bedroom, study, and storage room. “That’s a very good question, one I don’t know how to answer. The elves don’t recall Cumbric, though I imagine they could easily learn to speak it if they heard the language again. It’s possible that Hogewáþ herself was helping the translation of that document to be certain the elves were properly honored. It could be because it was a document crafted by all four of the Founders. Or it could be that I simply didn’t remember enough about the translation spell at that time, and when I recalled how it worked, I magically stymied myself.”

“I rather doubt it’s the last part,” Elfric says thoughtfully, and then switches to Old English. “It sounds like a problem similar to the books in the library. By all rights, those few surviving Cumbric texts should have modern translations alongside them.”

Nizar shakes his head. “The books in the library are all soaked in protection and preservation spells to keep them as they were written.”

“Yes, but—those magics should not be in conflict,” Elfric insists. “Thus, the copies that Aunt Rowena’s Updating Translation Spell created in the library were likely destroyed by hands who did not wish that knowledge to be passed on.”

“And I don’t see myself forgetting to have cast the Updating Translation Spell on anything I placed in a trunk for you, Father,” Galiena adds. “Even if Uncle Salazar is guilty of forgetting to place the Updating Translation Spell on the scrolls he stored within the Black Lake’s trunk. Fortunately, Castilian has not changed overly much.”

Nizar frowns. “That suggests that someone in Gringotts would have violated the sanctity of your vault, somehow managed to open the applewood chest you left for me, and either ended the spell or took away the updated copies, Galiena.”

“No.” Elfric sighs. “Not that. I think the Updating Translation Spell might have been viewed by the goblins’ protective magics as an error in their accounting. They can’t abide errors, and errors would have been erased in order to make certain their records were correct.”
“Errors.” Nizar thinks about it. “It wasn’t an oddity regarding Rowena’s spell in regards to the contract. The Brae Elves’ contract is a Founding document, just like the school’s charta. Hogewâp’s magic was correcting errors, but in the opposite manner of the goblins’ magic.”

Elfric shrugs. “It’s a theory.”

“It’s an excellent theory.” Galiena eyes her brother. “Stop deflecting attention away from your own intelligence.”

“Charms were not my strong suit!” Elfric protests.

“No, I was the one who owned a strong suit,” Brice says blithely. Both of his siblings groan over the terrible pun.

Nizar looks up at the ceiling. “Could you not also have considered my books to be something that needed correcting?” The castle’s magic doesn’t answer him, but he didn’t expect her to. Documents tied directly to the school are very different things from private tomes.

“Uh—Father?” Galiena suddenly sounds alarmed.

“What is it, dearest?” Nizar asks, and then realizes that he’s no longer perpetually chilled. In fact, he’s very much the opposite of chilled.

“How many doses of Fire in the Blood have you taken this afternoon?” Elfric asks in concern.

Nizar strips off the hooded jumper and then looks at his hands. He lengthens his fingertips into talons and then returns them to normal. The hex has finally worn off, which is a relief, except for the part where he feels like his skin is bloody well on fire. “Well…shit.”
“That is not very nice,” Luna says sternly. “I shan’t put any thought into letting you down until you apologize.”

Nizar rests his arms across his knees, wriggling his bare toes on the damp pebbles. In front of him, the eight tips of the squid’s black tentacles repeat the wriggling motion before settling again, all bunched together to play at having their own toes. Nizar moves his left big toe and the squid, after thinking about it, moves its opposite largest tentacle.

“Seriously, how do you survive in this loch?” Nizar asks the squid, which is otherwise underwater to avoid the chilly evening air. “I do not recall this loch being quite that deep, nor is it salty.”

The squid lifts all eight of its tentacles and slaps them down again. Understood; do not ask about its living arrangements. “Fine. I was only curious. Or concerned. Do other squids think you’re mental?”

This time the squid slaps Nizar’s toes with its tentacles before it resumes toe-formation. “Oi! Manners!”

“Are you actually trying to make a habit of soaking yourself out of doors in near-freezing conditions?” Severus asks in disbelief.

Nizar glances up and smiles when he sees Severus approaching, wrapped in a cloak against the fine rain starting to drift down from the sky. “It’s not what you think. I didn’t go swimming in the Black Lake. I did consider it, though.”

“The water’s temperature certainly did not stop you in November.” Severus raises an eyebrow at the squid’s tentacles, which are wriggling again in a bid to gain Nizar’s attention. “Making new friends?”

“Of a sort. If it likes friends. Does it have a name?” Nizar asks. “I do not speak squid. Or Mermish. More importantly, does it have a gender? Calling something an ‘it’ is really rude, but sometimes people don’t like they, either.”

“Ask Hagrid,” Severus replies dryly. “You do realize we have students that would swoon if they knew you were out here in only a shirt, trousers, and barefoot?”
“That’s why I made certain they weren’t. I really don’t want to know if they’ve discovered more slang aside from ‘hot.’ The weather drove them indoors, anyway,” Nizar says. “Were you looking for me?”

“You weren’t trying to crawl into your own fireplace, so I will admit to at least being curious.” Severus notices a flat, dry rock tall enough to act as a decent seat and sits down on it. “If you didn’t give into the temptation to fling yourself into the Black Lake, why are you drenched?”

“The fucking hex wore off before the three phials of Fire in the Blood.” Nizar smiles; it’s really ridiculous to be suffering the opposite after two days of chill. “I’m outside because I really don’t want to try to explain to Poppy why I’m in her hospital, drenched in sweat and suffering of heat stroke in February.”

Severus looks relieved. “Completely worn off?”

“I changed my appearance, which always buggers up the Polyjuice, so it was easy enough to confirm. Of course, my first warning was trying not to drop into a faint from suddenly being far too fucking hot.” Nizar taps his toes on the pebbles for the squid to imitate. “How was your day? Any interesting visitors to your office?”

“Not really, though I did speak with Mister Roshan in regards to his feelings about Potions. Nothing more particular than that. I simply wanted to see if he had any continued interest.” Severus makes an irritated sound. “He has apparently only kept with the subject in order to have a better understanding of the underlying alchemical principles. He plans to study Alchemy in university out of the country. I had no idea; Roshan isn’t one of Eustas’s students. It seems Roshan is not fond of the man, and the feeling is mutual.”

“Then it’s down to Kinjal,” Nizar says.

Severus nods. “Possibly. If she does not have a desire to apprentice in Potions, then I fearfully await Granger’s sixth year, as she does.”

Nizar starts laughing and stops, swearing, when the squid slaps his feet for not paying enough attention to it. “Maybe Miss Granger is trying to terrify you.”

“Then it’s working!” Severus retorts, and then pauses to glare at the squid. “Morse code. This squid knows Morse code.”

“Morse code—oh.” Nizar gives the tentacles an offended look. “It probably thinks I’m an imbecile. I didn’t realize it was trying to have a conversation.”

“I didn’t think a student could have more than one formal apprenticeship at a time,” Severus says while doing a poor job of biting back a smile.

Nizar decides to ignore the fact that Severus is quietly mocking him. Later, he will learn Morse code so he can curse at a squid. “You recall Salazar speaking of my acquisition of my first three magical masteries in January, yes?”

Severus nods, still amused. “And he mentioned your lack of sleeping.”

“He was shading the truth. Or perhaps he doesn’t recall. It’s been a very long time.” Nizar grins. “Try three concurrent formal apprenticeships while studying two other magical masteries on my own, while also continuing to learn other languages to I could speak to people.”

Severus stares at him. “You’re suggesting that I should not concern myself with Granger’s academic
desires unless she decides to emulate that insanity.”

“I’m so glad that I wasn’t specific in those letters about how everything sort of tangled together all at once, or she might have decided it was a grand idea. I got that information from the journals.” Nizar smiles again in response to Severus’s continued appalled staring. “Mind Magic was first. Blood Magic was second. Then Defence, Pictish Magic, and Metamorph Magic. Geomancy followed when I realized that the things I wanted to do with Pictish Magic required a greater knowledge of mathematics than I currently possessed, and it was thus time to bash my head against a wall known as algebra and geometry, followed by Arithmancy. That, I remember.”

“And yet you don’t have a mastery in Arithmancy,” Severus says.

“No, but I didn’t need a mastery to understand it and apply it to geometry, which is the first part of understanding anything of Geomancy at all. That took a while, as it’s complicated.”

Severus frowns. “Then what is Lupin and Black’s explanation for gaining a Geomancy mastery on accident?”

“In Lupin’s case, a natural understanding of how objects take up space, and how rooms come together to create cohesion—spatial awareness. That. I read of that term recently, and could have used it when I was raising Galiena. Werewolves have a natural affinity for spatial awareness. In Black’s case, he has an eidetic memory. Aside from his constant exposure to those Dementors in Azkaban, he never forgets anything he’s seen.” Nizar smirks at Severus and draws a shining green glyph in the air. “But they don’t know how to do this.”

Severus studies the magical rune with one eyebrow raised. “An understanding of runic magic combined with the Geomancy and Pictish Magic, I’m assuming.”

“Have I ever mentioned that I adore the fact that you’re intelligent?” Nizar asks.

Severus snorts. “You might have. I just think of it as noticing the blatantly obvious. Can others learn to do that?” He reaches out, and when Nizar does not warn him off, touches the glowing magical energy with one finger. “Warmth. Interesting.”

“Energy tends to be warm unless you’ve decided it needs to be ice-based.” Nizar waves his hand through the rune to get rid of it, dispelling it. “Masters of Rune Magic can do that. I knew several Elemental Magicians who learned runes and used them almost instinctively in conjunction with their spells, though Salazar never bothered. He would simply will what he wanted into taking place, but as I once said of his waiting for messenger birds—he didn’t have the patience for it.”

Severus looks uneasy. “Voldemort used runes to construct that blood-based trap within the Ministry.”

“He did a half-arsed job of it, too, as he never made a true study of runic magic. He found a spell that would do what he wanted, learned how to use it, learned how to subvert it with his half-arsed learnings of other types of magic, and that was where he stopped. He was always a bit lazy because he fancied himself to be so fucking intelligent,” Nizar says witheringly. “He assumed that once he knew what a thing was and how it functioned, that was all he would ever need. Voldemort is still doing that today. I’m glad he’s that stupid, since it means I will completely obliterate the numb fuck, but it’s just so fucking irritating!”

Severus laughs. “I know you’re feeling better when you go on an absolute tear against stupidity.”

“Please. That was a mild tear. Oh, and I met that Necromancer the tea leaves were talking about
today,” Nizar says.

“I see.” Severus’s expression becomes wariness writ large. “I didn’t realize we’d had any visitor aside from Percy Weasley.”

Nizar grins at him.

“You are fucking joking.” Severus’s voice is as flat as his expression. “Percy. Percival Ignatius Weasley. A Necromancer.”

“All untrained and unaware Necromancer and Earth-Speaker, which is one of those beautiful times when magical talents combine perfectly to be the utmost expression of what is needed,” Nizar replies. “I thought that man was going to start hyperventilating until he finally settled and began to listen. As of this afternoon, Percy Weasley is a part of the Underground, is learning Mind Magic and Necromancy from Betisa’s borrowed portrait, and he’ll learn Earth-Speaking from Salazar. Not that he’ll be telling anyone, but you’ll notice a bit of a political shift when Percy wanders over to make friends with Madam Bones.”

“Please wait a moment,” Severus finally says. “I’m busy recalibrating my scale in regards to how much plotting I should expect from you. Again.”

“Efficient and effective plotting!” Nizar points out.

Severus shakes his head, smiling. “Efficient. You tried to learn five different branches of magic at the same time. It should not actually surprise me that you accomplish so much the moment I turn my back for a few hours. It’s a wonder you didn’t master every form of magic possible.”

“After the summer of 992, I was suddenly a full-time teacher, a full-time parent, Protectoris, and a war mage. I didn’t bloody well have time!”

“And if you suddenly had the time?” Severus asks. “If you were not busy stacking plots within plots, what would you study?”

“I’d try to figure out why I don’t have a Transfiguration mastery. It isn’t as if I’m bad at it,” Nizar says, not even needing to think on it. He’s often pondered the question. “Not Arithmancy. I find its more advanced theories annoying. Healing. Rune Magic. Modern geography, science, and history that hasn’t been filtered through the Ministry of Magic.”

“It sounds as if you’ve already crafted your schedule once translating the Cumbric texts no longer occupies your blocks of insomnia.” Severus looks impressed…or it’s the remembered academic terror again.

“Of course I’m dedicating it all to the insomnia. The rest of my free time is dedicated to you.”

* * * *

Hermione and Pansy look at each other over the noise, both of them sharing the same unhappy thought. They’re so very late to Potions.

She doesn’t know if performing their role as Prefects will keep Snape from verbally eviscerating them for missing part of the lesson, taking points, or both.
Who is she kidding? It’s both. It’s always both.

In the meantime, Hermione is still gripping Dennis Creevey by the back of his robes, preventing him from leaping at Mafalda Prewett. “LEMME GO!” he howls. “I’ll bloody well turn her hair into bleedin’ dandelions!”

“Keep him away from me!” Mafalda shrieks, clutching at her ginger hair—which is now much less ginger and a lot more green, tangled, and Merpeople-like. “They attacked us! Creevey’s a menace!”

“That isn’t true!” Edward Black shouts at her. Hermione and Pansy stare at him; Hermione thinks it’s the first time she’s ever heard him raise his voice above audible mumble. Then Edward notices Hermione and Pansy’s staring. “I mean—we’re sorry! Kind of sorry! Luna, help, I don’t know what to do!”

Luna is gazing idly at the ceiling while blood drips from her nose, watching the Carrow twins bump against its surface like errant balloons capable of loud, angry swearing. Pansy sighs, digs out her handkerchief, and presses it gently to Luna’s nose. “Lovegood, snap out of it and hold this.”

Luna obediently grabs the handkerchief and holds it in place. “I’m very sorry to be a bother,” she says. “I only wanted them to stop.”

“Can you get them down?” Hermione asks, though it’s very tempting to just leave them there. The Carrow twins have managed to annoy almost everyone this term, including the few actual Death Eaters among the seventh-years that Hermione pretends not to know about.

“I don’t actually know how.” Luna lowers the handkerchief and gives the blood staining it a curious look. “There is a spell to lower someone who is floating, isn’t there? Or is it a charm? I don’t always keep them straight in my head.”

Pansy regrettfully takes out her wand and aims it at the Carrows. “Liberacorpus!”

Hermione has to choke back a laugh when nothing happens. “Oh, dear.” Maybe Professor Salazar or Nizar knows how to fix an Elemental Magician’s accidents—“Dennis Creevey, you will behave yourself this instant or I’ll give you to Mister Filch myself!” she orders when he starts tearing his robe while trying to free himself from her grasp.

Dennis stops struggling and blanches. “You wouldn’t!”

“I would! This fight is over, and a Gryffindor does not continue a fight when there is no need!” Hermione retorts, giving him a gentle shake. “Now, someone reliable: please tell me what happened.”

“They started it—!” Edward, Dennis, and Mafalda all start to yell at once.

Pansy rolls her eyes as she makes Luna press the handkerchief back to her bleeding nose. “We said someone reliable. I’m going to trust the fourth-year here who never gets in trouble and has never had a detention in her entire life. Luna?”

Luna looks surprised to be asked. “Oh. Well. I didn’t think Edward and Dennis should walk to their classes alone. The wrackspurts were getting a bit thick in the air, you know. Dennis has Charms with Professor Flitwick on the third floor, and Edward is meant to be in History with Professor Salazar. I was going to the study area on the fourth floor in the library, so I thought I’d accompany them.”

“And?” Pansy asks when Luna stops talking.
Luna frowns and looks at her borrowed handkerchief again. “I think it was a stinging hex? Perhaps a bleeding hex? I wasn’t paying much attention to the words, but it does sting. Dennis and Edward were upset, and the Carrow twins started to throw curses while Mafalda and Dennis were dueling, and I just…wanted them to stop.” She looks up again. “I really am sorry.”

“You’ll pay for this, you fucking blood traitor!” Hestia shrieks.

“That is not very nice,” Luna says sternly. “I shan’t put any thought into letting you down until you apologize.”

“Go to hell, you complete bi—”

Hermione lowers her wand after casting the Silencing Charm. “I think that is enough foul language out of the pair of you. Mafalda, I’m off to class with your Head of House. Trust me, Professor Snape is going to find out that you and the Carrow twins were hexing people in the hallways. Go to class. I’m sure your detention will be delightful.” She should probably take points, but right now she just wants this incident to end so she can go to class, be subjected to snideness for being late, and get on with the rest of her day.

After Mafalda creeps away, Edward asks, “Why are you giving the Slytherin the detention? I mean, I don’t mind, but it—you know—both of you are here?”

Hermione really wants to know what’s happened recently to give Edward enough confidence to speak at a normal volume. “We discussed it.”

“Granger and I decided to swap, so we’re not inclined to favor our own Housemates.” Pansy grins at Dennis. “More fair that way. Creevey, you’re in detention for the night for not being able to control your need to smack people in the face. You’ve got a wand, and also? Your Transfiguration is horrible. That is the least dandelion-looking dandelion I’ve ever seen, and it’s not even a useful Defence spell! I know you’ve declared Prewett to be your Sworn Enemy after the Grand Potions Detention back in January, but really, you can find a better class of sworn enemy. You’ll find out what your detention is at dinner. I need to think on it.”

“Why not just give me to my Head of House?” Dennis asks, sulking.

“Because I have it on good authority that McGonagall is already hosting a detention tonight, and probably doesn’t want to distract Ernie, Dean, and Seamus from fixing her blackboard,” Pansy replies. “Wait here, though, because we’re going to escort you and Edward to class.” She glances up at the enraged, muted twins. “We’ll be taking Luna to the hospital wing for Madam Pomfrey to look at her nose. Then we’ll let the staff know that someone needs to come along and fetch you two idiots down from the ceiling.”

“What about me? I mean—detention?” Edward asks in a plaintive whisper.

“Granger, he’s doing the sad puppy eyes at me,” Pansy complains. “And worse, he means them! Help!”

Hermione looks at Edward and sighs. “Five points from Gryffindor for dueling in the hall. I refuse to take more when I know good and well that you won’t lift a wand unless someone else is in trouble.”

Edward stares down at the floor. “Okay.”

“That sounds like a proper amount of points to lose for this. Come on. Let’s drag you all off to class.” Pansy waves cheerfully at the red-faced twins. “Someone will be along soon!”
Dennis is left with Professor Flitwick, who is already dressing Mafalda down in regards to her appearance. Then he exclaims over Dennis’s torn robes and Luna’s nose. He gets out his wand and gives her a brief check, confirming that it’s best to let Madam Pomfrey deal with the hex.

When Flitwick discovers where the Carrow twins are, he looks very close to burying his face in his hands. “After the two of you have escorted the others to class, please return here. I’ll need you to look after my second-years while I attempt to restore the Carrow twins’ ability to walk on the ground.”

Hermione and Pansy give each other resigned looks of despair. They’re so very, very late to Potions.

They get Edward to History, where Professor Salazar raises both eyebrows over Edward’s downcast face and disheveled appearance. “More nonsense in the halls, I take it?”

“Yes, sir,” Edward mumbles.

“And did you cast the first spell?” Professor Salazar asks, glancing at Luna, who smiles.

Edward looks up. “Er, no?”

“Then I wouldn’t worry on it overly much. Sit down. I’m about to terrify the lot of your brethren with the notion of microwaves.”

Edward perks up at once. “Awesome!”

“What is a micro-wave?” Luna asks as they walk to the hospital wing. She’s had to refold the handkerchief twice now to catch the blood from her nose. “Is it a miniature wave of water, or a small breeze?”

“I want to know, too!” Pansy declares.

“It’s a Muggle device, and it’s neither.” Hermione tries to explain radio waves exciting atoms of water within food to make it warm up. Then she gives up and tells them it’s an electric Muggle box that quickly heats already-cooked food, boils water, or warms beverages.

Pansy’s brow wrinkles. “Is it better or worse than a warming charm?”

“Honestly, it depends on the food,” Hermione says. “You can overdo it if you tell the box to heat things for too long. Oh, and if you put metal in it, the metal will catch fire.”

“You had me at fire, Hermione.”

Madam Pomfrey declares Luna to be her captive for the next hour, explaining that this particular hex has a nasty habit of trying to reassert itself after it’s been dealt with. Luna seems disappointed about not spending her free period in the library, but she doesn’t complain.

“We’re so dead,” Pansy moans after they leave. “So dead! He’s my Head of House, and I’m still going to die.”

“I don’t think being a Prefect has ever caused me to be this late!” Hermione agrees, hurrying along as fast as she can without running. “And we still have to go back to Professor Flitwick!”

They only make it down to the third floor before they find more trouble. Or more accurately, trouble comes flying at them in the form of several cloaked and hooded students, their wands raised. “Impedimentia!”
“BUGGER!” Pansy shouts as Hermione whips out her wand and casts a Shield Charm without remembering to say it aloud. The first jinx smacks against the glowing blue shield, and then it’s chaos.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you,” Pansy is muttering under her breath as they fling jinxes and hexes back at the students attacking them. “Thank you, Professor Slytherin, for being so mental that you taught us melee dueling!”

Hermione fervently agrees with her, casting a knee-reversal hex that leaves one of their five attackers swearing and walking backwards as they try to figure out what went wrong. The next hex they cast is a lot stronger, shattering Hermione’s shield. Before Hermione can raise another, a spell comes flying through that strikes Pansy’s leg just as she’s casting her own Shield Charm.

“OW, FUCK! THAT FUCKING HURTS!” Pansy snarls and hurls nasty yellow light at a student. They scream and go down in a mess of jerking limbs.

“PANSY!” Hermione yells in disbelief. That was Crucio!

“Granger, that was the same hex that destroyed Condor’s prosthetic! THEY ARE FUCKING WELL TRYING TO KILL US!”

Oh. Right. Hermione grips her wand tighter and casts Ginny’s Bat-Bogey Hex on the knee-cursed student to keep them distracted. That leaves three cloaked berks with wands to worry about, not including the one still twitching on the floor.

Their attackers are taller, larger. Sixth- or seventh-year students, Hermione thinks.

They’re in such trouble.

“Duck!”

Hermione’s eyes widen as she drops into a crouch. A spell goes flying over her head that hits the closest student. Their black cloak promptly wraps them up like an Egyptian mummy. They fall over, cursing and struggling.

Then Professor Salazar is standing between Hermione and Pansy, cherry wand raised and glittering anger in his eyes. “Are you all right?”

“My leg is not happy!” Pansy answers. “But the rest of me is very happy to see you, sir!”

“Right, then—and there he is,” Professor Salazar says with a smile.

Hermione watches Professor Slytherin pile into the other cloaked students like an outraged steam engine. By the time Professor Snape and Professor McGonagall Apparate into the passage, everyone who attacked them is on the ground, tied up with Incarcerous, or bound in their own clothing.

Professor Snape glances at them, and then at the pile of captured students Professor Slytherin is glaring at. “What. Happened.”

“A bunch of idiots decided to be—be—idiots!” Hermione finally spits out as the anger catches up to her. She’s also terrified, but she’s too outraged to be overly concerned with that part.

“Oh, hey, those are really pretty lights,” Pansy coos just before she topples over. Professor Salazar catches her and then begins hissing under his breath when he sees Pansy’s leg.
Hermione feels her stomach try to turn over and refuses to allow it. Pansy still has all of her leg, but it’s torn open and bleeding, and Pansy was still standing despite all of that…

“Miss Granger.” Hermione blinks at Professor McGonagall when she is suddenly standing in front of her. “You’re also injured.”

“What?” Hermione looks down and notices that part of her robe is gone. Her sweater and shirt are torn open like someone went after them with a knife. The spell, whatever it was, must have spent most of its energy up on eating cloth. It’s not a very bad slice across her stomach, but it’s bleeding. Now that she’s paying attention, it also hurts. Quite a bit.

“Explanations later. Hospital wing for the both of you, right now,” Professor Salazar decides. “Nizar?”

“Adelante, hermano. We’ll three stay and deal with these complete—” Professor Slytherin breaks off into hissing that Hermione strongly suspects is nothing but swearing.

She has no memory of how they get back to the hospital wing. She blames the adrenaline. For all Hermione knows, they were Apparated directly, but she’d like to hope she would remember that. She doesn’t even remember when Pansy was picked up, but Professor Salazar holds her as if he’s cradling something precious.

Professor Salazar is even more intimidating when he’s informing others of what is supposed to be done. Madam Pomfrey doesn’t argue with him, which is even stranger. She argues with everyone, often, when it comes to anything to do with the hospital wing. “I’ll see to Miss Parkinson’s leg. It does not require any bit of immodesty or undressing—” He hesitates and then gestures for Luna to come with him. “Miss Lovegood will be acting as a chaperone in case the damage is worse than it appears. Madam Pomfrey, Miss Granger has a cut across her midsection from a slicing hex.”

Madam Pomfrey looks alarmed as she gently grasps Hermione by the elbow. “Hex or curse?”

Professor Salazar glances up after he places Pansy onto the closest bed with curtains available. “Definitely the hex, not the curse. The curse would see us planning a funeral.”

“Good heavens,” Madam Pomfrey mutters. Hermione is dazed enough from everything happening so quickly that she goes with Pomfrey, but begins to protest when Pomfrey draws the curtain, claims Hermione’s bookbag, and removes her robes.

“Miss Granger.” Madam Pomfrey silences Hermione by saying her name because the tone isn’t what she expects. Sternness would have set off Hermione’s obstinacy, but Madam Pomfrey sounds too concerned for an annoying, stinging scratch of a cut. “Your robes, your sweater, and your shirt are all a loss until proper Transfiguration work can be done to repair the holes. I am excellent at shifting undamaged items, but otherwise, I always manage to leave a hole somewhere that it doesn’t belong. You’ll be able to keep wearing your brassiere.”

“Bra,” Hermione mutters, feeling a bit resentful as Madam Pomfrey strips her to the waist with gentle hands. “Why is it so important, that distinction? The curse or the hex?”

Madam Pomfrey is carefully checking the whole line of the slice with her wand rather than healing it immediately. Hermione has been trying to learn how to read those healing diagnostics that shine in the air, but Madam Pomfrey is an expert. Each one is dismissed too quickly for Hermione to keep up. “The hex is easily treatable, and for the most part, a hex is all a student will ever need to contend with.” Madam Pomfrey meets Hermione’s eyes for a moment. “Have you an interest in Healing, dear?”
Hermione tries not to feel guilty over saying no. Good gracious, what is the matter with her? “I don’t want to devote myself to it or anything, but I like understanding what’s happening.” She looks down at the slice, which begins just to the bottom left of her sternum and does a bad job of trying to wrap around her ribs. Whatever Madam Pomfrey first did stopped it from bleeding or being painful. It isn’t very deep, either—it might be long, but it looks like the worst cut Hermione ever gave herself from shaving her legs, messy and shallow rather than dangerous.

“A slicing hex is likely the worst you will ever see, too. Wait a moment.” Madam Pomfrey walks away and returns with a jar of dittany. “I’ll need to apply this first before closing the wound. That way we’ll guarantee it doesn’t scar.”

“That’s…good,” Hermione says. She isn’t certain she’d mind a scar, but dittany will speed the healing, too. “Wait, why does it smell a bit like lemon balm?”

Madam Pomfrey smiles while applying the dittany in a thick line with a smooth length of flat glass that looks like an oversized iced lolly stick. “Professor Slytherin suggested it to Professor Snape as a valid addition. He was quite correct to do so; I’ve seen improvements in its effectiveness no matter the wound.”

“Lemon balm. Qualities of an antioxidant against potentially harmful free radicals, an antiseptic, and mild anesthetic properties,” Hermione murmurs.

“I do not actually know what that first part means, but as I’ve seen its usefulness, I believe I’ve some studying to do in that regard later.” Madam Pomfrey takes up her wand again and begins closing the cut.

“You didn’t tell me where I might see a slicing curse.”

Madam Pomfrey purses her lips. “During the first war, I saw it often. On both sides. It was a relatively forgotten bit of foul magic that one of our own rediscovered. Unfortunately, the enemy made use of it as well.”

Hermione feels her blood run cold. “Slicing curse. Cut forever. It’s Sectumsempra, isn’t it?”

“And how in the world would you know that?” Madam Pomfrey asks, so startled she almost forgets to finish closing the wound.

“I—I read about it. Was it…was it really bad?” Hermione asks, trying not to let her voice shake. She’d found that spell in Professor Snape’s book, one labeled only For Enemies, and hadn’t dared to try it once she worked out the meaning.

Madam Pomfrey studies Hermione. “I shouldn’t say, but you’ve always been a sensible sort with a good head on your shoulders, including a good grasp on what to natter on about and what should be kept quiet.”

Hermione nods, flattered that Madam Pomfrey thinks so well of her. “I will. I don’t want anyone to know a curse that can slice people in half.”

“And it can literally do just that. Far too easily.” Madam Pomfrey finishes her work. “Its creator did not particularly like the curse, but the first time he used it in front of others to remain alive, the cat was, as they say, out of the bag. All he could do was teach it to members of the Order, warn them of its irrevocability, and then hope the damage would not be terrible. Moody’s missing leg, alas, fell victim to that particular curse.”

“Oh.” Hermione chews on her lower lip for a moment. “No wonder Moody can’t stand him.”
Madam Pomfrey makes a choked sound, but doesn’t tell Hermione she’s wrong. She just gives Hermione another look, fetches a pyjama top from a drawer, and suggests that Hermione rest for now. Even if she feels fine—“I do feel fine!”—the other staff will no doubt have questions when they’ve finished dealing with today’s idiot offenders.

Hermione lies down because she doesn’t have anything else to do, grabs a book from her bag, and wakes up sometime later to find Nizar sitting on the edge of her bed. He’s reading the book she must have dropped after falling asleep. “Did that absolute cheat of a hospital matron put me to sleep?” she slurs indignantly.

Nizar closes the book and smiles. “No. You did that on your own.” He puts the book down next to Hermione. “Miss Parkinson is not going to be able to tell us what happened until she is allowed to wake up later this evening. Yes, she’s fine,” he continues when Hermione props herself up in alarm. “Pansy got the Shield Charm up just in time for it to be messy rather than a loss of limb.”

“Then it was a curse?”

“Yes. A…well, a variable one, as the nature of the curse reacts to whatever it strikes. Nasty bit of work. I don’t suppose you heard the incantation?” Nizar asks. “I’d rather see that it’s not used again after what it did to Miss Condor and Miss Parkinson.”

Hermione sits up in bed. “No. It was noisy, but I think it was nonverbal. I just saw the spell before it hit Pansy. They used something with enough power to break my Shield Charm, and then cast again before we could get another one raised.”

“Bugger,” Nizar mutters. “The twit who is of age is very good at verbally ducking their way around Veritaserum.”

“You can’t use that without Ministry approval,” Hermione says in alarm. “Can you?”

“Not in Wizarding Britain. Fortunately, the war mages have permission from Her Majesty to use it when we judge it necessary to preserve the safety of others, and oh, yes, Hogwarts is now on land sovereign to the Crown.” Nizar grins at her flabbergasted look. “It was even printed in the paper, what lands Queen Elizabeth put me in charge of, and still no one noticed that particular detail.”

Hermione kicks him in the back. “Slytherin!” she hisses, which only makes him laugh. “Can’t you do anything without it being a pile of plotting?”

“Not really. I like being efficient. I’ll confess I didn’t realize the expediency she granted me at first, either. I was too busy whinging about having to deal with a continuance of noble title.” Nizar turns his head around to glance at her feet. “You have pointed shoes, and those were my kidneys. Good job on selecting a more valid target while armed for the task.”

Hermione blushes. “Uhm. Sorry.”

“I still want to see you demonstrate if you actually do know how to kick properly and just didn’t want to create bruising, or if you need to be taught.” Nizar straightens in place, a clear sign from any teacher that they’re about to be official. “I need to hear it from the beginning, Miss Granger. Start with just before the altercation that gave us floating twin Carrows who are no longer anchored by the Earth’s gravity.”

“Luna turned off their connection to gravity?” Hermione asks, gaping at him.

“Yes, but you can be amused by that later. Story time, please.”
“Oh. Right, Professor.” Hermione bites her lip for a moment, recalling how she and Pansy had been in the midst of finishing their between-class check of students in the castle, and then tells him everything that happened that morning. It’s a surprise to realize that, from start to finish, it was all over with by nine-fifteen.

“I thought as much. Don’t worry about Miss Parkinson’s use of Cruciatu. Professor Snape will be discussing the matter with her, if only to reiterate the warning that it is only for times she thinks her life to be in danger. Sadly, it was.”

“Really?” Hermione feels her stomach try to turn upside down again. “Wait—how did you all know? All four of you? Is it about being tied to the castle’s magic?”

Professor Slytherin nods. “Professor McGonagall as Head of Gryffindor, Professor Snape as Head of Slytherin, Salazar as a Founder, and myself as the school’s protector. We’ll always know when students are endangered within the castle or on the grounds, though my role means I’m aware when anyone is endangered, not only the students.” He glances off in the direction of Pansy’s bed, even if they can’t see it through the curtain. “If not for those of us who are tied to the castle’s magic, students like Rachel Condor might have been badly injured instead of inconvenienced. They were not the first to be attacked. You and Miss Parkinson will likely not be the last.”

“Then—you captured everyone responsible. Why not expel them?” Hermione asks indignantly. “They could have killed us!”

“But they didn’t. Except for the student who used that odd melting curse, these particular idiots are not experienced enough to know how to cause true harm. Most of them are terrified of casting Unforgivables, as they are aware of the cost of Azkaban.” Professor Slytherin looks at her. “Don’t make the mistake of thinking we aren’t taking a valid threat seriously. We are, which is why all four of us react if the castle’s magic alerts us. Those students who tried to hurt you both today—if they are here, within this school, they are not out there with Voldemort, committing atrocities that they can never take back. I don’t like what happened to you and Pansy, but these are treatable injuries that will heal without scars. Murder is a lot harder to atone for.”

Hermione can see his point, even if she’d rather shove every single one of the idiot Baby Death Eaters out of the Entrance Hall doors. Maybe even shoot fireballs at them so they’ll bloody well leave. “If I promise not to tell anyone else, will you tell me who attacked us?”

Professor Slytherin shakes his head. “Don’t be ridiculous. I’d rather as many of you know as possible. Those of you who know how to keep secrets.”

“Oh.” Hermione thinks on it. “The titled Slytherins, the war mages, the Prefects, and the Head Boy and Girl?”

He smiles. “Wise choices. You and Miss Parkinson hexed the blazes out of Vincent Crabbe, who was the only Slytherin in attendance. The others were Eloise Midgen, Lisa Turpin, Wayne Hopkins—who discovered the joys of Cruciatu—and Jonathan Chambers.”

Hermione frowns. She remembers Professor Slytherin mentioning an inter-House fight, Davies and Chambers against Roshan and Carmichael. If Chambers is a Death Eater sympathizer…then Roger Davies might be, too.

Then again, they’re both seventeen. It could be more than sympathizing that they’re doing.

“It does seem out of character, doesn’t it? But no, there was no Tempero involved. They chose it.” Professor Slytherin sighs. “I’ve suspected for a while, but I wasn’t certain if they’d be fool enough to act on their beliefs.”

Hermione has no idea why that’s what makes her eyes start to burn with tears. She doesn’t want to cry over idiots, but it’s Eloise and Hopkins! They weren’t exactly friends, but Hermione has done homework with both of them, and never once did they act like…like that.

Pansy was certain the others were trying to kill them. She and Pansy were outnumbered. They could have died.

Nizar is very good at making it obvious when the teacher’s mask is gone. “Come here,” he whispers, pulling Hermione closer and wrapping his arm around her so she can rest her head on his shoulder. “It’s all right, Hermione.”

Hermione shoves her face against the soft fabric of his robes and chokes back a sob, hot tears coursing down her face. She’s survived a werewolf, Quirrell, a basilisk, and actual bloody flocks of Dementors. She should be fine, but she isn’t.

It isn’t all right. It’s never been all right, everything that’s gone wrong here at Hogwarts.

Not at all.

* * * *

Nizar isn’t really surprised when he offers to remove the Cruciatu damage from Hopkins and has the offer flung back in his face, along with a poor attempt at throwing a pillow. “Suit yourself, then.” Nizar drops the young idiot’s pillow onto a bed just out of reach. Every word Hopkins yells after him in response before the privacy spells muffle it all is just another day Nizar adds to Hopkins’ detention count.

He isn’t going to take points. These five idiots would see all four Houses sitting near zero.

“I take it Mister Hopkins did not want assistance?” Severus asks him when he rejoins the others.

“No. If he prefers to wake up to early morning pain at a young age, that is his business.” The last thing Nizar is going to do is force blood magic on an unwilling student, even if it’s meant only for healing to remove damage from the Cruciatus Curse. Not when the student in question is already terrified of all the wrong individuals. Hopkins can’t have met Voldemort, not yet, or he would know who he should really fear. “If he changes his mind, Mister Hopkins knows where to find me.”

“This isn’t just a crime of opportunity as it was with the first group,” Minerva says, stalking back and forth while fuming. “It was a planned ambush.”

“Then Miss Prewett and the Carrow twins had to have been involved in order to delay Miss Granger and Miss Parkinson.” Severus rolls his eyes. “Has anyone figured out how to remove the Carrows from the ceiling yet?”

“Filius and I gave up and tethered them,” Salazar informs them, looking grimly amused. “They were rude enough to Miss Lovegood that she’s not inclined to assist until they apologize. Those two might lack gravity for quite some time, or until Miss Lovegood is suitably distracted enough to forget what
was done."

“Please figure out how to suitably distract Miss Lovegood,” Severus requests. “I do not need two of my House permanently lacking gravity, even if things would be far quieter if they were to conveniently float away.”

“Oh, don’t tempt me,” Minerva growls under her breath. “Detentions rather than points, Severus?”

“Just like the previous group of three that were caught,” Severus agrees. “Unless we’d like to empty the gem counters—”

“I can’t get rid of those fucking things!” Salazar interrupts, all but grinding his teeth. “Can we not simply do so and encourage that no more points be handed out afterwards?”

“Why can’t you rid the castle of the gem counters, if you’re so opposed to their existence?” Severus asks.

Salazar lifts both hands in a shrug. “It was four who built them, four who were not only tied properly into Hogwarts’ magic, but properly descended family of each of us—though in Helga’s case, it had to be one of her brother’s descendants. I can’t undo it unless that situation were to repeat itself, and those who were descendants of Sigurd and magical are not often found in Britain. Most of that lot had returned to Norway by the middle of the eleventh century, or scattered off to Ireland. Those who remained on this isle are firmly non-magical.”

“Let’s worry about the gem counters later,” Nizar says. “Our latest batch of idiots will be so busy with detentions that they’ll be doing nothing except attending class, eating, and sleeping, just like the previous three twits.”

Minerva stops pacing and draws in a deep breath. “My classroom has certainly never been cleaner. I don’t like it, but I don’t wish to expel them, either. Not with Voldemort waiting to snatch them up and turn four of them into murderers before the age of seventeen. The fact that Chambers is of age and has not already abandoned school does give me some hope that perhaps he is just foolish, not irredeemable.”

* * * *

Hermione has no idea why she argues with Madam Pomfrey, as it never does any good at all. She finally gives up and agrees with her that she’ll remain until the dinner hour, even if she feels fine. Pansy, Hermione is told, will be remaining overnight, if not through tomorrow as well.

She wakes up again later when she hears voices and climbs out of bed to peer through her curtain. Madam Pomfrey is escorting Draco, Millicent, Daphne, and Blaise to Pansy’s bed, though when Hermione glances over at the hospital wing doors, she sees a much larger crowd of students from the other Houses, all with worried looks on their faces. Ginny is at the forefront, and catches Hermione’s eyes to signal the need to speak.

Madam Pomfrey walks up to Hermione’s curtain, but doesn’t draw it. “Miss Granger?” she murmurs.

“I’m awake, Madam Pomfrey,” Hermione says, snagging a dressing gown from a peg and wrapping herself in it. Maybe Ginny brought her a change of clothes.
“Then I’ll leave the idea of visitors up to you,” Madam Pomfrey replies. “I’ll be in my office, dear. You lot! Only the five of you up front may enter. The rest will simply have to wait.”

The moment permission is granted, Hermione is surrounded by Gryffindors. “You’re all right!” Ginny exclaims, flinging herself at Hermione. “I brought you clothes—I hope I brought the ones that fit.”

“I still have my wand. I can Transfigure them if they don’t,” Hermione says, hugging Ginny. “Thank you.” She smiles at Ron, Neville, Ginny, Fred, and George just before they converge and all try to hug her at the same time. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“The entire school is talking about what happened, same as what went down the first time someone used that bloody curse,” Ron says when they let her go. “You’re really all right, yeah?”

Hermione nods. “I’m fine, but…” She bites her lip. “Come with me.”

She leads the other Gryffindors to Pansy’s bedside, and is promptly hugged by Blaise, who is probably the most demonstrative Pure-blood Hogwarts has ever hosted aside from Astoria. “I’m all right, really.” Hermione says to reassure the others, especially when she notices the pinched look on Draco’s face. “Pansy got the worst of it, and Professor Slytherin says she’ll be fine. No scarring at all once the healing is done.”

“Good,” Pansy slurs from her bed. “Because I missed that part earlier.”

“Are you all right?” Daphne asks Pansy, sitting down and taking her hand—the first time Hermione has seen Daphne willingly touch someone who isn’t her sister.

“Good potions.” Pansy has the pleasantly lethargic contemplation of the drugged. “Crucio’d the fuck out of one of the pricks who hurt us.”

“You did what?” Neville gasps, horrified.

“They tried to melt my leg—oh shit, is that Longbottom?” Pansy props herself up on her elbows to subject Neville to a bleary stare. “It is Longbottom. I’m sorry I mentioned Crucio. Except I’m not, because they tried to melt my leg!”

“It’s—it’s okay. I just. It’s that curse, is all,” Neville replies after swallowing. “Defending yourself is—that’s different. It’s okay, Pansy.”

“Well. All right.” Pansy flops back down on the bed. “Who was it, anyway? I missed that, too.”

“We already know about Crabbe,” Draco says before Hermione can open her mouth. “I thought Professor Snape was going to set his arse on fire.”

“I think Vincent’s in detention until Easter break, at least,” Blaise adds. “We don’t know who else, though.”

“But I do. Professor Slytherin told me.” Hermione manages a weak smile when they all turn to look at her. “It’s the sort of list you share with people you trust, after all.”

“Bugger. How bad is it?” Millicent asks. “We’ve got theories, but nothing concrete.”

Hermione adjusts the belt on her dressing gown when it feels too loose. “Prewett and the Carrow twins probably helped set things up, since they delayed us, but they would be in trouble for attacking Edward, Luna, and Dennis, anyway.” She drops her hands to her sides when she can’t pull the belt.
any tighter. “Aside from Crabbe, it was Eloise Midgen, Wayne Hopkins, Lisa Turpin, and Jonathan Chambers.”

“One Slytherin, one Gryffindor, a Hufflepuff, and two Ravenclaws.” Ron blinks a few times. “Is it bloody opposite day, and no one told us?”

“Even I’ll admit I would have expected more of the older idiots in our House than that,” Daphne says while patting Pansy’s hand. “Chambers is the only one of age. Is he Marked?”

“I think they’re not telling us that on purpose,” Fred says thoughtfully. “Hard to give a bloke another chance if you’re convinced he’s evil.”

“Midgen and Hopkins, though.” Draco shakes his head. “I confess I don’t know much about Turpin, but those two are a complete surprise.”

“Is it about that blood purity shite?” Ginny asks. “I don’t remember Midgen or Hopkins being on any Pure-blood list of names.”

“Leaving aside the Sacred Twenty-Eight nonsense…” George stares up at the ceiling while thinking. “I think they’re Half-bloods, most likely on their mother’s sides. Even if ol’ Volde isn’t relying on the blood purity shit, he doesn’t like Muggle-borns. Turpin is Pure-blooded; she’s from one of the very old families out from Yorkshire that tend to send their kids off to Durmstrang instead of Hogwarts. Chambers is from a French Pure-blood family who only immigrated in because of the British Wizarding War. His grandparents were gung-ho about being Death Eaters. His great-grandfather and grand-uncles all proudly went in with Grindelwald. Prewett’s kinda self-explanatory, unfortunately. Great-Aunt Muriel is probably going to have it out again with estranged Cousin Geoffrey over that. Pretty sure everyone knows about the Carrows.”

“That they’re nuts,” Millicent says dryly, giving George a curious look. “How do you know all of that?”

“The stuff about the families?” George shrugs. “I got bored in History class, read the book, and then went looking for a bit more that focused on the people instead of goblin rebellions. Less any hint of swottiness and more me wanting to be dead certain who not to date.”

“Right.” Daphne gives George an odd look. “I suppose we all know who to spread this information to—the attackers, you numbskull,” she adds when George grins.

“I told Professor Slytherin that I would tell the Head Boy and Girl, the Prefects, and the titled Slytherins.” Hermione smiles when Millicent, Pansy, Neville, and all of the Weasleys stare at her. “What? I never once promised to tell only them.”

“Scary,” Pansy says in a drugged mumble. “Keeping!”

“And that’s it for your visitation this afternoon!” Madam Pomfrey declares as she bustles over. “All of you except for Miss Granger and Miss Parkinson will be departing now.”

“Right. Bye, Hermione. See you at dinner, or at breakfast,” Ron says. The others offer similar farewells, or tell Pansy not to trust the hospital beds, as they are lying liars. Hermione thinks on that and decides it explains why she kept falling asleep throughout the day. Harry would always wake up, but then Harry had (or perhaps has?) insomnia, and he visited the hospital wing so often he probably developed an immunity to the suspected low-grade Sleeping Charms.

Hermione sits down in Daphne’s abandoned chair with Pansy while Madam Pomfrey is busy trying to keep the other students from piling in. “I notice you’re not asleep yet. Want to gossip?”
Pansy pries her eyes open again. “You want to discuss one of my favorite pastimes while I’m drugged and you’re not? Absolutely! What are we gossiping about?”

“The fact that Millicent isn’t dating Katie Bell,” Hermione says, grinning when Pansy scowls in disbelief. “It’s true! The whole of Gryffindor would know if they were. Ginny asked on the sly, and it seems as if Millicent asked, but Katie is already involved with someone whose identity she’s keeping a firm secret.”

“Oooh, a secret. That will be fun to find out later.” Pansy chews on her lower lip. “Why bring it up, then?”

“Because I saw something. In the library the other day.” Hermione feels her face heat up and tries to ignore the blush. “When Millicent was talking about everything, Draco and I weren’t the only ones blushing. So did, uh—so did Susan Bones.”

“Oh. That. Glad I’m not the only one who noticed, then,” Pansy mutters.

Hermione waits, but Pansy doesn’t say anything else. “Well?”

Pansy pouts at her. “Well, what?”

“Why doesn’t Millicent try to date Susan? Or vice versa?” Hermione asks in frustration. “Susan wasn’t looking at my backside!”

“Stop grouching,” Pansy complains. “It’s politics, Granger. Dunno if Millicent noticed that Bones is interested in anything, but I know Millicent. She would have considered every eligible female in the school before making any decisions. Millicent’d say she’s just a Bulstrode. Meantime, Susan is one of the only two living members of the Ancient House of Bones left in the entire fucking world. Millicent thinks she’s not good enough.”

Hermione frowns. “That’s a stupid reason not to at least attempt to date someone. I mean, if everyone else thinks the way Millicent does, then it’s no bloody wonder I’ve never heard about Susan dating anyone! They’re all running from her family name instead of looking at her.”

“Or they’re running from her aunt. Madam Bones is s’posed to be made of some scary stuff, Granger.” Pansy tries to scratch her nose, misses, and gives her hand an offended glare. “You wanna play matchmaker?”

“It isn’t as if they have to marry each other,” Hermione says primly. “If they go to Hogsmeade together once and nothing comes of it, then nothing terrible happened, either.”

“Or they could fall utterly in love and horrify Millicent’s parents. Death Eaters,” Pansy adds when Hermione looks confused. “The lot of them, from what Millicent says. Maybe a few young cousins that aren’t, but otherwise the entire Bulstrode clan went Death Eater.”

“Oh.” Hermione feels horrible for Millicent, and maybe a fierce desire to set fire to a lot of Bulstrode backsides. “That’s—she never says a word.”

“Doesn’t want anyone to know,” Pansy mumbles. “If Millicent survives the war and they all go off to burn, or go to Azkaban, or just get eaten by something in the woods, she’s Head of the House of Bulstrode. S’a big deal. All the money and political power with the Wizengamot seat. I bet she’s doing like Daphne is.”

“Right.” Not that Hermione has the slightest idea of what Daphne’s doing.
“Kay. I’ll do it,” Pansy says.


Pansy rolls her eyes. “I’ll help you get Millicent and Susan convinced to go off to Hogsmeade together next weekend if you find me a boyfriend—and not a Weasley, Granger.”

“Why not?” Hermione asks, though the idea hadn’t even occurred to her.

“Family’s are too closely related. Not givin’ birth to children with too many toes,” Pansy mumbles, and promptly falls asleep.
Chapter Summary

Some *idiota* has a birthday.

Chapter Notes

It's my Eldest Podling's thirteenth birthday today. So you guys get a gift. <3

Nizar uses the castle's magic to keep an eye on their eleven detention-ridden students that evening, wanting to be certain none of them are stupid enough to stir up further trouble. Chambers and Hopkins consider conspiring until Nizar Apparates directly in front of them.

He stares down at the two students trying to scrub alchemical residue off the floor of Eustas's classroom. “Go on. Do tell me how foolish you were thinking of being.”

Hopkins bites his lip, shakes his head, and begins scrubbing the floor with renewed vigor. Chambers is the one who has to make a go of it, emboldened by the Dark Mark on his arm. “The Dark Lord will defeat you, and you’ll come to regret every decision you’ve made against his followers.”

“I carved a hole in the side of Voldemort’s face.” Nizar is pleased when they both flinch. “You’re merely scrubbing a floor. Many floors. Possibly until the end of term. Would you care to know what Voldemort—” another flinch “—does to his followers who displease him?”

“If they displease him, they deserve it,” Chambers retorts in a cold voice.

Nizar lets out an amused snort of laughter. “Let me rephrase: Voldemort’s idea of those who displease him is subject to change without notice and often is not defined at all. If you are available when he seeks a target, you will be that target.” Neither of them will stop flinching every time Nizar says the walking corpse’s name. “Multiple bouts of *Cruciatus* at Voldemort’s pleasure sounds preferable to you instead of cleaning?”

“It wasn’t so bad.” Hopkins mutters.

“That was a curse cast by a student who was already injured. You think Voldemort will be so merciful?” Nizar smiles. “If the Cruciatus Curse is cast for more than thirty seconds, do you know what happens?”

Hopkins is starting to turn white, and Chambers doesn’t look nearly so confident. Time for the killing stroke. “After thirty seconds of your nerves seizing from the pain, you piss yourself. Then you might soil yourself. You’ll definitely vomit. The tiny veins in your sinuses may burst, causing you to bleed from the eyes, ears, and nose. You see, it isn’t just about pain for Voldemort. It’s about humiliation, and there is no follower in his circle he has not humiliated, more than once, for his own amusement.”

Hopkins is no longer white, but green. Chambers looks like he might be considering sicking up all
over the floor they’ve been cleaning.

Nizar crosses his arms. “If your parents decided your path for you, but did not warn you of the cost, I
strongly suggest you not go home for Easter break. Stay here. If you bother no one during that week,
no one will bother you. If Voldemort is still an active threat at the end of term, and you have no wish
to go home to parents who presented you to their favorite Dark Lord as untrained bait, arrangements
will be made to safeguard you.”

“They didn’t.” Chambers doesn’t sound convincing in the slightest.

“Of course not.” Nizar nods at Argus Filch, who is overseeing things with a flinty smile while
petting his cat. “Good night, gentlemen.”

Nizar is in his classroom on Tuesday afternoon after his last class departed for the day when he gets
an unexpected visitor. “Albus,” he greets the man when Dumbledore enters the room. Without
knocking. Even his first-years know how to bloody well knock.

“Nizar,” Dumbledore responds, the twinkling set to its highest, irritating levels. Hogwarts’ current
Headmaster has never once come to this classroom, not since Nizar resumed his post in November.

“To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“I heard that there was an incident on the third floor yesterday morning.” Dumbledore says.

“There was. Your Heads of House dealt with the matter, as they usually do.” Nizar gives up and
closes his book when Dumbledore shows no signs of moving from the room. “Or was there another
incident of which I’m not aware?”

“Aside from the Carrow twins’ insistence on floating?” Dumbledore nods. The twinkling diminishes;
he looks quite grave. “Miss Parkinson cast an Unforgivable. I’m afraid that is a very serious matter.”

“Oh, you mean the spell she cast after being nailed with a curse that could have permanently
removed her leg if Miss Parkinson hadn’t managed part of a Shield Charm in time?” Nizar asks in an
innocuous voice. “Of the two, I’m far more concerned with the destructive one. If Miss Condor’s leg
had not been prosthetic to begin with, she’d certainly be using one now due to the last casting of that
curse in this castle. I don’t suppose you know the incantation for it?”

Dumbledore looks nonplussed before he recovers himself. “I’m afraid news of the other curse had
not reached me.”

Of course not, Nizar thinks sourly. “Miss Parkinson reacted on instinct in the way her parents trained
her to do before they had a parting of the ways in regards to certain philosophies. Given the situation,
I think she and Miss Granger acquitted themselves rather well.”

“I did know that Miss Granger was injured in the fight,” Dumbledore says, “and am relieved to hear
she is well today. There is still the matter of Miss Parkinson. I believe a detention may be in order.”

Nizar has never had Severus’s ability to maintain perfect impassivity. He often finds things too
amusing, so he settles for smiling. “You would need to take up that matter with Miss Parkinson’s
Head of House, Albus.”

“I see.” Dumbledore tilts his head, as if imitating the curious magpie Severus has often accused him
of being. “You do not much care for me, do you?”

“At the moment, I find myself supremely irritated that you’ve come here to complain of a victim’s
lack of detention while voicing no concern at all for the five students who attacked two of this school’s Prefects with the intent to cause them grievous harm.” Nizar’s smile widens. “It almost sounds as if you wish to punish the Slytherin who defended her Gryffindor friend, Albus. That will not gain you any sense of unity within this school.”

Dumbledore frowns. “I was not aware that Miss Parkinson and Miss Granger had become friends.”

“Oh, yes. The truce was first, but I believe they came to that arrangement a few weeks ago.” Nizar regards Dumbledore with far too much cheer. “A Slytherin is rather insistent on not letting go of what they choose to claim. Thankfully, Miss Granger and Miss Parkinson get on quite well. But, again, I’m not in charge of our students’ detentions unless the incident takes place within my own classroom. If you’re still certain that Miss Parkinson should face punishment, I’m sure Severus will be happy to speak to you on the matter.”

Dumbledore begins twinkling again, as if he just won some great concession. “I’m certain he will. Thank you for your time, Nizar.” He pauses and glances around the room. “You have quite the interesting classroom, I’ve heard. I could have sworn, though, that I once encountered a door in this hallway that led to someplace quite different.”

“It’s a temperamental door,” Nizar replies. “I wouldn’t be surprised in the slightest.”

Dumbledore nods. “I’ll leave you to your reading, then.”

“Thank you.” Nizar waits until Dumbledore has left the room and the echo of his footsteps has faded into nothing. “Why am I not allowed to stab you? Some days I’m certain it would be so much more satisfying than letting you politically hang yourself!”

Severus comes to see him that evening, but Nizar rightly blames a pile of essays that kept him from attending dinner. Many of his students slogged their way into completing their Defence essays before the final deadline of the twenty-ninth. He’s been grading them steadily since the stupid hex wore off.

“What did you say to Albus?” Severus wishes to know immediately. “He came to me talking of Miss Parkinson’s ‘prime performance’ and her ‘exemplary defence of a fellow student.’ If I didn’t know any better, I would have considered being flattered for three seconds.”

Nizar grins. “Oh, he’s trying to plant doubt and divisiveness! Does that man forget that we sleep with each other, and therefore we perform this amazing feat known as communication?”

“Take it he said the opposite to you,” Severus responds dryly.

“Oh, he wanted Miss Parkinson to be placed in detention for using the Cruciatius Curse against her attacker when she was already grievously wounded.”

Severus’s amusement dries up like a rain puddle struck by the full might of the southern Iberian sun. “I see. Why is he not dead?”

“Because there are still people who would be sad if it happened.” Nizar drops his quill and stretches, trying to ignore his own irritation. “I won’t be telling Minerva that Dumbledore said that. She might forget how much she doesn’t want to be Head Teacher of this school and strangle the life out of him.”

* * * * *

* * * * *
At four o’clock Wednesday evening, Filius surprises Nizar by coming to his classroom. “Do you have a few moments, Nizar?”

Nizar gestures for his lingering first-years to run along. “Certainly, Filius. What can I do for you?”

Filius glances at the classroom door, then at Nizar’s office. “Could this be a private conversation?”

Now Nizar is intrigued. “Of course. Follow me, please.” He shuts the door to his office, flips the metal S, and opens it again to reveal his quarters. He steps inside, giving Brice’s portrait a particularly intent look, before he invites Filius to join him.

“Magical space that is swapped around to allow for a different space, much as the exterior classroom does by providing its various doors.” Filius looks around with burning curiosity. “Oh, and these must be your young ones!”

“They are, though only Brice and Elfric are about today.” Nizar properly introduces them, though the children are already aware of Filius’s name and status within the school.

By the time they’re seated at the table with afternoon tea, Nizar might be able to compete with Filius for insatiable curiosity. He suspects he knows why Filius asked for privacy. There are so many other things that Filius could be concerning himself with, but gods, he can’t help but hope.

“A wonderful afternoon blend,” Filius says of the tea before setting his cup down. “I’ve been asking Minerva about what it was like to be tied into Hogwarts’ magic. I believe she is correct to say that as Head of Ravenclaw, I would hold what is called the Eastern Seat?”

Nizar resists the urge to grin like a fool. Bloody finally! “Minerva is correct, yes. Severus holds the Western Seat, and Minerva holds the South. If Pomona were to ever join us, she would hold the North.”

“Why the cardinal directions?” Filius asks, bright-eyed. “They don’t often have much to do with magic.”

“Not always, but sometimes. In this case, Myrddin likened the Founders—who will always be Keepers of Hogwarts’ magic, not holders of its seats—to points on a compass. Godric represented the south by being of England while also magically linked to Rome. Rowena held the east because her home duchy was in East Francia. Helga held the north, as she was born in the Orkney Earldom, but also because she never gave up any part of her heritage save her father’s name. Salazar was furthest to the west in Burgos, and furthest from the influence of the latest incarnation of the Roman Empire in terms of both politics and heritage.”

“So many different perspectives, all coming together to grant Europe a school for magic,” Filius murmurs under his breath. “It could have been disastrous, that sort of cultural blending.”

“But it wasn’t. Myrddin knew what he was doing, even if he was an arsehole about it,” Nizar says, smiling while Filius does his best not to choke on his tea. “Does this mean you’ve changed your mind?”

Filius mops up after himself while nodding. “I’d already put quite a bit of thought into the matter. It helped to see two instances of that sort of experiment stand as walking, talking successes, with no apparent ill effects at all.” He pauses. “There are no ill effects, are there?”

Nizar shakes his head. “If I did it incorrectly and tied you into the magic so you had it all at once?
That would be a side effect—it’s too much. It would be overwhelming. I bind the magic so that you adjust slowly, a process that takes about a month. I also do it in such a way that allows the magic to be easily unwound if you were to give up your post as Head of House.”

“What do I need to do, and can you explain it as you go along?”

Yes, yes, yes, yes! Nizar draws in a breath and lets it out slowly. “I need your dominant arm, skin bared up to your elbow. It’s a literal tying of your magic to Hogwarts, and vice versa.”

Nizar does his best to explain the process as he works, but some of it—a lot of it—doesn’t translate very well. It’s by feel, an instinctive awareness of the flow of magic. That he has a natural sense of such things just makes the process easier.

Filius studies his own arm when Nizar is done. Nizar slumps back in his seat, pours another cup of tea, and drains it dry before he realizes he forgot to add sugar. “Could anyone else do this?” Filius asks.

“If you’re asking if you can have assistants with the same awareness, the answer is no. Only one person can hold one of the seats at a time. However, if you hold the magic long enough, I’m given to understand that you gain a much more enlightened awareness of how it’s tied to you, and how to untie those magical threads. If you choose your own successor and I’m not available, you can remove the magic from yourself and tie it to them, instead.”

“Absolutely fascinating.” Filius buttons his shirt sleeve and retrieves his jacket, putting it back on. “I was going to wait until the end of term,” he confesses. “When Minerva said that there was an adjustment period, I thought it safer to experience such a thing during the summer. After what happened to Miss Parkinson and Miss Granger, however…” Filius narrows his eyes. “Yourself, Salazar, Severus, and Minerva are the reason why those two girls had a timely rescue. Without the awareness of the school’s magic, no one would have come to their defence.”

“Titled protector of this school,” Nizar points out, making a third cup of tea. He must still be drained from the stupid Sheep’s Clothing hex; he wasn’t tired after tying Severus and Minerva into Hogwarts’ magic.

“Yes, but if you weren’t here—the Heads of House, properly tied to Hogwarts, would be the first line of defence,” Filius says. “I don’t want anything like that attack to ever happen again, but I’m no fool, either. We’re on the verge of a major magical war that is beginning within these very halls. I’d rather be in a position to help prevent injuries, not learn about them after it’s too late to assist at all.”

“Speaking of assistance, did anyone ever get the Carrows to stop floating?” Nizar asks.

Filius sighs. “Salazar must have sufficiently distracted Miss Lovegood. They returned to the ground this morning. Rather abruptly, too. I’m still not certain if they should be granted the same detentions our other troublemakers are suffering, or if lacking gravity for two days is punishment enough.”

“I’ve put them in detention six times on my own for the way they behave in class. Severus is ready to ask Argus to hang them from the ceiling. Detentions, Filius. How many is up to you, but gods know we’ve got to do something to keep them occupied and away from malicious mischief.”

Nizar continues to keep an eye on their trouble-making Baby Death Eaters—the ones they’ve caught, at least—throughout the rest of the week. Hopkins, Midgen, and Turpin are behaving themselves. Vincent is carrying on with his detentions as if it’s no different from what he’d usually be doing. The Carrow twins are sullenly cleaning a seemingly endless supply of cauldrons. Miss Prewett is with Flitwick, sorting Charms supplies. Chambers is starting to look a bit too exhausted to
contemplate any sort of revenge. Miss Davis, Miss Branstone, and Miss Thatcher, their other three conspiring idiots, have been kept separate after they quarreled when they were meant to be cleaning, started dueling, and wrecked half of a classroom. Since then, they’ve been quiet and well-behaved, if moody and resentful.

He wakes up on Friday morning and feels an impending feeling of something crawling under his skin. Excellent. He loves starting the day with that sensation lodged like a dagger between his shoulder blades.

Nizar stumbles out of his bedroom to have tea in the sitting room and walks directly into Severus. “Ow.”

Severus steps back, rubbing his chin. “How is your skull such a terrible instrument of destruction?”

“No idea. You are blocking the way to the tea.”

“Of course.” Severus smiles and makes a show of stepping to one side. “Perhaps consider widening your hallway?”

“Perhaps consider tea,” Nizar retorts. Between the itching dagger-feel in his back and a terrible night’s sleep, that is as coherent as he’s going to manage until he drowns himself in a teapot.

Nizar drinks two cups, makes himself eat one of the morning rolls, and then has another cup of tea. He almost feels capable of normal human interaction again. “Where were you last night?”

Severus is only now stirring his second cup of tea. “Good morning to you as well.”

“Good morning,” Nizar replies. “Or, wait. Was I supposed to go downstairs?”

“Neither, Nizar. I simply had one of my rare nights of being unable to sleep until very late, and I didn’t want to disturb you.” Severus picks up his teacup. “Have you awoken enough to realize what day it is?”

“Fucking guessing games?” Nizar scowls. “It’s Friday.”

“The date, Nizar.”

“This is revenge for Hanukkah, isn’t it?” Nizar asks.

Severus smiles at him over his teacup, his eyes filled with pleased warmth. “Of course it is.”

Nizar has to admit that he probably deserves this. A bit. “First day of March.”

“And?”

Nizar gives him an angry, baffled glare. “And, what?”

“Does this particular day always draw out this sort of peevishness?” Severus reaches across the table, resting his hand palm-up on the tabletop. Nizar eyes it warily before he finally places his hand over Severus’s fingers.

Severus gives Nizar’s hand a gentle squeeze. “Happy birthday, you complete idiot.”

“Is it?” Nizar blinks a few times. “Oh. Well, I don’t know if I’m prone to being a morose, cranky prick on my birthday or not. I do know that in this particular instance, I’d forgotten all about it.”
“Fortunately, the rest of us were paying attention.” Severus slides his thumb along the top of Nizar’s hand. “I have the entire morning free, as do you.”

“We do. We do, don’t we?” Nizar repeats as the realization begins to sink in along with the tea. “I hope you planned for it more than I did.” The only thing he’d planned to do with the day was to grade yet more Defence essays, delivered yesterday by clusters of half-panicked students with no true grasp of deadlines.

“I am not nearly as over-prepared as you were, but I believe I thought of something satisfactory.” Severus jerks back from the table as a rolled-up newspaper pops into existence and drops down onto the tea tray. “Others’ timing, however, leaves much to be desired.”

Nizar fishes the newspaper out of the scattered breakfast rolls and turns it until he finds a yellow note attached with some sort of glue strip. “Happy Birthday,” he reads, raising both eyebrows. “Salazar, this is actually concerning.”

“Open it,” Severus suggests. “I’d like to know what the Daily Prophet could possibly have done that Salazar thinks it to be an appropriate gift.”

Nizar pulls off the yellow square of paper and sticks it to the side of the teapot, where it proves that the adhesive strip is still doing its job. Then he unrolls the newspaper and sucks in a breath before smiling.

“Please do share with the rest of us,” Severus says dryly.

Nizar flips open the paper around to display the headline. “It’s a very nice gift, even if the second line sours the first a bit.”

Cornelius Fudge Retires from the Office of Minister for Magic, Claiming Poor Health

Albus Dumbledore Restored as Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot

Election for a New Minister for Magic to Take Place on 1st April

Contenders Rufus Scrimgeour, Amelia Bones, and Pious Thickness

Now Rivals for the Position of Minister for Magic!

Cornelius Fudge, long-standing Minister for Magic since 1978, successful candidate for Minister through three consecutive elections, has decided to tire at the age of 58 in order to concentrate on his poor health, representatives from the Minister’s Office reported early this morning. While this reporter cannot confirm the state of the former Minister’s health, it is known that Minister Fudge has been subject to failing public opinion as many of his dubious decisions during this governing term have come to light. Dementors in our beloved Hogwarts, among many other instances of willful endangerment of our youth, has convinced many in the Wizarding World that Fudge is not fit to be Minister. While no official action has been taken against former Minister Fudge, the public outcry may have been a dire contributor to the Minister’s claimed illness.

Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts, former Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards, has been temporarily reappointed as Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot while Wizarding Britain waits to elect its next Minister for Magic in a month’s time. The Wizengamot
will, of course, make certain that our government continues to run effectively, with care and concern for all of Wizarding Britain’s citizens.

* * * *

Severus finishes reading the article detailing the many—ludicrously untrue—reasons for Fudge to have left office before his current term is complete. Salazar was correct to call such news a gift, but it makes him thinks the other might not be nearly as impressive.

“I’d think you’d be far happier to read about Fudge running for his life,” Nizar says.

“It would be so much more satisfying if that was a literal running,” Severus mutters, standing up. “Salazar and I…collaborated.” Salazar calls it that, at least. Severus thinks it’s not a true collaboration when someone else does the majority of the work involved.

“Wait, on a gift?” Nizar asks in surprise.

Severus rolls his eyes. “Did you think no one would?”

“Much like forgetting it was my birthday, that had yet to cross my mind.” Nizar rolls the paper back up and sets it on the table. “Do I get to find out what this mysterious gift is?”

Severus holds up his hand, curling his fingers in a come-here motion. “This way, idiot.”

“I had tea. You don’t have to limit your instructions to that extent,” Nizar responds, tugging his loose silk shirt back into place as he follows Severus down the hallway. He tilts his head as he realizes their destination. “I’m not certain I want to know what possible gift the two of you could have collaborated on that involves my bedroom.”

Severus glares at him. “Was that really necessary?”

“Worth it for the look on your face!”

Severus growls under his breath and pushes open the bedroom door. “Just go inside while I remind myself that you have said and done far, far worse.”

Nizar steps into the room and halts in shock. “Oh,” he whispers, swallowing. “When did that happen?”

“The elves put it in here while you were distracted by tea.” Severus feels like his heart is caught somewhere in his throat. He desperately hopes this is not a terrible blunder.

Nizar steps barefoot onto the rug that now fills most of the room. It’s made of dark grey wool with an overlaid pattern of light grey, a magical working that Salazar has been swearing over since that damned Horcrux bled on and destroyed the original, ancient rug this one is designed to replace. Nizar paces the length of it by circling the bed, a look of intense, narrow-eyed concentration on his face.

Severus can’t stand the fucking silence. “Pensieves are useful things. I’d spent the most time in your sitting room recently, and recalled what it looked like. Your brother insisted on paying for the work. I hope it’s…I hope it isn’t an insult.”
“You always did have such an eye for remembering fine details,” Nizar whispers. “The feel of the magic in the weave is different, but the pattern is an exact match.” He finally looks up at Severus. “It’s not an insult, Severus. It may be one of the kindest gifts I’ve ever received.”

“I still can’t take full credit for it,” Severus says quickly, overwhelmed by the amount of gratitude in Nizar’s eyes. “Salazar complained for two months on how difficult it was to obtain a magically woven rug crafted to specific standards on such short notice.”

“I imagine most of the whinging was in direct response to the weaver’s whinging.” Nizar holds out his hand. “Please.”

Severus reaches out to grasp Nizar’s hand and is gently pulled forward until they’re both standing on the rug. “Yes?”

“Take off your boots,” Nizar says. “It’s easier to feel it that way.”

Severus frowns and does so, setting his boots aside on the stone near the door. Once his sock-clad feet are resting on the thick pile of wool, he can feel the faint tingling of magic beneath his feet. It’s nothing like the intensity of the ley line that led to Griffon’s Door, but it’s definitely noticeable. “I must not have been paying attention. I didn’t realize the old rug was like this.”

“You weren’t as sensitive to magic before the war mage title,” Nizar murmurs. “It’s still odd to walk through the sitting room and feel no hint of magic from the rug that the elves found for me last month. I hadn’t given a thought to replacing it, Severus, and I wouldn’t have thought to put it in here, either. It—this fits in here.”

Nizar looks up at Severus, his eyes overbright, but he isn’t weeping. “Thank you.”

Severus feels his shoulders begin to relax. Not a blunder. “You’re welcome.”

Nizar smiles, a much more mischievous expression putting in an appearance. “Is that all you’d planned for the morning, then?”

“Absolutely not—fucking hell!” Severus swears as he feels the charm in his pocket grow warm enough to gain his attention. “Someone needs me in my office. Given the note on my door, it’s either a Slytherin with an emergency, or an idiot who is about to regret their lack of reading comprehension.”

Nizar laughs. “Go. As you pointed out, we have all morning, and if not? Severus, it’s a Friday. We also have all night.”

Severus leans down and plants a kiss on Nizar’s smirk of a smile. “You’re entirely too reasonable. It makes me want to murder the deserving far less often.”

“The horror,” Nizar replies. “Go on. If it’s that dire, I’ll see you at lunch.”

Severus Apparates downstairs and discovers every single one of his Slytherin first-years lurking outside of his door in a panicked cluster. “Oh, this should be fascinating,” he says, and half of them flinch. “Why are you all here when you’re supposed to be in class?”

Miss Mortimer nudges Miss Dolohov, apparently of the thought that she needs to act as their vocal representative. Miss Dolohov swallows. “The—the seventh-years, sir.”

“Not all of them,” Ward interrupts, but he also has a death grip on Berrow’s elbow. “Just—Bole, Derrick, Peebles—and Pucey, too.”
All of them are Marked Baby Death Eaters, and all of them are trying Severus’s patience. He waves goodbye to the rest of his free morning and opens his office door, gesturing for his terrified flock of first-years to go inside.

Once the door shuts, Severus turns to face them. “Now: tell me what happened.”

* * * *


Nizar buries himself in his brother’s arms. “Gracias por ayudar con el tapete. También te amo.”

Severus joins them a moment later and tolerates the display for almost a full minute before testily reminding them that they’re blocking the way to the table. “Some of us would like to have lunch before heading off to deal with imbeciles!”

“Was it that bad this morning?” Nizar asks Severus.

“I would very much like to mute several idiots for the remainder of this term.” Severus looks to be contemplating murder. “Nothing unsurmountable. Just supremely irritating!”

Minerva smiles at him after Nizar sits down. “Happy birthday, Nizar. Has it been a kind day so far?”

“It has. I’m just glad Salazar behaved himself,” Nizar replies. “Sometimes he can be overenthusiastic.”

“No worse than you, hermanito,” Salazar responds, grabbing the coffee pot after he locates it on the table.

“How old are you?” Aurora asks politely. Nizar watches in amusement as most of the staff table tries to peer around everyone else in order to hear the answer.

“One thousand twenty-one. Or forty-three. It depends on how you want to look at it, really.” Nizar snatches the teapot away from Minerva before she can claim it first. She merely raises an eyebrow in irritation at being thwarted instead of glaring at him. If Minerva restrains her ire merely due to a date on the calendar, he’s going to be taking advantage of that next year.

“You should look at the stars tonight,” Salazar suggests. “I’m sure they’ll be enlightening.”

Nizar rolls his eyes. “Thou hast angered an idiot Dark Lord who wants you dead. I don’t need to read the sky to know that.”

Aurora frowns. “What do the stars have to do with Divination? That isn’t a part of Astronomy.”

Nizar and Salazar both lean forward to stare at her. “Please tell me that you’re joking,” Salazar finally says.

“I most certainly am not,” Aurora replies, miffed. “I’m aware that the centaurs divine by the stars, but that is for centaurs, not humans.”

Salazar buries his face in his hands and lets out a muffled groan. “That’s so much more explained than I knew before. Please, can someone at this table tell me who it was that took the necessary
magical lessons out of Astronomy?"

"Is there something wrong with learning the night sky on its own?" Aurora counters, still frowning.

"Not at all!" From the sound of it, Salazar is grinding his teeth. "But we’re on a spinning ball of dirt that orbits a solar body that is also always moving as it orbits a central point in this galaxy, and our galaxy is also orbiting a much bigger central point in the universe. That means everything you would be teaching in astronomy beyond basic astral identification and navigation applies to almost every single branch of magic in existence!"

"That was, almost word for word, one of Myrddin’s speeches the last time someone whinged about needing to learn proper astronomy," Nizar tells Severus in a low voice. "Not that it’s a bad speech, mind."

"If someone knows of the culprit and this person is not already dead, I might need to make certain it happens," Severus growls under his breath. "This is almost as frustrating as the Herbology failings. I spend so much time informing the blighters of things they should apparently already know!"

"It sounds like you wish to do away with my job," Aurora says.

"What—no! Don’t be ridiculous." Salazar scrubs his face before pouring another cup of coffee and slugging it back without adding sugar, making Nizar cringe. "After a student’s first two years, what you teach should advance to the many ways that knowledge of the heavenly bodies applies to all of the varying forms of magic."

Aurora is beginning to look intrigued, as is Filius. "That isn’t part of my job at all. To be honest, I’m not certain I would know how to teach those things, as I’m not aware of all of them, myself."

"Your role in this castle is valid," Salazar reassures her, "though your subject matter never advances beyond astronomical basics. It makes me want to tear out my hair that these students do not receive a proper education in these halls!"

"Salazar, if you don’t keep quiet, you’re going to be teaching every single class that’s missing from the curriculum, and it will be your own fault," Nizar says.

"Ah, the mysterious missing subjects." At least Dumbledore sounds genuinely curious. "I’m afraid I’m not privy to those numbers, but I would like to be."

Salazar grinds his teeth again. "I’ve done my best to drink away my knowledge of those gaps. You should ask Nizar."

Nizar digs around in his robe pockets until he finds the book with its class listings. "Right, the numbers were…thirty-seven primary subjects in magical and non-magical classes, with forty-six available magical masteries that were recognized in Britain one thousand years ago."

Sasha chokes on her tea, cleans off with a napkin, and then stands up to give him a horrified look. "Thirty-seven?"

"How many of those subjects were magical?" Dumbledore asks, a bit wide-eyed. "Not to disregard the non-magical necessity, but I’d like to know what magical aspects are missing."

"Thirty classes for twenty subjects, as several of the lessons were optional after learning the basics of a magical form." Nizar flips to the next page. "For example, basic healing potions was a class for anyone, as these were the brews and poultices that didn’t require magic to make. Then Potions became a magical subject for mastering the basics of magical brewing, and afterwards you would
seek an apprenticeship if you wanted to continue to learn. Transfiguration began with a basic class to introduce the concept, and then it became a primary subject before diverging into apprenticeships for Transfiguration, Animagi, or Metamorphmagi.”

“Transfiguration used to be taught similarly in Hogwarts, though that was more than fifty years ago. I was Head of the Transfiguration Department when we still had more than one teacher for the post,” Dumbledore says musingly. “Alas, we haven’t needed more than one teacher in quite a while. We taught Transfiguration classes for basic mastery of the magic to the young ones, then there was another teacher devoted to the third-, fourth-, and fifth-year students, and then myself at the time, teaching the N.E.W.T-level classes.”

Filius looks excited. “What were the non-magical courses?”

Nizar has to flip two more pages to find the list. “Reading and writing—”

“Which we fortunately do not need to reintroduce,” Salazar grumbles.

“—maths, Herbsology—yes, it was a non-magical subject, as anyone could learn it, Pomona. The rest of magical herbal lore was taught in Potions. Then there is the aforementioned basic healing potions, the basics of Astronomy, map-reading, Magical Theory, Elemental Magical Theory, Weather-reading, Ethics, Diplomacy, Sciences, History, Writing, the learning of at least two other languages, Algebra, Geometry, Rune-reading, Geography, and caring for non-magical creatures.”

“Why is the discussion of magic still prevalent?” Pomona asks, still miffed over the idea of her subject matter not being considered a magical class.

Salazar gives her an irritated look. “Because we hosted your cruelly named squibs in Hogwarts, Pomona Sprout. They needed to know the theories of magic even if they could not use a wand. Many of them were capable of mastering what magic they had, and denying them that education was and is wrong.”

“If those are the old standards, what would you add to the non-magical roster in our time?” Filius asks. Nizar gives him a brief look of approval; it’s a very good question.

“Economics and government as a paired subject. Ecology, though I suppose ecology could be folded in with the study of non-magical creatures,” Salazar answers. “The sciences would be a bit more specific than they used to be. A class for the non-magical-born students to introduce them to magical culture, and the same in reverse for the magical students instead of that bigoted bit of separation known as Muggle Studies.”

“I beg your pardon!” Charity squawks in outrage.

Salazar doesn’t look impressed. “Charity Burbage, you have a telly in your room that you tell your students is a modern device, yet it’s fifty years out of date—and yes, that truly does matter. You don’t know your subject nearly as well as you think. I know your own non-magical-born students have tried to correct your misconceptions, and you’ve ignored their words despite their greater experience, as they actually live in the world you claim to teach of. There should be a class of one to two years in length designed to inform magical-born students of what they do not know about their fellow students, not an elective that is full of so much misinformation it makes me suspect it to be deliberate.”

“Oh, I see. So you’re sacking me, then,” Charity says with an air of great dignity.

Salazar lets out an irritated sigh. “Don’t be ridiculous. You could easily teach the classes for the non-
magical-born students as well as the magical students… if you bother to learn what a non-magical life is actually like. I’m tired of seeing the continuation of this bloody separation between our worlds, this ridiculous notion that Wizarding Britain resides on another planet! And yes, truly, your subject matter bears a bigoted name. As my brother is fond of telling others, Muggle is a slur and an insult, even if it sounds nicer than the more infamous Mudblood.”

Charity subsides, fuming quietly to herself. Poppy peers around her. “Where did the term come from, then?”

“Genghis Khan,” Nizar says, starting to smile. “Idiot magicians traveled the road to the East and met with the Imperial Court while the Xi Xia Empire was dealing with the united Mongolyn tribes. Barbarians, the Chinese called them. Barbarian Mongols. By the time those travelers returned to Britain, barbarian and Mongol had become synonymous terms in their minds. After the old languages had their way, Mongol became Muggle. Therefore, the term is bigoted and racist, and I’d thank you all to stop using it.” Nizar turns to Severus, grinning. “I’ve been trying to remember that for years!”

“Congratulations,” Severus says dryly. “You now might actually make headway with about five percent of Wizarding Britain’s population.”

“Mongol barbarian. Muggle.” Filius nods. “Yes, I could see that becoming an easy shortcut. The English language is known for doing that often in regards to crafting new words.”

“It’s just a bloody word,” Charity mutters.

“Oh, yes, it’s a word. A word designed to deride, to mock, to separate. To diminish,” Salazar responds in a cold voice. “Ask a magician with black skin how they’ve felt about certain words that were applied to them. Ask a gay man what it’s like to be called certain words. Ask an entire community of people like the Roma what it’s like when those words are used to make them vulnerable to persecution and murder for merely being who they are.”

Hagrid speaks up from the other side of the staff table, but someone must have done something to shield their conversation from the students—no one reacts when his words boom out at full volume. “What about the International Statute of Secrecy, then? How does that bit apply to all of this?”

Hagrid, you are one of my best students, Nizar thinks, pleased. It’s well-timed, too; sparks are starting to appear in the air as Salazar’s temper begins to fray.

“That Statute, for one, is not international at all,” Salazar answers. “There are many countries that do not adhere to it, no matter what your Ministry has to say on the matter. As to its original intent: the Statute was written only to say that non-magical beings should be kept from learning about the existence of magicians and magical communities in Britain. It has absolutely nothing to do with isolating yourselves from the rest of the world.”

“I see.” Dumbledore peers over his spectacles at Salazar. “What do you intend to do in regards to these interesting gaps in Hogwarts’ schooling?”

Salazar’s answering smile is grim and determined. “My brother is fond of saying that he does not want to see easily slaughtered sheep, but capable magicians. I feel similarly. I’ve seen my school stagnate for centuries, Albus Dumbledore, and I won’t stand for it. Not anymore.”
Miss Granger drops by his classroom after three o’clock that afternoon. “Hello, sir.”

“Hello, Miss Granger. What can I do for you?”

She hesitates before reaching out to shut the classroom door. “Er, well. Happy birthday, Nizar.”

Nizar drops his quill and sighs. “Who’s been spreading tales?”

“I don’t think Professor Salazar is spreading tales so much as telling a few specific individuals,” Hermione says, putting her bookbag down on the seat of a desk. “He did make certain to tell me in private. It’s not proper, you see.”

Nizar gives up on the idea of grading his remaining essays for the moment. “What isn’t proper?”

“Giving a teacher a gift.” Hermione reaches into her bag and holds out a square shape wrapped in silver paper. “Like this.”

He takes the gift from her, suspecting by the flex in shape that it’s a book. “Not proper. Is that why it was a mob who descended to present that blank printing book before the Winter Solstice?”

Hermione nods, smiling. “They couldn’t punish all of us for it, especially as it’s more of an unspoken rule rather than an official one. Teachers giving students gifts is favoritism, and vice versa. Though to be honest, that didn’t stop Professor McGonagall. She broke school rules, put you on the Quidditch team in first year, and bought you a broom,” she explains. “Oh, and I think you got her something for Christmas last year, but you never said what it was.”

“At least I’d already learned something of subtlety, then,” Nizar mutters, sliding his fingers beneath the seam of paper and adhesive to pry it open. Inside are two books, not one. He can tell at once that they’re non-magical printings, like his borrowed copies of Dracula and The Portrait of Dorian Grey that he swiftly put back into the bloody Lost and Found box. The two books have colorful, glossy paper covers rather than leather, though the titles are concerning. Dragonsbane and Dragon Search. Tell me these aren’t about killing dragons.”

“No! Absolutely not,” Hermione replies, startled. “Those aren’t the original titles, anyway. The author and the books are American, but I couldn’t get American printings on short notice. The original titles are Dealing with Dragons and Searching for Dragons. They’re technically books meant for young teenagers, but they are…” She pauses, face scrunching up. “They’re satire, but not really. It’s sort of humorous commentary on ridiculous social standards set against the watered-down Western ideas of ‘safe’ nursery tales.”

“I was already interested the moment you said satire, Hermione.” Nizar takes a glance at the back covers, which have summaries of the plot. That is useful; magical books should do that. “Besides, I don’t mind nursery tales. I’ve had to read quite a number of them.”

“Why would you be reading nursery tales?” Hermione asks.

Nizar puts the two books down on his desk. He’s going to be rewarding himself with fiction when he’s done grading, and for once, it isn’t fiction that will have ridiculous connections to his life. He hopes so, anyway. “Brice and Elfric. They didn’t yet know how to read when I adopted them, so I read aloud to them every evening until they learned. Galiena pretended she didn’t want to listen, as she could read the stories for herself, but she would always eavesdrop.”

“Oh.” Hermione bites her lip. “You didn’t need to teach Galiena?”
“Gods, no.” Nizar smiles. “She knew how to read before we ever met. She spoke three languages at age six…not that I currently recall what those languages were aside from Old English.”

“Not Parseltongue?”

“Not until after the magical adoption.” Nizar realizes that he’s forgotten a step. “Thank you. For the gift.”

Hermione grins at him and then flings herself at him. Nizar mock-rolls his eyes. “More hugging?”

She nods without letting go. “More hugging!”

George and Fred stop by after five o’clock. Nizar looks at the three essays he has left and puts them aside. “What do you want, troublemakers?”

“Who’s had time to make trouble? We’ve only been product-testing!” George declares.

“And that has earned you how many detentions that Professor McGonagall was kind enough to schedule at times when I didn’t need you?” Nizar asks dryly.

“Lost count,” Fred replies. “Do you mind a small crowd, Your Leadership, sir?”


Nizar opens a drawer to place the remaining essays, his quill, and the ink pot inside before shutting it again. “Let me guess. Salazar told you, as well.”

“Might’ve done,” Fred says while George goes to the door, waving in Nizar’s entire seventh-year class. Miss Johnson and Miss Parangyo are carrying something in a long and shallow rectangular container.

“Does it explode if you take the lid off?” Nizar asks them after they’ve placed the container on his desk. At least he was sensible enough to have put everything away before the invasion.

“No!” Miss Parangyo protests.

“Well, sort of,” Jordan says, helping Fred remove the lid. Nizar gets a brief glimpse of a lot of candles before they all ignite at once.

Nizar raises both eyebrows at the sheet of flame in a box. “Excellent; you’ve brought me a contained bonfire.”

Miss Parangyo sighs as if put-upon. “It’s a cake.”

“A birthday cake,” Gupta adds, his arm slung around Miss Chang’s shoulders. She isn’t trying to hex him limbless, so they must have become friends. He rather doubts they’re dating; Miss Chang still suffers intense bouts of grief over Diggory.

Miss Applebee grins. “One thousand twenty-one candles!”

“You couldn’t have stuck with forty-three?” Nizar gets out his wand and casts a charm to be certain the smoke is Banished into nothing once it reaches a certain height.

“What, and ignore a thousand years of experience? That’s just not on, sir,” Miss Fairbourne says cheekily.
“I’ll forgive your bringing me my own personal bonfire if you do the very same to Salazar on twenty-eighth December.”

“It’s a cake!” Miss Parangyo insists. “Not a bloody bonfire! Now make a wish and blow out the stupid candles before they set the cake on fire!”

“You don’t rush wish-making. That leads to botched wording and terrible problems if you ask for the opposite of what you intended. Deflammo.” Nizar watches in relief as the bonfire is extinguished.

“That is bloody cheating, it is,” Fleet mutters.

“Do I look like a dragon to you?” Nizar counters. “Next time, just bring an actual bonfire and leave the poor cake alone. Were you sneaking down to bake with the elves again, Miss Parangyo?”

“Nonsense!” Miss Parangyo smiles. “There’s nothing of sneaking about it. I simply go down the stairs.”

“Is it safe, or is it scorched?” Miss Shah asks.

Fred reaches down, gingerly touches the edge of the cake, and then uses both hands to lift up a literal sheet of wax with the remains of one thousand twenty-one candles jutting out of it. “The charm worked exactly as it was supposed to! The wax never landed on the cake at all.”

“That’s disappointing. I do like my wax-covered cake,” Gupta drawls. “What kind is it, Ona?”

“Orange cake,” Miss Parangyo announces proudly.

“Well, we can see that it’s orange…” Miss Spinnet ducks away from Miss Parangyo’s elbow. “I’m joking, I swear!”

Nizar looks down at the cake; to him it looks much more yellow than orange, with an odd hint of green. “Please do not make me eat modern confections on my birthday. I like my teeth where they are, not screaming and trying to climb out of my skull in self-defence.”

Miss Fawcett makes a face. “Oh, that’s a terrible mental image—George, don’t you dare come up with a hex for that! I will leave you hanging off the western battlements!” George hangs his head in a show of dejected disappointment.

“Don’t worry, I made it properly, sir,” Miss Parangyo says to Nizar. “I asked my mother. I used honey instead of sugar, fresh butter, less flour and more eggs, fresh oranges—oh, and I added cinnamon and black cardamom, because I could and it’s wonderful.”

Jordan nods. “I’m sold. We’re eating this cake.”

“All of it?” Miss Shah regards the length of cake warily. “Jordan, we’d die in the attempt.”

Jordan grins back. “But what a way to go!”

“Before you all attempt literal death by dessert, why did you bring a flaming cake to my office?” Nizar asks. He knows the answer, but he wants to hear the reasoning behind it.

Fred assumes a mock-serious pose. “Professor Salazar would like it if you stopped calling him old, or he’ll keep doing things like this to remind you that he isn’t the only one.”

“Professor Salazar’s portrait informed us in regards to the importance of the day, sir,” Miss Shah adds.
“Sal and his portraits are conspiring. Wonderful. Also, my brother seems to have forgotten that being offered flaming dessert isn’t a punishment unless someone is trying to fling it at your face.” Nizar glances down at the cake. “I couldn’t convince you to actually fling this at him, could I?”

“I baked. A cake.” Miss Shah cuts out a square of it and thrusts it at Nizar. “No one is flinging my baking at anyone else!”

Fred and George look at each other. “Oh, bugger,” Fred whispers.

“We’ve been overlooking a niche market!” George yanks a quill and a piece of paper out of his robes. “Food fights! Actual food fights! What were we not thinking?”

“Congratulations, sir. You’ve given them a terrible idea,” Miss Johnson says.

“Please.” Nizar eyes the cake and gives in to the inevitable. “They come up with most of their terrible ideas on their own.”

“Well?” Miss Parangyo bounces on her toes after he finishes eating it. “You have to give me feedback!”

Nizar wipes crumbs from his fingers and glances at her. “Are you planning to do any sort of baking after Hogwarts?”

“Well, I’d planned to stay local, and there is an astonishing lack of cultural food diversity in Wizarding Britain. I had thought about it, but hadn’t decided,” Miss Parangyo replies.

“If you decide to do so, please let me know. I’ll give you the money to start a baking business just to avoid the bland repetition of English food.”

Miss Parangyo squeals and hugs him. “Thank you! I’ll definitely think about it!”

“Why would you need money for that, Ona?” Miss Spinnet asks. “You’re wealthy!”

“No, my parents are wealthy,” Miss Parangyo corrects her. “I will be well off right up until the moment my parents discover I want to remain in Britain, after which I will be completely buggered and penniless.”

“Huh. I’d wondered why you hoarded every single Galleon your parents sent you,” Miss Shah says.

Miss Parangyo nods. “Don’t get me wrong. I love my home. I love Nairobi and Kenya…but I like it here. Even with a magical war likely to break out at any moment, this place has potential. I’d love to be one of the people to help drag Wizarding Britain out of the magical Stone Age.”

“Oh, I’m all for that,” Miss Chang says before biting into another square of cake. She’s managed to capture three pieces so far on her own. Nizar suspects none of these students are going to bother with dinner.

“Change can definitely be a good thing,” Fleet agrees. He seems intent on studying the cake more than eating it.

“Or chaos,” Miss Fawcett says, eying the Weasley twins.

“Yes, but that’s useful chaos!”

“Are you wealthy enough to bankroll businesses on a whim, sir?” Jordan asks.
“I’m not wealthy, I’m well-off.” Nizar grins. “I also know how to write contracts to ensure I see a proper return of my investment.”

“Which is entirely as it should be,” Miss Parangyo agrees.

Dinner is a staff table full of discontent teachers who are either insulted by the need to restructure classes, or want the modern restructure and have no idea how to go about it, or who are just angry that things will change. No other reason—just a despicable hatred of change. Nizar resolves to avoid Pomona, Barnaby Harper, Quintinus Stirling, Charity, Septima Vector (who is insulted about the need for other types of maths), and Eustas Viridian with the same dedication in which he and Salazar are both avoiding Cuthbert Binns.

If Dumbledore has an opinion, he’s keeping it to himself, but he doesn’t act as if he disfavors the idea of restructuring the school for better learning. In that, Salazar is correct—Dumbledore is a decent Headmaster for Hogwarts as a whole. He just shouldn’t be trusted with an individual’s welfare. Ever.

Aurora spends the dinner hour excitedly babbling at Salazar about advanced notions of Astronomy. Nizar is relieved to discover she does know what satellites are. She just doesn’t know how to teach others about them when it comes to starting with basic concepts. Minerva looks grimly satisfied by the idea of the return of a Transfiguration Department, and not only because she would be the automatic choice for its Head. Filius, after discussing it with Nizar, is all but salivating over the idea of adding Enchantments back to the Charms curriculum. Cassandra is pleased that magical philosophy would be an expanded subject of discussion rather than a single year’s brief study. Poppy adores the notion of bringing back Healing as a subject offered to underage students, as she’s always wanted the opportunity to teach others. Rolanda has promised to corner Nizar in terms of discussing Wood-Speaking, and Nizar knows exactly who to blame for that particular revelation. He is not a bloody Wood-Speaker! He just happened to take detailed notes.

Hagrid likes the idea of non-magical creature care as an additional part of what he teaches to the younger years, as some of them have no idea what to do with owls, cats, rats, or any of the other myriad animals they bring to Hogwarts as pets and familiars. Bathsheda is frowning and thinking her way through the notion of teaching squibs how to read runes, as runes do not only apply to spells. Nizar thinks she’ll go for it after the introspection, as it would give Bathsheda more classes of students to literally babble at non-stop. Sybil already teaches by increasing skill level, but Salazar says she’s gaining a much better sense of how to do so while avoiding the previous rubbish. Sasha has always instructed her students in magical and non-magical art, so she isn’t a difficulty. Argus Filch hasn’t weighed in, but he’s been sitting in his usual corner, wide-eyed and endlessly stroking his cat, since he heard Salazar declare that it’s wrong not to teach Squibs. It makes Nizar wonder if Argus has children that he’s hidden away, schooling them in the non-magical world so they never have to face the prejudices and hardships that led to Argus’s supremely bitter state.

Apparition is going to be one of the sticking points, given the Ministry’s ridiculous age restrictions and licensing. Licensing! Nizar knows just from what little he’s witnessed that Apparition is not like driving a stupid fucking automobile. The idea of needing a license for only one type of magic smacks of the Ministry’s need to control every aspect of Wizarding Britain.

At least Severus is quietly thrilled by the idea of Potions being split into its proper sections. Nizar knows he’ll never admit it, but Severus likes the idea of teaching potions that don’t require magic to the first-years. Fewer explosions and traumatizing disasters.

Blood Magic. Necromancy. Learning how to make and break curses. Warding. Flight. Getting zoikóthropy students back into Hogwarts without bigoted parents and the Ministry losing their collective minds. Those are going to be the worst difficulties, and that’s aside from the headache that
is teaching elemental magics.

He’s back in his office afterwards, contemplating the idea of skipping the rest of his office hours that evening, when Miss Granger skids back into the classroom. “I finished it!”

“Finished what? Wearing out the bottoms of your shoes?” Nizar smiles as she flings the door shut and bounces over. “You’re monopolizing me.”

“Nonsense! Not any more than I did previous to last week.” Hermione grins and holds out another, much more familiar book. “I finished the editing!”

Nizar accepts the printer’s book in which he meticulously recopied and rearranged Brice’s ingenious thoughts on Defence. For every place there is need for correction, Hermione placed a flat sheet of paper in between those pages, the notations marked with page and line number. It looks like most of the errors are contending with his bad habit of using spelling that is several centuries out of date.

“I didn’t want to mention it earlier,” Hermione is saying. “I thought I might be done today, but I didn’t want to rush it, just in case I wasn’t…but it is! It’s done.”

He closes the book and holds it between his palms, feeling the hardbound leather press against his skin. “Thank you. Would you consider doing the same if I ever figure out how to edit Elfric’s work into a cohesive narrative?”

Hermione nods at once. “Of course, absolutely! Is it taking longer because he wrote more than one?”

“Not exactly.” Nizar puts down the book with Hermione’s edits and picks up a much older, far more battered book. He opens it to the page he was working on and holds it up for her inspection.

Hermione frowns and peers closer at the pages. “All right, the Old English isn’t bad, but—wait. Is he cross-referencing other books? Wait, which books? His books or other books? How did he keep up with all of that? Was he mental?”

Nizar smiles. “A little bit of all of that. This is what’s slowing me down. Brice was far more logical in his thoughts. Elfric would leave himself thousands of notes for one paragraph.” He closes Elfric’s ancient, disastrous idea of a book and puts it back down on his desk. “I’ll get it put together eventually.” He doesn’t have much choice. This year Nizar could cheat; next year he’ll be dealing with students who will have dealt with him for most of a term already, and they’ll need the challenge.

“You’ve mentioned Brice and Elfric having books. Did Galiena ever write anything down?”

“Absolutely.” Nizar gets up, finding the right book on the shelf before letting it thump down on his desk.

“It’s gigantic,” Hermione says of the massive, leather-bound tome. “Are those ancient Norse designs on the front?”

“No, these are the originals that the Norse borrowed from.” Nizar opens the heavy cover and flips through several pages until the true part of the book begins. “And this is why.”

Hermione’s eyes widen as she looks at the illuminated manuscript. The printing is still stark black and gold-edged; the figures and animals, drawn in the same style as the designs gracing the front, wander freely along the wide margins that surround the text on all four sides. “Wow. What language—is this Pictish?”

“It is.” Nizar places his finger on the first line. “This is an accurate record of the ones who sing with
magic among the Pecht tribes of the north. These are the magical teachings of the Venicones, the
Vacomagi, the Decantae, the Taexali and the Epidii, all that remain of what were once the great
kingdoms of Kait, Fidakh, Fortrin, Ke, Kirkinn, Fotia, Fib, and Verteru.”

“You can read Pictish.” Hermione lets out a high-pitched squeal of excitement. “You can interpret
the writing on the old stones! You could tell everyone what they say!”

“Hermione, the magical world might believe me, but the non-magical? You do recall what scholars
are like, yes?”

Hermione lets out a resigned sigh. “Yes, I know. You’re not white, you have no explanation for why
you can read them, and you’re not white.”

Nizar glances at her. “It’s truly disheartening that you felt the need to point out that I’m not pale-
skinned twice. At least one thousand years ago, such a thing wasn’t a concern. I could just use
language to hammer a stubborn scholar into the corner of ‘You are wrong, please shut up.’”

She cheers up a bit at that. “You only mention five tribes remaining from eight kingdoms of Picts.
I’ve always heard that there were nine Pictish kingdoms. Oh, and I’m pretty sure those are Roman
names, not Pictish ones.”

Nizar smiles. “Please never stop being a devoted academic. Pict is technically an incorrect term,
though by the late 900s, they’d bloody well given up on convincing anyone to call them otherwise.”

“Like Slytherin,” Hermione points out, grinning.

Nizar rolls his eyes. “You don’t always have time to argue with someone about your name. Look:
the original term sounded similar, but was an all-encompassing Pictish word for all of their people—
past, present, and future. These tribal names are the old Roman terms because if they used their own
names, no one knew who they were speaking of any longer. When I wrote the words that Galiena
would later turn into this book, these five small tribes I mention were the only Picts remaining in
northern Britain. The Venicones had one last magician when I was young. It didn’t take long at all
for the remaining tribes to disappear into the teeming masses of the Gaels and the Norse. Their
magical enclaves lasted a while longer, but I’d say they were all gone by the twelfth century.”

“That’s really just awful,” Hermione says. “To just watch an entire people just…just end!”

“It was hard to watch.” Nizar lets his fingers brush against one of the moving animals, which stops to
investigate his finger. “You can’t stop the loss of an entire people when it’s centuries too late by the
time you learn of it happening.” He steps back and lets Hermione turn the pages, studying the book
while the magical illustrations lose track of their boundaries and start wandering across the text.

Hermione tries to nudge one of the larger illuminated figures away from the words. “Were you ever
going to tell anyone you could remember Pictish?”

“Eventually, I suppose. It might be useful for magicians to learn Pictish again, if only in the historical
sense. I don’t think I’d say much about Pictish magic, though,” Nizar answers.

Hermione looks up at him. “Why?”

Nizar gently closes the book. “It’s dangerous. I don’t mean it’s dangerous in the same way Blood
Magic can be dangerous, either. That one is sort of a given. Pictia Magia can do things that are
amazing, and it can just as easily do things that are incredibly destructive to the fabric of existence.”

“And you learned this?” Hermione squeaks, her mouth hanging open.
“Someone had to.” Nizar puts Galiena’s illuminated Pictish book back on the shelf. “There was still the chance that there were magicians in the world capable of the same magic. Someone had to know how to stop them, Hermione. Gedeloc of the Venicones trusted my word when I said that I would.”

“Britanni Bellum dux Magum, Defender ex Britanni Insulis,” Hermione whispers.

Nizar smiles, hoping the expression isn’t bitter. “Yes. Exactly so.”
Chapter Summary

It's a Hogsmeade weekend. Of course someone gets punched.

Chapter Notes

I'm fundraising again and I said I would post a chapter for every goal met, so... here you go?

Fundraising details and Whys are on my tumblr, @deadcatwithaflamethrower

(betabetabetabeta credit: @norcumi, @mrsstanley, @sanerontheinside, & @jabberwockypie)

“You’re going with Malfoy. You’re going to Hogsmeade with Malfoy.”

Hermione rolls her eyes. “For the eighth time since I told you last weekend: yes! Why do you suddenly have a problem with Draco again, Ron?”

“I don’t—really—you hit him in third year!” Ron sputters, refusing to admit that Hermione has a point. All of the reasons he can think of to claim this as a bad idea are stupid reasons.

Hermione smiles at Ron with perfectly polite cheek. “Which means Draco knows I can knock his teeth out if he ever steps out of line, doesn’t he?”

“Right. Okay. My best mate is going to Hogsmeade with Malfoy. On a date.” Ron takes a deep breath. “I can handle this.”

“Oh! Granger’s going with Malfoy!” Ron hears Blishwick exclaim, and tries not to cringe. How someone manages to squeal while sounding completely evil, Ron has no idea. He used to think Pansy was a master of it, but, no, Pansy and Hermione just went shrill in different ways when they were younger. Blishwick is the master of evil squealing.

Hermione’s eyes narrow, but she somehow keeps that polite expression in place. “Can I help you with something, Blishwick?” she asks sweetly.

“Oh, no! Nothing at all. It’s just fascinating to see that even a Mudblood is willing to spread her legs for Malfoy money—”

The next thing Ron knows, Blishwick is on the floor with both hands over her broken, bloody nose, and his hand hurts.

Oh. He punched her. That’s probably not good.

“Do something!” Lavender exclaims, staring up at Ron in dismay. “She’s hurt!”
“She just called my best mate a Mudblood and a whore. You do something,” Ron retorts.

“You’re a Prefect!” Dunbar yells at Hermione as she marches over with a wad of handkerchiefs for Blishwick’s nose. “You’re supposed to punish someone when they do this!”

Hermione sweeps on her scarf. “Do what? I didn’t see anything.”

“Then I’ll tell someone,” Lavender says in fury, abandoning Blishwick to be tended by Dunbar.

Hermione sighs as the portal door slams shut behind Lavender. “Come on, then. We might as well go straight to Professor McGonagall’s office. It’ll save time.”

“Or we could run off to Hogsmeade and deal with this mess when we get back,” Ron suggests as they exit the Common Room. It’s too bad almost everyone was already out of the room for the day. He might have gotten applause for that. Or he would have had his arse handed to him for hitting a girl.

Then again, it’s Blishwick. It might’ve been both. Still worth it, though.

“Professor McGonagall would just come out to retrieve us from Hogsmeade, and that’s worse. Think politically, Ron! Gryffindor’s fifth-year Prefects can’t be seen getting caught in public that way. Better to do it in private.”

“And that’s why you’re going into politics, and I’m running away in the opposite direction,” Ron says.

Hermione smiles. “Is now a bad time to mention that Aurors have to deal with politics, too?”

“It’s always a bad time to mention that!”

When they get to McGonagall’s office, Lavender Brown must have just finished her tirade, or screaming, or whatever it is she did to inform on them. She’s frazzled and panting for breath.

For some reason, Lavender doesn’t look angry when she sees them. She just seems surprised.

*Girls*, Ron thinks in near-despair. He’ll never understand them.

Hermione has that overly polite expression back on her face. “I imagine you wanted to see us, Professor.” She’s bloody terrifying, but Ron’s known that since their first year.

“You would imagine correctly. Thank you for not making me hunt you down in the village today.” McGonagall does the Peering Over Her Glasses bit, even though she hasn’t worn spectacles in months. “Is it true that you ignored a student altercation, Miss Granger?”

“I didn’t ignore it. I simply didn’t witness it,” Hermione replies. “I’d turned away to leave.”

“I see.” McGonagall looks at Ron. “Is it true that you hit Miss Blishwick, Mister Weasley?”

Ron shrugs; there’s no point in lying about it. “Yes, Professor. It’s true.”

McGonagall narrows her eyes. “It isn’t like you to hit other students, Mister Weasley, and definitely not ladies. Is there a reason you felt it prudent to break Miss Blishwick’s nose?”

“My fist might’ve taken offence to something she said about Hermione, Professor.” Ron glances at Lavender, who hasn’t contradicted them, and he gets an idea. Maybe he’s not political-minded, but he does understand strategy. “Lavender was right there. She’ll know what her friend said.”
“You didn’t mention that Miss Blishwick might have said something to instigate the affair, Miss Brown.” Professor McGonagall crosses her arms as Lavender bites her lip. “Please do finish enlightening me.”

“It’s…not very nice. I didn’t want to say,” Lavender whispers. Ron has to give her credit; either she’s genuine, or she’s a damned good liar.

“Trust me, Miss Brown. In my career, there is very little that I’ve not heard spoken of before, and probably in worse circumstances,” McGonagall says. “Be as exact as possible, please.”

“Bernicia said…she heard that Hermione was going to Hogsmeade with Malfoy today, so she…” Lavender looks really unhappy. “She said it was fascinating that even a Mudblood was willing to spread her legs for Malfoy money, Professor.”

“Did she?” McGonagall doesn’t even bat an eyelash. “Which part did you object to, Mister Weasley?”

“The slur and the spread legs bit,” Ron says, trying not to wince. “I mean, if Hermione does, that’s all her own thing, an’ none of my business. But Blishwick wasn’t saying it to tease, Professor. She was saying it same way she and Dunbar have been saying everything else of late—she meant it to hurt. I really did mean it when I said my fist had its own ideas about taking offence. I sort of blinked and Blishwick was bleeding.”

“I see.” McGonagall removes her hat, smooths her hair, and puts it back on. “Mister Weasley, ten points from Gryffindor for striking another student. It would be more, but in my day, it was proper to defend a lady’s honor, even if it was from another lady. I’d rather you not use your fists next time, Mister Weasley.”

She looks at Lavender. “Five points to Gryffindor, Miss Brown, for doing what you thought was right, even if you had to be encouraged to admit the whole of it. Unfortunately, Miss Blishwick’s comments have lost your House ten points. Given the rumors I’ve heard, I imagine she’s earned worse losses, but I made a grave error regarding House points in 1992, and I won’t be repeating it.”

McGonagall turns to Hermione. “Miss Granger, five points to Gryffindor for immediately coming here to deal with the situation properly. There will then be the matter of Miss Blishwick’s detention. Miss Brown, do let Miss Blishwick know that I wish to see her once she’s visited Madam Pomfrey in regards to her nose. Mister Weasley, is your hand damaged?”

Ron looks down at his right hand. His knuckles are bright red, but nothing hurts. “I think I might bruise up, Professor, but I’m all right.”

“Good. Now get out of my office, and do try to behave like responsible young men and women today in Hogsmeade.” McGonagall shoos them out of her office before shutting the door.

“She called me a Mudblood.” Hermione scowls as they walk down the corridor. Lavender follows a few hesitant paces behind them. “Why did Blishwick do that?”

“Blishwick called you a what?” Malfoy exclaims as he meets them at the stairs. “I’ll hex her ears off!”

“Oh, relax.” Hermione puts her hand on Draco’s arm. “Ron already broke her nose.”

“You did?” Malfoy gives Ron an approving look. “Good job, Weasley.”

“Punching people for saying that word is sort of a tradition,” Ron replies, grinning when Malfoy
flushes a little. “I’m just windin’ you up a bit, mate.”

“Right. Who earned detention for it?” Malfoy asks.

“Blishwick,” Hermione says. “I don’t think Professor McGonagall was fond of either of the things Blishwick said.”

“There was more than one thing?” Malfoy asks, frowning.

Hermione bites her lip. “Well…”

Malfoy raises an eyebrow. “One of you needs to confess. What did Blishwick say?”

“She said—” They all turn around when Lavender speaks up, sounding hesitant. “Bernicia said that Granger would be spreading her legs for Malfoy money.”

“Now I’m really glad you hit her.” Malfoy rolls his eyes. “Hermione’s parents are well-off even by non-magical standards, and she’s brilliant. Why in God’s name would she need my money? Or does Blishwick think that Pure-bloods fuck each other for money?”

Ron feels his face heat. “I dunno, some of our traditions have been pretty much that. It just involved marriage contracts first.”

“True,” Malfoy admits. “But I’d rather live in a civilized society. At least Kinjal’s marriage was properly arranged with someone she likes rather than…well. The alternative.”

“Ininitely preferable. Shall we go?” Hermione asks, tugging at her scarf. “I’m already dressed for the weather outdoors. I’ll melt if we stay in this castle much longer.”

Malfoy holds out his arm. “Absolutely. Weasley, if Blishwick opens her mouth and more of that filth pours out, I will pay you to hit her again.”

“Please. I’d do it for free, Malfoy.” Ron watches as Malfoy escorts Hermione down the stairs. From the sounds of it, they’ve already launched into politics. He doesn’t know if they’ll ever get around to any sort of snog-like dating, but they certainly can chatter about a hell of a lot of nonsense.

“You’re really not dating Granger?” Lavender asks.

Ron glances at Lavender, who is watching Hermione and Malfoy’s departure in confusion. “No. What makes you think I’d be dating my best mate?”

Lavender gives him a baffled look. “Who wouldn’t, Ron? Everyone was convinced the two of you were joined at the hip and snogging like your life depended on it after the Ball last term. We just couldn’t catch you at it.”

Ron snorts. “Lavender, by that measure, everyone should have been thinking we were doing the same with Harry.”

“Well…”

“Are you bloody serious?” Ron stares at her. “Just—doesn’t anyone have anything better to do? Besides, Harry is into blokes, and I’m definitely not.”

“I’m not certain Harry knew he was into blokes until the end of term—” Lavender flinches. “Sorry, I didn’t mean…”
“It’s fine. We all sort of figured that out.” Ron shoves his hands into his pockets. “Why do you hang around with Blishwick and Dunbar? They’re not very nice.”

“They’re, uhm…they’re my friends,” Lavender mutters.

“You like hanging about with people who call others Mudbloods, then?” Ron asks in a flat voice. “Given that you’re Muggle-born, Lav, I’d like to think you’d want to avoid that sort.”

Lavender points down the stairs. “She’s off to Hogsmeade with Malfoy!”

“Yeah, she is,” Ron says. “But Hermione punched Malfoy when he called her that in our third year, and he didn’t ever call her that again. Not directly, anyway, and—yeah, I’m pretty sure I know what that bit on the train last year was about,” he decides. Ron would be wetting his trousers in terror if he thought Voldemort was waiting for him at the Burrow like the world’s most terrifying uncle, and Malfoy had always gone the bravado route. Coming home with a tale about justly attacking a blood traitor, a Muggle-born, and Harry Potter would have been like carrying around a personal shield.

Bugger. Now Ron feels bad about hexing Malfoy unconscious on the train.

Not so much about Goyle and Crabbe, though. Neither of them look to have noticed that most of Slytherin House considers Voldemort to be their enemy.

“Malfoy’s gone to a great deal of trouble this term not to be a complete wanker. He couldn’t hold a magical title in Britain if he was still a twat, Lavender. I might be poor, but I’m still a Pure-blood. I know the traditions. The land would reject him if Malfoy was only doing it out of greed, or to help with someone’s daft scheme. It’s a bit of an advantage us magic-types have over Muggle nobility. They just have to be the eldest to inherit, but a wanker can’t inherit a magical title.”

Lavender glances down at the floor and then looks up at Ron through her eyelashes. He’s pretty sure she isn’t doing the bashful bit to play him, either. He can’t put his finger on why he knows, but Professor Slytherin would probably say that it’s something about body language. “Are you—are you dating anyone?”

Ron blinks a few times in surprise. “Nah. S’not like anyone’s asked. Besides, look at me. I’m a ginger twig who’s still tripping over his own feet half the time. Who’d be interested?”

Lavender looks down at the floor again. “I am. Interested, I mean. I’d ask.”

Oh.

“Look.” Ron scrubs at his hair. “You’re pretty, Lav, and back when we first started school together, you were really nice. But as long as you’re hanging about with Dunbar and Blishwick while they’re saying that sort of shit about my best mate? You could be the richest, most beautiful girl in the entire bleedin’ world and I’d still tell you to bugger off. See you later.”

“Aren’t you off to Hogsmeade, Ron?” Pansy chirps at him when Ron finds her and Xavier Macnair on the second floor.

“I’m thinking about it. Not really sure I’m in the mood yet. You off?” Ron asks.

Pansy grins. “Sure am! You coming, Xavier?”

Macnair gives Pansy an adoring smile. “You lead, and I’ll follow.” Macnair takes Pansy by the arm and escorts her down the passage like Malfoy did with Hermione.
Ron stares after them, nonplussed. They’re bloody dating? When did that happen?

He next crosses paths with Millicent Bulstrode and Susan Bones, waving at them. Millicent smiles and Susan waves back with her left hand, not her right. Ron turns around to watch them walk down the stairs and notices that they’re…holding hands.

Right. That’s decided it. Everyone in the castle has lost their bloody minds.

* * * * *

“Well!” Hermione releases a sigh when she finally feels like the weather has helped her cool down, inside and out. “Did you have any unnecessary drama this morning?”

“No. I just had to escape Pansy trying to dress me,” Draco says, smiling. “I keep telling her that she’ll never outdo my mother for a sense of style, but she just takes it as a challenge.”

“Right.” Hermione hesitates, but his hand is still on her arm, escorting her into Hogsmeade like a gentleman. “Your mother. Is she…I mean, the politics of your situational rift aside, what would she say about me?”

“Situational rift,” Draco repeats. “You have such a way with words. Blaise is still cackling over pen plot.”

“I like accuracy,” Hermione says to defend herself, and then realizes Draco is trying not to smile. “Oh, you berk!”

“Theo’s vocabulary is spreading, too.” Draco smiles before it gives way to a thoughtful look. “Right now, she would consider many possibilities. Mother would see me dating someone born of non-magical parents and think it a show to further the apparent sign of a rift between mother and son. She might think that merely a side benefit and decide that I’m also slumming it with the common folk to see what it’s like. She might even suspect that we’re baiting some sort of trap for the Baby Death Eaters in the school.”

“You put a lot of thought into this,” Hermione says in surprise. She shouldn’t be shocked, but Slytherins still have an entirely different way of thinking that sounds far too complicated. Maybe she can convince Nizar to teach her how Court works.

Maybe she can also pray in the meantime that no one decides to discuss Harry around her for the rest of the year. That is quickly becoming so very, very awkward.

“I have to. Even if I don’t necessarily need to worry about who I marry anymore because of the magical title, I still have to deal with other Pure-bloods—and Mother is a Black. That will always complicate things.” Draco glances at the bookstore. “Would you like to go in, or perhaps tea first?”

“Madame Puddifoot’s is horrible,” Hermione protests. “I’d rather go to the Hog’s Head Inn than sit in that gaudy box of a tea shop.” She wonders if she can figure out how to introduce Draco to Aberforth Dumbledore, including Aberforth’s Slytherin status, without giving any part of the game away. Draco would be intelligent enough not to say anything about it to the wrong sort.

Draco smirks. “Please. There are much better places to go than Puddifoot’s. If I’m slumming it, then you can see how the upper crust lords their wealth over mere mortals.”
“Are you actually slumming it, then?” Hermione asks in an arch voice.

“I believe I would actually have to put forth some serious effort into finding someone truly disreputable enough for slumming to even apply,” Draco answers.

“Mundungus Fletcher.”

“Oh.” Draco tilts his head. “Do I even want to know why you’re capable of naming someone properly disreputable without needing to think on it?”

Hermione glances at Draco. “I saw him several times in London over the summer, visiting Grimmauld Place.”

“Ah,” Draco says in understanding. Hermione knows Draco is aware that the Order of the Phoenix exists, but it’s one of those things none of them talk about. Just in case. “Is this Fletcher useful, then?”

“That’s debatable.”

Draco leads them off of High Street and onto one of the quieter side streets where the village’s residents have their homes. He knocks on the door of the third home, which seems just like any other house, but then opens the door and leads the way inside without waiting for anyone to answer his knock.

A small foyer opens up into a large space with small tables placed around the room quite a distance from each other, giving a better impression of privacy. The torchlight and candles reveal dark, polished wood accented by white tablecloths and several folding screens of painted silk.

Hermione glances at the clothing the other patrons are wearing and resists the urge to flush. This is definitely a place for people with money. She is not poor, but she didn’t dress to impress anyone today. She dressed to be warm!

“Here.” Draco helps her remove her cloak, hanging it on the wall on an empty peg that Hermione suspects might be charmed to prevent theft. Then he does the same with his own cloak, revealing a grey jacket and trousers paired with a crisp black shirt.

I wore a hooded jumper, Hermione thinks in bemused despair. And denims. It’s a wonder the other customers aren’t getting out the pitchforks.

“Periwinkle.” Draco is smiling at her jumper. “You do look very nice in that color.”

Hermione blushes. She didn’t put a single thought into the color. “I—thank you. Though you look like you belong here. Fetching!” she corrects herself, wide-eyed. “I meant fetching!”

“There is no reason why it can’t be both,” Draco says, and then smiles at someone behind Hermione. “Madam Zhi!”

Hermione turns around to find a short, middle-aged Chinese woman approaching them. She has silver-streaked black hair, brown eyes, and a bright smile on her face. She’s wearing a shining blue cheongsam made of silk brocade, not the awful polyester satin Hermione can find in any cheap little “Asian” shop in London.

“Master Draco!” Madam Zhi greets Draco. “It has been too long. Was my tea not satisfactory during your last visit?”
“Your tea was absolutely superb, Madam Zhi,” Draco replies, bowing to the shorter woman instead of taking her hand. “There have just been some politics that have kept me away.”

Madam Zhi nods. “I know of such things, but we do not discuss politics in Madam Zhi’s tea parlor. Please. You both will come here, with me!”

Hermione follows, curious, as Madam Zhi leads them to a table in the far corner of the tea parlor with an elegant, gold-lettered Reserved sign on the tabletop. She taps the sign with her finger, causing it to vanish, before gesturing for Hermione and Draco to sit.

Madam Zhi Conjures two menus and hands them to Draco. “I will be back in ten minutes. Such decisions should be made carefully!”

“She seems nice,” Hermione says, accepting a menu when Draco hands it over. It feels lovely in her hands, made from a very thick rice paper. The ink bled across the page in a way that makes it look like she’s holding art.

“Madam Zhi is impartial, practical, expensive, and possibly the best tea brewer in Britain unless you go into London—and even then I have my doubts.” Draco flips his menu over to study the back. “Why are you nervous?”

“I’m really not…dressed. To be here.” A few of the other patrons have eyed her, but none seem affronted by her presence. They might just be really good at hiding it.

“Oh, the clothes don’t matter, trust me. They may be trying to figure out your blood status, but as I said, Madam Zhi is impartial. She doesn’t keep her business quiet out of prejudice, which used to drive my father absolutely mad. The truth is that Madam Zhi knows many of the students who might want to visit can not afford her prices. She doesn’t wish to disappoint them.”

“How do you know that?” Hermione asks. Then her stomach drop into her shoes when she notices that there are no prices listed. She’s been out with her parents on two occasions to very posh restaurants, and the lack of pricing is always a sign that you shouldn’t eat at that establishment unless you can afford not to care about the bill.

“I asked her,” Draco replies. “If you like astringent teas, stick to the top half of the menu. If you like them to be smooth, the lower half of the menu.”

Hermione nods, flipping the menu over long enough to realize that the backside is a list of savory hors d’oeuvres and sweet desserts. It’s a really costly replacement for lunch.

Breathe, Hermione reminds herself. She managed to go into Hogsmeade in Viktor’s company without hyperventilating over the fact that he insisted upon paying for everything. She can do it again. Pure-blood customs and non-magical customs agree on one thing: the person who did the inviting is the person who’ll be paying the tab. Draco knows exactly what he’s doing, how much it costs, and how much he can afford.

 Granted, once Draco inherits the Malfoy estate, he can probably afford to buy most of Wizarding Britain.

Hermione realizes Draco is staring at her, smiling. “What?” she asks. “What did I do?”

“For someone who insists that Slytherins think too much on plotting, I can all but hear you overthinking every single aspect of this,” Draco says. “Not that it’s a bad thing.”

“You’re right. I really am.” Hermione resolutely turns to her menu. “Do you have any suggestions
among the mellow teas?” A hot bit of chai would be nice, but none of these teas have the right sort of spice blends attached to the description. She doesn’t know what the drink is actually called to be able to request it, either.

“Anything listed as a black Dianhong—a Yunnan tea,” he answers. “That sounds nice, actually. Do you mind if I order for us?”

“That’s probably for the best,” Hermione admits, taking another look at the back of the menu. “The takeaway shops in London use English terms. I have no idea what most of these things are.”

“Takeaway?”

“If you’re going to order food to take home or have it delivered. We call it takeaway,” Hermione explains. “A lot of restaurants offer that service, though you have to live in their delivery area.”

“That sounds like a grand idea.” Draco grins. “I wonder if we could convince anyone in Hogsmeade to try it?”

“Like a Conjuring system? Or hiring someone to Apparate back and forth? Or a Floo ordering system?” That’s a discussion that distracts them until Madam Zhi returns, still just as bright-eyed and happy as before.

“You,” Madam Zhi says to Hermione. “You have my apologies. Another customer needed me, and I did not take the time to ask your name.”

“Oh, it’s no bother at all,” Hermione replies. She’s starting to like Madam Zhi, and hopes she isn’t a blood purist. “I’m Hermione Granger, Madam Zhi.”

“Hermione Granger!” Madam Zhi beams. “You will be the Defence professor’s next apprentice!”

“Er—it’s not a guarantee!” Hermione protests, and notices that Draco is hiding his face with one of the menus. He’s *laughing* at her, the twit! “It’s possible,” she says. “Wait. How did you know?”

Madam Zhi touches her finger to her lips and makes a shushing noise. “I have my ways, Miss Granger. Master Draco, you are both ready to order now?”

Draco orders them a Yunnan tea called *jīn yá diānhóng*. Then he mentions *jian dui, lou po beng, baozi*, and *zongzi*. “A variety of flavors, please,” he requests of Madam Zhi. “Dessert will be decided afterwards.”

Madam Zhi nods. “Of course, Master Draco.”

“You could try ‘mister,’ you know,” Draco says.

“But I’ve known you since age two.” Madam Zhi smirks at him. “I will call you mister when you marry.”

“I hope she wasn’t just implying that *we’re* going to marry,” Hermione says after Madam Zhi bustles off again. “We’re a bit young for that, even if Daphne seems to think otherwise.”

Draco frowns, but he looks concerned, not angry. “Daphne will probably have to negotiate her own marriage contract. She’s beginning now, when those eligible will be more likely to view her through the merits of friendship and Hogwarts association instead of her title. It will be more difficult to do that when she’s older. Besides, if she doesn’t have a contract before she turns seventeen, even one that delays the marriage by several years, her parents are going to push for her to marry someone
they choose. I wouldn’t trust Geronimus Greengrass to eat his own breakfast properly, let alone arrange a marriage.”

“Oh.” Hermione thinks that sounds much too complicated and terrible, but Daphne is setting to it with a grim sort of determination. “Did Mister Greengrass really try to arrange a marriage between you and Daphne?”

Draco makes a disgusted face. “God, yes. The utter blighter. He didn’t even discuss it with my mother! He just sent the offer by owl. Crass, rude, and unacceptable, and that’s aside from the fact that Daphne and I aren’t compatible in the slightest.”

Hermione rests her chin on her hand and grins at him. “Why not?”

“Because Daphne reminds me of my mother.” Draco shudders. “I love my mother, but I refuse to marry anyone who is so utterly like her!”

“Can I ask—what is your mother like?” Hermione has wanted to know, especially with this rift Drago has cultivated between them. Some days she’s not certain whose safety it’s meant to ensure, but Draco and Madam Malfoy have everyone outside their small inner circle of friends convinced that they entirely disapprove of each other’s choices.

“Intelligent. Cunning. Ruthless.” Draco pauses. “Exceptionally pragmatic. Cold to everyone she doesn’t like, and much like a true Black, she does not care for many. She loves me dearly, though she won’t ever let that sentiment interfere with her pragmatism. However, if Mother decides she likes someone, she will do everything in her power to support them, even if it means hiding the bodies of an entire Quidditch match’s worth of spectators.”

Hermione glances around the room and casts the privacy charm Professor Snape taught her. “It’s all right. *Muffliato*, she says. “No one will be able to make out what we’re saying.”

“*Muffliato*,” Draco repeats, brow furrowing. “I think I’ve heard that before. Professor Snape used it when visiting the Manor, I believe.”

Hermione wrinkles her nose. “He visits your house?” She’d very much prefer it if all of her teachers visited her home exactly never. Well. Perhaps after she’s graduated Hogwarts and uni, but not while she’s in school!

Draco nods. “Regulus Black, my cousin, was my godfather when I was born, but then he… disappeared. We know he’s dead, but no one knows how it happened. Professor Snape has never been officially written into documents as my godfather, but Mother considers him to be the only proper and intelligent replacement.”

Hermione does her best to bite back a smile. “I can’t see Professor Snape being willing to raise a child. At all.” It’s too easy to picture the sort of expression that would appear on the professor’s face at the very idea of parenting.

Draco laughs. “No, neither can I. Fortunately, I have a godmother, Great-Aunt Koralia. She’s my grandmother’s sister. She was the sanest woman my mother knew in those days outside of Aunt Andromeda, but there was no way my father was going to allow her to be my godmother.”

“Your cousin Tonks—she’s very nice,” Hermione says, not sure if she should. Draco is better about things now, but she knows exactly why Andromeda was burnt off the Black family tree.

“I’d like to meet her.” Draco sounds wistful. “Aunt Andromeda, Uncle Ted, and Cousin Tonks. It
was good to finally meet Cousin Sirius without being terrified out of my wits that he would murder me. It would be nice to have more family that isn’t batshit insane.”

Hermione stifles a giggle with her hand. “Batshit?”

“It’s a useful term and it’s accurate,” Draco stresses, but he’s smiling, too. “Crazy Aunt Bellatrix, Mad Uncle Rodolphus, and my father really do not count as family. Grandfather Cygnus, Grandfather Abraxus, and Grandmother Delphina are all deceased, and good riddance, too. The only downside in this is that I’ve all but run out of family.”

“You’ve got us,” Hermione says at once. “The Slytherins who aren’t stupid, and myself, and the Weasleys—I’m sure you’re related to them somehow, given how much your father hates them.”

“If I am, they’ve been burnt off the family tree.” Draco glances at her. “Why did you need a privacy charm? Though I do appreciate not speaking of this where anyone can listen.”

“Er…the comment about the stadium’s worth of bodies to hide.” Hermione has no idea how to say this diplomatically. “Your mother used to be fond of Voldemort.”

Draco flinches. “Please don’t say his name. And yes, she did. Given what I’ve overheard, and what Mother has been willing to say on the matter, I think she’d stopped being fond of the Dark Lord well before the last war ended.”

Hermione glances around to make certain no one is approaching with their tea and food before leaning closer. “Why?”

Draco looks down at the table, tracing his finger along a tablecloth seam that’s been stitched to resemble growing ferns. “I think—and I’m not certain—that Mother realized that the Dark Lord didn’t care. He said all the right things, but he’s…empty.”

Hermione stares at Draco. “Oh, my God. You’ve met him!”

Draco swallows before looking up at her from the corner of his eye. “Last summer,” he whispers. “Father invited him to the Manor. I suspected I might have to see him, but I wasn’t expecting it to be the day I arrived home from Hogwarts.”

“Oh, Draco.” Hermione reaches out on instinct to clasp his hand. “Was it very bad?”

“He’s terrifying.” Draco grips her hand tightly. “The Dark Lord put his hands on my shoulders, congratulated my father on raising me to live by proper standards, and told me he expected greatness from the next scion of the Malfoy line. He smiled, and his eyes…he projected the idea that he meant it, but he didn’t. Not that way. He thinks we’re all tools. We’re not people to him. We’re just…things. That’s why Mother won’t follow him.”

“And because she loves you, and Vold—er, You-Know-Who being around puts you in danger,” Hermione says.

Draco nods. “Yes, I suppose that, too. I don’t think Mother will ever forgive my father for proclaiming her loyal to the Dark Lord without her permission. She’s a Black. You don’t speak for a Black; they speak for themselves. Mother didn’t go to Little Hangleton, you see. She didn’t know my father had until he returned.” Draco glances at her. “If you hadn’t told me that Professor Slytherin had declared you an advanced Occlumens, I wouldn’t be telling you any of this, you know.”

“I know.” Hermione squeezes his hand. “And I won’t say anything to anyone else. I promise.”
A male server in a loose robe and flowing trousers approaches with a large tray. Hermione hastily uses her wand to cancel the privacy charm. “Hello!” she greets him, trying to smile like everything is fine.

Their server puts the tray down on the table, signals that he is mute, and then uses British Sign Language to tell them he doesn’t sign in their language. They both nod and smile their understanding, with Draco signing, “Thank you” in BSL.

Their server smiles back and begins unloading the tray. There is a large pot of fragrant tea, small cups and saucers, and several platters of steaming hot food: sesame seed-covered pastries, a savory cake, and two different types of filled dumplings. Then he gives them a brief bow and departs with the empty tray.

“Oh, this smells wonderful, Draco.” Hermione has to curl her hands in her lap to keep from reaching out when Draco insists upon pouring the tea. It’s a courtesy and a courtly gesture. She can cope with courtesy.

“It does,” Draco agrees quietly, watching as Hermione re-casts the privacy charm. “It is…nice. To talk about it with someone who understands. I suppose Potter would really know what it’s like to stare into that man’s noseless face.”

Hermione blesses all of the facets of Mind Magic, particularly the one that allows her to focus on the Triwizard Tournament instead of dissolving into a pile of helpless giggling over the idea that Nizar not only stared at that noseless face, he sliced a permanent hole into it. “I don’t know if Harry would ever want to talk about it,” she says, which is entirely true.

She debates for a moment and then decides that Nizar won’t mind. If it’s something that helps Draco, she knows he’d think it was worth it. “They got to the trophy in the maze at the same time, the trophy that was the port key,” she says, taking a sip of a tea that tastes absolutely delightful without needing a bit of sugar. “Harry and Cedric helped each other in the maze a few times, but when it came time to get the trophy, Harry wanted Cedric to take it. He always felt that Cedric was the real Hogwarts champion. Cedric refused, insisting that Harry earned it for saving him from an Acromantula. They argued, and Harry finally suggested they take the trophy together. For Hogwarts.”

Draco is staring at her, wide-eyed and pale. “And then it took them to that fucking cemetery.”

“Yes.” Hermione hopes she’ll be able to eat after this. “Pettigrew killed Cedric immediately. The Killing Curse. Right in front of Harry. Then there was the ceremony that brought You-Know-Who back to life, and he used Crucio on several of the Death Eaters who turned up, punishing them for not being loyal. Then he—he tried to use the Imperius Curse on Harry, but that didn’t work, so he used Crucio, instead.”

“Why didn’t someone tell us that?” Draco asks in a hoarse voice. “Any of it? Just knowing that the Dark Lord used the Cruciatus Curse on his own people would have given us all a fucking hint that following him would be a terrible idea!”

“I don’t know, Draco. I thought at the time that Professor Dumbledore was just trying to spare us the messy details, you know?” Hermione shakes her head. “Now I think he didn’t say enough. I don’t think he ever says enough.”

“Is anyone looking this way?” Draco asks, putting down his teacup.

Hermione glances around. “Well, no, I don’t think so—” She turns back to Draco and then he’s
kissing her. Her eyes widen in surprise, but the kiss is over with before she has the chance to react.

Draco draws back slowly, that bashful smile on his face again. “I thought maybe it would be a good idea to remind both of us that this is supposed to be a date. And I, uhm…thank you. For giving me a second chance.”

Hermione brushes her finger over her lips, still moist from the kiss. “I—date. Yes. That was a good idea. And…you’re welcome.”

Draco’s smile widens. “So,” he says, picking up a pair of chopsticks and pointing to the food. “This is zongzi. Madam Zhi stuffs her version with venison, chicken fat, and herbs. You peel the bamboo leaves off to eat it. This one is the baozi, a steamed dumpling, and it’s full of vegetables from China. The one with the sesame seeds is jian dui, and it has a sweet filling on the inside. This one is…” Draco blushes. “It’s lou po beng. A sweetheart cake.”

Hermione decides to be conveniently diplomatic. “Then it’s certain to be a wonderful cake.”

She’s right. It’s delicious, as is everything else. Hermione drinks far too much tea, excuses herself to the loo, and then returns to help Draco finish eating everything at the table. Then he orders dessert: a cotton candy-looking dish called Dragon’s Beard Candy, a hot pudding made from ginger and milk, candied fruit on sticks called tanghulu, and a mango pudding.

“I’m going to explode,” Hermione says, leaning back in her chair. “Everything is too delicious not to eat it all.”

At least Draco appears to be in a similar state. “It always is. Madam Zhi’s food is magic. Possibly literally, but I think it might be rude to ask.”

“How did you find this place?” Hermione asks. She can’t picture Lucius Malfoy in here. The food isn’t pretentious enough.

“Mother brought me. Father didn’t want anything to do with it. ‘Too foreign’ he said.” Draco rolls his eyes. “I hate that he’s such a fool. Not all of the Malfoys were horrible, but he struts around like such a prick. He’s tarnished my entire lineage, and I used to admire him for it,” he says bitterly.

Hermione reaches out and takes Draco’s hand again. It’s strange to be doing so, it really is, but it also feels comfortable. She doesn’t think she’s up to snogging Draco Malfoy senseless or anything, but she can do this. She doesn’t want Draco wallowing, either. Blaise said they should all worry about what’s happening this year, and he’s right. “We should do this again. For the next Hogsmeade weekend in April.”

Draco looks up in surprise. “You want to—you want to go on another date? With me?”

“Well, we still have so much to talk about,” Hermione says, trying not to dwell on the fact that Draco is adorable when he’s baffled. “We haven’t even started discussing fiction yet, or how I’d like to introduce you to a non-magical bookstore over summer break!”

“What’s a non-magical bookstore like, then?”

Hermione lets out a happy sigh. “It’s bliss, Draco. Utter bliss.”
Chapter Summary

While students are in Hogsmeade, there are politics and plotting happening elsewhere.

Chapter Notes

I’m so awed by how amazing people can be. This is the second posted fundraising chapter; for those of you who follow me for Ashlesha as well, there will be a book chapter later this evening from Vishakha.

Betas still awesome: @norcumi, @mrsstanley, @sanerontheinside, @jabberwockyepie.

The kitchen in Twelve Grimmauld Place feels too full on Saturday, but it’s a nice change. Everyone Nizar knows to be part of the Order is present except for the reserve members—and Aberforth, who would now possibly rather stab himself in the eye than be in the same room as his brother.

It isn’t just that this meeting was arranged weeks in advance. It’s Dumbledore. The man is twinkling to his utmost in his bid to impersonate stars, doing a very poor job hiding how pleased he is with recent events.

“We have much to discuss today, so we will begin at once,” Dumbledore says the moment everyone is seated. “All of you are already aware that Kingsley was promoted to Madam Bones’ former office as Head of Magical Law Enforcement. This put us in much better position to glean information from within that part of the Ministry, as it now comes directly to Kingsley.”

Kingsley stands up. “It also placed me in the position of being able to research certain proceedings regarding Sirius’s status as a fugitive. I now have the old case files, which reveals what little investigation the idiots bothered to conduct in 1981. That alone would be enough to grant us a re-trial on Sirius’s behalf if it weren’t for Fudge. Thankfully, after his resignation for ill health—” More than one person at the table has to stifle laughter. “—Fudge is no longer an obstacle. Albus, temporarily restored as Chief Warlock to the Wizengamot, could petition for a trial right now, and I would of course grant it. However, I’d rather it be a certainty.”

“You mean we need Pettigrew,” Sirius says in a grim voice. “That fucking note he sent isn’t enough?”

“It’s certainly damning evidence, but we have a Wizengamot full of wizards and witches who have been certain of your guilt since November of 1981. They would talk themselves out of believing a piece of paper, no matter the ways we would magically verify it.” Kingsley shakes his head. “The Ministry won’t go against Her Majesty’s granted amnesty, not when to do so risks the royal family paying a great deal more attention to Wizarding Britain, but we need Peter Pettigrew to completely overturn your 1981 conviction.”

“Bugger,” Sirius mutters. “So much for flinging a dead body at the Wizengamot.”
“I’d pay to see that,” Tonks says cheerfully.

Dumbledore resumes his control over the meeting after Kingsley sits down. “Speaking of the Wizengamot: due to my restoration, whether or not it is temporary—”

“Temporary?” Bill speaks up. “Why would it be temporary, Professor?”

“There has been talk that the new Minister, whichever of the three that may be, should order the Wizengamot to hold a vote in order to either confirm my position, or confirm a new Chief or Chieftess of the Wizengamot. Something about not resembling any part of Fudge’s regime,” Dumbledore explains. “I’m not concerned. There are no real contenders for the post, or they would have voted in my replacement for the half-year I was sacked.”

“If Scrimgeour wins the election, Madam Bones would be a contender for Chieftess Witch of the Wizengamot,” Elphias Doge points out. Nizar has no idea who the man is, as this is the first time they’ve met, but Nizar likes Elphias already for being sensible.

“Madam Bones is quite the competent witch, yes,” Dumbledore says in apparent agreement. If the others realize that Dumbledore was granting rather faint praise, they say nothing.

Nizar glances over at Andromeda, one eyebrow slightly raised. She meets his eyes and then shifts one of her shoulders, as if trying to settle herself more comfortably. Andromeda definitely noticed, and she isn’t pleased.

“No matter the decisions made by our future Minister for Magic, Fudge’s vacancy has left us with the opportunity we’ve been hoping for since the arrests that were made on the twenty-second of December. Trials.” Dumbledore looks fiercely pleased. “We can finally see that those Death Eaters who were captured within the Department of Mysteries have the trials they have so rightfully earned.”

“We are, however, beginning with those that Fudge tossed into Azkaban without granting them proper trials before the Wizengamot,” Kingsley says, glancing at Dumbledore. Nizar hides a burst of delighted surprise; Kingsley was not happy with that bit of grandstanding at all. “Sturgis Podmore, for example. His trial will be this Monday morning, and it’s been a long time in coming. There are several others who committed no crime other than disagreeing with our former Minister, but had no political clout or standing in Wizarding Britain to keep them from being jailed without due process. The Death Eaters still within Azkaban can wait their turn.”

“Can we go after the Death Eaters that Fudge bloody well let out on bond?” Hestia asks testily. “That was beyond illegal, what Fudge did!”

Kingsley nods. “The M.L.E. began the search the moment that Fudge’s official retirement became known. Unfortunately, we’re not going to find them. Not unless they’re foolish enough to leave the safety of You-Know-Who’s Fidelius Charm. There are several Aurors lurking in Little Hangleton to keep an eye on the area where we know the old Riddle Manor is located, but I don’t expect results unless they’re sent out to do his bidding.”

“Some of them really are that foolish,” Alastor growls. “Theodore Nott Senior, he’s rubbish at subtlety. Same with Alexander Jugson. It’s types like Lucius Malfoy, Antonin Dolohov, and Victor Crabbe who will be smart enough to lie low.”

“Thank you for being specific enough to name them in full,” Nizar says. “There are children in Hogwarts who don’t need to be tarred with that particular brush.”
Alastor looks to be chewing on his own cheek for a moment. “True enough. Never thought I’d see the day when a Malfoy would willingly serve a Muggle, no matter what sort of title went along with that kind of thing.”

“She’s a bigoted insult,” Nizar sings under his breath, annoyed.

“What’d you have us call them, then?” Alastor asks crossly.

“We always liked the term *people*, ourselves,” Salazar answers dryly.

“If we can continue,” Dumbledore nods at Remus. “I know you have an update for us.”

Remus doesn’t bother to stand. “Right, well. It’s a brief one, and shouldn’t be a surprise. Between You-Know-Who’s promises and the Ministry’s rulings that make it illegal for a werewolf to work or rent a residence in Wizarding Britain, we’ve lost the werewolf packs to him. Something might still happen to change that, but at the time being, they all serve him.”

“How did you get that out of them, if they’re already on his side?” Ted asks.

“Wolfsbane Potion. I went out with the instructions to brew it and enough ingredients for three full moons, found the right sort of desperate werewolf, and traded for the information. Much more efficient than trying to hang about with that lot during a full moon,” Remus says. “That is one werewolf who might consider staying away from Voldemort. Just one.”

“Two,” Tonks corrects, rolling her eyes at Remus. “Don’t forget to count yourself.”

“Fine. Two,” Remus says, frowning. “Two against hundreds are not favorable odds.”

Dumbledore shakes his head in disappointment. “Especially when Olympe and Rubeus were not able to convince the remaining giants to join us. It would have been a kindness if they had decided to remain neutral rather than joining Voldemort.”

Nizar feels his shoulders tense at the couched accusation. Hagrid is standing behind everyone and doesn’t seem to notice, but Nizar thinks it might take explosions and six miracles for Hagrid to ever see Dumbledore in a negative light.

“And then there are our war mages,” Dumbledore continues. Nizar considers revising his stance against stabbing the spangled fiend.

Charlie lights up, grinning. “Oh, I’d hoped we were going to speak about that at some point. It didn’t seem proper to do it when we were in such a rush last week.”

Salazar’s voice is full of wry honesty: “There is really not much you could be told that was not printed in the paper.”

“Well, we are lacking the answer to the question…why all of you? Why was it not merely Nizar continuing his role?” Hestia asks. “Five of you at once—I’ll be honest, it made many people of my acquaintance nervous.”

Sirius scowls. “No, it was that first article full of fucking lies that made them nervous. You’d think the idiots of your acquaintance would know not to trust a damned thing Rita Skeeter says by now.”

Hestia glares back at him. “I would still like to know!”

“Stupidity. Mine, to be specific.” Nizar treats everyone to an innocent look when they turn to stare at
him. “A war mage is aware of both the land and people they’re meant to safeguard. When I was first granted the title, I gained the awareness of both gradually. Over the course of centuries spent in a lovely painting, I lost a great deal of that awareness, and didn’t even remember there was a lack. Thus, I got it back all at once. The burden of fifty-eight million people, all on my head alone.”

“To be blunt, we did not wish for my brother’s head to explode,” Salazar says. “To keep that from becoming a rather messy truth, we spread out the burden. Fortunately, the titles are linked only to this island and the United Kingdom, not the whole of the Commonwealth.”

Severus is eying William and Oliver in displeasure for looking far too excited. “Being able to count the populace of London merely by thinking on it is not as enjoyable as you idiots believe it to be.”

Emmaline rests her chin on her hand and grins at them. “What is the current population of London, anyway?”

“Seven million, twenty-nine thousand, six hundred fifty. Wait, six hundred fifty-one,” Nizar says. “Please don’t ask me to do that again right now. There were only one million people on this island a thousand years ago. It was a lot easier to keep track.”

Salazar adjusts the cuff of his beaten leather jacket. “Thirty-nine thousand, four hundred twenty-eight in Inverness.”

“Nine hundred eighty-eight thousand and six for Surrey.” Remus grins. “It’s like the worst sort of parlor trick.”

“Nine hundred eighty-eight thousand and eight. Someone just had twins,” Severus corrects him in a sour voice. “No, drop the number by one. Someone else just dropped dead.”

“That was a terrible joke, Severus!” Molly exclaims, frowning at him.

Severus stares back. “I wasn’t joking.”

“I take it the same restriction applies,” Fleur says in French-accented English. “A war mage cannot act against the Dark Lord unless he acts against the throne.”

“Why doesn’t it count if You-Know-Who acts against Wizarding Britain?” Dedalus asks indignantly. “We bloody well live here!”

“Belief.” Nizar glances around the table. “The magicians among you born of non-magical parents don’t think of themselves as separate from the United Kingdom, but many of the Half-bloods and all of the Pure-bloods do. They think of Wizarding Britain as a governing entity that is completely separate from the United Kingdom. They don’t recognize the Queen, not in truth, even if the words occasionally pass their lips. When that belief is so strong, magic recognizes it. Thus, the magic of the land does not include Wizarding Britain in what a war mage is meant to protect.”

Arthur looks concerned. “How can you be so certain?”

Nizar smiles. “Because I can’t tell you how many souls reside in Diagon Alley. I can’t sense them to count them. None of us can.” Hogsmeade is different, as that land is tied to his magical title, but Nizar is in no mood to share that information. “Oh, and we can’t count the population of Northern Ireland, either. Despite the politics of that situation, the majority of the populace is loyal to Ireland, not to the English crown, and magic pays attention to such things.”

There is a long minute of stunned silence. “Well…that sucks,” Oliver finally ventures. “Mum would be in a right flap if she heard about us being separate. One of the only reasons she married Da was
him reassuring her that we’ve got magical government and a Minister just because we magical folk are so difficult to deal with. Never thought of us as being a different country entirely.”

“On paper, you’re not,” Salazar says. “When the Ministry was first formed, the intention was to be accountable to the Crown. Unfortunately, that was an intention quickly abandoned and forgotten.”

Filius nods. “I sent an owl to my father in regards to that matter after the magical title restorations were announced. He says that resolution lasted for a week. If you make allowances for a bit of rightful goblin bitterness, then it only took the Ministry about a year to forget that allegiance was meant to be adhered to with the same regard and seriousness that was devoted to the International Statute of Secrecy.”

Dumbledore, sensing he is losing complete control of the meeting, clears his throat. “To get back to business…we do finally have confirmation from the Department of Mysteries that our requested one-way Apparition wards have been put into place. Our patrols of the Ministry are now able to continue without any interference from Cornelius. If Voldemort makes another attempt to gain the prophecy, we’re ready to act. The only thing we lack is Harry Potter.”

“Albus, you know good and well that You-Know-Who still has those bloody Horcruxes,” Minerva snaps. “If you place Mister Potter into a battle, it will mean nothing but his death unless those Horcruxes are already destroyed!”

Dumbledore sighs. “I’m aware.”

“Salazar…” Molly presses her lips together before continuing. “How does Harry feel about all of this?”

“Frustrated,” Salazar responds flatly. Nizar bites back a smile; it’s true. “How is he supposed to fulfill the requirements of this mysterious prophecy that Voldemort is seeking unless he knows what he’s meant to do?”

“Maybe he’s meant to destroy at least one of those Horcruxes,” Hagrid says. When Nizar glances over at him, he’s blushing. “The last one, like, since it would be the most important one.”

“I don’t actually know,” Dumbledore says. Nizar sees Sirius flinch at the blatant lie, but at least he keeps his mouth shut. “We will simply have to wait and see. In the meantime, Harry is safe, even if Salazar has spent the majority of his time in Hogwarts.”

Salazar raises an eyebrow at the masked question. “He’s with good people, Albus Dumbledore. That is the best assurance of safety I can give you.”

“How have you heard anything more of Narcissa?” Molly cuts in to ask Andromeda. Nizar quietly thanks her for her sense of timing. “I’ve been concerned; we haven’t heard a bit of news since January.”

Andromeda frowns. “I have, but only in the briefest words. My sister claims to be in the midst of an act that will prove to be the ultimate demonstration of where her loyalty truly lies. This being Narcissa, that could mean anything. We’ll simply have to wait and see.”

Kingsley signals for their attention. “Speaking of covert activities, I have another bit of information for you all, but this is something that must not be spoken of to anyone outside the Order. Absolutely no one—and I make that declaration as Head of the M.L.E.”

“We understand, Kingsley,” Arthur says to additional muttered agreement. “I take it this is something within the Ministry.”
“It is.” Kingsley straightens his shoulders. “Madam Bones received word from a personal source that Pious Thicknesse is under the Imperius Curse. Subtle checks by myself, Rufus, and two of our Unspeakables confirmed it.”

“Oh, good fucking buggering hell,” Alastor spits. “Tell me we’re using that to find out who did it, Kingsley.”

“Of course we are. I’m as paranoid as you are, old man,” Kingsley replies. “I’m just not nearly as rude about it.”

Alastor snorts. “Aye. Go on, then.”

“Yes, please,” Tonks adds. Her hair is slowly turning a shade of red that is trying to burn Nizar’s eyes.

“We are monitoring Thicknesse to see who he contacts, who he tries to coerce with words or curses while under the effects of the Imperius Curse,” Kingsley says. “Those who are coerced are assisted, told what is going on, and instructed to play along with Thicknesse’s plot until we can see the whole of it.”

“I haven’t heard a word of Thicknesse being near my department, or any of the departments close by,” Hestia says, looking concerned.

“For now, Thicknesse is centering his efforts within the M.L.E.” Kingsley folds his hands on the table. “I have no doubt at all that this is You-Know-Who’s attempt to infiltrate the Ministry by more subtle means. If not for the warning Madam Bones received, we wouldn’t be aware of the situation at all.”

Ted whistles. “It will be a lot easier for You-Know-Who to get ahold of that prophecy if he’s already in charge of the Ministry.”

“That will not be allowed to happen,” Dumbledore says sternly. “Kingsley is addressing the problem, and that plot will fail. Voldemort will be forced to resort to invading the Department of Mysteries to gain what he seeks, and when he does, we’ll be waiting for him.”

When the meeting finally concludes after one o’clock, Nizar could happily hunt down and kill his own fucking lunch. At least Severus already promised to drag him off someplace that has food after they leave Grimmauld Place. Unfortunately, Nizar needs to speak to someone before they can leave. That means waiting until everyone who might run bleating to Dumbledore with information has gone, which sees Nizar spending the next hour resisting the urge to lift his wand and fling them all through the front door.

With Kingsley and Diggle gone, Nizar can finally approach Remus. “Do you have a moment?”

Remus begs off from speaking to Andromeda and joins Nizar in one of the public rooms on the ground floor. Without being asked, he lifts his wand and destroys a listening spell that was hiding in a candle, causing it to shatter and drip hot wax all over the floor. “What is it, Nizar?”

Nizar rummages in his robe pocket and draws out three phials of the Taming potion, which really
needs a new name. The original won’t work; modern Wizarding Britain would lose interest by the second syllable. “I thought I’d leave these here with you.”

Remus reaches out and takes the three phials, tucking them into a pocket on the inside of his jacket. “Why now? I already have the potion for this Tuesday’s full moon. You brought the doses on the seventeenth.”

“I just have a feeling that we’re going to be so busy trying to accomplish useful things that I might not make it back here unless it’s for unplanned Order meetings. I’d rather not advertise,” Nizar says. “I don’t want Dumbledore to become aware of how easy it is to make this potion.”

Remus frowns. “Why? He could offer it to the packs as a lure to draw them away from Voldemort!”

“He could,” Nizar allows, “but I think it’s more likely that Dumbledore would turn it into a prize to hold over their heads rather than a potion the packs should receive outright. He’d use it as a fucking tool.”

“Bribery.” Remus nods in grim resignation. “I can see that happening all too easily. How do you plan to give it to the werewolf community, then? Assuming that’s your intention.”

“You’re so fortunate I’m not that easy to insult,” Nizar replies, annoyed. “Of course that’s my intention. I just need to do it in such a way that no one can limit their access to the potion. That requires planning, and that is one of the projects that will be keeping me very busy.”

Remus lowers his eyes. It’s close enough to the full moon that it’s more of a wolf’s gesture of submission than a human gesture of apology. “I’m sorry. I’m not certain—I don’t know why I did that.”

Nizar waits for Remus to look at him again before he grins. “Full moon temperament. I’m used to it, Remus. Besides, except for Severus, I’m the greatest representation of everything you’ve been taught to hate about Slytherins for the last thirty-five years.”


“Please.” Nizar rolls his eyes. “Salazar comes to Order meetings dressed like a non-magical man who might possibly be homeless.”

“I HEARD THAT!” Salazar shouts from the upper floor.

“YOU WERE MEANT TO!” Nizar yells back. “Remus, don’t worry about the bloody Slytherin prejudices. They’ll fade in time, just like they did for my students—who spend a lot more time around me than you do, by the way. In the meantime, go fuck your girlfriend.”

Remus winces while blushing. “Nizar, that’s not appropriate. Besides, she’s not my girlfriend.”

Nizar isn’t impressed by that argument. Tonks still has the gleam in her eyes of a Black woman in the midst of a great scheme. “Yet.”

“Why is everyone so bloody fascinated with my love life that they can’t keep from meddling in it?” Remus asks in exasperation.

“Because we want you to be happy, you idiot.” Nizar tilts his head, amused. “Unless you’re allergic to happiness. That would be inconvenient.”
Remus lets out a low growl before turning on his heel to stalk off. “Tonks!” he yells. “We need to talk!”

“Talk. Is that what they’re calling it now?” Nizar says under his breath. Remus looks over his shoulder long enough to glare at Nizar before he’s distracted by Tonks, whose hair is currently eight different shades of blue…or perhaps it’s only one shade for everyone else.

Nizar is still quietly miffed at learning that Ginny Weasley’s eyes are brown. They are not. Not to him, at least, but that’s not an argument he wants to have with ninety-nine percent of this planet’s population.

Minerva walks by the room, muttering in an unending stream of Scots Gaelic. Nizar pops his head out of the doorway. “Are you all right?” he calls after her.

She stops and retreats to join him, speaking in a quiet voice. “I’m so frustrated! It was so very difficult to sit there and listen to Albus rattle on about that child’s need to face Voldemort. I don’t care if the child is now more than capable. Albus doesn’t know that, and still he insists! If not for a Calming Draught, I may well have slapped him.”

Nizar nods, unsurprised that some of them have resorted to drinking Calming Draughts in order to cope with Dumbledore. Until Minerva, Remus, and Sirius are true masters of Mind Magic, it’s a safe, useful way of containing their tempers. “The irritating part is that we’ll be enduring that nonsense until Voldemort steps out of hiding.”

Minerva frowns. “Your favorite noseless walking corpse can’t hide forever.”

“No, but I dislike that fact that Dumbledore is correct. The Ministry trap is still our most likely means of catching the walking corpse.” Nizar rubs at his face. “If Voldemort acts against Wizarding Britain in other ways, we won’t know until it’s too late.”

“Thank you. It’s always wonderful to have a conversation with you that fills my heart with hope for the future,” Minerva says dryly. Nizar only smiles, which makes her huff and roll her eyes.

Nizar leaves that room and glances down the hall. Arthur is standing with Molly, facing away from him. “Oh, hello Nizar!” Molly calls, waving. “I didn’t realize you were still here.”

“I was just looking for Sirius,” Nizar says, hiding his amusement when Arthur holds up two crossed fingers behind his back.

“They’re just in there,” Molly answers, pointing at the room nearest them. “In…well, whatever Sirius is going to name that room. This being 1996, I hardly think it should resume life as a ladies’ parlor or a men’s smoking room.”

“We never did figure out which was which, did we?” Arthur asks as Nizar walks inside.

“No!” Molly sounds despairing. “They were both dull, dim, drafty, and hideous before, and now they’re both identical!”

Nizar raises both eyebrows in surprise. Molly is right; except for the orientation of the hearth and mirrored mantelpiece being reversed to allow for the dual-sided fireplace, the rooms are the same size, with the same wallpaper, wall sconces, candelabras, and even the number of windows. He would put money on the fact that the mirror above the fireplace is magical, meant for spying on those in the opposite room. It fits with Lycorus Black’s paranoid mindset.

Sirius waves him over. “Nizar! I was just talking to Bill and Fleur about their work for Gringotts.”
“That’s fortunate timing, then. I’d been hoping to speak to them before leaving today.” Nizar smiles at Fleur and Bill. “I’d noticed the ring on Fleur’s finger and wanted to offer my congratulations on your betrothal.”

Bill’s wary smile becomes a wide grin. “Thanks, Nizar! Your brother said the same. It’s…well, really kind of you both.”

“And here I thought it was just good manners,” Nizar says, raising both eyebrows. “Has there been a lack of that for you both?”

Fleur and Bill glance at each other. He doesn’t need to be Court-observant to see the pinched look of unhappiness that Fleur is desperately trying to hide. “It is…hard,” Fleur admits, her accent getting thicker. “I did not realize that so many would be angry that I would say yes when Bill asked me to marry.”

“Rubbish,” Nizar says, even though he knows exactly why people are angry. Hermione informed him of the difficulties Bill and Fleur are facing, and for some very stupid reasons, too. “Oh, wait. Let me guess. The Veela prejudices are as bad as I’ve overheard from my portrait.”

Fleur nods, expression faltering into sadness. Bill takes her hand and gives her a reassuring look. “They are. I am only one-quarter Veela. I attract attention, but not like my grandmother! As if someone like Bill Weasley could be so easily snared!”

“I dunno, love, your unwed aunt was kind of distracting,” Bill says, grinning again.

“That is because she is unwed,” Fleur mutters testily.

“Exactly,” Nizar says, surprising them both. “The unwed part. Too many people don’t know that a Veela loses their, uh, distracting influence the moment they find their chosen mate.”

Fleur lights up, her smile brilliant. “You know of that?”

Nizar nods. He had to talk to Brice and his own fucking portrait to remind himself, but he hopes the result will be worth it. “You’d think people would notice when a Veela woman no longer gains the attention of every female-attracted man in the region.”

Fleur blushes, though Bill skips the blush and just turns bright red. “My family, we have many stories of that. How do you know of such things?”

“My son married a half-Veela,” Nizar explains, and he doesn’t have to fake a melancholy smile. Just because he can’t remember her doesn’t mean he can’t recall what it would have meant to the family. “Brice was very confused when he met his first Veela and didn’t find himself compelled to fling himself at her. Eithnemael was just frustrated that she’d finally met the man who would be her mate for life, but he was her new fifteen-year-old apprentice, and thus she could not say a word to explain to him exactly what was going on. She did, however, come to the castle while Brice was occupied one day just to yell at me for doing that to her.” He can’t remember that, either, and gods, but he wants to. “Godric and Salazar were just grateful that they could be in the same room as Eithnemael and no longer be driven to distraction.”


“It was a…a moot point,” Nizar replies, aware that Sirius is giving him a look of sympathy that isn’t doing much to hide his own feelings in the matter. “Brice died at age twenty-two, only four years after they were wed. They never had the chance to have children.” Nizar draws in a breath. “I wish
that your own marriage lasts until you are both old, grey, and merely waiting for Death’s touch so that you may leave this world together.”

Bill is baffled by his words, but Fleur recognizes the blessing. She lets out a delighted sound and leaps forward to hug Nizar. “Thank you!” she whispers. “Thank you so much. I never expected to hear those words from anyone but my sister, aunt, and grandmother!”

“What about your mother?” Nizar asks curiously after she steps back. “Would she not say the same?”

“I think she would, but she is no longer with us.” Fleur lifts her chin. “My father was a good man, but his brother, he was…jealous.”

Nizar can glean a lot from both pose and words. “I see. I’m very sorry for your loss.”

Bill reaches out to clasp Nizar’s hand. “Thank you. I’ll have to ask my fiancée why those words were so important, but it meant a lot for her to hear them.”

“You’re welcome.” Nizar doesn’t breathe out again until Bill and Fleur leave the room, but it still emerges as a sigh.


“I do not meddle. I connive.” Nizar uses the mirror to observe Arthur and Molly’s progress as they pass by the open doorway. Arthur is smiling, talking about something that sounds non-magical, but Molly has a thin-lipped, thoughtful expression on her face. Nizar hopes she listened to everything he said to Fleur. The more open-minded she is in regards to her children, the less likely Molly is to ostracize Percy Weasley for a second time once she discovers his new magical talents. A Necromancer supported by their family is one less likely to die for stupid reasons.

Nizar swallows. He knows Elfric didn’t die for a stupid reason, but he’d like to know, one day, what really happened that would have allowed for the rise of Utredus Gaunt.

“Besides, you liked helping with the conniving,” he says as a distraction from his own thoughts.

Sirius grins. “Not the sort of conniving I used to get up to, but it’s good practice for the big stuff.”

“Like?”

Sirius pretends to think about it. “Chasing a drunken deer Animagus down a crowded London walkway on a Friday night while yelling for him to come back this instant and finish his beer.”

“How the hell do you even plan for that?”

It’s a relief to finally leave Grimmauld Place. The townhouse isn’t the problem, not when it no longer reeks of dust and despair. His conniving in regards to Veela acceptance aside, it’s frustrating to be among intelligent people who disfavor Albus Dumbledore’s ways of planning but will never speak of it. Nizar would like to inform them that they have options, but too much of convincing them of that truth would lie in revealing his identity. He’s done enough of that this month, and it’s been more exposure than he ever wanted to risk.

“Where are we going?” Nizar asks when he and Severus have walked several blocks in silence.

Severus glances up from his grim exploration of the walkway. “I know of a restaurant that specializes in Middle Eastern flavors. It’s halal and Kosher. We’ll need to take the train, unless you
“Either is fine. I don’t mind the Underground.” Nizar draws in a deep breath and lets it out. It’s almost ten degrees Celsius, fifty degrees Fahrenheit—however one wants to measure it, it’s warm outside. Not summer weather, but a vast improvement on the past few months. “Middle Eastern. You mean Persian?”

“Close enough, I should think. I don’t believe the flavor profiles of certain dishes have changed much.” Severus glances at Nizar before reaching out and taking his hand. “If you don’t mind this, either.”

Nizar smirks at him. “You do realize I keep tabs of how many people are offended by the sight as we walk, yes?”

“I will take that to mean that you’re fine with it.”

“Are you?” Nizar counters.

Severus frowns. “I’ve only ever done such a thing with you, and this makes a grand total of twice in public. However, if I can kiss you in full view of everyone in bloody Diagon Alley, London will just have to cope with a bit of hand-holding.”

“All right.” Nizar smiles. “But if anyone throws anything at us, I might turn them into something more useful than a bigot. Perhaps a sprinkler head.”

“Do you even know what a sprinkler head does?” Severus asks, letting his hair drift forward to hide the expression on his face.

“It sprinkles, presumably.” Nizar nudges Severus with his shoulder. “You owe me birthday sex, by the way.”

Severus’s lip twitches. “I owe you no such thing. It isn’t my fault that you were sound asleep when I came back to your quarters yesterday evening.”

“Pffft. Details.”

Lunch is familiar, even if the restaurant is not mindful of the past at all. Their server is gruff until Nizar addresses him properly. Afterwards, he is pleased to rattle on how Iranian—Persian—fare is considered one of the oldest in the world, and how the arrival of Western or Eastern ingredients only made way for new dishes, having very little impact on the original cultural favorites. Severus points out a few dishes that are Israeli, which leaves Nizar confused until he remembers that Israel is now the country surrounding Jerusalem.

Severus casts the privacy charm at their table after their server leaves a bill behind. “Was it the same?”

Nizar folds over a piece of hamir, thinking he might explode if he tries to eat anything else, but the spices are still an intoxicating temptation. Maybe he can take everything left of their generous portions back to Hogwarts.

Maybe he can convince the elves to learn another style of cooking. There are students in the castle who would be thrilled to find something familiar on the table.

“The bread is softer,” Nizar says. “Otherwise? No. Nothing has changed very much at all.”
“You’ve been quiet since we left Grimmauld Place. Usually I need to resort to other means in order for you to shut up.”

Nizar smiles. “Usually. Very appreciated means, no less.”

Severus nods, but doesn’t smile in response. “Talk. Something is bothering you.”

Nizar picks up his cooling mint infusion and takes a sip. “I feel like we’re sitting in the calm before the storm.”

“Calm,” Severus repeats, narrowing his eyes. “Nizar, the whole of February was completely insane. You’re telling me that you feel as if it’s going to get worse?”

“I’d really prefer it didn’t. Even my capacity for plotting is starting to think that this is a bit much.”

“I see. Voldemort?” Severus asks.

Nizar shakes his head. “I don’t know. Neither does Salazar. It’s always made him nervous when he’s scryed upon the water and seen nothing of what’s to come.”

“I thought that was only in regards to Voldemort’s death,” Severus says.

“No. It’s…” Nizar removes the mint leaf from the infusion when the drink starts to get too strong. “Flux. When there are many important events trying to happen in the same brief span of time, you’re not going to receive clear Divination unless it’s by chance, or you know exactly the right sort of question to ask.”

Severus’s expression settles into grim displeasure. “Voldemort,” he repeats. “He’s been too quiet since the Winter Solstice.”

Nizar gives up and nods. As much as Dumbledore has concerned them, there is still a greater threat in Britain than an old man plotting a coup. “Voldemort,” he agrees quietly.
Representation

Chapter Summary

“I told you. A bloody potted plant!”

Chapter Notes

This was supposed to post Friday but...well, distractions. (I'd really like a place to live that doesn't cost over $100 per day.)

Beta credit: @sanerontheinside, @jabberwockypie, @norcumi, @mrsstanley!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I’m sure you’re all dying to know how you did on your essays,” Nizar says on Monday after greeting his first class. The chorus of dismay that meets this statement is not as mournful and despairing as the response to the first essay.

“You’re done grading them already?” Miss Shafiq is a bit wide-eyed. “All of them?”

“Surprisingly enough, a number of you did manage to turn them in early for that extra credit. Not many waited until the actual deadline.”

“I’ll brave it out, sir,” Corner of Ravenclaw says. “Tell us how bad it is.”

“Nothing could be worse than the first batch of nonsense I received at the end of December,” Nizar replies in a dry voice. “To make it fair to both you fifth-years and the sixth-years, who had no idea what sort of competition they were up against, Miss Granger’s essay is not being considered for top marks in the year this time. Given that she was given more work in exchange, she’s fine with this.”

“You mean the rest of us have a chance?” Miss Jones asks while grinning, which makes several of the others laugh as the tension breaks.

That is why Nizar hates grades. Students turn into bloody anxious wrecks when grades are at stake.

“Mister Malfoy, you have top marks for sheer academic bullheadedness.” Draco looks up in surprise before he smiles. “Miss Padma Patil, you are tied with Mister Malfoy not merely for content, but for being one of the only students I have who wrote of not how to defend yourself from another race of beings, but how they defend themselves, and why that defence is necessary.” Miss Patil drops her quill, startled, and then beams in delight.

“You can all fetch your essays at the end of class. In the meantime…” Nizar tilts his head at the wall, where three empty portrait frames are hanging. “I do believe we made a bargain last month.”

Elfric pops into his frame first. Several students who were present at his funeral gasp, which makes Elfric’s face twist up in dismay. He’s joined a moment later by Brice, who arrives with twigs in his hair and feathers on his tunic.
Nizar eyes his son’s portrait. “Brice, what did you do?”

“Fought an owl and lost?” Brice offers, trying to pull twigs out of his hair.

Galiena sighs as she appears in her painting. “That painted owl who speaks Parseltongue is not nearly as fluent as it likes to believe it is. Hello, fifth-years.”

“Er, hello,” Longbottom squeaks first. The greeting is repeated by the others, who all seem to have come down with a sudden case of nerves. Nizar thinks that Brice turning up looking like a thief trying to escape a chicken coop after losing the fight to the chickens should have helped make things less awkward.

“Galiena Aenor deSlizarse of Hogewâþ and Winchester, Elfric Ilbertus deSlizarse of Hogewâþ, and Gilbert Brice deSlizarse of Eidyn Buhr: these are my mysteriously mute fifth-years. Fifth-years, my children’s apprenticeship portraits, each painted at age fourteen.” Nizar settles down at his desk. “As promised, you lot get to question them all you like.”


Nizar shakes his head. “No. No lecture today.” If they all miss the fact that they’re still about to learn quite a bit from three portraits, that is not his fault. Given the quirk of a smile on Galiena’s face, she is about to enjoy the granted opportunity.

His only real surprise for the day comes from Ron Weasley after he asks a question of Elfric’s portrait, listens to the hissed response, and then continues the conversation without waiting for a translation. “Er—mate—!” Finnigan says to get Weasley’s attention.

Weasley glances at Finnigan. “What? This is interesting!”

“The rest of us need a translator, that’s what!” Parkinson retorts.

“You can understand Parseltongue, Weasley?” Nott asks with an academic’s rabid curiosity. “You’re not a Parselmouth!”

Weasley looks at the others as if they’re mental. “Harry talks in his sleep, and I was in the next bed over. Four years of this, you lot, Hogwarts and summers both. I decided if Harry was going to keep me awake half the night, I might as well try to figure out what he was saying.”

I am now extremely uncomfortable with this entire conversation. Nizar still talks in his sleep, though it only seems to happen if he’s dreaming of unwanted or stressful things.

The child’s entire tenure at Hogwarts as a student had been stressful. Weasley is fortunate to have ever slept at all.

“What was Potter saying?” Miss Bones asks. All of them are staring at Weasley in fascination.

“Uh…it wasn’t…” Weasley swallows. “It was either all really boring, or it was a bit depressing, like. Harry didn’t exactly live with the nicest people.”

“Mister Potter’s home life is not up for discussion,” Nizar says before things get entirely out of hand. He wouldn’t let them speak this way about any student, not just—well, himself. “Mister Weasley, congratulations on being one of those rare individuals capable of discerning the variances in pitch, vibration, and harmonics that make you capable of learning Parseltongue. Most people cannot do so without having the natural-born talent for it. Galiena, please translate that last part Elfric was speaking of before we all became side-tracked.”
Goal achieved, Nizar thinks to himself at the end of class. His fifth-years are suddenly a lot more interested in the concept of magical masteries and apprenticeships—more importantly, they’re interested in seeking out where their talents actually lie. “Mister Weasley, a moment.”

Weasley waits until everyone else has filed out, most of them with their noses shoved into their newly returned and graded essays. “Yes, Professor? If it’s about my spelling, I did not use one of those stupid quills this time.”

“No, not that.” Nizar considers Weasley before addressing him in Parseltongue. “The quills are fine as long as you pay attention to the breakdown of the magic.”

Weasley looks baffled. “Oh! Er, I got the, quills, long, you, pay attention, and magic.”

“Then your understanding is about three-quarters complete. That isn’t bad given the way you seemed to have learned it. Have you learned any other languages?”


“Do they?” Nizar crosses his arms and leans back against his desk. “Mae hynny’n chwerthinllyd. That would be Welsh. Chan eil Beurla eadhon ga bruidhinn anns a h-uile ãite ann am Breatainn. Scots Gaelic, Mister Weasley. Ta bewa ogas dhe Kernow. They speak Cornish not far from where you live in the south. Ansin measann muid an Ghaeilge. Including Irish Gaelic and English, we’re up to five languages and have yet to leave the British Isles.”

Weasley has abandoned baffled and traded it for completely bewildered. “Yeah, but I don’t need to speak those languages!”

“You don’t need to speak Parseltongue, either, and yet you’ve gone and done it anyway,” Nizar replies. “I know you’ve trouble with written words, but there are many paintings in this castle who were once teachers who speak other languages. You might wish to settle on something and experiment. Anyone who learns Parseltongue has an ear for language, and there is no reason to ignore that sort of skill aside from laziness. What sort of life do you plan to lead after Hogwarts?”

“Er—I wanted to be an Auror. Been fond of the idea since I was eleven,” Wesley says.

“You think Aurors do not need to know other languages? An Auror who can translate what a witness is saying is the sort of Auror with a skill in demand. It wouldn’t matter if it were your first year in that role. You’d earn so many points, ones far more useful than those stupid gem counters in this school.”

“I’ve never wanted to make my way through underhanded means!” Weasley protests.

Nizar gives him a baffled look. “Your definition of underhanded is entirely incorrect and horrifying. Go on to your next class before you’re late, Mister Weasley.”

Weasley shrugs. “All right then, sir.” He leaves the room, but the moment he rounds the corner, Nizar hears the sound of someone striking Weasley with a book.

“OW! Ginny!”

“You idiot!” Miss Weasley hisses in response. “You complete and utter idiot!”

“What? What did I do?” Weasley whines, and that’s it. Nizar turns and bolts into his office, shutting the door before he leans against it, howling with laughter.
In his fourth-year class, Xavier Macnair hears the announcement that he tied for top marks with Zubeida Khan and looks completely disbelieving. So does Zubeida, who is used to her speech impediment losing her points in class, and has no faith in her academic work at all.

It’s a trend that continues in all the lower-year classes, perhaps because they’re all trying harder to do the work properly. Edward Black takes top marks (“Wait, again?” Black yelps in shock) along with Astoria Greengrass, who blushes scarlet at the announcement that she’s done so well for a second time. Demelza Robins and Niles Hanley snatch victory among the second-years; Vanity Jugson and Cameron Boyle bashfully accept congratulations from their fellow first-years.

“And now I’m greeting you lot,” Nizar says, glancing around the room at his reshuffled group of ten N.E.W.T. sixth-year students. Hermione sat with Katie Bell last week; this time she is seated next to Kinjal Bhatia. Except for some low-voiced grumbling from Sloper and Edgecombe, the other students have quickly adjusted to having a fifth-year among them.

Miss Brown grins. “Did any of us beat out Granger?”

“Do you really want me to answer that?” Nizar asks in response. “Because I do not need nine depressed N.E.W.T. students today.”

“All right, then.” Miss Bell straightens her shoulders. “Hit us. Figuratively, sir.”

“Mister Roshan, you barely scraped past Miss Bhatia, and I do mean barely,” Nizar says. Roshan blinks a few times and then stares at Kinjal in disbelief.

Kinjal frowns. “What did I do wrong?”

“One misspelled word.”

“BUGGER!” Kinjal shouts, and then tries to hide beneath her book when the others start laughing.

Seventh-year N.E.W.T. Defence is his last lecture for the day. The other twelve students adopted Miss Chang without missing a single step, though Miss Chang might prefer that they be less clingy about it. “Essays,” Nizar says.

“Dooooooom,” Fawcett moans, collapsing dramatically onto her desk. “Sir.”

“If all of you feel that way, then I won’t tell you who took top marks out of the original twelve.”

“Most of us feel that way,” Miss Shah says while Gupta nudges Fawcett with a rolled-up scroll. “But we’re taking wagers, so we have to find out.”

Nizar rolls his eyes. “I’m not supposed to encourage gambling among students, so I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that. Miss Applebee, congratulations.”

Miss Applebee gives Nizar a blank stare. “Me?”

“Yes. You. Top marks. Entire year.” Nizar raises both eyebrows. “I’m not certain I could break it down any further.”

“But I’m not…that,” Miss Applebee says, baffled. “Are you sure, sir?”

“Being that I’m the one who graded two hundred-odd essays and assorted travesties? Yes, I’m certain,” Nizar replies.

“Wait, I thought there were two hundred fourteen Defence students?” George asks, frowning.
“There are. Seventeen students are not contenders because they were late, and two others still have yet to turn in their essays.”

The N.E.W.T. classes are the only other students who also get to meet the portraits of Nizar’s children. Nizar doesn’t think the younger years are quite ready to contemplate the idea of apprenticeships and masteries when they’re still slogging their way through all of the basic knowledge they missed due to shoddy teaching. The sixth- and seventh-years, however, happily spend their lecture hours bombarding Galiena, Brice, and Elfric with questions. Galiena and Brice have to take turns translating for Elfric when he gets flustered and forgets what little of modern English he’s learned, but the students have grown used to Nizar’s random fits of Parseltongue. Elfric answering them in that fashion is now accepted as normal.

* * * *

The Daily Prophet on Tuesday is devoted to full page interviews of each candidate for the office of Minister for Magic. Nizar thinks about the level of political horseshit involved and doesn’t even bother to unroll the paper until he’s consumed an entire pot of tea.

Rufus Scrimgeour, seventy-one years of age, Head Auror in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, strikes an imposing, lionesque figure—

Nizar feels his eyes try to glaze over as the reporter, someone named Hanley Rupert, begins waxing poetic about Scrimgeour’s appearance. For three paragraphs. Possibly Rupert should have kept the “Please court me!” advertisement limited to Witch Weekly’s section for personal connections.

Auror Scrimgeour has stated that his decision to campaign for the office of Minister for Magic came about after a recent trial for a former student of Hogwarts, Victoria Bluebell, who has become a famous fact of contention for not being granted the Dementor’s Kiss at her sentencing.

“Famous fact of contention where?” Nizar mutters.

“There is evidence that our way of life may again be under attack by forces unknown,” Scrimgeour is quoted as saying. “No one within our Ministry will jump to conclusions, and neither should the Wizarding public. The Aurors of the M.L.E. will do as we have always done, and what the department will continue to do when I’m elected as Minister for Magic—we will keep Wizarding Britain’s borders secure against those that would threaten us.”

Nizar scowls. “What fucking borders? Wizarding Britain does not have borders. The United Kingdom has a border. We call it the ocean.”

Severus lowers his newspaper. “Nizar. It is very hard to take this rubbish seriously when you are mocking it so effectively.”

“Does that mean you want me to stop?” Nizar asks.

“Absolutely not,” Severus replies.

When asked about the problems of educating our young men and women of Hogwarts, Scrimgeour promised to rid the system of any remaining corruption, including a full review of the school Governing Board. He wishes to ensure that only the highest quality teachers will remain employed by Hogwarts School of Witchcraft & Wizardry, and only those qualified will sit in offices of political
importance in both the school and the board.

“Good luck with that.”

Scrimgeour has pledged to remain firm on the Ministry’s decision to keep werewolves away from decent Wizarding citizens—

“All right. Now I really hate you.”

—and has new measures ready to implement to ensure werewolves and other dangerous beasts are prevented from entering public shops, Gringotts, and other venues in Wizarding Britain.

Nizar flinches back as his copy of the Prophet abruptly catches fire. He Banishes it before it can do more than light up like a torch from the ink and magic embedded in the newsprint. “Bugger! I actually wanted to finish reading that.”

Most of those seated in the Great Hall are staring at him, though Nizar suspects it’s because several of them believe Nizar had the best response to that nonsense. “You can’t have my copy of the paper,” Severus informs him.

“That’s fine. Just tell me if the other two interviews are better or worse than Scrimgeour’s,” Nizar says. “I didn’t even finish his.”

“I told you,” Rolanda mutters. “A bloody potted plant!”

Nizar glances at Minerva. “I’m surprised you weren’t telling me off for inappropriate language.”

“You were keeping your voice down,” Minerva replies, but she is staring at her copy of the paper, flinty-eyed. “Besides, that was tamer than all the language I want to indulge in right now.”

“Worse, then,” Nizar realizes. “Which one?”

“Thicknesse.” Charity looks as if she expected a spoonful of honey and mistakenly ate a spoonful of sand. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d wonder if this was actually Lucius Malfoy they interviewed and then forgot to change their names.”

“It does read rather like the worst sort of Pure-blood dogma, doesn’t it?” Pomona shakes her head. “Rubbish.”

“The sort of rubbish that is going to attract the voters within the Wizengamot who feel similarly,” Dumbledore says, “and their numbers are not few.”

Nizar, busy wishing Salazar had put in an appearance at breakfast so as to seek his opinion, is immediately distracted. “Wait. Wait a minute. Only members of the Wizengamot can vote for the Minister for Magic?”

“I thought you knew,” Minerva says quietly.

“No! I knew the bloody Wizengamot was built from inherited family seats instead of proper elections or rotating appointments, but not the Minister for Magic!” Nizar resists the urge to bury his face in his hands. “Please tell me Amelia Bones came through her interview looking like a saint. A saint from any religion.”

“If one does not espouse Death Eater-like philosophy, she reads like a breath of fresh air, even if it is stern and terse fresh air,” Aurora says. “She may wish to gain a bit more affection for the interview
process.”

“It’s the Daily Prophet. I don’t think that’s possible,” Poppy observes dryly. “The interviews for all three of them run similarly in Witch Weekly, so this must have been taken from public speeches made within the Ministry.”

“That no one else was invited to witness.” Nizar drums his fingers on the table. He no longer regrets his desire to dismantle the Ministry and reintegrate magicians with non-magical society. This is completely, utterly ridiculous. No wonder Wizarding Britain is basking in stagnation. He gets up and leaves the Great Hall, if only so he doesn’t accidentally set another copy of the Prophet on fire.

“Oh, you look to be in a mood, Fearless Leadership,” George says when he enters the classroom a few minutes before eight o’clock.

Nizar is sitting cross-legged on his desk, most likely doing an admirable job of appearing to be in a full sulk. To be fair, that is exactly what he’s doing, though he is accompanying it with plotting. “I’m in an excellent mood. A fantastic mood. Everything is bloody sunshine and unicorn piss.”

“Chang’s not quite seventeen yet,” George reminds Nizar, sitting down at his favorite desk. “In case you’re still worried about that on her behalf, sir.”

“Buggerfuck,” Nizar hisses, and honestly has no idea if the word emerges in English or Parseltongue.

When all thirteen of his students have settled at their desks, Nizar gestures for the classroom door to shut. “Before we continue with the absolute disaster known as the beginning concepts of combat flight, I have a question. How many of you are aware that you have no voice in Wizarding Britain’s system of government?”

“Er…” Fleet, Miss Fawcett, and Miss Applebee glance at each other. “But we do,” Fleet says hesitantly.

“Not us,” Fred and George say together. “Too poor,” Fred adds while rolling his eyes. “Rich Pure-bloobs don’t want the likes of us about. Being poor might be contagious.”

“Amrish, Ona, and I are foreign-born immigrants,” Miss Shah says. “I believe the requirements involve living on British soil for at least six generations before you are offered a seat.”

“If you’re offered a seat,” Miss Spinnet stresses while Miss Chang nods. “Both of our families meet the requirements, but there hasn’t been a hint that the Wizengamot would welcome either of our families—and we’re bloody Pure-bloobs!”

“We just don’t look like proper British Pure-bloobs,” Miss Chang emphasizes, scowling. “How dare we not conform.”

Jordan shrugs. “I’m Muggle-born—uh, non-magical parents. Also not a chance of it. Same for Natalie and Angelina.”

“So, three of you were unaware that all of your fellow classmates have no say about the doings of the government they choose to live and work under.” Nizar lets his head fall back so he can stare up at the ceiling. “And that would be why the Ministry of Magic was a giant step backwards in magical progress. They’ve taken away the voices of ninety percent of the magical population.”

“They did structure our government upon the belief that those best suited to run it efficiently would be those who would hold a seat in the Wizengamot,” Fleet says.
Nizar rolls his eyes and quotes from a poem he knew by heart since it was bawdily sung in the Slytherin Common Room in the late 1870s:

“Remember, remember!
The fifth of November,
The Gunpowder treason and plot;
I know of no reason
Why the Gunpowder treason
Should ever be forgot!”

“What is that from?” Miss Spinnet sounds intrigued.

Jordan glances at her as if she’s insane. “How can you not know ‘The Fifth of November!’ It’s a classic for Guy Fawkes Night!”

“What’s Guy Fawkes Night?” Miss Applebee asks. Nizar groans in despair and considers toppling backwards off his desk.

“Combat flight!” Fred sings out. “Let’s get to the combat flight lessons before something else catches fire today!”

“That poor, poor newspaper,” Miss Johnson says sadly.

Nizar gets down from his desk. “Combat flight. Combat flight before I go punch several dozen dead politicians, which would be an unfortunate, messy, and really disgusting endeavor. Do you all have your brooms?” He watches as all thirteen students unshrink varying models of brooms, though Miss Chang’s is undoubtedly the best of the lot. Then he retrieves one of the two brooms he discovered in Galiena’s applewood chest and unshrinks it. Visually, he can’t remember a damned thing about it, but his hands recognized the feel of the polished black elder wood. The twigs are birch and hazel, and it’s obvious that it’s meant to mimic the properties of the original Firebolt model—or vice versa—but Nizar thinks this broom is nicer to look at. The silver foot grips are definitely more to his preference. Less limitation on the magic.

“Where did you get that broom?” Miss Chang asks him once they’re all in the air. Given that this class is composed mostly of Quidditch players, he expects these lessons to be an entertainingly educational disaster.

“I built it. I think.” It’s the most likely explanation. He can’t see Galiena putting another’s broom into a chest meant to be full of things returned to him.

“You can build a broom?” Miss Chang gasps.

Nizar is immediately surrounded by thirteen wide-eyed students. “Uh…yes? I mean, I may recall everything needed to do so, but I’d have to sit down and consider it to be certain.”

“But you can build a broom!” Jordan grins. “Sir, you have to teach the rest of us!”

“Oh, so none of you think I have enough to do?” Nizar asks.

“No, not if you’re not teaching us how to build our own brooms!” Fawcett declares.
Nizar rolls his eyes. “One disaster at a time!”

Watching insanity unfold for one hour and thirty minutes within the expanded magical confines of his classroom and its simulated field is a nice distraction from politics. The horrifying state of Wizarding Britain’s government sits in the back of Nizar’s mind, bubbling away like a cauldron left too long on to boil.

No matter who wins the election, they’re not going to be fond of the idea of dismantling the government they were just elected to represent.

* * * *

“Kettle’s mine!” Tonks declares, grinning like the absolute fiend she is.

Remus loves it. Loves her. For some odd bloody reason, she feels the same way about him.

He still has no idea how that happened. “Give me the blasted tea, woman!”

“Nope!” Tonks cheats, lengthening the reach of her arms so she can snag the kettle from the hob before Remus can get to it. “Last cuppa is mine!”

Remus scowls at her as she pours tea into a chipped mug, emptying the kettle. “You,” he declares, “are a cruel woman.”

“I’m a Black woman. It’s a talent,” Tonks replies cheerfully, watching as Remus fills the kettle at the sink to brew more tea. “You’re a werewolf, love. How am I faster than you when it comes to racing down the stairs and into the kitchen?”

Remus puts the kettle down on the flame a bit harder than he intended. “It’s the full moon tonight, Tonks. I’m not really…with it.”

“Oh.” Her voice is soft and quiet. “I can…you can have this.” She holds out the cup like it’s a peace offering.

Remus grimaces when he notices it’s already been topped off with cream. “You’ve already ruined that one. Keep it.”

“Oh, no cream in the tea for you, then.” Tonks grins. “What about sugar?”

“Sugar is nice, but like Nizar, I much prefer honey. It’s…it’s a wilder flavor.”

“Suppose it can be,” Tonks muses. “You took your potion at lunch, right? I was distracted by the others, and I know you asked me to remind you—”

“I took it, don’t worry.” Remus finds a suitable black leaf to brew, wanting dense, dark caffeine. The new potion doesn’t destroy him the way unmedicated transformation or Wolfsbane did, but he’s still prone to exhaustion before nightfall.

Tonks suddenly has her hand on Remus’s arm, and Remus tenses. “I am worried,” she says, “but not because I’m scared of a bloody wolf. I worry because it’s you, and I care about you. I got to see the difference between the shit potion and this one, and I want you to be…I want you to be happy.”
Remus closes his eyes, ignoring the kettle as it begins to whistle. “Is it a terrible confession to make if I admit that I’m terrified of being happy?”

“No, but it means you might want to see a shrink. That’s a bit of a problem there, being afraid of happiness.” Tonks wraps her arms around him from behind. She’s made herself tall enough to rest her head on his shoulder comfortably. “Or we could just have more sex.”

“Tonks!” Remus feels his face heat even as he smiles. “You’re insatiable. While the idea is appealing, please not today. This is the one day of the month I won’t chance…” He hesitates. “Logically, I know nothing can go wrong. But that’s the sort of fear that makes a man incapable of performing.”

Tonks snickers into his shoulder. “Don’t worry; I understand. Make the tea, Remus.”

Remus removes the kettle from the heat, grateful again for magic fire that heats things so quickly. He puts the tea into the kettle using a non-magical steel infuser. If tea leaves slip out of steel, they’re meant to be read, his grandmother always claimed. “Tonks.”

“Yeah, Remus?”

“How do you…why are you certain about this? About us?”

“Well…” Tonks swaps shoulders to press her face against the other side of his back. Her hair tickles his neck. “I may not know you very well yet, but that’s all right. I have time to figure you out. Here’s what I do know, though—I know me. I live in my own head, after all. I know what I like, don’t like, and won’t ever put up with. I know that I’m a bloody klutz, but when others roll their eyes when I trip, drop, or break things, you don’t. You smile at me, and you hold out your hand if I’m sprawled on my arse.”

Remus swallows. “I hadn’t…I hadn’t realized.”

“That you’re the only one outside of Nizar and my parents who don’t mock me when the klutz bit happens?” Tonks sounds like she’s smiling. “That’s why I believe it’s going to work, Remus. You already like me for who I am. The rest is just a learning curve.”

“And if Scrimgeour gets away with putting all of those…those methods in place to keep people like me out of the wizarding world?” Remus asks quietly.

Tonks’s arms tighten around him. “Then we’ll do everything the Muggle way. Non-magical. You can move your family money into a Muggle bank and receive your stipend for being a titled war mage and whatnot there. Almost anything magical can be bought by mail-order owl. All Scrimgeour is bloody doing is driving good business away from Diagon Alley, and that’s going to bite him in the arse once the ones running those shops realize they’ve lost money.”

“Savvy woman,” Remus says, daring to smile.

“Mum’s a Black,” Tonks sings out, “and my Dad’s brilliant. No matter what happens, we’ll be fine, yeah?”

Remus lifts his arms and places his hands over hers. Her skin is warm, and on the day of the full moon, she smells like divinity brought to life. “Yes, I think we will be.”

Chapter End Notes
Yes, I really meant cream. Double cream, more specifically. (You can scoff all you want, but it makes bestest coffee neultalizer and makes tea decadent if it's a stand-up-and-punch-you black leaf. But yes, Tonks has done the British equivalent of murdering tea, and she isn't sorry.)
Chapter Summary

Ron Weasley is not having a very good Friday.

Chapter Notes

Awesome betas are awesome: @norcumi, @sanerontheside, @mrsstanley, & @jabberwockypie

“Hermione, it’s way too early for this,” Ron protests. Hermione, as usual, pays him no mind at all and continues to bloody drag him down the corridor. “It’s Friday! Can’t it wait until after breakfast?”

“No, because then there are witnesses,” Hermione retorts without turning or releasing his hand. Ron wriggles his fingers, which are starting to feel a bit numb. “Here we are,” she announces as they round the corner into a section of the fourth floor that Ron can’t remember ever seeing before.

“Where the bloody hell are—oh, hello!” Ron stares at the portrait of a beautiful woman, life-sized, who is probably about the Slytherin brothers’ height. She has their skin tone, but her hair is solid black and her eyes are brown. She’s also dressed in a style that even he knows is a disaster of a cultural clash, but the portrait wears it well. “Who are you?”

The portrait smiles at him. “I am Fortunata Constanza, young Mister Weasley. Salazar Slytherin is my father.”

Ron keeps staring, even though it’s rude. “Yeah, sorry. I’m getting over the part where Salazar Slytherin’s not evil, but him having kids is still a bit boggling.”

“Don’t mind him,” Hermione says, rolling her eyes. “He’s just…Ron.”

Ron glares at her. “Thanks a lot!”

“It’s quite all right, Mister Weasley. You grew up on incorrect culture from birth, whereas Miss Granger has only had to contend with it since age eleven,” the portrait says. “It’s a pleasure to see you again, Miss Granger. It is also quite early to be awake and about, especially if you’re coming here.”

“Oh. Well.” Hermione draws herself up like she’s bracing herself. Professor Slytherin calls it a tell and has been trying to get her to stop doing it. Ron had to go splash his face with water when he realized he agreed with the Slytherin, but that was at the end of November. He’s getting better about it all, really he is. When Salazar Slytherin walked into this school like he belonged here the last weekend of January, Ron did not shriek, panic, whimper, hide, or try to hex the man. He challenged him to a bloody game of chess. If that isn’t improvement, then Ron must not understand what the word is supposed to mean.
“We wanted to speak with Professor Salazar, if it’s possible,” Hermione says, and Ron blinks a few times in surprise. The painting is life-sized because it’s a bloody door.

“It’s very, very early for that, too,” Fortunata the portrait frowns a bit. “My father was never a morning person, Miss Granger.”

“Neither of them are morning people, from what we’ve seen,” Ron says. “Hermione’s big on not wanting witnesses for whatever secret she’s wanting me to hear about.”

“Big secret.” Fortunata raises an eyebrow. “I see. Wait here, please.” She vanishes from her frame.

“You should have warned me, ‘Mione,” Ron says. “She’s brilliant and she’s beautiful. I think I’m in love!”

Hermione huffs out a sigh. “You are so hopeless.”

“Not my fault you introduced me to a looker of a portrait, is it?” Ron responds, grinning when Hermione shoots him a death glare that could fry a bloke’s bollocks.

The portrait of Fortunata returns, still with that same raised-eyebrow expression. “Come in, but if he swears in your presence, don’t you dare tell my uncle.”

“Wizard’s honor, won’t tell a soul,” Ron replies. Hermione rolls her eyes at him again, but nods at Fortunata. The portrait smiles one more times and then the door clicks open, swinging into a brightly lit sitting room beyond the frame’s confines. “Neat!”

“Come on,” Hermione says, grabbing his hand again and yanking him over the threshold. “Professor Salazar doesn’t actually want the entire school knowing where he lives!”

“And yet I’m contending with the two of you before the breakfast hour.”

Ron makes a point of not squeaking when he realizes that the man himself is standing at the front of a long hall on the other side of the room. Salazar Slytherin isn’t wearing pyjamas or wizarding dress, just a t-shirt and denims, both of which are rumpled enough to have been slept in. He also looks like he’d happily murder everything in his path.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of waking so early?” Slytherin asks them.

“Our apologies, sir,” Hermione says in her best We Are Good Children, Honest voice. “It’s just that — the portrait of your daughter told me something last month, but I didn’t want to repeat it too often in public halls, just in case someone overheard. I also thought it would be easier if Ron heard it from someone who was a person and not a portrait.”

“I dunno, that portrait of Fortunata could probably tell me the sky was green and grass was blue and stars were holes in the universe, an’ I’d believe all of it,” Ron says.

Slytherin scowls. “You behave yourself, young Mister Weasley—she was happily wed.”

Ron shrugs. “Yeah, all right, sir. She’s paint and a thousand years older than I am.”

Slytherin rubs at his eyes. “Gods, it’s too early for this. Filky, dear, please give me caffeinated death in the glorious form of tea.”

The house-elf appears long enough to give Slytherin an utterly scandalized look. “Filky be giving you caffeine, but not death!” she declares, and vanishes almost before Ron has the chance to realize
she’s wearing a pale blue tea towel and a necklace made of transparent glass beads on multiple strands of string. That is barking mental…except everything has been mental since Hallowe’en.

Everything has been bloody mental since Harry’s last birthday, but he tries not to think about that.

Slytherin gestures for them to sit on one of the green sofas, which is sleek and comfortable but not Malfoy-levels of rich. The silver pillows are fine enough to imply otherwise, but the room itself is comfortable and nice, not terrifyingly overstated. His one trip to Malfoy Manor as a kid in Dad’s company for Ministry business had put Ron in a right loathing of anything too fancy.

Their history professor sits down without bothering with socks, shoes, or clothes that haven’t been slept in. He grabs the teapot when the house-elves deliver it, pours a cup, and inhales it while Hermione is still pouring cups for herself and Ron.

“That’s better,” Slytherin mutters, immediately snagging the teapot back for a refill when Hermione puts it down again. “Now: what am I supposed to be affirming away from prying eyes and wandering ears, Miss Granger?”

“Fortunata told me that—no, wait, let me start over,” Hermione backpedals. “Sir, Harry Potter is my friend. Ron’s, too.”

“Best friend,” Ron decides to add, trying not to frown. “Least if he’s…still alive.” There; he said it.

“He’s still alive and well, Mister Weasley,” Slytherin says, but there is something off about his expression now. Weird. “And I am aware of your friendship.”

“How would you know about that?” Ron asks. There are enough gossips in his school that it’s an easy guess, but…

Ron draws back in shock. “You kidnapped him!” he gasps, trying to ignore the fact that his voice goes shrill and squeaky.

Slytherin gives Ron a bewildered look. “You know, throughout all of this, not once has anyone actually accused me of that.” He takes a sip of tea. “Granted, I am the man who removed your friend from that foul fucking house.”

Hermione seems to be at a loss for words, so Ron decides he’s the one who gets to plow ahead and stick his foot in it. “Last I heard, that’s still kidnapping.”

Slytherin makes an amused noise. “Not if you’re talking about a willing removal, Mister Weasley—and yes, it was indeed willing. I’m honestly not certain if your friend would have survived the rest of the summer had he remained in that house.”

Ron glances at Hermione, who is biting her lip. “Worse than the incident with the bars and the flying car?” he asks, not sure he wants to hear the answer. Ron doesn’t like to talk about the actual prison bars he and the twins had found bolted over Harry’s bedroom window the summer before second year. Mostly they don’t talk about it because no one would do anything. His own mum and dad said that Professor Dumbledore claimed the problem fixed. Ron bloody well knew better, but when it comes to Harry and danger, nobody listens to Ron except for his siblings and Hermione.

Hermione nods. “Yes, worse than the bars and the car.”

“At least when it was a mere problem of bars, they were still providing meals, even if they were pathetic ones,” Slytherin mutters, glowering down at the tea left in his cup. “It was much easier to deal with such foul beings in my youth.”
Ron feels the small bit of tea he drank trying to turn to acid in his stomach. “Oh.” He reaches out on instinct; Hermione wraps her fingers around his hand in reassurance.

“Indeed,” Slytherin says in dry agreement.

“I knew about your taking Harry, sir,” Hermione says. “Before it was sort of not-announced.”

Ron turns to stare at her, his jaw hanging open. “What?”

Hermione ignores him. “I guessed, sir, when Fortunata said that you and Harry were distant family.”

“They are?” Ron squeaks again. “I thought only You-Know-Who could claim that about a Slytherin!”

Slytherin shakes his head. “No, not only him, though it’s down to so very few now. Voldemort is directly of my line thanks to a woman I’d like to never have met in the 1400s. Your friend is descended from a younger cousin of mine who didn’t bear the family name, but was of my father’s bloodline. Harry James Potter is also a descendant of Rowena Ravenclaw’s grandniece Adelaide through his mother’s side, and Godric Gryffindor’s youngest daughter through his father’s family—but then, you’re a descendent of Godric, too, Mister Weasley, as is your Head of House, along with about three-quarters of the population of Wizarding Britain.”

“But no one else in Britain but Harry and You-Know-Who can claim you, can they?” Hermione continues doggedly. Ron gets why she wanted him to hear it from a person instead of a portrait now, and especially why she wanted it done in private. People are odd enough about Harry and the Boy-Who-Lived stuff, and sometimes they’re mental about the Parseltongue. Even with things better than they used to be, Ron still thinks the news of Harry and Voldemort being distant cousins would just set off the entire paranoid, stupid lot of them worse than second- and fourth-year combined.

“Not really, no,” Slytherin admits. “The Plagues were harsh and unforgiving on our family.”

Ron gives up on tea, not wanting to add anything more to the acid pool sitting in his stomach. “Then if Harry’s all right, where is he? Why hasn’t he…?” Said something? Turned up at bloody school? Written to them? Ron can’t figure out which question to ask.

“Because it was not safe for him, and it is definitely not safe for the pair of you.” Slytherin is doing the same raised-eyebrow thing his daughter’s portrait did a few minutes ago. “I do know that he wrote to you both, among others. I don’t know if those letters have a scheduled delivery date, or if he’ll be handing them to you himself. He didn’t say.”

“But is he…” Ron has to swallow to ask the question. “He’s all right. Yeah? Harry’s fine.”

Slytherin gives him such a long, searching look that makes Ron fidget in place. If Professor Salazar used that expression in class on troublemakers, the lot of them would be the most well-behaved and attentive history students the bloody school has ever seen. “And if your friend returned to you embracing the traits of my family, rather than merely tolerating them as he did before? Parseltongue is not the only thing that followed my bloodline, Mister Weasley.”

“Oh. That explains why the Sorting Hat took so bloody long,” Ron says. Hermione looks pleased with him for making that leap, which means she bloody well knew already.

“Yes, I did,” Hermione says, as if reading his mind. “I just never knew *why* he argued with the Hat. Harry didn’t know anything about Hogwarts. He’d never read *Hogwarts: A History*, he wouldn’t have known—”
Ron rolls his eyes. “It was Malfoy. You weren’t about that day on the train when Malfoy decided to act like…well, I’d say himself, but since he’s finally not acting like a complete prat all of the bloody time, then the next comparison would be his dad. I wouldn’t have wanted to share a dorm with Malfoy acting like that, either. And I keep telling you, Harry did read that stupid book. It’s only that every time he tried, I’d find him sleeping over it. I’m the one who knows better than to try to read that bloody thing, Hermione.”

“At least that bloody book has some redeeming quality, even if it’s only as a cure to chronic insomnia,” Slytherin comments, smirking. “I’ll have to keep that in mind.”

Hermione looks stern and disapproving. “Professor Slytherin says you set it on fire when you tried to read it from start to finish, sir.”

“The book bloody well deserved it,” is Slytherin’s counter. “I was never much fond of people who’d never met me telling me what sort of person I am.”

“Is my mate safe?” Ron blurts out. All right is one thing. Safe has always proved itself to be something totally different.

“Safe?” Slytherin considers the question. “To maul a quote from a famous film, I suppose that depends upon your point of view. Now do please exit my quarters. I’d like to take a proper bath before I deal with classes full of stubborn darlings.”

“Just one more thing. I can never find an appropriate time to ask about it during the day,” Hermione says, startling Ron in the midst of trying to stand up and flee as instructed. “It’s about the dress code for the school, sir.”

Slytherin raises an eyebrow. “I’m not fond of the idea of uniforms, but you lot have been used to the concept for quite some time now.”

“No, not the uniforms, sir.” Hermione scowls. “It’s the skirts.”

“I see.” Slytherin looks far too calm not to be irritated. “None of the young ladies in this castle have been choosing to wear a skirt with these uniforms, have they?”

“No!” Hermione bursts out. “We haven’t been choosing. It’s mandatory to wear a skirt unless you’re male or declaring for another gender!”

“That is…” Slytherin plasters one hand over his forehead. “That is ludicrous. I’ll speak with your Heads of House, Miss Granger. Don’t yet alter your method of dress until an official statement is made, but I’ll be certain the rules are changed so that anyone of any gender can wear the Hogwarts uniform to their preference.”

Hermione smiles in relief. “Thank you, sir. We’ll go now. Thank you for your time!”

“What film?” Ron asks when they’re back out in the empty corridor. At least he’s no longer baffled by the mention of films, what with Hermione dragging him into Muggle London to see a few over the summer as a distraction from being worried about Harry.

“One of the Star Wars films. There are three of them.” Hermione’s frowning again. “That was very deliberate of him.”

“You think so?” Ron wouldn’t have any idea. He has no idea what Star Wars is, though it sounds like it’s either sketch or camp. “And you promised me breakfast, Hermione.”
“One theme of the films,” Hermione says as they walk towards the stairs, “is redemption, but it sort of comes at it on the slant.”

Redemption. Okay, Ron can see how that’s fitting when people like Malfoy are trying not to be complete pricks. “How’s it on the slant, then?”

“Keep in mind I haven’t seen them since I was nine.” Hermione goes quiet as she thinks. Ron lets her, content to lead the way down the stairs to the Great Hall. “At first, it’s like there is a very clear division of black and white, evil versus good. But then as things progress, it’s not that simple. Not everyone who is evil was always evil, and not everyone who is good was always good. Some people don’t want to be either, but eventually…all right, if I had to say that the films have a theme at all, it would be about making choices. Choosing to be bad. Choosing to be good even after choosing to be bad. Discovering that maybe someone who appeared to be bad was never that way at all. I think. I might be misremembering them. It’s Dad who loves those films.”

“Not your Mum?” Ron asks, trying to think about all of that. Choices definitely makes sense. Their Potions professor was recently outed as being mostly evil instead of completely rotten, and that was definitely a choice.

“Mum likes Star Trek, which was a show on the telly from the States. It’s also been a few films. That one is a lot more…” Hermione gives him a faint smile. “It’s complicated. I’ve watched episodes of the new version of the show when I’m at home. Mum got them all by video piracy so we could see them, back before we could just buy them. I think that may be the only law my mother has ever broken in her life.”

Ron spends most of breakfast staring at the Slytherin-y end of the staff table. It’s not like it’s a useful source of information or anything, since both literal Slytherins hate mornings. So does Professor McGonagall, and Snape always looks like he wants to kill something, anyway. None of the staff are all that talkative until lunch—if Professor Slytherin remembers lunch, anyway. Ron has figured out just from the way that Snape will roll his eyes at the professor’s empty chair that Professor Slytherin gets distracted and forgets. At least there are now six hundred elves roaming about Hogwarts who can shove food at their Defence teacher.

He’s still quietly gleeful over the fact that nobody has house-elves anymore except Hogwarts. None of those stuck-up Pureblood twats of any family can lord their servants over him. Now it’s just their money they’re flashing about, but to Ron that’s still an improvement.

“Oh, has Ron developed a new crush?”

Ron blinks and turns to glare at George. “Are you absolutely mental? No!”

“Well, it’s just that you were staring awful hard at our Fearless Leadership, not to mention the additional staring at the reason as to why Binns now hates everyone,” Fred says. “Merlin bless our new History Relic Slytherin.”

“We really don’t see you suddenly overcoming Slytherin prejudices to crush on our favorite Bloody Bat,” George puts in. “And we’re pretty sure Professor McGonagall is dating someone.”

Dating? Professor McGonagall? Ron takes another look at the staff table, realizes that Salazar Slytherin always sits next to her, and decides he is going to pretend he didn’t hear that.

“So, it’s either a crush or plotting,” Fred adds.

“It’s…” Ron thinks about it. If he doesn’t give Fred and George some sort of answer, they’ll never
let up. “It’s sort of under the plotting category, yeah. Just don’t have all the details yet.”

“Scouting ahead. Sensible plotting.” Fred gives Ron a sage nod and looks like he’s completely serious. What the hell—everything and everyone has just gone bloody sideways lately. Harry is going to be so confused when he comes back.

All right, maybe not. Harry is never really fazed by much of anything that anyone does unless it’s a berk trying to hurt someone. Then he’s just barking and a bit rabid.

Harry definitely could be related to the Slytherin brothers. It’s not like Ron suspected Salazar Slytherin of lying about it, or of the portrait being starkers or anything, it’s just…he likes to see these things for himself. Both of their new-ancient professors look a bit like Harry—Professor Slytherin looks a lot like Harry, even more than Professor Salazar.

It’s the nose, really. Ron had to listen to Ginny practically wax poetic about Harry’s nose when she was in the bottomless depths of that stupid crush. Thanks to her, Ron spent a lot of time looking at Harry, trying to figure out why his little sister was losing her bloody mind over his best mate. All he really got out of that bit of staring was Harry wondering why Ron was staring at him, and also the realization that he really didn’t go for blokes. Nice to know, but it didn’t ever answer Ron’s question about Ginny being a loon.

Ron looks at the table again just in time to catch Snape staring at him. He resists the urge to immediately avert his eyes and possibly hide under the table to escape.

Basics of Occlumency and Legilimency. Mind Magic. Whatever Professor Slytherin wants to call it. He’s been hearing enough about it thanks to Hermione and the twins. It doesn’t sound all that hard.

Ron draws in a deep breath and thinks, very loudly, WHAT?

Snape flinches. That is bloody marvelous.

Of course, then Snape gets his revenge. Staring, Mister Weasley, is incredibly rude.

Fuck! Fuck, he was not expecting anyone to talk back! Fuck!

The resulting smile on Snape’s face is evil. Pure evil. Ron is not ever going to be convinced otherwise that Snape is not some level of evil, not when he does shit like that.

“Ron, are you all right?” Ginny asks. “You’re really pale all of a sudden.”

“He fucking talks!” Ron gasps out, which is met by immediate laughter. “Fuck all of you, too!”

Hermione just rests her head in her hands. “Ron, please tell me that you didn’t just challenge one of the professors known to have a mastery in Mind Magic.”

“I didn’t know that Snape did!”

“Deserved it, then,” George says, patting Ron on the head. “Poor baby brother.”

“Dammit, George!”

“Ron, please stop swearing in front of the younger students!” Hermione begs, but the fourth-years and third-years are already laughing. Professor McGonagall must have been off her rocker and setting it on fire to have decided that Ron needed to be a Prefect.

Ron waits until his classes are over for the day, though Hermione is still in Runes. He might not be
the greatest student Hogwarts has ever seen, but he makes a point of knowing everyone’s office hours—mostly because it means that those teachers are actually inside their office, not roaming the halls and scaring the life out of a body.

Hermione went straight to the Founder for information. He wants to try the Slytherin that’s proved since the first of November that he’ll talk about bloody well everything. Ron wasn’t exaggerating when he said that Professor Slytherin’s fairness could play at being a knife’s edge, and that might be really useful.

He walks to the open classroom door, thinking on what he might say. Where is Harry? feels like it’s a bit too desperate, even if he does want to know. Slytherin told them that Harry is safe; Hermione says that Harry is getting the education he needs to not be You-Know-Who’s victim. That’s not great, but Ron gets it—better now than he would have before the bloody Triwizard Tournament, anyway. He once thought he wanted to be in Harry’s shoes until he got to watch the Tournament happen. Lesson definitely learned, but none of that tells Ron where.

Professor Slytherin is at his desk in the classroom, but he’s sound asleep. Ron lowers his hand before he can knock on the door to announce himself, wondering how in the world the man is keeping his balance like that. The professor is kicked back in the chair so that its front legs are off the ground, his boots are resting on the desk, and somehow he isn’t crashing to the floor.

He’s already on his way out the door again when hissing stops him in his tracks. He turns around to see that the professor hasn’t moved or woken up. He’s talking in his sleep, just like Harry does, in bloody Parseltongue. That’s a familiar sound that used to haunt the dormitory.

Ron punched Finnigan in his stupid face at the start of term when Seamus said it was going to be nice and quiet in their dorm without all the bleeding Parseltongue. To be fair to Seamus, he apologized, but only because Neville pulled out his wand and hit Seamus with some weird plant-based jinx that wouldn’t stop until Seamus said the words and meant them.

Lesson also learned: do not piss off Neville Longbottom. That one’s grown some terrifying stones, especially once they were rid of the Pink Toad and got themselves the best Defence teacher they’ve ever had outside of Remus Lupin. Neville doesn’t even panic in the Potions classroom anymore, and no one knows what to make of that miracle at all.

Professor Slytherin doesn’t look like he’s enjoying whatever he’s dreaming about. What he’s saying is…yes, that is definitely about blood, death, and people dying, even if Ron can’t understand the specifics. Or maybe it’s the lack of context, the things that would make those words make sense.

Ron debates for a minute and decides he’s going to be the sort to definitely step in it this time. Harry gave him some awful habits about helping people. It didn’t take much encouragement or anything, but he still reserves the right to blame Harry.

He steps up close to the desk and then coughs loudly.

Professor Slytherin jerks awake and nearly falls off his wobbling chair before he catches his balance by grabbing the edge of his desk. “Mister Weasley. Can I help you?”

Ron has no idea how the professor is pulling off that level of dignity when he’s clinging to a desk. Maybe he really does need to be paying more attention to the verbal defence stuff than just the basics, but Ron’s never been dignified a day in his life. He isn’t convinced the lessons will stick.

“Maybe, sir. I wasn’t going to wake you up once I realized you were sleeping, but you didn’t seem to be enjoying your nap very much.”
The professor lets his chair thump back down to the floor and then rubs his face with one hand. “No, I suppose I wasn’t. I was dreaming.” He frowns. “I don’t remember what I was dreaming about. It was just…it was important.” He reaches up to run his fingers along the glittering edges of Kanza’s scales, just barely visible above his collar. “What time is it?”

“Five?” Professor Slytherin sighs. “I hope no one came in as you did, then. I must have been sleeping in this chair for the last three hours. I’d hate to think someone needed my help and decided they shouldn’t bother me.”

Ron decides Overwhelming Cheerfulness is called for. It works on Mum. “Well, it’s the end of the week. We know where to find you if we need anything. I should be off, then.”

“Why did you come up here if it was only to leave?” the professor asks curiously.

“Oh, well—I didn’t, but—”

Professor Slytherin only raises an eyebrow in response to Ron’s sputtering. Bollocks, but both Slytherins and the bloody portrait use that expression.

“Professor Salazar says your family is related to Harry,” Ron says, feeling like he’s turned babbler.

“Yes.” Now both of the professor’s eyebrows are raised. “And?”

“Uh…all right, that’s about as far as I got,” Ron admits. “It just—it’s odd. Maybe I want to talk to someone who might find it odd, too.”

“Odd.” Professor Slytherin nods. “Yes, that’s one way of putting it, but it’s infinitely preferable to Voldemort, who is just irritating.”

Ron still winces out of habit at hearing that name. “Irritating and deadly aren’t synonyms.”

Professor Slytherin snorts. “Yes, they are. Are you doing anything until the dinner hour sweeps you away?”

“Oi, eating is just good sense!” Ron protests. “But no, not really, sir. Hermione’s in Runes, and everyone else is off trying to get in a Quidditch game.” He’d like to be out there with them, but they started while he was still in his last class, and there isn’t time to run seconds.

“Hold that thought, then.” Professor Slytherin disappears into his office, door shutting behind him. When he comes out again a moment later, he has something carefully balanced on one hand that he slides into place on the desk, shoving an inkpot off to the side.

Ron’s eyes widen as he stares down at the board and its engraved pieces. “Holy—” Every word he can think of will either get him detention or lost points. “That’s a Shatranj board!” It’s a very, very old one, too. The pieces are all abstract designs and look like they’re probably made of ivory. The board is wood painted in white and blue—not checkered like a modern chessboard, just a design
painted over the squares like the grooved lines don’t matter.

“Someone found it in the rubbish room aspect of the classroom during the voluntary cleanup sessions...which will probably end sometime this decade.” Professor Slytherin shakes his head over that idea. “But it’s pristine, and it has every single piece. I’ve not seen one of these in a very long time. Do you know how to play, Chess Master?”

Ron frowns a bit over the naff title. “Yeah, I do. Taught myself on a board I carved out a few years ago. It’s just that no one else knows how to play, so I’m probably not very good at it.”

“Neither was I. Granted, I’m comparing that skill against Godric and Salazar, both of whom were very, very good,” the professor says.

“Were?” Ron asks, grabbing a chair once it occurs to his dimwitted brain that he’s being granted the chance to play a game of real Shatranj against someone who isn’t himself. “Professor Salazar isn’t good at it anymore?”

“You’ve encountered Salazar’s excellence at chess, but that’s been a constant for a very long time. The method of play between Shatranj and chess may not have changed very much, but those changes are enough that he may as well not recall how to play at all.” Professor Slytherin’s expression slips a bit back towards that worn-down look. “You can forget a lot over the course of a thousand years, Mister Weasley. I’m certainly proof enough of that.”

“Well, it’s been over four months now, sir,” Ron decides to remind him. “You remember a lot more now than you did when you first started teaching us not to be stupid gits.”

Professor Slytherin smiles after making the first move. “I do, yes. I have Cumbric back. Our swots are salivating.”

That explains a lot about one of Hermione’s language spews the other day. “You know, it sounds to me like that’d be something useful,” Ron says as he decides how he’s going to counter. Shatranj and chess are the same game just as much as they’re really not. “You know, if anyone needed to communicate in battle and be sure the enemy couldn’t understand it.”

When Ron looks up, Professor Slytherin is grinning at him. “Mister Weasley, everyone in your dorm would attempt to murder you in your sleep if I introduced that very concept and stated it was your idea.”

“Throw me under the Knight Bus then, why don’t you?” Ron replies, seeing an opportunity and taking it after the professor moves again.

“I have no use for a magical bus painted up to impersonate this school’s Headmaster.”

Ron grins and makes his next move. “Didn’t know you’d seen it yet, Professor.”

“I was introduced to it in London.” Professor Slytherin doesn’t sound impressed. “Fortunately, I wasn’t made to board it.”

Ron loses the first game before he thinks he can say the words and not stutter over them. “The Slytherin thing.”

The professor gives the board a gentle rap with his knuckles so that the carved pieces reset themselves. Unlike Wizard’s Chess, this bunch doesn’t destroy each other. They just fall over and pretend to be dead until they’re removed from the board. “The Slytherin thing?”
“Harry never told us, but, uh—Hermione and I figured out that he was nearly a Hat Stall because the Hat wanted Slytherin.” Ron takes the first move when the professor gestures for him to do so. “And…and I feel terrible about it.”

Professor Slytherin gives him a confused look. “I’m afraid you’ll need to be a bit more specific,” he says after he moves the asp Horse. Whatever they were calling it at the time, but it’s definitely not a knight yet. Either way, it means the professor makes off with one of Ron’s foot soldier-pawns.

“Right. Uh.” Ron shoves his free hand into his hair and gets his chariot-rook involved. “It’s…well, actually, that nice portrait acting as Professor Salazar’s door said it pretty well. Hermione only listened to House prejudice stuff from when she was eleven—nearly twelve, actually—and on. I heard it my whole life, even though we knew Slytherins like Mrs. Tonks who weren’t starkers, rabid, or evil. It didn’t matter that I already thought of Harry as a friend when we got off the train and went to the Hall to be Sorted. If he hadn’t argued with the Hat, I would have…” Ron can’t think of a decent move to counter the professor’s elephant-bishop, so he just slides a foot soldier into a new position at random. “I would have just stopped talking to him. He would have been like Draco.”

“The enemy.” When Ron looks up, Professor Slytherin is staring down at the board. Ron gets the oddest feeling, like it’s less about the game and more like the professor is avoiding looking Ron in the face. “You would have sacrificed a burgeoning friendship for mere House prejudices.”

“Yeah. I wouldn’t do that now,” Ron insists. “But the fact that he never told me—Harry knew how I would have felt about it, I reckon. I don’t like it, but he was right not to tell me.”

Ron lowers his face when he feels his skin turn hot. He’d acted like such a complete prat about the Triwizard Tournament, refusing to believe his best mate saying he hadn’t put his name into that stupid Goblet. Jealousy made him extra-daft until dragon fire burned it away. Ron woke up and realized all at once that he didn’t give a mouse’s tit if Harry really had been idiot enough to put his name in to compete. It didn’t matter, because the Tournament was going to bloody well kill him, and Ron didn’t want that to happen.

Course, it hadn’t been the Tournament that nearly did him in. Harry decided to stick it to everyone and win, probably out of obstinate bloody spite. It was a fucking lunatic Death Eater and You-Know-Who what almost killed Harry instead.

“Sometimes it saddens me that I had no way to record for posterity the absolute litany of foul language that Professor Snape gave vent to when he learned about that particular Hat Stall’s cause. He was at it for at least an hour before having to give up when he simply ran out of new ways to say fuck.”

Ron jerks back in surprise. “Uh—”

Professor Slytherin glances up with his fingertip pressed to his lips. “I said absolutely nothing inappropriate.”

Ron blinks a few times. “Nope. Didn’t hear a word, sir. But…Snape knew?”

“He overheard your friend confiding that truth to one other person, someone in your House that he considered to be a neutral entity. Not Miss Granger, Mister Weasley. To that student’s credit, they have never once betrayed your friend’s confidence.”

“Who?” Ron asks.

The professor rolls his eyes. “That was a very poor fishing attempt. I won’t tell you, but if you figure
it out? Let it be. They gave their word not to tell another, Mister Weasley.”

“Yeah. All right,” Ron agrees, feeling baffled. Keeping secrets isn’t exactly a trait he’d pin to his own House, but it looks like someone in Gryffindor is really good at keeping their mouth shut—especially if they were about for the Chamber nonsense.

The professor didn’t say he shouldn’t find out, though. He just said that Ron shouldn’t bother whoever it is. Challenge bloody well accepted.

Ron loses the second game, too. That’s a bit more discouraging than just losing the first one.

“This is actually what I mean about you, chess, and limiting yourself,” Professor Slytherin says. “You know this game, but the difference in appearance and function, the slight shift in the rules from the chess that you rely on—that greatly contributed to the distraction you were already dealing with in trying to cope with a conversation about your friend and Slytherins.”

Ron scowls. “Did you use this as an opportunity to give me a lesson?”

The professor smiles and spreads his arms. “Oh, I’ve gone and done my job again. How dare I do such a thing!”

Ron huffs out an annoyed breath. “Yeah, yeah, I get it, Professor. I—” He freezes in place, staring at Professor Slytherin.

It isn’t just the nose that Ginny waxed really bad poetic about. It’s the smile.

That is the way Harry smiles when he’s being Sarcastic-Playful, not Sarcastic-Biting or Sarcastic-Fuck-You, or even Sarcastic-Please-Go-Off-And-Die-Now. Ron needed to add that last one because of Minister Fudge at the end of the Tournament. Not even Snape ever earned Harry dredging through those seriously deep wells.

Salazar Slytherin waited out a thousand years just to be here for his brother. Slytherin being the one to decide that Harry needed to be safe and educated, what with the other adults in their lives doing such a bang-up job of it. Professor Slytherin talking in his sleep in Parseltongue. Harry being family to the Slytherin line. Professor Slytherin being all too willing to dispatch You-Know-Who, while also talking about how adults shouldn’t be relying on an undertrained teenager to save them from a noseless walking corpse. Harry always being derisive and insisting on calling You-Know-Who by name. The bloody Hat Stall.

Too many puzzle pieces just decided to fall onto Ron’s head at once, and they make no sense unless Ron accepts the idea that their utterly mental conclusion isn’t mental at all. It’s not like bloody Time-Turners don’t exist. Hermione never said how far back you could turn one, but she didn’t say it had limits, either.

Professor Slytherin’s smile fades, but he doesn’t look angry or upset. If anything, that really awful worn look is worse than ever.

Ron flinches when the classroom door abruptly shuts. “Like I told you when you finally handed in a decent essay: you’re a natural tactician, Mister Weasley.”

“Are you going to Obliviate me?” Ron asks, a bit proud of the fact that his voice doesn’t wobble.

The professor sighs. “Is there a reason I should, Mister Weasley?”

Ron swallows. “Well…I suppose I was just wondering how you’d look with green eyes, what with
the family resemblance being so strong between you, my mate, and Professor Salazar.”

“I’d look like myself, but with green eyes,” Professor Slytherin says in a dry voice. “If you’re wondering about the hair, that I can’t do.”

“No?” Ron asks, hoping there isn’t a nervous smile on his face. He is either correct and terrified out of his wits, or he’s just as much of a loon as Ginny.

“That hair holds some sort of magic that is particular to the Lohat family line, that of your friend’s grandmother. I could mimic it to a certain extent, but it wouldn’t look right.”

“Oh,” Ron says, while thinking, Because you don’t remember it. Yep, terrified it is. “But then—"

“You know, if you’re going to mentally shout across a crowded hall, you might wish to master Occlumency first.” Professor Slytherin stares directly into Ron’s eyes. “It’s the most important aspect of Mind Magic. Defence, Mister Weasley.”

“Defence. Right.” Ron swallows again because his mouth is far too dry. “Because there’s that walking corpse an’ all.”

“Yes. Exactly so.” Professor Slytherin makes a motion with his hand, mimicking a person darting from the room. “Mind Magic. The seventh-years who take Defence can assist you in the basics, but you should only let Miss Granger assist you with whatever shielding you decide upon.”

“Hermione learned bloody Occlumency?” Ron asks in surprise.

“Self-taught, no less.” Professor Slytherin smiles. “She is very, very good. Out, Mister Weasley. I’ve things to do before dinner.”

Ron nods and goes to leave, but he grips the doorknob without opening the door. He already knows, and the professor is bloody well aware of it. He makes himself look at Nizar Slytherin and ask the question. “You don’t remember me at all. Do you?”

The professor slowly shakes his head. If he looked worn before, now he looks absolutely knackered. “Stay away from Professor Dumbledore until myself or Salazar can confirm you capable of shielding your mind properly.” He pauses. “Don’t get into another mental shouting match with Professor Snape, either. He would not hesitate to Obliviate you, but his intent would certainly not be to harm you.”

No, it wouldn’t be about harming, even if Ron would bloody hate it. “Yeah. I get it. I mean, I get it, sir.”

Professor Slytherin makes that run-along gesture again. “Do keep in mind that eye contact is currently your enemy.”

Ron nods and then all but bolts from the room, leaving the classroom door hanging open as he runs past the dancing troll tapestry and multiple paintings whose occupants never wake up. When he reaches the quietest, darkest section of the hallway, Ron leans against the wall, feeling like he’s just run ten miles.

Shit. Bloody hell, what is he supposed to do?

Besides learn Occlumency, anyway.

Shit!
Think. Please, he knows how to think. He dealt with Quirrell and an insane maze of traps, Gilderoy bleeding Lockhart and nearly being Obliviated by his own broken wand, Sirius Black trying to murder Peter Pettigrew (deservedly, even), Lupin turning werewolf—

Snape putting himself between the three of them and a bloody werewolf. Ron definitely has to give up and concede to their Potions professor being a bit less evil. Just a little.

His Potions teacher and his Defence teacher are dating.

Ron shoves both hands into his hair. He is not going to think about that. No, absolutely not, that is too barking mental and bleeding weird and just No.

He needs help. “Uh—Dobby?” he calls, hoping the house-elf might be willing to listen to him.

To his relief, Dobby pops into the hall in front of him. He’s wearing too many socks again, but he’s added a belt and a tiny silver necklace that looks like chain mail. “Ron Weasley remembered Dobby!” the elf says happily. “Dobby was starting to think Ron Weasley had forgotten Dobby.”

“Oh—not that, not really,” Ron manages to say. “Sorry, I actually didn’t mean to leave you thinking anything like that. It’s been a weird year. I—I need help.”

“Dobby is happy to be helping Harry Potter’s friend Ron Weasley!” Dobby declares.

Ron stares at the elf. “But—is he? I mean, really?”

Dobby pauses, frowns, and then nearly turns his head upside down as he stares back at Ron. Then he gives a decisive nod.

All right, then. That’s…not making this any less weird. “Uhm. I need an empty room that nobody uses, and I need Hermione. Oh, and dinner if it’s not too much trouble.” He can’t stand the idea of going down to the Great Hall right now. Snape might be there, and Ron still has nightmares about Obliviation. Not doing that, thanks. Dumbledore will definitely be there.

Why is Professor Dumbledore suddenly on the list of people to avoid?

Dobby takes Ron’s hand while he’s distracted and Apparates Ron to a room in the castle he’s never seen before, but the torches are lit and there is a table with chairs. “Oh. Yeah. This is nice,” Ron says, mentally trying to catch up with the idea that a house-elf just Apparated him within Hogwarts. That’s wicked.

“Dobby will go find Hermione Granger and Dobby will be making sure the two Hogwarts students have a proper dinner.” Dobby vanishes again. Ron nods to an empty room, pulls out one of the chairs, and slumps down into it. If he can mentally shout across the Great Hall, how hard can Occlumency be?

He’s been listening to the seventh-years whinge about it for almost two months. Oh, Merlin, he’s going to end up Obliviated until You-Know-Who is dead.

“Ron?”

Ron stops beating his head against the tabletop and looks up at Hermione, who is holding Dobby’s hand. “I don’t want to be Obliviated!” Ron whines.

“Oh, for—no one is going to Obliviate you.” Hermione comes over to sit down next to him. Dobby looks pleased and vanishes again just in time for two dinner trays to appear on the table. Hermione
jerks back from the trays, blinks, and then apparently decides to go along with it.

“Snape might!” Ron retorts, realizing his voice has gone all shrill again. He hasn’t sounded this bad since the bloody Yule Ball.

Hermione looks frustrated. “Ron, Professor Snape isn’t going to Obliviate you just because you shouted at him with basic Legilimency.”

“Not for that!” Ron’s jaw hangs open. “Bloody hell, I’m thinking about it again.” He puts his head back down on the table.

Hermione pats his shoulder. “Ron, I have no idea why you’ve suddenly gone off the deep end. Please enlighten me.”

Ron laughs into wood that smells like dust, lemon, and beeswax. “Our Defence teacher is sleeping with our Potions teacher.”

“Yessssssss? We did know that already. Or at least we know that they are definitely dating.”

“Hermione?” Ron waits until she stops patting his shoulder. “How do you get from hating each other’s bloody existence to shagging?”

“Well, I suppose maturity is the deciding factor in most cases—oh.” Hermione draws in a deep, shocked breath. “Oh! Are we having the conversation I think we’re having?”

“He’s not coming back.” Ron feels his eyes burn. This isn’t fair. “Harry isn’t coming back because he never left. Sort of.”

“Yes, we are definitely having that conversation. Oh, dear.” Hermione sighs. “You know he doesn’t —”

“Yeah, I know he doesn’t remember, but he told everyone that in our very first class.” Ron lifts his head just enough to plant his chin on his arm, staring at a pile of food he should be eating. He’s never felt less like eating in his entire life. “You bloody well set me up this morning by taking me to talk to Professor Salazar.”

“Yes and no,” Hermione admits. “It was supposed to be part of my stupid plan to convince you to devote more time to Occlumency.”

“Well, it fucking worked!” Ron retorts in dismay. “How did you find out about this, ’Mione?”

“My essay was about, uh, Occlumency. Mind Magic. And how Mind Magic would have protected Harry from Voldemort,” Hermione replies. When Ron turns his head, it’s to find Hermione staring at him in misery. “I was right, too. But it was the Mind Magic part that…well. Professor Salazar, Professor Snape, and Professor Slytherin can’t get through my shielding. So, Professor Slytherin—Nizar—he told me.”

“Because you’re able to keep everyone out. So no one else will know.” Ron resists the urge to beat his face against the table again. “Why didn’t you bloody well tell me?”

“Because of Occlumency!” Hermione shouts before biting her lip. “Why do you think I’ve been nattering on about Mind Magic all the time, Ron? It was the only hint I could give you!”

“I don’t know Occlumency. I’m going to be bloody Obliviated!”
Hermione frowns at him. “How did you find out, Ron?”

“Oh. Uh. Played Shatranj with Professor Slytherin. Realized that I was sort of staring the answer right in the face.” The laugh Ron utters is watery and sort of horrifying. The only difference between Professor Slytherin and Harry is age, eye and hair color, and some time spent out in the bloody sun. Ron just doesn’t understand how Nizar Slytherin can look so much like Salazar Slytherin when it’s not Professor Salazar who knows how to be a Metamorphmagus.

“He told you, and he didn’t Obliviate you,” Hermione points out.

Ron eyes her, surprised she’s overlooking something that’s even more obvious than the professor’s features. “Hermione, if this had all happened before that funeral, he really would have Obliviated me, and he wouldn’t have told you.”

Hermione pours herself a drink from a pitcher of juice on the tray and sits back in her chair with it, brow furrowed as she thinks. “He might have, but I’m really not sure. I have the feeling that Professor Salazar and Professor Slytherin aren’t really fond of the Obliviation spell.” She takes a sip and looks down at her goblet. “I suppose he’s tired of losing people. How many people can you lose over a thousand years?”

Ron lets out another laugh that really isn’t. “A lot, I bet. You still won’t find me climbing into a bloody painting—and why do that? Why a painting?”

“Because you can’t travel forward in time.” Hermione gives him a weak smile. “Time-Turners only go backwards, Ron. There is something about traveling forward in time, if you’re not actually experiencing it, you can…well, you can miss. It’s like there are layers of worlds, dimensions, all of them stacked on top of each other. Non-magical science calls it Quantum Physics. If you go forward in time but it’s not a path you’ve already traveled, you could end up somewhere else, and then what good does that do?”

“Not much, I reckon.” Ron rubs his face and is mortified when he realizes his cheeks are wet. Oh, no, absolutely not. He is not crying. This is Hermione and he is not crying in front of his other best mate. “But why be gone that long? He’s what—forty-one?”

“Forty-three after the first of March,” Hermione corrects absently. “They moved his birthday,” she explains when Ron looks at her, baffled. “He didn’t go from July to July. It was July to March.”

“Oh.” That makes sense. “But why didn’t he come back?”

Hermione sips at her juice again, making a face, but she doesn’t look to be in any great hurry to eat, either. “He did come back. But if you’re talking about immediately—he had a family, Ron.”

“What about us?” Ron asks, his voice cracking. “We’re his bloody family, too!” He feels absolutely terrible when Hermione reaches up and brushes tears away from her eyes. “I’m sorry—”

“No, it’s…it’s all right. No, it’s not, but it has to be, because this is what is!” Hermione insists, slamming her goblet down so hard that juice sloshes out onto the table. “Professor Salazar mentioned letters this morning, Ron. Harry wrote—or Nizar—either way, it doesn’t matter. He wrote to us, Ron. I’ve seen mine already, and I’ll bet if you figure out Occlumency, you’ll receive yours, too. He didn’t forget us or abandon us.”

Ron chews on his lower lip. “Then—they didn’t know how to send him back. The painting bit was something they only figured out later.”

“You can’t travel forward in time,” Hermione reminds him, wiping her eyes again. “Yes, it’s exactly
like that.”

“Then the name...thing.” Ron thinks about it. “Magical adoption? The real sort instead of just the paper sort?”

“Yes. Professor Salazar forgot a certain loophole, so Professor Slytherin can’t say his name is anything except what it is. At all. Ever.”

Ron stares at her. Then he says, “Harry punched Merlin.”

Hermione’s eye twitches before she bursts into hysterical-sounding giggles. “Oh my God, I hadn’t really—you’re right! Harry punched Merlin, Ron!”

“But it sounds like the blighter really deserved it.” Ron holds out for another few seconds before he’s laughing, too. It’s so very Harry that he can’t help it. Harry wouldn’t give a single fuck if it was Merlin or an actual god. He hated bullying, hated adults who did it— “Merlin is probably lucky it was only the two teeth, an’ not all of them!” he gasps out.

Hermione nods wildly, her eyes watering as she laughs. “Professor Snape is so proud of the fact that Nizar did that.”

“Oh God, you had to go and remind me of that!” Ron covers his face with both hands. “I don’t want to think about my best mate shagging one of our teachers!”

“Our best mate is one of our teachers, dingbat,” Hermione replies, but she’s still giggling. “And now I’m picturing it and, well...if I’m stuck picturing it, I’m glad Professor Snape is fit.”

Ron drops his hands to glare at her in disbelief. “He is not. He’s a greasy—”

“Don’t. Say. It,” Hermione warns him. “If you want your best mate back in any form, you really can’t do that.” She hesitates. “Well, actually, Nizar would probably find it very funny, especially if Snape heard and hexed the daylights out of you. You would have earned it.”

“Snape would, yeah. That hex he used during that one dueling session? Wouldn’t want to meet it again,” Ron says, trying not to wince. Then something else occurs to him. “Wait. Does Snape know?”

Hermione nods. “He’s known for a while now. Not before Hallowe’en, but he found out sometime afterwards.”

“And he didn’t murder Harry.” Ron wonders if anything will ever make sense again, because that really doesn’t.

“Nizar,” Hermione corrects him. “And no, he didn’t.” She plucks a napkin from the tray and starts to clean up the spilled juice. “You have to look at it...well, on the slant. Harry dealt with Professor Snape for only four years. Nizar and Professor Snape have known each other for over twenty-four years. It’s not really the same thing.”

“I guess not,” Ron finally admits. “Does anyone else know?”

“Professor Salazar, obviously,” Hermione answers. “Sirius and Remus. Professor McGonagall spends a lot of time around Professor Dumbledore, so they couldn’t tell her about Nizar until after she became proficient in Occlumency last month. Nizar doesn’t want Dumbledore to know.”

“But why?” Ron asks in disbelief. “That really doesn’t make sense. He’s the head of the Order of the
Hermione picks up a dinner roll and studies it without eating it. “I know the answer to that question, but that’s all I can tell you until you learn Mind Magic. Aside from the sort-of-problem with Dumbledore, there is a noseless walking corpse who knows Mind Magic, too.”

Ron shivers. He does not want You-Know-Who trying to rifle through his head. He is going to learn Occlumency in bloody record time, or he’s going to make Hermione be the one to Obliviate him just so it isn’t anyone else. He trusts her to make sure he understands what happened, if not why.

Bloody Merlin, he’s plotting his own possible Obliviation. Because…because that’s his mate. Ron’s mate doesn’t even remember being his mate, and still he brought out an ancient game of Shatranj and tried to be one anyway, even if there is a lot of baggage and student-teacher nonsense in the way.

“How’s it going?”

“Yeah, Ron?”

“This is really bloody fucking odd.”

Hermione doesn’t chastise him for the language and mutter about Prefecting. She just gives him a wide-eyed nod. “Yes. It really, really is.”
Chapter Summary

Maybe Twelve Grimmauld Place is burning down. That’s a cheerful thought.

Chapter Notes

I accidentally took last week off...and probably should have taken 2 weeks, as this move has eaten 2 months. Losing that kind of time has really hurt my writing. (Opening AO3 should not cause anxiety.)

Betas still awesome: @norcumi, @saneronthеinside, @mrsstanley, & @jabberwockypie

Severus watches the Gryffindor table during dinner, highly suspicious. Granger and Weasley both arrived late, and don’t seem to be eating at all. Weasley is staring at the tabletop, wincing every few minutes while alternately going white or red in the face. He suspects Granger must be kicking Weasley beneath the table.

Severus gets out a scrap of paper and scrawls a note on it, frowning. Nizar, did you say something to Ronald Weasley? “Mitto ad Nizar.”

“What is it?” Salazar asks without turning his head. “Aside from my brother’s inability to attend dinner on a consistent basis.”

“Nizar left for London at Black’s request a few minutes ago. I don’t even want to know why,” Severus replies. “This is about a student.”

Salazar glances at the Gryffindor table. “How is Ron Weasley not passing out after turning red and white with such consistency?”

“He’s a Weasley and a Prewett. They’re a sturdy lot,” Minerva comments. “Whatever is happening in regards to both Mister Weasley and Sirius Black, I also do not want to know.”

Severus catches the slip of paper when it returns, looking far more tattered than a simple Sending Charm should cause. I didn’t say a thing to Weasley, Nizar writes. Watching Weasley’s brain attempt to fry itself as he realizes whom he is staring at, however...

Severus curses under his breath. Obliviation did not occur to you? He sends the paper and its question back to Nizar, scowling at the most troublesome pair of Gryffindors outside of James Potter and Sirius fucking Black. Weasley doesn’t notice, but Granger does. The expression on her face is a blatantly telegraphed plea for assistance.

He grudgingly makes himself be fair. Granger has been academically insufferable, not a dunderhead, and does not deserve to be placed in the same category as the bloody Marauders.

Mind Magic is a thing that people can learn, Severus, Nizar writes in response. Why?
Severus watches Weasley turn white again, causing his freckles to stand out in stark relief. *Weasley is panicking. I would be entertained were it not for the circumstances.*

Nizar’s latest message arrives with the edge of it on fire. Severus grabs the slip of paper and pats out the flames. *He must have saved the panic for afterwards. No more messages for now. It might distract me—*

The fire burnt off the last of the message. Severus will have to wait and see what was so distracting…and causing small fires.

Maybe Twelve Grimmauld Place is burning down. That’s a cheerful thought.

He decides the best means of success will be to lie in wait rather than try to wade through the students. He’d rather fewer witnesses; it isn’t automatically assumed that he’s giving Gryffindors detention if he demands their attention these days, which is bloody inconvenient.

“I don’t want to be Obliviated!” Weasley is whining in muffled terror as Granger marches him along the ground floor corridor. He’s so busy panicking that he doesn’t notice when Granger bypasses the Grand Stair, veering closer to the short stairwell that leads to the dungeons.

“If you’ll actually close your mouth for three seconds, you won’t be Obliviated, you complete idiot!” Granger hisses back. “It’s been almost two hours, Ron. How are you still panicking?”

“How are you *not* bloody panicking?” Weasley responds in a shrill, cracking voice. “I mean, it’s—”

“Beyond time for you to learn subtlety,” Severus says as he steps around the corner to stand directly in front of them. Weasley turns an unflattering shade of green and swallows as if he’s going to vomit, but to his credit, he promptly glues his eyes to the floor instead of looking at Severus. Nizar must have warned him about the dangers of eye contact.

“Can we help you, sir?” Miss Granger asks politely. She does an excellent job of appearing calm, but terrified rodents would appear calm in comparison to Weasley.

“In previous years, when the two of you and your missing companion were up to mischief, it was always Mister Weasley who gave you away,” Severus says in a flat voice. “My office. Right now.”

Gupta is close enough to overhear everything. “The two of you got caught before you even pulled off the mischief? Shame, Weasley! You’ve got to work up a better poker face than that!”

“Mister Gupta, stop helping them,” Severus growls as he walks past. “My role in this castle does not need to be further complicated by all four Houses suddenly learning to be subtle!”

Severus waits until the two Gryffindors file into his office before he sweeps inside, slamming the door behind him. Weasley jumps in place, looking up at Severus, before immediately dropping his gaze. It still wasn’t enough to hide the hysterical smashed-together thought: *ohshitgoingtobeObliviatedpleasel’dratherfaceshafuckingBasilisk—*

“You do recall that the giant basilisk you’d prefer to face nearly killed Mister Potter, do you not?” Severus asks as he sits down at his desk. “Even Salazar Slytherin would be in no hurry to face a maddened basilisk, Mister Weasley.”

“Hedidthethethingagain.” Weasley plasters his hands over his face, but apparently with the intent to prevent further eye contact and Legilimency.

“Professor Snape, do you have a Calming Draught I could—” Granger glances at Weasley. “Well,
really, I think at this juncture I’d be shoving it down his throat.”

Severus considers the idea and realizes he would like to get through this affair without squawking or shrill screams of protest. He retrieves his wand and points it at the closest storage cupboard. “Place your hand on the knob until it feels warm to the touch. Only then is it safe to open the door.”

“That seems a bit more paranoid than, er, during my second year, sir,” Granger comments while obeying his instructions.

“After Barty Crouch stole Polyjuice ingredients all bloody term, I grew understandably cautious,” Severus counters, scowling. “He kept breaking through the wards I set. I finally resorted to fatal means of keeping a thief at bay. There is a warning built into the spell. I do believe in granting others the opportunity to cease their acts of stupidity.”

“Fatal?” Weasley squeaks in horror, staring at Granger.

“I did key her to the wards first,” Severus says. “You regress when you are panicked, Mister Weasley.”

“That would be why Crouch Junior ran out of Polyjuice at the end, then.” Granger gives a still-sputtering Weasley a disgusted sigh and shoves the correct phial at him. “Just drink it, Ron!”

“Fine!” Weasley swallows the entire potion, two doses instead of one, and is calmer almost at once. It makes the noise level in Severus’s office far more bearable. “Oh. Hey. We should have done that a while ago.”

“I wanted to, but Madam Pomfrey’s stock of Calming Draughts was cleared out by panicked N.E.W.T. students with complicated essays due.” Granger uses her wand to cast Scourgify on the empty phial before returning it to the cupboard. “Thank you, sir.”

Severus nods and pins Weasley with a glare. “Please tell me how this miraculous revelation occurred to you, Mister Weasley.”

Weasley drops his hands, but he does an admirable job of looking everywhere except at Severus. “It’s his bloody nose. Ginny and waxing poetic about his bloody nose!”

Severus looks to Granger. “Please make that ludicrous statement make sense.”

Granger is biting back a smile. “Ginny used to have a terrible crush on Harry in her first year. She was mostly over it by the time the basilisk died and the diary was stabbed, but that year, she liked to, uh, discuss Harry’s features. A lot. Ron spent a great deal of time trying to figure out why.”

“Same bloody nose!” Weasley exclaims. “And it’s Professor Slytherin’s face, and he’s still bloody short, and he talks in his ruddy sleep in Parseltongue!”

Severus raises an eyebrow. “And how did you become aware of that, Mister Weasley?”

“Oh. Uh.” Weasley blinks a few times. “I went to go see him this afternoon to ask about…well, him.” He scratches the back of his head, still far too alert for a potion that should have seen him glassy-eyed and biddable. Sturdy stock, indeed. “Professor Slytherin was asleep at his desk. It was a bad dream, I could tell by the words—”

“Back up again!” Severus barks. Weasley and Granger both flinch. “Explain how you could tell by the words.”
“Oh! I speak Parseltongue, me,” Weasley explains, looking proud. “You can’t sleep next to someone for four years and not pick up most of the language when they spend half the night hissing in it, Professor. I mean, you’re probably learning it—no, wait, I didn’t want to think about that!” Weasley covers his face with his hands again and moans in distress while Granger flushes a dull brick red.

Severus drums his fingers on his desk, reminding himself that it isn’t politic to throttle a student. “If I were not already going to Obliviate you, that would have most certainly convinced me to do so!”

“Obliviate—what? You can’t!” Granger shouts.

Severus glares at her. “I most certainly can, and I most certainly will,” he seethes. “I refuse to let a ginger security risk roam about this castle, especially one who is too concerned with whinging to even begin concentrating on the basics of Occlumency!”

“There has to be another way!”

“Dead is another way,” Severus points out, beginning to lose patience.

Weasley raises his hand. “I’d just like to say that as much as I’d rather not be Obliviated, I’m far more comfortable with Obliviation than I am with dead.”

“Thank you,” Severus responds dryly. “Your opinion has been duly noted.”

“But you—you can’t. You absolutely—” Granger looks to be on the verge of stamping her foot in frustration. “Professor, how could you even think to be using that spell?”

Severus rolls his eyes. “Easily, Miss Granger, as it is an effective security measure I’ve used time and again to ensure both my safety, and the safety of others!”

Granger bites her lip, clenches her hands into fists, and then seems to collect herself. “What I mean, sir, is…how can you continue using that spell after what it did to Nizar?”

Severus freezes, breath caught in his throat. “What?”

“Obliviate. Obliviscatur. Obliviscaris Omnia. Whatever you want to call it.” Granger swallows. “It’s a terrible spell. Gilderoy Lockhart destroyed people with it, even if I’m not very sad that he also destroyed himself. The person who used Obliviscaris Omnia against Nizar’s portrait—they were horrible to do so.” She draws in a breath. “I know by the look on his face when he talks about it that Nizar knew the person who did it, and that’s just—that’s worse. It’s an evil spell, Professor. The Cruciatus Curse might be an Unforgivable, but at least you can recover from it. Obliviate is—well, it’s permanent, isn’t it?”

All of those blank places where memory is meant to be, with nothing but static to denote there should be anything at all. All of that damage.

Severus clenches his jaw. Nizar hasn’t voiced concern or complaint with Severus’s inclination to Obliviate potential problems, but Severus never realized that Nizar didn’t use the spell himself—and that was before Nizar recalled Obliviscaris Omnia.

He needs a moment of Occlumency to sort his thoughts before he can speak again. “It is not as secure, but as long as Weasley resists the urge to go chasing after Death Eaters, it should…suffice. The Deflection Charm, Miss Granger. Do you know it?”

Granger shakes her head, wide-eyed. “No, I’ve never heard of it before. What does it do?” She is either distracted, or intelligent enough to never speak of his fucking oversight in this matter.
“Instead of erasing a memory, it alters the way a memory is retrieved. Your Defence instructor uses it to the exclusion of any other type of memory spell unless it’s a charm designed to assist in recollection. The incantation is Dehortor De Memoria, followed by the identity or event that you wish the subject to stop recalling. The second part of the charm is Audi Mea Verba Et Memini used with a simple key phrase, which tells the subject to recall the thing they’re meant to forget if you are the one who mentions it to them. When they’re meant to forget again, re-invoke Dehortor De Memoria. To end the charm when its usefulness is truly done: Finite Dehortor De Memoria.”

Granger purses her lips before she translates the incantations. “Discourage memory of the subject. Listen to my words and remember. End the discouragement of memory.”

“Excellent. Now leave my office and cast it on this panicked ginger Weasley before I lose my temper and do worse to him. Have the intelligence to do so in privacy.” When neither of them move, he shouts, “OUT!”

Severus waits until they scramble out of the room before flinging a pot of ink directly into his office fireplace. Fuck!

At least Granger will be fucking sensible enough to ensure that Weasley will become conveniently oblivious.

God, that pun. He didn’t need that right now.

He Apparates upstairs to the seventh floor, but Nizar is still not in residence. Kanza lifts her head and hisses out a clear demand for the scratching of her eye ridges, but Severus knows what she wants from hearing Kanza repeat those sounds often, not because he can discern individual words within her hissing.

“Weasley learned most of Parseltongue in four years’ time,” Severus says, noticing that Kanza’s skin is beginning to look dull at the top of her head. The basilisk is about to have her first shed since leaving the painting. “I wonder if I’ll understand everything you have to say in four years?”

Kanza twines around his wrist long enough to give him an unimpressed stare. He wonders if it’s disbelief in Severus’s ability to learn, or disbelief that Ronald Weasley could possibly have mastered any Parseltongue at all.

When an hour passes and Nizar shows no signs of returning, Severus gives up and sends his Patronus to ask if Salazar is decent enough for company. The Gorgon Patronus returns almost at once to respond. “The Lioness has retired for the evening, and I very much have not. You’re welcome to come downstairs to my quarters.”

Severus Apparates to the fourth floor, startling the sixth-year Hufflepuff Prefects in the middle of their rounds. Cadwallader jumps; Miss O’Flaherty is drawing her wand before she realizes she’s about to aim it at a teacher. “Oh! Sorry, sir. I keep forgetting that a certain few of you cheat and skip out on the stairs,” she says while tucking her wand away.

“I’m not used to anyone being in this corridor at all,” Severus replies. “Please depart. There are first-years on the second floor who are about to be out of their dorm after the first curfew.”

“Excellent!” Cadwallader responds with the enthusiasm of someone who should not be made Head Boy next year. Miss O’Flaherty sighs and follows him after bidding Severus good evening.

Fortunata’s portrait swings open at his approach; Severus steps inside to find all the candles lit, Salazar seated at his own sofa, and what looks like an entire bloody library stacked on his coffee
table. “Are you adopting your brother’s bad habits?” Severus asks.

Salazar looks up and then scrubs at his face. He looks tired, a trait that Nizar is sharing with his brother even more of late. Severus can’t keep track of even half of what they’re up to. “Only in the sense of trying to reteach myself a great deal of magic I’ve managed to forget in a thousand years,” Salazar answers. “What brings you here this evening, Severus?”

“The recognition that I am still a loathsome individual, and your brother might be some variety of saint to still be tolerating me,” Severus says bluntly.

Salazar lets out a snort of laughter. “Saint? Him? You know better than that. What could have happened this evening for you to make such a comparison?”

“Obliviate. I know that you don’t use it, and neither does Nizar, and yet it didn’t…I didn’t truly understand why. Even after learning of Obliviscaris Omnia. I still would not have hesitated to use that fucking spell.”

Salazar closes one of the nearest books after glancing at the last page. “I know from your long years of spying that you would use that spell only for just reasons, Severus, yet if I understand you clearly, tonight you chose not to do so.”

“No, I didn’t.” Severus sits down on the opposite sofa once Salazar makes it clear that he should. “Part of me still believes it might have been wiser to choose to Obliviate a student with unfortunate timing in learning to become more observant, but it wasn’t necessarily the right response. Not when the Deflection Charm exists.” He laces his fingers together. “I’ve seen the damage that Obliviscaris Omnia left behind, Salazar. I could not inflict that damage on someone who is not an enemy, even if they’re often irritating. What is galling is that it would never have occurred to me not to do so until another pointed out the obvious.”

Salazar smiles. “Miss Granger yelled at you, didn’t she?”

Severus sighs and drops his head back on the sofa. “Yes. She’s infuriating, but she is correct; thus, she has the joy of subjecting Ronald Weasley to the Deflection Charm.”

“Best she learns it now,” Salazar says in a mild voice. “It’s a useful tool that causes no lasting harm. Nizar would thank you for passing on the lesson. Why are you not sharing these intriguing moral revelations with him?”

“Because he still hasn’t returned from whatever charming event Black asked him to attend to in London,” Severus replies sourly. “If he found Death Eaters to kill and didn’t remember to invite me along, I’m going to be so bloody pissed off.”

Salazar gives up on the spells when he locates one of his own books full of potions he has no recollection of crafting. That sees the two of them downstairs in Severus’s office for half the night, attempting to brew ancient potions that require modern variations in order to work properly.

“Ah, evolution and the changing nature of plants,” Salazar muses as he waves smoke away from the latest, mildly explosive failure. “No one thinks of the nature of change over time when they first write down a potion. Not even myself.”

“It’s fire-based,” Severus says, checking the cauldron—and the workbench beneath—for damage. “It needs a water-based element for stability.”

“Or that would create more of an explosion,” Salazar notes, glancing at the shield-protected book again.
“I have nothing else pressing to do.” Severus isn’t going to be sleeping until he discovers what Nizar is doing in London. At this juncture, it’s less concern and more rabid curiosity.

A water-based element creates a larger explosion. Severus is glad they’re both intelligent enough to shield a cauldron, and that he was wise enough to choose an office with a high ceiling.

Salazar holds up a broken bronze stirring rod, bemused expression on his face. “Not water, then, but earth as a grounding element. Perhaps literal earth.”

“If it balances out, do you have any idea what this potion is meant to do?” Severus asks while searching for a thicker stirring rod.

“Not the faintest idea, Severus.” Salazar Banishes the broken stirring rod. “I really did not give it a useful name, did I?”

“Essence is not a very informative title, no.”

Severus has no idea how much time has passed before he hears Nizar ask, “What the hell happened in here? No, you know what? Don’t answer that question. I know what happened in here. It’s just that someone should have remembered to maybe not let the two of you be alone with a cauldron together!”

Severus and Salazar both look up. Severus blinks a few times, startled out of intense concentration, and realizes that his entire brewing area is a disaster. If he weren’t capable of cleansing spells, he might consider weeping. “Where have you been—” Severus glances at his watch. Bloody fuck, it’s almost time for breakfast. “Where were you all night?”

“London,” Nizar replies, smiling. His hair is a wild mess, his robes are singed, and there are scratches on his hands and face that make it look like he was attacked by rose bushes, or perhaps a dozen angry squirrels.

“We might have made a mess, little brother, but you’re quite the sight,” Salazar says. “Why do you smell like scorched fur?”

Nizar’s grin widens, revealing a bit of exhaustion-fueled mania. “You’ll find out at breakfast. What did you brew?”

Severus does not trust that grin. It makes him wonder how much of London is still standing. “Your brother gave it the entirely unhelpful name of Essentia, or Essence. It’s been re-brewed to modern stability—”

“I fucking well hope so,” Salazar mutters, giving the resulting potion a brief stir. After shattering another bronze rod, then one made of brass, they switched to glass.

“—but he does not recall what it does.”

Nizar gives them a look of disbelief, pinches the bridge of his nose, and says something under his breath in Spanish. “Etymology, Salazar!”

Salazar glares at Nizar. “I recall the Latin just fine, hermanito! Latin essentia, a word for being.”

“Exactly. A word for being.” Nizar rolls his eyes. “Essence is a treatment for bloody depression, idiota!”

Severus recounts the potion’s ingredients, groans, and puts his head down on a clean corner of the
workbench. “For fuck’s sake.” He should have been able to determine that himself.

“Essence, as it is a reminder to the self to recall all of one’s essence and being in order to drown out the negative nonsense the mind has become fixated on.” It sounds as if Salazar has just slapped himself in the face. “Is it time for breakfast yet? I need coffee in order to properly dwell on my own idiocy.”

“It begins in a half-hour. We can go early,” Severus suggests. “The elves might take pity on us.”

The elves do take pity on them, supplying Salazar with coffee and Severus and Nizar with tea that tastes quite a bit like the strong black leaf Aberforth introduced them to. Severus peers down at his teacup, frowning. Not just similar in flavor, but in effect and feel.

“Yes, it’s Aberforth’s magically grown tea. It’s a polite reminder that he is very sorry, and please do not kill him for that hex.” Nizar sips at his tea and watches as the early risers among the students begin filtering into the Great Hall. “It’s a well-timed gift, too.”

“Why are you so fucking awake?” Severus hisses. Now that he isn’t chasing after the proper brewing of a one-thousand-year-old potion, he just wants to put his face on this table and sleep through breakfast.

“Adrenaline and euphoria. Oh, and spite. All three are quite useful,” Nizar replies.

Minerva, Filius, Aurora, and Poppy join them not long after seven o’clock. That leads to questions as to why everyone looks as if they spent the night awake, and to revelations about the Essence potion. “A cure for depression?” Aurora asks, wide-eyed.

Salazar is quick to shake his head. “No. There is no cure for depression, not when it’s the brain’s own ability to misfire causing it rather than a normal bit of sadness. It’s a treatment meant to help keep the suffering to a minimum.”

“Do we have anything like that, Poppy?” Filius asks.

Poppy slowly shakes her head. “We’ve Cheering Charms and Calming Draughts, but those aren’t the same sort of magical working. Salazar, if this potion proves viable, I’d very much like to discuss it with you.”

“Absolutely, Madam Pomfrey,” Salazar replies. “I’d judge it safe, but we’d need someone whom we know to be suffering true depression to sample it.”

Nizar leans over the table and gives Salazar an annoyed look. “Hello there, arsehole.”

Salazar scowls back. “There is no need for you to be a bloody guinea pig!”

“What the fuck is a guinea pig?”

Minerva releases a sigh of the long-suffering. “Please, please stop using such language at the staff table!”

The owls arrive promptly at seven-thirty, bearing the mail, the Daily Prophet, Witch Weekly subscriptions, and the growing number of Quibbler issues that are arriving in the morning. Severus has gathered the impression that real news is now consistently intermixed among the Quibbler’s nonsense; after viewing the news, Xenophilius’s eccentric articles are being regarded as a mental balm after reported Ministry stupidity. Severus likes the idea, but he can’t stand Xenophilius’s wandering way with words and lack of logic. If he wanted a lack of logic, he’d read Lewis Carrol
“Oh, my!” Minerva promptly drops her newspaper in her breakfast. Salazar goes wide-eyed before he turns in his seat to stare at Nizar.

“Holy shit!” Fred Weasley squawks, his jaw hanging open as he stares at his copy. Nizar’s grin gets wider.


“Paper, Severus,” Nizar chirps, looking so pleased with himself it’s a wonder he’s not glowing, magical or otherwise.

Severus growls under his breath, pulls the twine from the Prophet, and yanks the paper open. There, in bold print with an accompanying large, damning photograph, is one of the best headlines he’s seen in weeks.

The Daily Prophet

9th March 1996

PETER PETTIGREW FOUND ALIVE, A LOYAL MINION OF YOU-KNOW-WHO

Reported by Joyous Spencer, Dictating Directly to the Printing Press due to Time Constraints

Peter Pettigrew, formerly considered to be both a member of the Order of the Phoenix and deceased since 1st November 1981, was discovered hiding in a Muggle London alley near Diagon Alley. His presence was discerned with magical means by the Magical Duke over London County. His Grace Sirius Black’s magical title includes the astounding ability to know when dangerous enemies that would threaten London are within the County’s boundaries.

When Pettigrew’s presence was noted, His Grace alerted Aurors within the Ministry. Head Auror Rufus Scrimgeour, Head of the M.L.E. Kingsley Shacklebolt, Auror Nymphadora Tonks, and Auror John Proudfoot answered His Grace’s request for assistance. His Grace also asked for Professor Nizar Slytherin to be in attendance to be certain one of Her Majesty’s named war mages was present as a royal witness, and to assist the Aurors, if necessary.

Pettigrew was captured after prolonged bouts of dueling that lasted for most of the night. Upon capture, it was discovered that Peter Pettigrew, presumed deceased hero, bore the Dark Mark on his left arm. Knowledgeable readers will recall that the Dark Mark cannot be faked, altered, or hidden. Under M.L.E. approved use of Veritaserum, Pettigrew confessed to killing not only the twelve Muggle victims from 1st November 1981, but countless others previous to that date as a Death Eater. He also confessed to casting the Killing Curse that fell Mister Cedric Diggory, Triwizard Champion of 1995 (an honor shared with Mister Harry Potter).

His Grace Sirius Black spent twelve years in Azkaban, accused of the murders that Peter Pettigrew admitted to committing before lawful company and in front of royal witnesses. Pettigrew has been remanded to Azkaban, where he will await trial before the Wizengamot for betraying the Potter family to You-Know-Who on 31st October 1981, framing His Grace Sirius Black for the crime of
killing twelve Muggles on 1\textsuperscript{st} November 1981, for the death of Cedric Diggory on 24\textsuperscript{th} June 1995, and an as yet unknown number of Muggle, Muggle-born, and Wizarding victims during the British Wizarding War of 1975-1981.

Severus slowly lowers the newspaper and looks at Nizar, whose grin is all teeth. “Pettigrew.”

Nizar nods. “Sirius literally ordered Remus not to go—he was too certain there would be a dead rat instead of a captured prisoner. Remus punched Sirius for that.”

“That was probably a good idea.” Now Severus understands why Nizar didn’t tell him what was occurring. He also would have been tempted to turn Pettigrew into a corpse, but corpses can’t provide useful evidence.

Minerva has her hand over her mouth. “Oh, good God,” she’s repeating in a muffled voice. “My dear Sirius.”

Severus looks over at Albus. To his relief, Albus looks pleased by the news of Pettigrew’s capture rather than disappointed. Severus can’t stomach the idea of the Headmaster considering this a negative development, not in light of everything else the man’s been up to.

“A very good day,” Albus murmurs. “We do not receive the justice we need nearly often enough.”

Recognition finally catches up with Severus. “Why did you let that pathetic bastard scratch you?” he asks Nizar, already searching through his robe pockets to find some sort of disinfectant.

“She did no such thing. I caught Pettigrew when he was attempting to escape in his Animagus form. He’s strong for a rat. Most of this damage came from that stupid silver paw that Transfigures along with the rest of him. Personally, I think it would be far more entertaining to see a rat dragging around a human-sized hand.”

Severus finally finds a small jar of ointment and uncorks the lid. “Look at me, idiot.”

Nizar turns to him and smiles while Severus traces the lines of every scratch on his face and neck with a thick smear of ointment. “Tea Tree oil again, Severus?”

“It’s an effective antibiotic, as is the antiseptic Gentian Violet. Be grateful I figured out how to keep this ointment from turning everything it touches stark indigo.”

Nizar holds out his hands for treatment. “That would be fun. Like wearing woad.”

“You mean painting yourself blue and being stoned off your arse.”

“That, too.” Nizar inspects the lines of ointment on his hands. “Tingly. I’m so glad it’s a Saturday morning. I’d like to spend the rest of this morning sleeping.”

“You don’t wish to celebrate helping to clear Black’s name?” Severus asks over the noise starting to erupt from the students as they all realize what’s happened.

“Oh, that will happen,” Nizar agrees, but then he takes Severus’s hand. “Right now, though, I’d rather be with you.”
Hermione is a bit surprised by how celebratory everyone is after reading that morning’s paper. She’s so glad they caught Pettigrew, the traitorous rat. She knew Ron and the other Weasleys would be happy about it.

She just wasn’t expecting everyone to be happy about it.

When the students claimed Britain’s war mages as theirs, Hermione sat in the rain of confetti made from newsprint, shocked and cheered by how united everyone was in spiting Fudge, the Prophet, and Skeeter. Apparently, she hadn’t quite gotten it through her head that everyone really meant it. Hogwarts claimed Sirius Black as the Magical Duke of London just as much as they’d claimed Adele, Professor Snape, Nizar, Remus, and Professor Salazar.

The sense of victory is contagious. It haunts the castle for the entire weekend.

The Gryffindor Common Room hosts a party thrown together so quickly that Hermione suspects everyone of having advance warning of the need to celebrate. Butterbeer and mead—the latter quietly reserved for fifth-years and above—is set out in buckets with cooling or warming charms, for varying preferences, along with a bowl of punch that better not be spiked, or Hermione will turn Lee Jordan upside down on his head and make him walk on his hands for the rest of the day.

It isn’t spiked. Not until much later, at least, and by then most of the younger students have given up and gone to bed.

The elves aren’t even asked to supply food. It just appears, the sort of party fare they’re kind enough to supply when Gryffindor scores a Quidditch victory, or just after exams when everyone is too exhausted to contemplate stairs and sitting at tables like functional people.
They’re an hour into the realization of yes, they really are having a party, when Fred and Angelina stand up. “We’ve had a thought, you lot,” Angelina says. “Fred has heard old Salazar’s portrait say that our Common Rooms used to be public spaces.”

“Yeah, and?” Katie asks.

“Well…” Angelina straightens her shoulders. “I was asking Fellona. She says that unless a Gryffindor is to escort someone from another House up the stairs, no one but us can get into the dorms. So we were thinking—Sirius Black isn’t just ours, for all that he was once a Gryffindor. Why don’t we try it? Why don’t we open this door and let everyone else join the fun?”

Hermione finds herself holding her breath. She can’t be the one to lead on this. Too many will follow just because she knows Sirius, or because she’s a Prefect. It has to be others. She glances at Ron, and then the sixth-year Prefects, Kartik and Nandini. They’ve realized it, too.

“I think it’s a grand idea,” Neville is the first to say. Hermione almost gapes at him in shock. He always chooses really interesting times to speak up.

“Right, yeah,” Rachael agrees. “I mean, why not? We know who we don’t want in here, and I doubt the Baby Death Eaters would want to hang out with us terrible Gryffindors, anyway.”

Raza nods. “Let’s do it. Let’s be…well, inclusive. I don’t see enough of it out in the non-magical world, and it would be nice to see it here.”

“But any naysayers?” Angelina asks, looking proud of them. Hermione hears a few desultory mutters, but no one seems to want to dare to say it aloud.

“All right then!” Neil jumps to his feet, grinning. “Fellona! Open up the door and keep it that way for the afternoon! House declaration!”

Fellona’s portrait pops into the frame on the back of the cog door. “You’re certain, dears?” She grins when there is a loud shout of agreement from them all. “All right, then. It will be like the old days again!”

Natalie Fairbourne starts giggling. “You know—we should probably go tell the other Houses. I mean, word travels fast in Hogwarts and all, but maybe make it official?”

“Neat!” Dennis declares. “I’ll go with Natalie to tell the Puffs!” In short order, most of the first- and second-years have gone off in groups to round up the other Houses.

Hermione keeps track of who joins them in the next two hours as she sips at a butterbeer and pretends not to notice the new arrivals. Tamsin Applebee, Alice Windcharm, Alex Summerby, Herbert Fleet, Felicity Eastchurch, Sarah Fawcett, Amrish Gupta, Manami Ichijoh, Ona Parangyo—whom George is trying valiantly to flirt with, but not succeeding—Poonima Shah, and Adele make up the seventh-years. Adele gets extra attention because she’s their attending war mage.

Sixth-years Maxine O’Flaherty, Eddie Carmichael, Heidi Macavoy, John Cadwallader, Cassius bloody Warrington, of all people, Kinjal Bhatia, Archana Shetty, Cho Chang, Hermani Roshan, and Mark Bradley join in short order. Almost every Slytherin fifth-year attends except for Crabbe, Goyle, and Tracy Davis, which isn’t a surprise. Richard Vaisey turns up long enough to apologize about sitting the party out, as he’ll be keeping Davis company in her self-chosen exile. All of the fifth-year Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs come piling in through the portrait hole en mass.

The lower years aren’t as inclined to join them, maybe because the intimidation factor is too high. Luna, Maxine Smith, Natalia Ollivander, Rebecca Goldstein, Vanity Jugson, James Cadogan, and
Mx. Josh Adams from Ravenclaw. Xavier, Johnathan Holmes, Eleanor Branstone, Heliotrope Grey, Iolite Rothschild, and Rose Zeller from Hufflepuff. The younger Slytherins are cautious about entering the Common Room, but Hermione sees them relax the moment they notice how many older Slytherins are already present: Zoe Accrington, Yatin Bhagat, Byron Miller, Gertrude Meads, Zubeida, Sourav, Atsushi, Reiko, Astoria, Graham Pritchard, Adelaide Murton, and Cameron Boyle. Darius Berrow is escorting Seraphina Dolohov, who is shy and nervous, and it isn’t a thing to do with the party. Hermione hopes Seraphina’s uncle never gets out of bloody Azkaban.

Ron and Hermione get badgered—literally, it’s the Hufflepuffs’ fault—into sitting down on the two-seater sofa near the fire, all but holding court as the others make them recount the tale of Sirius Black’s visits to Hogwarts during Hermione and Ron’s third year. Everyone third-year and up knows the public side of things; Fellona still sulks every time the temporary destruction of her painting is mentioned.

It’s what happened in June that was kept such a secret, as much as anything is ever a secret in Hogwarts. Hermione is surprised at how little of the truth the others know, though it didn’t stop them from making up a lot of entertaining nonsense at the time. Harry hadn’t cared, so Hermione and Ron decided that they didn’t care, either.

Now they’re repeating, to rotating audiences, everything that happened the night of the full moon on twenty-third June in 1994, such as Crookshanks catching Scabbers the rat, who was actually Pettigrew. The younger students are horrified by the idea that a Death Eater masqueraded as a Weasley family pet for twelve years.

“Hey, that makes all of us, mate,” Ron says when Xavier mentions it aloud in tones of morbid disgust.

Then Alicia’s mouth falls open as she realizes that a Death Eater was *sleeping in their dormitory*. That elicits another round of vocalized disgust, not to mention the appalled realization that the Animagus could have done anything to do them while they slept in their beds, and no one would have been the wiser until morning.

Then they tell the others about meeting Sirius Black, who was, yes, completely bonkers, mental, mad, and off his rocker at the time, but at least he was just trying to kill Pettigrew, not everyone else. They learned that Remus Lupin and Sirius Black had been best friends, along with James Potter and Peter Pettigrew.

“Geeze, their best *friend* betrayed them,” Natalia says sadly. “I couldn’t even imagine my best friend doing that to me.”

“We knew that, though,” Julie Parks says. “We knew that the Potters were betrayed. It’s in the history books.”

“No, I mean—it’s like a double betrayal!” Natalia exclaims. “First Professor Lupin thinks Sirius Black is horrible and ignores him for twelve years while his best friend is in Azkaban. Then he finds out it was his *other* best friend who did it, and then it’s that same feeling all over again!”

“That’s the problem, like,’” Ron speaks up after chugging down a bottle of mead. If he belches, Hermione is going to introduce his ribs to her elbow. “No one really could imagine it’d be Pettigrew. Maybe if they all hadn’t tried to play it so Sly, switching Secret Keepers like they did, this mess’d never have happened. But it did happen, and we’re fixing it. We’re making it right and that’s what matters.”

“No more mead for you,” Hermione says, “even if you’re right.”
Hermione tells them how Professor Snape arrived, conveniently omitting how he snuck up on them. Professor Snape had his wand pointed at Sirius, maybe to kill him—until Harry stepped between them, desperately trying to get Professor Snape to listen to them.

“Harry stepped in front of Professor Snape’s wand.” Draco stares at her. “I did always say he was mental. I just didn’t know I was being quite so accurate!”

“Horntail,” Pansy sings out, and most of them start laughing. Hermione notices that Blishwick and Dunbar don’t look amused, and wonders when that’s going to become a row.

Ron broke his leg. Pettigrew was revealed as Scabbers while Professor Snape was unconscious. “Wait, what? How?” Kinjal demands to know.

Hermione looks at Ron. “You know…Professor Snape was a spy. A good one.”

Ron raises an eyebrow. “You think maybe he was faking?”

“How many stunning spells?” Draco asks.

“Uh, three?” Ron hedges. “But it was us doing it: me, Hermione, and Harry.”

“Third-year strength stunning spells.” Draco grins. “He was definitely faking it.”

“How do you know?” Pansy asks, accepting a bottle of butterbeer when Xavier brings it over.

“Mother—” Draco hesitates, and everyone gives him sympathetic looks. “Mother always claimed that it takes at least three powerful Stunning Spells, or he’s rather like Professor Slytherin in that regard. Professor Snape might not be very happy about being stunned, but he wouldn’t be unconscious.”

“So, then Snape knew all of it, and he—” Ron grins. “Okay, I might not ever like the terrifying bastard, but wow. I want to give him a medal just for the way Harry said he schmoozed up to Fudge while Fudge was on a tear that day.”

“We could probably make one of those,” Fred says after glancing at George. “In all seriousness, I mean it. I’d want a medal for having to be nice to Cornelius Fudge, too.”

“Not to mention his screaming at Harry and I for helping Sirius to escape while we were, uh, innocently in the hospital wing the entire time,” Hermione says, managing such an angelic expression that stoic Daphne breaks down giggling. “I wonder if Professor Snape already knew we’d done exactly that, or if he found out later.”

Draco considers it. “I don’t think it matters. Professor Snape did what he was expected to do, and that was to hate three smarmy, insufferable, arrogant Gryffindors.”

Hermione elbows him, smiling. “That would be a swotty arrogant Gryffindor, thank you.”

“Oi!” Ron looks offended. “Speak for yourself, ’Mione!”

“I did,” Hermione replies sweetly, and the others laugh again.

Everyone left the Shrieking Shack, intent on handing over a not-dead Pettigrew as evidence of Sirius Black’s innocence. Then the full moon rises and everything just goes to buggering blazes.

“Say that again.” Millicent has a wide smile on her face. “Buggering blazes.”
“I’m a lady, so I shan’t,” Hermione says with a dainty sniff.

“How did Sirius Black really escape the castle that night?” Edward asks. “That’s the part that nobody knows!”

“Er. Well.” Hermione looks at Ron.

Ron grins. “Don’t look at me. It was your Time-Turner.”

“RON!”

“Is this when you stole the hippogriff?” Adele asks, resting her chin on her hand and smirking at them. She’s definitely been at alcohol harder than Rosmerta’s mead; Hermione has never seen Adele this relaxed in a crowded room.

Hermione considers burying her face in her hands. “Yes, that’s when we stole the hippogriff.”

“I knew it,” Adele says smugly, and accepts another drink from Jack.

Hermione continuously elbows a chortling Ron while telling the others the “adventure” of going back several hours in time to steal Buckbeak so the hippogriff wouldn’t be executed. She possibly takes a bit of perverse pleasure in relating what it was like to watch herself punch Draco, and the tips of Draco’s ears turn pink during that part of the story. He insists he’d done something to deserve it when asked, but won’t tell the younger students what incited Hermione into attempting to rearrange his teeth without a wand.

She notices the adoring faces of many younger students and despairs. She doesn’t need them emulating her in that fashion!

No one is laughing when Hermione tells them how Harry cast the most powerful Patronus she’s ever seen outside of Professors Salazar, McGonagall, and Slytherin in order to fend off countless Dementors from Sirius Black and…well, from Harry himself on the opposite side of the lake.

“What was that like?” Tiny Cameron asks in a hushed voice.

“Terrifying,” Hermione says bluntly. “I didn’t get to see the Dementors the first time. I didn’t realize—it was just so frightening. There were so many of them that the water froze. It was winter descending, and we’d never be warm again. Then the Patronus—that was like when warmth comes back to your toes when you were silly enough to go running around in the snow barefoot. That part was amazing.”

It’s a lot easier to relate the last: flying on Buckbeak to Professor Flitwick’s office, freeing Sirius Black, and sending him away from Hogwarts by way of hippogriff to escape a Minister intent on having Sirius executed on school grounds.

“HERE?” Iolite screeches in outrage. “IN HOGWARTS?”

“Well, that is kind of why Cornelius Fudge ran from the office of Minister for Magic like his arse was on fire,” Lee says.

“One of many, many splendid reasons,” Blaise adds cheerfully. “For once, the Daily Prophet had a straight run of honesty!”

“I told you she was trash,” Blishwick says in a too-loud voice. Hermione flinches, though it’s more instinct than any real dread at this point. Ron stops mid-word as they all watch Dunbar and
Blishwick storm across the Common Room like someone personally insulted them. “Come on, Fay. Let’s go find proper sorts to hang out with.”

“Who the bloody hell does she consider proper?” Ginny asks in angry disbelief. “Does she need the Minister and the Pope before things are acceptable?”

“It’s just because we’re paying attention to Hermione and not to them,” Ron says, shaking his head. “Don’t worry about it, Ginny. They’re idiots.”

Hermione bites her lip, but doesn’t say anything. At least Lavender didn’t storm off with them, even though she’s not certain where Lavender is right now.

“Jealous twat,” Millicent says. Susan nods in agreement before wrapping her arm around Millicent’s waist. Draco uses the distraction to grip and squeeze Hermione’s hand. She smiles and squeezes back, glad that he can be so thoughtful.

“Too right.” Amrish rolls his eyes. “Not sure what she was hoping to accomplish with that, because it certainly wasn’t us somehow thinking she’s an amazing, mature individual.”

“No, not that. Well, not only that,” Millicent amends. “I’ve been employing Pansy to find out why those two have been so rude.” Pansy beams at them. “It turns out that Blishwick’s father was a Ravenclaw, and her mother was a Slytherin. Bernicia Blishwick is jealous because Granger is getting positive attention from the two Houses she was supposed to join after her parents allowed her to come back to Britain for schooling.”

“One Slytherin parent and one Ravenclaw parent. Wonder what her home life is like,” Colin muses. “Wait, Blishwick is British?”

“You couldn’t tell by that accent?” Blaise says dryly. “They both are. It’s Dunbar that had to be the weird Scots girl who picked up the hint of French after attending Beauxbatons for two years.”

“What the bloody hell is Dunbar’s problem, then?” Fred asks, scowling. “The Blishwicks are…well. No one ever proved anything, but it wouldn’t surprise me if she was a Baby Death Eater.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Pansy says quickly. “Blishwick never hangs out with the ones we know are Baby Death Eaters. Just Dunbar and Brown.”

“Dunbar wants to go back to Beauxbatons,” Alice answers the earlier question. “It doesn’t excuse her attitude at all, but I do feel sort of bad for her. From what I’ve overheard, Dunbar wanted to keep going to school in France. She liked it better there. Her parents didn’t give her a choice, and with Blishwick being the only person she knows…”

“I wonder if Dunbar would hang with us if we gave her the chance,” Tamsin says.

Lee shrugs. “I wouldn’t push it. She’s really bloody touchy. Offer once and then back away like it’s a Weasley firework is my advice.”

When they’ve recounted Sirius and Buckbeak’s Great Escape so many times that Hermione is starting to lose her voice, the others take pity on them. They gang up on the other Weasleys, who can regale them with everything they know about Twelve Grimmauld Place and Sirius’s life during the past two years. Some of it is no doubt going to center around Harry’s relationship with Sirius, and Hermione is decidedly not going to listen to that.

“Come on,” Ron says to Hermione a bit later. “I want to go somewhere.”
“But they were finally going to put on music!” Hermione protests. She’s been trying to get everyone to listen to 2 Unlimited for a month!

“Yeah, but it won’t take long,” Ron insists. “Please.”

“All right.” Hermione gives Draco an apologetic look while mouthing *I’ll be back in a few minutes.* When Draco nods, she follows Ron through the open porthole. The party has spilled out into the corridor a bit, with students leaning against the stone railings or sitting along the wall, talking to each other in small groups.

Hermione realizes after a minute that Ron is leading them to the Defence classroom. “Ron?”

“I needed your company for a bit of bravery, all right?” Ron mutters, knocking on the open classroom door.

“All right.” Hermione wonders if the Detachment Charm failed because of all that talk about Harry. They tested it, and it worked, but it was her first time using the charm. Anything could have gone wrong, but Ron doesn’t seem panicked…

When they go into the classroom, Nizar is laying across his own desk, his legs crossed at the ankles as he regards the ceiling. The turntable is sitting on a nearby student desk; the sound of Pink Floyd is bleeding out of the walls.

Hermione feels something brittle in her chest relax. She has no idea what sort of non-magical music Harry listened to during their first four years of friendship, but Pink Floyd sort of…it fits who he is now. Or maybe Nizar likes the music because Professor Salazar likes them so much.

“I thought there was a party in the Gryffindor Common Room for all student comers?” Nizar asks without moving.

“Oh, there is,” Ron says. “I just wanted to say something.”

Nizar turns his head to give them a curious look. “Well, as you’ve already said something, I would imagine there are more words meant to be following along behind those.”

Ron flushes and nods. “Er, yeah,” he says. “I wanted to thank you.”

Hermione wonders if she looks as surprised as Nizar does. “Thank me for what?” Nizar asks.

“Well…” Ron swallows. “I know you had something to do with Pettigrew’s capture, even if the papers were giving credit to the M.L.E. I just wanted to—I’m thanking you because Sirius is my friend, and you helped him. I know a lot of other folk are going to come up with other reasons why it’s a good thing. Seeing a Black proven not to be a Death Eater after all, that’s gonna be great for a lot of the kids in this school. People knowing that you can be from a family like the Blacks and not be evil, they need that kind of reminder. We don’t get enough justice, not any of us, no matter our blood, and you helped give us that. So: thank you.”

Nizar slowly sits up. “All right, that’s not what I expected. I helped capture Pettigrew because it was the right thing to do, Mister Weasley. I’ll admit to being distracted enough that some of those excellent reasons you’ve just mentioned had yet to occur to me. You’re welcome.”

“Yeah, uh—” Ron glances at Hermione pleadingly.

Hermione rolls her eyes and smiles. “Go on. I’ll catch up.”
“Thanks, ‘Mione!” Ron says, and practically bolts from the room.

She shakes her head. “He is such a Gryffindor right until he runs out of words. He’s right, though. Thank you.”

Nizar has a curious expression on his face. “I didn’t see a hint of recognition in his eyes, but he hasn’t been Obliviated. Is that the Deflection Charm, Hermione?”

Hermione blinks a few times, startled. Everything happened so fast, last night and this morning both, that she never had the chance to tell him. “Oh! Yes. Uh, he was panicking. A lot. Professor Snape taught it to me until I can help Ron wrap his head around Occlumency. Mind Magic, I mean.”

“The Deflection Charm instead of Obliviation.” Nizar tilts his head. “Oh, that will be a fun conversation to have later. You did an excellent job casting the charm. You should test it thoroughly in privacy later to be sure it holds if you need to speak to him regarding me. In the meantime, I think your Common Room is overflowing. Go enjoy it.”

“As long as they don’t make me retell Buckbeak’s Great Escape again,” Hermione mutters.

“Oh, so the Time-Turner is now common knowledge, is it?” Nizar grins. “None of the Heads of Houses will thank you for that. Now they’ll have twice the work vetting their students, trying to determine who wants such a device for academic reasons, and who wants it for the mischief!”

Hermione’s jaw drops. “Oh, God! I didn’t even—they’ll all kill me!”

“They can’t all kill you. We don’t have a trained Necromancer yet,” Nizar returns dryly. “Go make certain Weasley makes it back to your Common Room. He reeks of mead.”

Hermione smiles. “All right, then. You, er…you could come with us?”

Nizar snorts in amusement. “Yes, that’s certainly what everyone needs—a teacher in their midst when they’re trying to have an illicit party.”

“It was polite to ask,” Hermione replies, but she’s grinning, too. Everyone but the Slytherins would panic, especially as she suspects Firewhiskey has started making covert rounds among those students who are of age. “I'll see you later, Nizar.”

Back in the Common Room, Hermione finds a lot of students who were raised solely in Wizarding Britain, Pure-blood and Half-blood alike, looking completely baffled by the music playing. Someone really did put 2 Unlimited on the gramophone, but then they didn’t bother to explain anything.

Hermione sighs in frustration and looks for Angelina until their eyes meet. “Help me fix this disaster in the making?”

Angelina grins. “I’d love to. Can you dance to this?”

“Yes? Maybe?” Hermione has danced on her own, in her room, since her parents aren’t fond of this sort of thing. She’s never danced in front of anyone except for waltzing with Viktor at the Yule Ball.

“Maybe is good enough for me.” Angelina shoves her way through the crowd until she reaches the gramophone and dancing area. She lifts the needle from the record and yells for attention. “Hey, you lot! Do you want to see how this is done?”

“Please!” Tamsin shouts. “It sounds interesting, but what is it?”
“It’s hip-hop. Dance music. Really, what type of music it is depends on who you’re asking,” Hermione replies, kicking off her shoes; Angelina does the same. Neville grabs their shoes and puts them against the wall, out of harm’s way. “It’s a newer bit of music that started in the late ’80s, but it really started getting attention after 1990.”

“Which song, Hermione?” Angelina is holding up the gramophone needle. “Your choice.”

Hermione shrugs. “We might as well go with something famous. ‘Get Ready For This.’”

“Get ready for what?” Herbert asks, bewildered.

Angelina lowers the gramophone needle to the right spot on the album and then bounces in place. “This is going to be so much fun. I didn’t get to start clubbing on my own until winter break!” She turns to face Hermione. “You ever see the music video for ‘Tribal Dance’?”

“Yes,” Hermione answers as the first quiet notes of the song start to play.


Hermione gulps, but she’s committed to this now. If she makes a fool of herself in front of all of these people…well. It isn’t as if they’ll know if she did it wrong. Besides, she’s never backed down from a challenge in her life.

Angelina raises her hand and points at Hermione. Hermione breathes out and points back…and then the sharp bass beats begin. She’s loved this kind of music since she first stumbled across it playing on the radio. It’s fun and bright and pulsing, and to dance with the music is to move every part of her body in the same rhythm.

Maybe that’s what Harry meant, when he always said that flying made him feel like he was free. For her, this is what flying is like.

The last synthesizer-created bass pulse signals the end of the song. Hermione and Angelina are standing the way they started, pointing at each other. Angelina’s braids are a wild mess, her shirt untucked from her trousers, and she’s breathing hard, color high in her cheeks. Hermione thinks she probably looks as much a mess or worse, considering what her hair is like.

It’s the last moment of calm Hermione has for the rest of the day. She and Angelina are abruptly swarmed by the other students, being hugged and congratulated.

“That was bloody fucking amazing!” Pansy shouts, picking Hermione up long enough to spin her around once.

“You have got to teach us how to do that!” Isobel chimes in, grinning.

“I’m in for that!” Theo is flushed, bright-eyed and smiling. It’s the most enthused Hermione has seen him about anything. “You guys danced like it was—like—”

“Like you understood what it was like to feel alive,” Draco finishes. He’s staring at Hermione as if he’s seeing her for the first time all over again.

Hermione blushes and hopes the red blends in with the flush in her cheeks. “It’s very, uh, primal.” She doesn’t want to use that word, given the connotations it would have in the non-magical world for people with her skin color, but it’s the closest term she has right now. “Like, uh, a spiritual connection to sound.” There, that’s better.
“Exactly!” Theo grins. “It’s like having sex, but you don’t have to deal with other people or the mess afterwards!”

Kellah and Dean elbow their way forward. “We’re going to be doing that again!” Kellah declares.

“And this time, all four of us will be demonstrating how to bloody well dance properly!” Dean adds.

“What about you, Lee?” Fred yells.

Lee is standing on a chair on the far side of the room. “Hell, no!” he shouts back. “I don’t bloody dance! Ask Ona!”

Ona pops up by slinking her way around George, whose eyes bug out of his head to follow her movements. “Is ‘No Limit’ on that album?”

“No, not this one,” Dean says. “It’s got ‘Twilight Zone,’ though!”

Ona smiles and cracks her knuckles before she kicks her trainers off. One of them hits George in the knee. He doesn’t seem to notice. “Perfect.”

“NO MORE ROOM!” Dean thunders. “You lot who know what you’re doing will handle the next round!” Then he turns to Hermione, looking a bit panicked. “Tell me you’ve got another album aside from this one,” he whispers.

Hermione nods. “What do you think they’ll make of C + C Music Factory?”

Dean laughs and grabs her hand as the first beats of “Twilight” play. “Shit, Granger, they’re going to love it!”

They finish the first album, and Hermione has to scrounge around the bottom of her trunk to find the rest of her hip-hop albums, the ones she hides from her parents. They’re not dirty, and her parents wouldn’t take them away, but her parents wouldn’t approve, either. Living with that cloud of disapproval at home isn’t the way Hermione wants to spend her time away from Hogwarts.

She’s soaked through her clothes from sweating before she’s confronted by Draco. He’s shed his suit jacket and his shoes, but is still oddly formal when he asks, “Would you like to dance with me?”

Hermione’s confidence is soaring. She might be a bit tipsy on endorphins and mead when she smirks at him. “Can you keep up?”

Draco smiles. “Only one way to find out, isn’t there?”

He proves that he can not only keep up, he’s a fast learner. Draco’s body is already flexible from—from whatever it is that Pure-bloods do in their spare time for physical fitness, and he can follow the beat just as well as he did during the Yule Ball’s waltzes.

Then Draco snags her by the waist and swings her around so they switch positions, and Hermione laughs. She’s happy, and has just realized she might want to snog Draco Malfoy senseless.
Severus wakes up in a too-bright room that smells of lavender, beeswax, sunlight, and a faint hint of sandalwood. He relaxes; he fell asleep upstairs in Nizar’s bed rather than downstairs in his own.

“What time is it?” he asks when he realizes Nizar is sitting on the other side of the bed, scribbling into an older leather-bound book with one of the Self-inking quills.

“A bit after two o’clock. How do you feel?”

He thinks about it. “Like that was far too many cauldron explosions for a single evening.” He’s felt worse, though. This is just a desire to sleep more, not any hint of pain. “And how do you feel this afternoon?”

Nizar frowns. “Guilty.”

Guilt? Severus sighs and sits up. “I’m not having a conversation about anyone’s guilt until after I shower and drink a proper amount of tea.”

“Fair enough.” Nizar puts his quill to the book again, which Severus realizes has spare sheets of paper tucked between each and every page. “Let me know if you have any particular requests aside from tea.”

“Not yet.” Severus pauses before he goes to his quarters to fetch clothing that didn’t spend the night soaking in cauldron fumes. “What are you doing?”

“Wishing Elfric had been a bit more fond of linear thought,” Nizar says.

“Ah. So you finished Brice’s book and immediately decide to work on another?”

Nizar glances up. “Two of his books are going to be my texts for the N.E.W.T. Defence students next term. I don’t really have much choice, and I don’t want to make my students cry on their very first day of class by handing them these books as they are now.” He removes the sheet of paper and
then flips the book up and over for Severus to view.

Severus scowls as he realizes he’s looking at a disaster of shorthand and longhand notes, accompanied by footnotes for almost every paragraph referencing all manner of things. “I think I wouldn’t blame them at all. Is this because he was a Necromancer?”

Nizar smiles. “Elfric’s book on Necromancy is actually rather logical. This was just him, Severus.”

Severus nods, fingering the uppermost button of his pyjama shirt. “You know, all this time and I’ve never bothered to ask. If this is meant to be your text for next term’s N.E.W.T. students, what are they using now?”

“Fifth-, sixth-, and seventh-years have Brice’s book. They were all so behind on basic material that it was a good fit this term. Brice’s book will be next term’s fourth- and fifth-year text. Third- and fourth-year students this term have the Defence treatise I wrote for my mastery at age seventeen. First-years and second-years have a much more basic Defence book written by some Roman arsehole in the first century. Complete prick of a human being, but he knew how to write out decent instructions for young magicians just learning to defend themselves.”

“Could editing this book not wait until summer break?” Severus asks.

Nizar snorts. “Severus, I don’t know what’s going to happen next month, let alone this summer.”

“Good point.” He goes to the door in the hallway with its tiny, emerald-eyed basilisk and turns it upside down, which always makes it seem as if it never moved at all. It’s still odd to be using this door rather than traversing the stairs or Apparating, but he has to admit that he enjoys the convenience. His quarters are quiet and dark but for the candles in the smaller wall sconces the house-elves keep alight. That gives him plenty of light in order to find clothing, and to bask in the magically-added shower that fits seamlessly into place. He is willing to share Nizar’s quarters and bath, but Severus still has an intense desire for privacy…and possibly far too many territorial notions in regards to his own bathroom.

When Severus goes back upstairs, Nizar has moved his work out to the table in the sitting room. A tea service with several bowls of the elves’ stuffed rolls sits as a blatant hint that the elves are displeased by the fact that Severus slept through lunch.

“What have the students been up to today?” he asks after he’s collected tea and, grudgingly, a selection of the stuffed rolls.

“Gryffindor decided to lead by example and is hosting an open-door party in their Common Room,” Nizar replies. “Minerva has been staying away from that section of the seventh floor so she doesn’t have to tell them that they’re technically disobeying school rules by inviting members of other Houses into Gryffindor Tower—and yes, there are students from all four Houses involved.”

There are Slytherins in Gryffindor Tower. Willingly. For reasons that do not involve inter-House war. Severus ponders the notion and decides he could have awoken to far worse things. “You didn’t sleep at all, did you?”

Nizar smiles and picks up a cup of tea. “I did shower off the stench of burnt rat fur, but no. I made the attempt, failed at it, and hung about in my classroom for a while in case I was needed. I only had two visitors, so obviously everyone is more concerned with the party.”

“Do your visitors have anything to do with why you feel guilty?”

“A bit.” Nizar sets the teacup down and gives Severus an intent look. “I owe you an apology.”
Severus misjudged; he has not yet had enough tea to deal with that sort of gut-churning statement. “What for?”

“I assumed that if you discovered Ron Weasley’s sudden recognition of the Slytherin sitting under his nose, you would Obliviate him. Instead, today I spoke to a young man who has never been Obliviated, and find that you taught Miss Granger the Deflection Charm instead. Thus, I owe you an apology for making that sort of assumption.”

“You—no.” Severus pinches the bridge of his nose. “You owe me no such apology. If not for Miss Granger, I would have Obliviated the panicked idiot.”

Nizar regards him steadily. “How long did you hesitate?”

Severus jerks back in surprise. “What?”

“How long did you hesitate?” Nizar repeats. “It must have been for quite a while if Miss Granger had time to intervene.” He smiles when Severus remains silent, choosing to glare at him instead. “You never hesitate, Severus. Not when you’ve made up your mind.”

Severus gives him a baleful stare. “I did not—fine! I hesitated, but I don’t know why. Until Miss Granger mentioned fucking *Obliviscaris Omnia*, I’d still planned to Obliviate Weasley!”

Nizar merely nods. “Sometimes our subconscious is a hell of a lot smarter than we are.”

Severus growls something impolite under his breath and refills his teacup. As far as theories go, it’s not acceptable, but he doesn’t have anything better to replace it with. Nothing that isn’t complete shit, anyway.

One of the house-elves pops into the room about ten minutes later. Severus doesn’t recognize this one, with grey skin so pale it’s almost blue, blue eyes, and a black tea towel edged with silver embroidery. Much like certain Slytherin-owned robes and vests, Severus suspects the silver thread is made from the real metal.

“Good afternoon, Cindrilicus,” Nizar says to the elf. “How are you?”

“Cindrilicus is fine, Professor Slytherin.” The house-elf pulls out two small scrolls, giving one to Nizar before passing the other to Severus. “I will be making certain the kitchen elves know to refill the tea, Professors,” the elf informs them, and vanishes again.

“Do you know the name of every single house-elf in Hogwarts?” Severus asks.

“There are six hundred sixteen elves in this castle, Severus. That would be quite a feat, even for me…though I’ll admit that I’m trying to do so. They live here, after all.”

“I thought there were six hundred fifteen?”

“Oh, Gilly gave birth last week,” Nizar says, and Severus rolls his eyes. Trying, his arse. Nizar seems to be succeeding if he knows that level of detail regarding Hogwarts’ house-elf population.

Severus opens the brief scroll and forgets all about house-elves. “A celebration of Black’s freedom hosted within Grimmauld Place at noon tomorrow? Absolutely not.”

“Politics,” Severus mutters. That makes him wish to attend even less. “I don’t think anyone actually uses the word ‘cavorting’ any longer, Nizar.”

“That’s a good reason to keep using the word, then.” Nizar raises an eyebrow at the scroll. “I think there is something else here.” He holds the scroll open and bends down close enough to breathe the words over the paper: “I solemnly swear I’m up to no good, and you need a new fucking password, Sirius.”

Severus makes a derisive sound as the password causes further ink to bloom into existence on Nizar’s copy of the invitation. “What did he say?” Severus asks. Nizar shrugs and holds the scroll out for Severus to read.

Dear Nizar,

I’d really like not to do this at all. I’d much rather set most of those who’ll be invited on fire and then complain about how they’re not providing enough heat. If that’s not enough proof that I’m a Black aside from being collectively inbred, not much else will do it.

This wasn’t even Albus’s suggestion, which is good, because I’m still twitchy enough that I’d have gone the Aberforth solution and punched him in his sizable Dumbledore nose. It was Kingsley, Rufus, and Amelia reminding me that I’m about to dump my arse out in public again, and I’d best make the public enjoy the privilege.

Only members of the Order of the Phoenix are receiving these invitations today. The next round will go out tomorrow morning, after Kingsley and Rufus push Peter’s trial through this evening on an emergency basis. I think Amelia might hex the life out of any Wizengamot member who dares to not turn up. Between Peter’s magically verified letter of confession we received last month, Peter being an illegal Animagus, the Court-ordered Veritaserum, and oh yes, Peter not being fucking dead, the three of them are certain the vote will be overwhelmingly in my favor. Not even our Wizengamot Death Eater friends are going to dare to vote against me right now.

Well, the stupid ones might. The smarter ones are going to watch the politics in play and bide their time until their idiot Dark Lord tells them otherwise.

Bollocks. My house is going to be full of Death Eaters, and I’ll have to be nice to them. However, you are not me. Feel free to scare the fuckers all you like, Nizar. Cousin Narcissa assures me that you know how to be terrifying and make it look like the fools are just overreacting to some imagined slight. Hell, let Snape help. He hasn’t seen some of these arseholes since Christmas Day. Just don’t let Snape hex them. Stupid politics.

Oh, speaking of politics, bring the Lady Adele of the Greenwood with you. The younger titled mischief makers can get out of it for now, but Adele is of-age and a war mage, so having her present will help with the stupid, stupid politics that Regulus was supposed to be alive to deal with. I never wanted to be responsible for this shit!

Dear Great-Grandfather Lycorus was a paranoid stain on humanity, but he knew what he was doing when he took ownership of the house. At noon, the old Fidelius Charm comes down so that everyone can find Twelve Grimmauld Place, and I will activate a temporary spell built into the old wards so no one can kill each other during this travesty. I don’t trust these bastards as far as I could throw them, and as that would mean I’d have to touch them, throwing is right out.

At least most of the attending Death Eaters are as inbred and Pure-blooded as I am, and would
consider it uncouth to murder me during a political function.

See you tomorrow,

—Sirius

P.S. GO TO SLEEP!

Severus sits back to signal that he’s done reading, and Nizar lets the scroll roll closed. Despite the enclosed whinging, that was some very intelligent planning. Not that he will ever admit so out loud. “If Black is speaking of the sort of politics that Madam Bones would suggest, then Twelve Grimmauld Place will hold the whole of the Wizengamot, all the senior Heads or ranking members of every single bloody office within the Ministry, surviving relatives and heads of related families, all the war mages, the entire Order of the Phoenix, Aurors to act as security, and God knows who else.”

“And all of it to craft the appearance of making amends and alliances with the Ancient and Noble House of Black.” Nizar taps the invitation against the tabletop before putting it on the tea tray.

Severus grimaces. “The more we speak of it, the more I want to go hide under a rock in a field rather than attend this nonsense.”

“You dealt with Narcissa’s Christmas Day ball well enough,” Nizar says.

“That is because it was enemy territory, and I knew exactly what to expect.” Severus glares at his copy of the invitation before tearing it in half and dropping it on the tea tray next to its undamaged companion. “Not all of them are enemies we’ll be seeing tomorrow. Many of them are allies I happen to despise.”

“It will be fun to get to know Scrimgeour better than last night afforded, and by fun, I mean I plan to let him know exactly what I think of his statements regarding werewolves.” Nizar looks as if he’s going to enjoy tearing Rufus Scrimgeour apart in public, even if he has to do so politely.

“Speaking of those you recently spent time with, why was Pettigrew in London?” Severus asks.

“The idiot had to have known the Ministry would be looking into his supposed death after the Queen gave Black amnesty.”

“That’s a very good question,” Nizar replies. “Pettigrew didn’t know. He recalled his instructions to go to London, but the reason had recently been Obliviated.”

Severus wonders if he still has any Firewhiskey remaining in his quarters. “Voldemort is sacrificing chess pieces.”

“Or placing them into positions where he believes they’ll do the most good,” Nizar points out. “Just because Voldemort’s first two attempts at retrieving his followers from Azkaban have failed doesn’t mean he stopped trying.”

* * * * *
What wakes him isn’t a noise, but the impression of swift departure. Severus rolls over in bed after determining by the ever-present scent of beeswax and lavender that he’s upstairs, in Nizar’s bed. This was one of the rare nights of late when they found sleep together instead of finding it separately, facedown upon a desk, or not at all.

Nizar isn’t in bed. That was the swift departure, and it wasn’t to visit the loo. Severus can always tell when Nizar’s quarters are vacant. Even when Nizar is silent, he has such presence that it’s like welcome noise that never ceases.

Severus scowls as he gets out of bed, gladly shoving his feet into slippers against the cold stone. Bloody March winds, along with his waking in the middle of the night mentally spouting flowery nonsense, have already put him in a foul mood.

He goes into the bathroom long enough to visit the toilet and find the dressing robe he left here in case of incident. He refuses to go hunting for a Slytherin without some means of warding off the chill in the tower.

He pauses after tying the robe closed and tucking his wand into his sleeve. Why is he so insistent that he needs to find the man? Nizar is capable of taking care of himself. He has no reason to do so, but he feels…driven.

Severus reaches out to touch the wall. He has never directly asked the castle for anything, as Nizar and Salazar both have said is possible.

Are you trying to tell me something?

Hogwarts does not respond in words, a fact that is currently frustrating Salazar to no end, as he doesn’t know why. Instead, Severus receives impressions of feeling: concern, alert awareness, an insistent desire to go go go—

Severus jerks his hand back. With that had also come a brief glimpse of Nizar climbing the steps that lead to the eastern battlements. He retrieves his wand to cast lux, not wanting to trip on the fucking stairs in the dark.

“Bloody barmy castle,” he mutters under his breath. Hogwarts is no longer nudging him, but if he catches any hint of smugness, he is turning right back around to resume sleeping like a sane man who knows what sort of politics await him in the morning.

He tilts his head to listen to the distant, gentle bells from the central tower. He was wrong; it’s already morning. Fuck.

Fortunately for everyone else, he encounters no student fool enough to be roaming the halls at two in the morning. He regards the stairs, decides that he is not that much of a masochist, and Apparates to the top of the battlements. Nizar is standing in place before the wall, feet braced apart against the spring gusts as he looks up at the stars. Severus watches in silence for a moment, partly in concern, and partly because it is an arresting sight to behold.

Nizar’s hair has grown longer as spring approaches, and is being pulled back from his face and neck by the wind. Kanza is present despite the weather, a glimmering, green-and-gold band wrapped around Nizar’s throat. His silk pyjamas are rippling in the breeze, catching on Nizar’s limbs and revealing the muscled length of his body.

The white silk is illuminated by the moon and stars in a way that could fool the ignorant into believing it to be another light. It highlights Nizar’s skin, bringing washes of bronze to the grey and
violet coloring provided by the dark sky.

“You look like an apparition,” Severus says.

Nizar doesn’t startle at Severus’s approach, and he doesn’t end his perusal of the sky. “Some days I certainly feel like one.”

“I see,” Severus replies, understanding at once that it must have been some sort of dream or waking thought that drove Nizar out of doors. The only surprise is that it’s taken so long for Nizar’s unfathomable grief and sorrow to manifest again. There hasn’t been any outright sign of it in several weeks, but Severus wasn’t fool enough to believe it dealt with and departed. For Severus, it’s been a quiet relief—there has been no need for him to flail about like a hapless idiot in a vain effort to figure out how to be of help.

Before Severus can discover if that help is even needed, he needs to find out why the hell they’re standing on the battlements in the middle of the night in bloody March. “While I’m aware that you are insane enough to wish to stand in the freezing wind while severely underdressed and barefoot, I doubt that the stars were your motivation.”

“Motivation,” Nizar repeats, brow furrowing. “It was preferable.”

That was no help at all. “Preferable to what?”

“Ah.” Nizar swallows. “Well. I had a lovely dream involving a portrait, but the events of this past Hallowe’en didn’t happen…and were never going to happen. When I forced myself to wake up, I needed to be in a space with no confining elements whatsoever.”

Severus feels a pained jolt, one that almost makes him flinch. That is—no, that is not acceptable. He wonders if it’s possible to burn the remains of Nizar’s shattered portrait frame. “If you needed a lack of confinement, I’m surprised you didn’t strip naked.”

“I considered it.”

Severus nods, though Nizar isn’t looking at him. “You could have woken me.”

“I’m sorry,” Nizar says, reaching up long enough to pull his hair away from his eyes. “I left in a bit of a rush.”

“You did have time to take Kanza with you,” Severus points out, trying not to be jealous of a reptile.

Nizar finally glances at him in surprise. His eyes are too wide, the expression of one who has just suffered a deep shock. “I didn’t, actually. I was too—I panicked. I was all but choking on it.” He takes a deep breath and lets it out, an obvious sign that the mentioned panic is not yet mastered. “Kanza followed me from my quarters. She managed to get my attention after I’d been standing here for—I don’t know how long. I was trying to remind myself that I was no longer trapped.”

Severus considers his sense of time. “Perhaps ten minutes, at most,” he says, and holds out his hand.

No. He is not going to contemplate that possibility. Nizar has voiced often that he isn’t in favor of killing himself, and Severus has to accept that as truth.

Even in this state, Nizar is able to discern Severus’s state of mind. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to frighten you.”
“You didn’t,” Severus lies, running his thumb along Nizar’s hand. His skin is surprisingly warm, a counter to the cold wind.

Nizar merely smiles and tightens his grip. “It’s my own fault. I’ve been using Mind Magic to keep quite a bit at bay. Portrait-based PTSD, I suppose. Of course, if you do that too long without coping with those feelings, even a bit at a time…”

“It broke through in the only fashion it could,” Severus finishes, relieved and annoyed at the same time. “I’m aware that you know better, as you taught me not to be that stupid.”

Nizar nods, sighing. “Everything has been so bloody fraught, Severus. Even without Voldemort sticking his lacking nose into it, it’s like things never cease. I’m sure it will crush your expectations of me to hear that I simply forgot to do so. Please do call me names; I’m doing the same.”

Severus gives Nizar a dry look. “You utter dunderhead,” he says, deadpan. Nizar lets out a soft huff of laughter. “Is it still so terrible, Nizar?” he asks in a softer voice. He does not just mean the portrait, but isn’t certain how to be that specific.

Nizar presses his lips together in thought. “Sometimes,” he admits. “I know I sort of unforgivingly forced myself into everyone’s lives after Hallowe’en.”

“That insistence made what could have been an intolerable process imminently tolerable,” Severus says. Nizar slotted himself into life at Hogwarts so thoroughly that most of the castle accepted his presence as normal by the first of December, forgetting that Nizar didn’t give them a choice in the matter in the first place.

“You mean entertaining,” Nizar counters. “Besides, I lived here first. I wasn’t in the mood to let anyone else say otherwise.”

“Technically, you did not.” Severus manages an innocuous expression as Nizar glares at him.

“Fine. I fucking well remember living here first.” Nizar uses his free hand to scrub at his face. “I’m still tired, but I don’t think I’ll be sleeping again tonight. Not after that sort of waking.”

Severus eyes him. It’s the middle of the night, and unless war breaks out, they are not likely to be disturbed. “Did you not say that I owed you sex for your recent birthday?”

Nizar blinks a few times. “Wait, have we turned sex into a trade?”

“Is it a problem if we have?” Severus asks, amused.

“Oh, not at all,” Nizar replies. “That just makes it more fun!”

Severus tugs at Nizar’s hand. “Then please, may we leave these bloody cold battlements and go back to your quarters?”

In response, Nizar Apparates them downstairs. While Severus is still blinking to adjust to the sudden change in lighting, Nizar’s silk pyjama shirt lands on top of his head. Severus yanks the offending cloth aside to find that Nizar is entirely naked, treating Severus to a distinct come-hither look that is edged by heat and impatience.

Nizar rarely seizes control of their infrequent times together, but tonight he does. Severus bottles up a hint of panic that still wants to flood his limbs, to convince him to flee and never look back. He doesn’t want that; he can ignore those irritating fears and allow Nizar the control that Nizar so often gives up to him.
The panic is truly foolish. Nizar’s gaze is intense, as if he is attempting to memorize every bit of Severus’s too-pale skin, but his touch is gentle—so gentle that it is either amazing, or it is going to drive Severus absolutely mad.

“Why not both?” Nizar whispers as he wraps his calloused hand around Severus’s cock. He might hate the whimper that escapes his throat, but Nizar’s eyes turn to smoky heat, his tongue darting out to wet his lips.

“It is very hard to enjoy this if one is out of one’s mind, Nizar.”

Nizar laughs against his lips before kissing him. “And yet you insist upon doing similar to myself.”

“You’re already mad,” Severus says dryly. Then his eyes roll back as the hands on his bare hip and on his cock tighten almost to the point of pain. “Nizar—”

“I love you,” Nizar interrupts. He’s smiling, a gentle curve of his lips that is failing to hide a great deal of wistful longing. “And no, I still don’t mind if you cannot say it. I just…” Nizar watches Severus’s face as he continues to stroke him, firm and relentless with no chance of escape. “I didn’t court anyone because it would mean…it would hurt,” he admits.

Severus makes a sympathetic noise, all the language he can muster at the moment. He settles for gripping Nizar’s arm, running his fingers along hard muscles and smooth bronze skin.

“You’re worth it,” Nizar whispers.

Severus frowns. “That…is not fair.”

“There is no such thing,” Nizar counters, bending down long enough to lick his lips, and then the tip of Severus’s nose. He smiles when Severus glares at him. “I spend every day now wondering if this war is going to take you from me…and I’ve decided that war and fate can go take a flying fuck. If I have to, I will fight my way through every square inch of the underworld, dare Hades’s wrath, and grant Persephone the finest gift she will ever receive if that is what it took to get you back.”

His breath catches in his throat; his heart feels like it’s beating too hard. He focuses instead on one single aspect of Nizar’s pledge. “Flying fuck?”

“Believe it or not, I learned that one from the Ravenclaws.”

“I believe it entirely.” Severus hesitates. “Can I touch you?”

Nizar raises both eyebrows in mock-surprise. “You already are.”

Severus rolls his eyes and slaps Nizar’s shoulder. “What if I said that I wished to bring you off while you were astride me?”

“Then I would say please, because you just eliminated my ability to think.”

That is what he does, taking smug pleasure in every single gasp. Nizar refuses to release his cock, working Severus with both hands. Severus again cheats, applying the careful brush of fingernails to oversensitive skin at just the right moment. Nizar comes first with a low moan that sends a frisson of electric fire through Severus’s veins.

Staring up at Nizar’s face, studying his sated hazel eyes, sweat-beaded skin, and lazy, happy smile, Severus makes a decision of his own. Maybe he is too crippled from long years of spycraft and war to say those three important words to Nizar, but he would stand before Death itself if it meant saving
Nizar from prophecy and fate.

“\textit{Quam pulchra,}” Nizar whispers. Severus’s sudden orgasm is a rush of pleasure that interrupts his churning thoughts.

“Latin, again?” he asks when he can speak.

Nizar’s smile gains a decidedly smug slant. “\textit{Cogitationes tuae errant. Vocavi illos retro.}”

“That,” Severus growls as he pulls Nizar down close and rolls them over in bed so that he is pinning Nizar against the sheets, “really is bloody cheating!”

Nizar laughs and responds to the accusation with a kiss. Severus sighs and buries his face against Nizar’s neck, glad of the distraction of sweat and sex and that ever-present hint of sandalwood.

There is no such thing as fair. Severus lives with the cold reminder of that fact all the time.
Opening Hostilities

Chapter Summary

"I am the wrong person to ask when it comes to the ethical quandaries one might face while dispatching unwanted vermin."

Chapter Notes

All hail betas! @sanerontheinside gave it a combing; @norcumi and @jabberwockypie sat it written, and @mrsstanley is buried somewhere beneath students and a chemistry set and could probably use some alcoholic assistance. <3

The accounting of Peter Pettigrew’s overnight trial—which ran longer than Sirius estimated—is in all three newspapers the next morning. Nizar reads the article and then is suddenly very glad he was too late to join everyone for breakfast in the Great Hall.

“Please do not set this one on fire,” Severus requests, not even looking up from his tea.

Nizar settles from viciously folding it up and shoving the newspaper away from his plate. “If I’d known of even half those deaths, that fucking rat would have died last night. An identifiable corpse with the Dark Mark on his arm would still have been useful evidence!”

Severus raises his head. “It’s worse than the twelve initial deaths, the betrayal of your parents, and Mister Diggory?”

“The betrayal is unpleasant, but…” Nizar wonders how offended the house-elves would be if he retrieved his dagger and began his day by stabbing a newspaper photograph. “Children, Severus. Most of his Death Eater-related murders are of children.”

Severus goes still, but his shoulders are a taut line. “I already wish to kill Pettigrew, Nizar. I’m not certain my temper can survive hearing of worse.”

“Then don’t read this morning’s paper.” Nizar stares at the breakfast that he no longer wants. He’ll need to eat in order to deal with the politics awaiting them in London, but it’s a meal that would likely see a commode in short order.

Those were students of Hogwarts, or students who were about to see their first year. They were from non-magical families, overlooked by Wizarding Britain until this trial brought their names and fates to light. They would have been his responsibility, his to teach, to protest.

He wants Pettigrew dead. It’s a part of who he is, the magic assigned to his titles. His teeth are all but singing with the need to make this right, and he can’t. Not without causing a serious diplomatic incident—or being on the run from the M.L.E.

“If you break into Azkaban to kill him, please allow me to know in advance in order to prepare an
ironclad alibi,” Severus says.

Nizar focuses and pushes the magic down, away, letting it seethe below his breastbone instead of gathering at his fingertips. “Severus, I would invite you along to assist me. It’s Minerva who would be providing the alibi.”

Severus’s lips curl up. “Nizar, Minerva McGonagall is a Scot. She would not only insist upon accompanying us, we would possibly have to leap out of the way of that woman’s wand.”

“Good point.” Nizar thinks about it. “It would be wrong of me to encourage her to do exactly that, yes?”

“Nizar, I am the wrong person to ask when it comes to the ethical quandaries one might face while dispatching unwanted vermin.”

* * * *

Severus sometimes dislikes being right. The gathering in Twelve Grimmauld Place on Sunday afternoon is full of loathsome individuals, most of them career politicians who happen to come from families with money and excellent social standing. That does not make them tolerable people. The only real difference between this political idiocy and a gathering of Voldemort’s court is that no one is casting Unforgivables when the whim strikes.

Case in point: Severus spends most of his first hour running interference to keep Adele Greenwood away from her blasted parents. He refuses to allow Basil and Margot to upset Adele when she is already on the verge of being overwhelmed by the crowded, politically fraught nature of the situation. It makes him angry all over again to see that they did so little to prepare Adele for adulthood. His student learned more from Severus acting as her Head of House and from Nizar in his portrait.

“Fucking Death Eaters,” Nizar growls after they have Adele sufficiently protected by the presence of Madam Marchbanks. The Head of the W.E.A. is delighted to discuss the standards of testing with a war mage student who will sit her N.E.W.T.s in June.

Severus frowns. “Margot and Basil? Death Eaters?” He always assumed they were fools, but he wouldn’t have considered them the sort to follow Voldemort. He never once saw them attend the Dark Lord.

“They have the Dark Mark, both of them. I can smell the magic.” Nizar grinds his teeth. “Adele does have other relatives, yes? I seem to recall her mentioning an aunt with fondness.”

“Fillona Greenwood, the wife of Basil’s younger brother. She has a son, Neil, who graduated Hogwarts as a Ravenclaw in 1991. Her husband Eustas is deceased.”

“What happened to him?” Nizar asks, narrow-eyed.

“The official inquiry determined that he suffered a fatal accident during a broom flight.”

“Fatal accident during a broom flight,” Nizar repeats, and his expression brightens. “I suspect I might like Fillona Greenwood.”
“Why? Nizar—” Severus rolls his eyes when Nizar ignores him and slips back into the crowd.

Fine. It’s meant to be a secret, but Severus is good at uncovering those. He can be patient.

Aberforth is present, glaring daggers and fire at Albus every time the older Dumbledore turns his back on his brother. Charlie Dumbledore is not in attendance, possibly because she would kill Albus before Aberforth was ever granted the opportunity.

“Have you acquired a new wand yet?” Severus asks Aberforth when the others are distracted.

In answer, Aberforth removes a dark and polished red-brown wand from his sleeve. A sharp curved line down its length emphasizes the wand’s split point. “Yew and unicorn hair, fourteen inches. Seemed a bit much, I thought, but Garrick insists it suits well enough.”

Severus raises an eyebrow. “It’s decent work, but I would have stolen a redcap’s literal cap, squeezed out the blood, and used that as the core instead of unicorn hair.”

Aberforth looks surprised. “Why the hell would you want one of those wee bastards?”

“Take the source of a redcap’s strength, remove the blood, and you have a powerful means of storing magic, that’s why.” Severus rolls his eyes. “If Ollivander is going to refuse to deviate from two magical creatures, then unicorn horn would have been a better choice for yew wood.”

“Why aren’t you a wandmaker, then?” Aberforth asks, sliding the wand back into his sleeve. “Acting as if you know so much about it.”

“I know shockingly little,” Severus corrects him, “and I loathe woodcarving. I would also commit murder the first time I dealt with overenthusiastic idiots who insist only dragon heartstring will do for their precious offspring.”

Sturgis Podmore, newly freed from Azkaban and still looking like warmed over death, spends most of the afternoon seated on a sofa on one of the two ground floor parlors. The Squib servants that Black hired for the affair keep Podmore in warm drinks, food, and might possibly be trying to smother the man in blankets.

Severus is introduced to the two permanent household servants Black took on—a man named Roderick Boyle, distant relation to young Mister Boyle of Hogwarts, and a woman named Frances Vance, a Squib cousin of Emmaline Vance. They both strike Severus as secretive, private individuals who loathe everyone who is not their employer, so in that regard, Black chose well. At least Emmaline seems fond of her cousin rather the more typical reaction of Pure-bloods who pretend their Squib relatives don’t exist.

The rest of the Order members who work within the Ministry put in appearances throughout the afternoon: Kingsley, Hestia Jones, Arthur, Nymphadora Tonks, and Elphias Doge. Andromeda and Ted are present, as is Molly, Charlie, Bill, and Fleur. Lupin is with Nymphadora, trying his best not to look awkward as she and Charlie reminisce about their shared Hogwarts years. Oliver Wood is too busy spouting about old Quidditch matches at every opportunity to notice as Lupin realizes, with greater expressions of barely contained horror, that he is surrounded by people far younger than he is.

Alastor spends most of the afternoon sipping from his usual hip flask and barking at anyone who seems too complacent. That is reassuringly normal, as is Mundungus Fletcher trying to make off with gilt picture frames and the fucking silverware before Roderick Bole clubs Fletcher across the shins with a cricket bat. Watching Fletcher roll around on the floor, shedding silverware while cursing and
clutching at his legs, definitely helps make the afternoon far more tolerable.

Aurora, Pomona, Rolanda, Poppy, and Filius sit in a cluster with Augusta Longbottom, with the latter’s vulture-topped hat reigning supreme. Arabella Figg sits next to Poppy, and is covered in cat hairs that accompanied her to the townhouse. Madam Longbottom loses her control of the conversation in stuttering dismay when Rubeus Hagrid brings Olympe Maxime into the room, finding chairs that will hold their weight so they can join the group of teachers. Hogwarts’ staff doesn’t bat an eyelash; Figg seems more interested in Olympe’s elegant silk brocade robes. Severus is viciously pleased to see that there exist people in this world whose mere presence will make Augusta Longbottom be silent.

“You look like you’re having fun,” Nizar says in a low voice when he finds Severus in the library upstairs, watching Sirius cheerfully play off Narcissa Malfoy’s presence as expected and normal before Madam Bones, Rufus Scrimgeour, Pious Thicknesse, and ancient Wizengamot member Dexter Fortescue, who is somehow not dead yet.

“I recalled how I survived every instance of Death Eater nonsense,” Severus replies. “Mocking everyone and everything to the best of my ability.”

“Which is definitely not a boast.” Nizar grins. “Ratier Gibbon was here. I didn’t realize he was on the Wizengamot.”

“Did Ratier appreciate being reminded of your stabbing him?” Severus asks.

“I’m almost certain he wet himself,” Nizar muses. “He left the townhouse in a hurry.”

“Did he remember to take his wife with him?”

“Perhaps, but I doubt it.” Nizar looks at Dexter Fortescue, who has been joined by his great-grandson Florean and Florean’s wife, Fiona. “I know this makes me sound like a hypocrite, but how the fuck is Headmaster Fortescue not dead yet?”

Severus can’t help but smile. “At this juncture, most of us are thinking it’s due to sheer, bloody-minded spite.”

“Of him, I would believe it utterly. Oh, and there is Percy Weasley,” Nizar says in a much quieter voice, tilting his head to indicate a direction. Severus glances over to see the estranged Weasley standing with Dirk Cresswell of the Goblin Liaison Office. Both are speaking to Amos and Lynette Diggory. Severus knows that Amos is still working within the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures simply by hearing him state that they still don’t know what to do about the sudden lack of a need for a House-Elf Relocation Office.

“I’m not even going to ask what such an office was even for,” Nizar mutters. “Am I correct in thinking those are Cedric Diggory’s parents?”

“You are. Did you hear their name spoken?”

Nizar shakes his head. “It’s in their eyes. They’ve lost a child recently. Excuse me. I’m off to count Death Eaters while seeing if any others happen to wet their trousers at the sight of my face.”

“There are plenty of them in attendance. Please do keep a running tally for my benefit, as well.” Severus is treated to the amusing sight of Gertrude Flint noticing Nizar and taking several hurried steps backwards before recalling herself and pretending that she did no such thing.

Downstairs, Lupin has a very polite standoff with the Head of Werewolf Support Services, which is
possibly the Ministry’s most useless department outside of the entire section devoted to exploding bon-bon removal. Cordelia Towler does not account herself very well when she spends the entire conversation regarding werewolf rights too pale and stuttering. She then makes matters worse by calling over a representative of the Werewolf Capture Unit, Giles Runcorn, in hopes of finding someone who supports her political views.

Sirius Black appears, grasps Runcorn by the seat of his trousers and the back of his robes, and unceremoniously tosses the man from the townhouse’s front door. Salazar, Florean and Fiona, the Diggorys, and the Cattermoles applaud. Cordelia takes the act as her cue to politely exit the townhouse before she also suffers Runcorn’s fate.

Severus looks over to find that Percy Weasley joined them at some point during Runcorn’s exit. He looks thoughtful before he turns to the others. “I think Madam Bones would love to be made aware of this particular event. For the sake of politics, of course,” Percy adds, smiling at the Cattermoles, the Fortescues, and the Diggorys. “Don’t you agree?”

Florey puts his arm over Percy’s shoulders as the group heads back up to the library. “You’re absolutely right, lad. Of course it’s entirely about politics, and not about the joyful sight of that man flying through the air.”

“I want someone to put that moment into a Pensieve,” Mary Cattermole says, and Fiona laughs. Black, overhearing them, bows from the waist and promises to do it again if the opportunity arises.

“My cousin shouldn’t have done that—ow! Tonks!” Lupin protests, rubbing the back of his head after Nymphadora swats him.

“Sirius, you shouldn’t have done that so much that I already want him to do it twice more!” Nymphadora retorts. “You great bleeding idiot!”

“Politics, Remus Lupin,” Salazar reminds them. “Think of what sort of message it will send: the newly exonerated Head of the House of Black tossed a man known for capturing ‘rogue’ werewolves from his home.”

“They’ll think that Sirius is biased on my behalf,” Lupin growls.

Black rolls his eyes. “Tonks, you do something with him. I’m going to see if I can find any Wizengamot members in my house who are not bloody Death Eaters. If I’m scoring political points, I want them to be useful ones.”

“Find that representative from the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures, the one you introduced to Buckbeak’s bedroom. I imagine old Austinus Stivers would be happy to help navigate the waters with Madam Marchbanks,” Salazar suggests. “Such would also help to introduce Adele Greenwood to those she should truly meet, rather than those who would be unpleasant.”

Black grins. “Austinus was rather pleased to discover that the hippogriff whose execution he was supposed to witness is alive and well, happily destroying my mother’s bedroom. I really think that man is in the wrong line of work. Adele will be in good hands. Excuse me, then.”

Severus is introduced to Bathilda Bagshot by proxy thanks to Muriel Prewett and Elphias Doge, who are both old enough to be Bagshot’s contemporaries. “I didn’t even know you were still living!” Elphias exclaims while clasping Bagshot’s hand.

“You know me. I don’t go about much, not after what happened,” Bagshot replies. For someone Black described as dotty, she seems quite lucid at the moment. It’s her clothing which reveals the
depth of the problem: the fabric is very old, the original colors faded to dull greys and browns, and she wears an odd assortment of shawls in unraveling, pitiful condition. Such is the sign of a magician who has forgotten that repair charms and basic Transfiguration spells that will restore damaged fabrics.

“But how have you been, dearie?” Muriel asks.

“Oh, not bad. I’ve been living on my own in Godric’s Hollow for…” Bagshot trails off. “For quite a while, I suppose. You know, I don’t think I’ve had company in my home since my nephew left.”

Muriel raises both of her gnarled eyebrows. “Well! That settles it, then. You’ll simply have to move in with me.”

Bagshot starts sputtering weak protests. “What? But my house, dear Muriel—”

“Your house will survive without you in it, but you strike me as being in dire need of company!” Elphias declares. “Perhaps a naughty sleepover or three, like in the old days!”

Severus immediately draws back and retreats. He does not want to know, he does not want to know, he does not want to know.

He says hello to Tiberius Ogden, who oversaw Severus’s O.W.L.s in Hogwarts, and then his much-delayed N.E.W.T.s in 1981. The man has always been stridently polite, even when he was still dubious about Severus’s status as a Death Eater. Tiberius has intelligent thoughts on how to run exams for students in other years, ideas that Severus has often implemented to great success on his part, and to much whinging of unfairness on the parts of his students who didn’t bother to study.

Geminia Rookwood, Thorfinn Rowle, Hector Selwyn, and Erik Talbot do a pathetic job of cornering Severus in the smaller upstairs public room that doesn’t host the overgrown Black family tree. “Hello, Severus,” Hector says, trying to sound threatening and only managing pathetic. “It’s been too long. Christmas Day, wasn’t it?”

“Are you asking for me to confirm it? If so, you seem to have forgotten how to use a calendar, and how to count,” Severus responds. Geminia cracks a brief smile, but she always had an excellent sense of humor. No morals at all, but an excellent sense of humor.

Talbot presses against Severus’s sternum with one finger that looks twisted by too many bouts of the Cruciatius Curse. “You should watch your step, traitor,” he whispers. “It’s dangerous for you beyond Hogwarts walls.”

“Traitor? Such an interesting use of the word. Do you mean to imply that I betrayed that walking corpse recently? Are you referring to my supposed turning traitor in 1980? Or have you gained sense enough to recognize that Voldemort committed the first act of betrayal against each of us by promising us things he never intended to grant?”

Rowle growls as he takes offence. “How dare you suggest such a thing, Snape!”

Severus affects an air of boredom that isn’t difficult to manufacture at all. “I expected more intelligence from the four of you. My apologies; I won’t make that mistake again.”

Geminia smiles again while Rowle, Talbot, and Selwyn sputter uselessly. “Your tongue is still as silver as your mother’s name, Severus. They’re right, though. By betraying our Lord the way you have, your life is forfeit. It’s only a matter of time.”

“I betrayed him in August of 1980, Geminia. Voldemort is certainly taking his time on carrying
through with his threat on my life, isn’t he?” Severus lets his expression grow cold as he stares at Talbot, Selwyn, and Rowle. “Get out of my way, or I will leave you embedded in these walls.”

It’s quite gratifying to discover that yes, he truly is still capable of terrifying Death Eaters. The three idiots all but trip over each other while trying to scatter. The only thing unsettling about the encounter is Geminia’s parting words: “We’ll see you again soon, my Prince.”

After that, Severus spends a few minutes in conversation with Arthur to get the taste of imbeciles out of his mouth. Arthur introduces him to Arnold Peasegood, who has the ambition to become a Hit Wizard. Nizar overhears the words current member of the Obliviator Squad and scowls at Peasegood from across the room, possibly trying to set the poor idiot on fire with his eyes.

“Do you have any advice for me?” Peasegood asks Severus. “What with you being a war mage and all.”

“Certainly. Do not choose to be a Hit Wizard because you think it will be exciting. It isn’t. It’s depressing and often involves chasing down the downtrodden and pathetic rather than those who deserve it,” Severus says flatly. “Ask Minerva McGonagall if you’d like further details, but for God’s sake, whatever you do, find a job that does not involve Obliviating people. Two of Britain’s five war mages have a strong disliking of that spell.” In truth, the answer is three, but Severus isn’t giving out that information to anyone who is not Nizar or Salazar.

Peasegood’s eyes widen. “But we need the Obliviator Squads to uphold the Statute and help keep us safe! What else are we meant to do when Muggles find out what we are?”

“We already uphold the Statute on a case-by-case basis, else we would not have magicians dating and marrying non-magical people, would we?” Severus asks in a dry voice. When Peasegood walks away, a thoughtful expression on his face, Severus looks at Arthur. “That man has never set foot in a non-magical bookstore, has he?”

Arthur shakes his head, smiling. “Not once. I don’t suggest it at work. The lot of them would never stop panicking the moment they encountered what the Muggles call the ‘New Age’ section.”

“What’s a New Age section?” Nizar asks from behind them. Severus glares at Nizar over his shoulder; he could have sworn Nizar was still on the other side of the room.

“Oh, it’s where the Muggles keep their books on magic,” Arthur says after making certain no one else is listening. “It’s quite a bit of entertainment.”

“Most of it is rubbish,” Severus adds. “But not all of it.”

Nizar looks intrigued. “You still owe me a trip into a non-magical bookstore, Severus. Can we go to one after we’re done here?”

Severus tries not to wince at the idea. “I know you’re short on non-magical funds. You’d need to visit Gringotts first, and I’d like to set a time limit.”

Nizar rolls his eyes. “I do have self-control, you know. Besides, I don’t need to visit the bank.” He reaches into his robe pocket and retrieves a square piece of plastic with a gold shine.

Severus stares at him. “How in the hell did you get a credit card?” He doesn’t even have one of the damned things. Mostly because he worries he’d use it, forget to pay a balance, and destroy his own meager credit rating in the UK.

“Salazar. He’s trying to do more to establish my identity in the non-magical world, and apparently
this is now one of the better ways to do so—tracked spending of money.” Nizar shrugs. “There are worse ways.”

“Do you even know how to use one?” Arthur asks, almost bouncing up and down in excitement. “Molly won’t let me get one—she says I’m too easily distracted and would forget to use it properly.”

“It’s complex lender-based trading, except no goods are involved, just numbers and money,” Nizar explains. It’s an accurate summarization. “We had lenders one thousand years ago, but they weren’t massive banking corporations. Instead of killing you in the street if you forget to pay them, now they drown you in paperwork. Seriously, everyone has forgotten how to be efficient.”

“When you’ve been through the process, do tell me how it works—oh, excuse me, that’s Gilbert Wimple,” Arthur says of the older man waving for Arthur’s attention. “Committee on Experimental Charms. Merlin knows what he wants. Gilbert, my good man!”

Nizar watches Arthur greet Wimple. “Percy, really, you were not paying attention,” he mutters, and then turns back to Severus. “Why do you have contact poison on your robes?”

Severus glances down and notices the faint shimmer on the black fabric. “Most likely Talbot. He felt the need to be demonstrative on how much he and his fellow Death Eaters missed my presence. My robes are spelled to neutralize such things, but…” He retrieves his wand long enough to get rid of the residue of Talbot’s poison, likely a poorly crafted one, too.

“Adding that to the tally, then,” Nizar says as a sour-faced woman strolls past, speaking in a quiet voice with Madam Edgecombe, Head of the Floo Regulation Network. “The one woman looks like family to our pair of Edgecombes in Hogwarts, but who is she speaking to?”

“The first is Jean Edgecombe, Head of the Floo Regulation Network and mother to Marietta and Vanessa,” Severus replies. “The one with her is Dolores Umbridge’s second replacement as Head of the Improper Use of Magic Office, Ida Thatcher. I believe she is Leanne Thatcher’s mother.”

“I thought Dolores was Undersecretary to Fudge before Percy replaced her due to Dolores’s unfortunate imprisonment in Azkaban?”

“She was. Becoming Senior Undersecretary was a promotion. Justin Travers then held the position until his demise by basilisk in December.” Severus watches Edgecombe and Thatcher for another moment. “Edgecombe and Umbridge are friends. It looks as if Madam Edgecombe has another close acquaintance in Madam Thatcher.”

Nizar gives him a brief look. “You don’t trust Madam Edgecombe.”

“I trust very few,” Severus counters. “Especially those who find Umbridge to be pleasant company. No Umbridge or Edgecombe ever attended the Dark Lord, but I still would hesitate to claim that they don’t follow him.”

“Dolores has close relatives in the Selwyn clan. It wouldn’t surprise me at all,” Nizar says, “considering how many from that family think Voldemort to be a grand idea. Vanessa is too young to really pin down, but what do you think of Marietta Edgecombe?”

“I have no fucking idea at all,” Severus growls under his breath. It’s rare that he can’t get a true reading on a student’s motivations. “She does her work to what seems to be the best of her ability—which is middling, at best. She would make an excellent mid-level Ministry employee, but I’ve seen no particular talents beyond an ability to follow given instructions.”

“She won’t declare for Voldemort or against him,” Nizar murmurs. “And I mean that when others
around her are vocally declaring that they’ll never join him, Marietta manages to remain unnoticed and silent. I don’t believe she wants anything to do with Voldemort, but her silence in regards to declaring against him—she doesn’t want anyone to be aware of her views. I suspect she has a Death Eater in the family.”

Severus grimaces. “The Edgecombes are known for standing with the Order in the last war.”

“Then I’d say there has been an interesting change of heart.”

“There you are!” someone declares loudly. Nizar jumps; Severus barely restrains the urge to draw his wand. “I’ve been looking all over this house for you!”

Nizar recovers first. “And which of us would that be, Madam?” he asks of the approaching woman. She is older than Severus remembers, with a matronly build to accompany the horde of children she’s said to have given birth to since leaving office. She still dresses impressively, and her blonde hair is artfully modern in the non-magical sense rather than the magical. Aside from the bit of stoutness, she doesn’t appear to have aged at all.

“Oh, I was looking for Britain’s oldest war mage, but I’ll accept the pair of you and consider myself fortunate,” she says, holding out her hand. “I’m Millicent Bagnold, former Minister for Magic until 1978, though I’m still involved in politics due to my seat on the Wizengamot.”

Nizar shakes her hand, respecting her insistence on a man’s grip rather than a woman’s. “Nizar deSlizarse, Defence Professor of Hogwarts. Forgive me; I know your name, but I never had any idea of what you looked like.”

“Hard to read a newspaper from a portrait frame, I imagine,” Bagnold says cheerfully, and then thrusts her hand in Severus’s direction. “Professor Snape. It’s been too long.”

Severus raises an eyebrow while giving her hand the briefest shake he can tolerate without being rude. “I can’t recall ever meeting you before at all, Madam Bagnold.”

“Oh, yes.” Bagnold’s cheer diminishes, but it seems to be genuine sympathy that marks her features. “I was present for your testimony on several occasions in the Wizengamot regarding Death Eater activities during the war.”

Severus mentally steps back, hiding his displeasure behind utter impassivity. “I see.”

“I thanked you for your service afterwards, in 1981,” Bagnold continues, not seeming to notice Severus’s reaction. “You were understandably stressed at the time. I don’t blame you for not recalling, especially as I was no longer Minister.”

“Why did you cease being Minister?” Nizar asks. “I sort of missed that, too.”

“Oh. Well.” Bagnold looks sheepish. “I’m a Half-blood, you see, and by that point in the war, everyone who wasn’t a Pure-blood working within the Ministry was a target. There were so many attempts on my life that I spent most of my time in hiding, and if you’re always in hiding, you’re not exactly governing anyone, are you? I resigned, and Cornelius won the emergency election to take my place. I was a bit surprised, to be honest, him gaining the position after working in such a junior department. Less surprised when he won the standard election for Minister in 1980, what with the Wizengamot emptied of everyone but the Pure-bloods as everyone else tried to keep tried to keep themselves and their families alive. Terrible time, that. Absolutely terrible. I can’t think of a one of us that didn’t lose someone…which is why I was actually shocked that Fudge took the election in 1988 when the Wizengamot was almost back up to snuff. He was up for re-election this fall, you know,”
but I doubt Cornelius would have won this one. I say he chose to resign rather than face the indignity of losing.”

Severus is beginning to recall one of the few critiques of Minister Bagnold during her term—the woman can talk. A lot. Without pause. He wonders if she’s related to the Babbling family.

Nizar is intrigued by the gush of information. “Why not run for Minister of Magic this year, then?”

“Oh, no.” Bagnold shakes her head, smiling. “I’ve a passel of young ones to look after, and most of them aren’t old enough for Hogwarts yet, though the twins are second-years in Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw right now.” Her smile fades. “They’re not all mine. I lost a brother and his wife during the last month of the war, and they had a baby girl. We dote on her a bit much because of it, probably, but she’s a good child.”

After Bagnold thankfully moves along to gush at someone else, Nizar leans closer to Severus. “If she’s in the Wizengamot in the Bagnold seat, did her husband take her name?”

Severus snorts. “No. She has two men in her life, and she didn’t marry either of them. That would be the other reason she won’t run for Minister. The Pure-blooded backward twits would run her family into the ground for being ‘improper,’ as she is an unwed mother living with two men. I really don’t know if the gossip would be less if she’d bothered to marry them. It’s possible the only reason there is Pure-blood tolerance for Black’s triad marriage is due to his two spouses being public heroes.”

“Ah, you’ve given me something else to do with my day. Discovering how many of these lovely people hold similar views about loving relationships.” Nizar stands up on his toes to deliver a dry peck to Severus’s cheek. “I’m off to finally rescue Sirius from someone named Phoebus Penrose, who is hounding Sirius as to how he stayed sane for twelve years in Azkaban when the effects of Dementors is so well-documented.”

Severus gives him an unimpressed look. “I get to borrow your credit card as payment for enduring that stupid pun.”

Nizar grins back. “Why? That one was worse,” he says, and vanishes into the crowd again. Severus almost suspects a literal vanishing; Nizar is shorter than average and often takes advantage of it, but he is not that unnoticeable.

“Oh! I do so like your blond hair, dearie,” Severus hears Auror Wilhelmina Savage say.

“What—blond?” Nizar sputters indignantly. “It’s no such—”

“Now, now, it’s a fine thing for a lad to have hair as nice as a lady’s nowadays!” Wilhelmina declares. The sputtering becomes decidedly Spanish in nature.

“What are you doing?” Tonks asks Nizar. Severus still can’t see any of them, finding his way blocked by Albert Runcorn, newly promoted Minister Superior in the Improper Use of Magic office.

“My hair is not blond!” Nizar exclaims.

“Not anymore, it’s not,” Tonks says. “Uh, wow. You and Salazar really do look quite a bit alike—”

“Severus,” Runcorn greets him, forcing Severus to stop and respond, if only to tell Runcorn to fuck off. What stops him is the knowing gleam in Runcorn’s eyes.

“Albert Runcorn.” Severus gives him a brief, bland examination. “You’re looking well.”
“You look the same. Fucking a handsome Slytherin must do wonders for one’s appearance,” Runcorn replies, baring his teeth in poor appearance of a smile.

Open warfare. Thank you, God. He’s been hoping someone would be this stupid all afternoon. “I would suggest that you attempt to find someone equally good-looking in order to test that theory, but I’d hate to subject them to your odious presence. In lieu of that, perhaps Voldemort will volunteer to accommodate you?”

Runcorn flinches. Interesting. “But that’s hardly a true test of the theory, is it? Are you certain you wouldn’t loan me your date? Let a friend try out the goods. For old time’s sake.”

Severus isn’t certain whether he wants to laugh at the oily presumptuousness, or kill Runcorn where he stands. “You have curious ideas about dating, and about friendship. I do not own my date, nor do I consider someone whose existence I loathe to be a friend.”

Runcorn lets out a feigned sigh of disappointment. “That’s too bad. I suppose I shall have to look elsewhere to test the theory. Young Mister Higgs, now, he’s growing up quite pretty—”

Severus has Runcorn pinned to the wall, his wand digging into Runcorn’s chest, before the imbecile can finish speaking. “Stay. Away. From. My. Students.”

Runcorn wheezes out a laugh; Severus realizes his arm is resting across Runcorn’s throat. “Once they turn seventeen, they’re not your little lambs anymore, Severus. They’ll be his, and from there, it’s a short step to mine.”

“And while they are within Hogwarts’ walls, you won’t lay a hand on them. Not any of them.” Severus leans more heavily on his arm, watching in satisfaction as Runcorn’s eyes widen. “Not either of you. Do you understand me?”

“You’re so certain?” Runcorn asks in a raspy voice, smiling. “Safety is the best illusion, Severus. No one knows you’re coming until it’s too late to stop them.”

“Severus.”

Severus curses Kingsley’s timing and steps back, lowering his wand. Runcorn starts coughing in overdramatic fits, rubbing at his throat. Kingsley has Albus and Black with him; Kingsley appears disapproving, but Black looks as if he was looking forward to someone attempting to start a fight in the townhouse. “What happened here?” Kingsley asks.

“This—this former Death Eater attacked me!” Runcorn gasps.

“Absolutely true,” Severus responds, ignoring several gasps of surprise and dismay. “Of course, he did voice a desire to have sexual relations with one of my underage students before I did so. That might have prompted the…attack.”

“Oh. Did he?” Kingsley sounds unconcerned, but the glare he pins on Runcorn could melt steel. Runcorn freezes in place, one hand still on his own throat. “Did anyone else hear him?”

“I did.” An old woman totters out of the shadows cast by an antique painted room screen, her hand wrapped securely around the head of a cane shaped like a bird’s beak. “Lovely thing about being old. No one notices you.”

Severus steps back to allow Enid Pettigrew clear passage, but the rest of those nearby do a poor job at hiding their surprise. “Madam Pettigrew,” Kingsley says, wide-eyed. “My apologies for not greeting you sooner; I had no idea you were present today.”
“It’s not every day someone is exonerated by the Wizengamot, now, is it?” Madam Pettigrew lets out a sniff as she regards Runcorn. “First your brother gets tossed out on his arse, and now you go and make the mistake of lettin’ on that you’re the sort that likes boys what are too young and pretty for you. Shame, that is. Must be hard going through life knowing no one would want you if you were being legal about it.”

Runcorn finally draws himself up in anger. “Now see here, you dried up old—”

Madam Pettigrew cackles. “Careful, you dumb sack of impotent mule juice. No one’ll have a drop of sympathy for you if you attack an old woman after that paedophilia confession!”

Kingsley looks like he’s trying not to smile. “You’ll testify as to what Mister Runcorn said, Madam Pettigrew?”

“Course I will. I’d have sat on my chair and stayed out of it if I didn’t think it worth my time, Kingsley.”

Kingsley nods. “Very well, then. Jacob! Wilhelmina! Tonks! Please do take this man down to the Ministry for processing and remanding to Azkaban until we can work him into the current schedule for trial.”

“Gladly,” Jacob Proudfoot mutters, coming out of the crowd with Tonks and Wilhelmina. He hooks Runcorn by the left arm; Tonks adds mass to her body for greater strength and then grabs Runcorn’s right arm.

“You can’t do this!” Runcorn bawls in angry protest.

“We’re already doing it, fool.” Wilhelmina leads the way, guests jumping out of their path in response to her not insignificant glare as Tonks and Proudfoot shove Runcorn along.

“What did you do to your bloody hair?” Black asks.

“She said it was blond!” Nizar still sounds miffed. “It fucking well is not!”

Severus glances over to find Nizar standing next to Lupin. Every single hint of sun-bleaching is gone from his hair, leaving it the same dark brown as Salazar’s. “Not now, it isn’t.”

“Exactly!”

Madam Pettigrew glances at Nizar. “What a shame. I thought it was a prettier with the blonde bits.” While Nizar makes a strangled noise of frustration, Madam Pettigrew looks to Black. “And how are you, young man?”

“Fine,” Black manages, though he looks pale. “Is, uh—is Edith here?”

Madam Pettigrew nods, and Severus bites back a surprised curse. “She is. My sister’s waiting downstairs in your little antechamber off the foyer, if you’re willing to speak to her.”

“Uh. Right.” Black swallows. “Is she going to be throwing anything at me?”

“At you?” Madam Pettigrew snorts. “No, lad. If my sister works up the strength to be throwing anything, I think she’ll be starting with throwing my nephew’s preserved severed finger at his face, possibly in the hopes that it lodges itself up his nose.”

“Er—all right, then.” Black holds out his arm. “Shall I escort you, Madam Pettigrew?”
“You’d damned well better,” Madam Pettigrew replies, smiling.

When they leave the room, most of the tension in the space departs with them. Following quickly on the heels of that tension are most of the room’s occupants, leaving Severus, Nizar, Lupin, Kingsley, and Albus. “Did Runcorn say anything else we should be aware of, my boy?” Albus asks.

“Runcorn is a Death Eater. He didn’t admit it, but he had a few interesting tells.”

“And the Dark Mark,” Nizar adds, still eying the door everyone departed through. “It is very hard to get distinct readings on blood magic when you’re surrounded by it, but he was the one fool enough to be the only Death Eater in the room when deciding to…what was his goal again?” Nizar asks Severus.

“Oh, he wanted to find out if I would loan him my date,” Severus replies.

“Loan?” Nizar grins. “For how much?”

“Please. He’s a Runcorn. He couldn’t afford you.”

“Save the flirting for later, if you don’t mind,” Kingsley requests, glancing upwards in a bid for patience. “As long as we’re gathering reports from those in the Order who attended this affair, is there anything else that Albus and I should know?”

“Margot and Basil Greenwood, Dark Mark,” Nizar says, sighing. “I haven’t told Adele yet. I’m certain she doesn’t know.”

“They weren’t present at any Death Eater gathering I attended through Christmas Day of last year,” Severus answers Albus’s unspoken question. “There was no hint of any Greenwood in Voldemort’s service.”

“Anyone else?” Kingsley asks.

“By conversation, I heard almost nothing except idiocy. By means of determining the use of blood magic, there are Dark Marks on Alfridus Bulstrode, Felix Davis, Oderick Derrick, Cornelius Yaxley, Augustine Travers, Erik Talbot, Hector Selwyn, Gertrude Flint, Patrick Rosier, Thorfinn Rowle, Geminia Rookwood, Ratier Gibbon, Oliver Montague, Tristan Parkinson, Constantine Pucey, and Clare Mulciber.”

“Christ, that’s sixteen members of the Wizengamot,” Lupin mutters. “If we ever catch them at it…”

Kingsley grimaces. “One headache at a time, please.”

“Indeed.” Albus looks grim. “How many of them would you say are unshakable in their service to the Dark Lord, Severus?”

“Most of them. Augustine Travers might be less inclined after losing his son last Winter Solstice, but I wouldn’t call it a certainty. Talbot threatened me and left poison on my robes this afternoon, so I rather doubt he wishes to be friends. I don’t know as much about Patrick Rosier as I did about his father. Oderick Derrick is also a relative unknown; I was forced to spend more time with Oliver Derrick.”

“Very well. Aside from Sirius now spending time with Peter Pettigrew’s mother, I’ve been informed that this particular celebration is ending for the day,” Albus says. “I’ll see you both back at Hogwarts.”
“He does like giving orders, doesn’t he?” Nizar says contemplatively after Albus, Lupin, and Kingsley leave the room.

“He certainly revels in dismissals,” Severus responds. “However, in this case, I would very much like to leave this fucking house, and will use the excuse to avoid giving my fondest of farewells to Sirius Black.”

Nizar smiles. “I’m almost certain that *Fuck you* and *Fuck you, too* do not count as fond farewells.”

Severus eyes him, feeling his lips curl in quiet amusement. “That depends entirely on the context.”
Nizar finally gets to meet a bookstore...and a future Slytherin.

Soooo I just realized that Part VI is in its home stretch. (And I still need to finish Part V. Whoops.) Yay? : D

BETAS! @mrsstanley, @saneronthesinside, @jabberwockypie, & @norcumi! YOU GUYS ROCK.

Nizar stares at the building with its dark awning and bright walls. Waterstone’s is set across both brick and awning in gold print. “That’s the non—er, that’s the book shop, then,” he corrects himself, mindful of the crowd.

“It is.” Severus sounds smug.

“The entire building.”

“Yes. First and second storey both,” Severus confirms, enjoying this far too much. “I’m given to understand the upper floors are storage, though there might be flats available. I’ve never asked.”

“You know, I’m not so distracted that I didn’t notice we didn’t bother to change clothes.” Nizar dressed sedately for the day, choosing mostly black with a dark green, silver-edged robe…but it’s still a magician’s robe over shirt and trousers.

Severus makes a point of turning his head to indicate two people exiting the book shop. The woman has bright blue hair spiked to stand straight up from her head, black lipstick, is wearing a shirt composed of netting over a sleeveless top, denims, and a glittering blue hooded coat thrown over it in deference to the temperature. Her companion is wearing tweed and looks like Cuthbert Binns but for his youth, the skull-and-crossbones bow tie, and similarly spiked black hair. “It’s a bit easier to blend in with other Londoners during warmer weather, Nizar.”

“Good point,” Nizar admits. He’s been wearing his robe unbuttoned since they left the townhouse, in deference to a day that turned warm while they were indoors. Even with the embroidered edging on his robe, he and Severus look bloody normal in comparison to some of the other Londoners wandering about. “And the time limit of five o’clock?”

“Aside from the fact that I’d like to have dinner, they close early on Sunday evenings.”

“Which is an hour from now.” Nizar suspects this might be the closest he’s been to pouting since childhood. “That isn’t nearly long enough!”

Severus snorts in complete lack of sympathy. “You can come back, idiot. The bookstore will still be
here next week, next month, next year, and most likely the next decade, too.”

“Right.” Nizar feels an odd flutter in his chest that he suspects might be nerves. “Bigger or smaller than the school library?”

Severus smirks at him. “Much bigger,” he says, and pushes open the door.

Nizar steels himself and walks inside. It’s just a bloody shop. It’s nowhere near as intimidating as that massive, city-block-sized building masquerading as a clothing shop.

He stares around after the door swings shut behind him and promptly forgets whatever he was just thinking about. The room is massive, quiet without succumbing to Madam Pince’s preferential silence. It smells of ink and paper, leather, and the scents carried by many different types of people. Colorful books are packed in wall-to-wall shelves that stretch from floor to ceiling.

He doesn’t realize he’s blocking the door until Severus snags him by the arm and moves them out of the way of people waiting to exit the shop. “I was expecting excitement, not a mental breakdown.”

Nizar’s throat feels too tight. “I haven’t seen anything like this in…in a lot time.”

Severus’s grip on his arm gentles. “Muffliato. How long, Nizar?”

“Oh, definitely more than nine hundred eighty years,” Nizar tries to say in a light voice. Given that he sounds choked, he definitely doesn’t manage it. “The Imperial library of Constantinople was still beloved when we were there last. The books were mostly scrolls from earlier centuries, but the scribes were trying to update them to bound tomes. The library of Astan Quds Razavi had already been built, though it was smaller than this place at the time. I’ve seen memories of what the library of Córdoba looked like thanks to Salazar—it was amazing. The building was much larger, but I think this store holds more books. Oh, and the Northern Song Court had a library in the Imperial academy that we were invited to use as honored guests. It was still smaller than this. Oh, and the Vatican library was already being pieced together, but we had to sneak in to see that one. Something about being heretics and nonbelievers.”

Severus offers him a gentle smile. “I didn’t mean for this to be upsetting.”

“It’s less upsetting and more overwhelming,” Nizar replies. “It’s fine, Severus. It will just take a while for me not to be completely overwhelmed by a bookstore.”

“In that case, I strongly suggest you investigate the History section. For posterity.” Severus has an innocuous expression on his face that Nizar doesn’t trust at all.

“Fine.” Nizar pauses before he goes in the indicated direction. “When the school opened in 990, Hogwarts’ library was just one room.”

Severus’s mouth falls open. “A room. One room.”

“Just a room!”

“Tell me it was a bloody large one!” Severus yells after him.

“Positively tiny!” Nizar calls back, and then proceeds to get lost in a building that is smaller than Hogwarts. There is so much of it, everywhere: names, images, and titles, none of which are familiar.

He does stop to glare at the dubbed Mythology section. “Oh, so the ancient Greek religion is mythology, yet I don’t see anything here suggesting the same of Ancient Egypt—never mind,” he
mutters when he sees the first book with Isis on the cover. That’s accompanied by books on the Norse, Roman gods, the Celts—which seems to encompass all the tribes of the British Isles and is thus stupidly incorrect. He sees books on Sumerian religious tales, modern Polynesian groups, and the Japanese before he gives up and makes himself walk away. That was sliding downhill at such an appalling rate that he wouldn’t be surprised if they’d decided to label the Hebrew texts as “mythology.” He already knows he’d find the Basque stories in this stupid fucking section.

The words “New Age” catch his eye and he stops to look. A minute later, it’s hard not to break down laughing in the shop. Some of it has promise, and often tends to be centered on Far Eastern thought. The rest is ludicrous. Several prolific authors are either charlatans, deluded, or both.

Nizar picks up a book from the History section entitled *The Beginnings of Rome: Italy and Rome from the Bronze Age to the Punic Wars* because he wants to sit down with a quill spelled scarlet and mark through everything that’s wrong. He certainly isn’t buying it for the pictures inside, and the stunning lack thereof.

On second thought, given the way the book is written, he might be purchasing a cure for insomnia.

The photographic books of differing groups and periods of history are far more interesting, useful, and in some cases, absolutely depressing. He’s not certain he wanted to know what Athens had become. Ancient Rome is slowly being buried by the modern city. The Egyptian pyramids have been stripped down to bare rock. They only seem to know of one giant sphynx instead of the multitude that should be present in the region, and that one is not only stripped, but two-thirds buried in the sand. The Crusades destroyed so much that few photos from the East are recognizable but for some surviving, massive landmarks. He can’t find anything about Jiangning, but they’d changed the city’s name twice in a century before he ever got to see it. Gods know what it’s called now.

No, that’s enough. He might actually start sobbing in a fucking shop if he keeps looking at this pile of evidence of how people can be such completely thoughtless twits. He is going to spend the rest of this hour hiding in the fiction stacks.

He plucks a copy of Jane Austen’s *Sense & Sensibility* off of a shelf without slowing down as he passes that section, mostly out of regret for not choosing the film version over *Desperado*. If he lingers, he’ll buy all of Austen’s books. Aberforth is not winning that argument until Nizar is willing to concede, which will only happen if this book makes him forget the rest of the world exists while he reads it.

Nizar finds himself in fiction meant for teenagers and children by accident, but he liked the two books Hermione found, written by that American named Wrede. Maybe she wrote other books, or there are books in the same category as tolerable—

Seeing the word Prydain has the effect of all but dragging him across the room until he snatches the heavy book from the shelf. Not just Prydain, but *The Chronicles of Prydain*, which turns out to be a boxed set of five novels. The summary is enough to reveal that the *Chronicles* are not strictly following the old legends, but he suspects the stories are told with the same affection. As another pleasant bonus, they don’t mention Myrddin at all.

Nizar looks around until he finds someone in a solid-colored short-sleeve shirt with a name tag, two things he’s learning are synonymous with shop keep. “Excuse me. Do you have a moment?”

The girl turns around, revealing that she has purple streaks in her bound hair and gold-rimmed round glasses on her face. “I have plenty!” she says despite the massive armload of books she’s carrying. “How can I help you?”
“I don’t suppose you have anything in the store written by the Welsh poet Taliesin.”

The shop keep gives him a blank look. “Uh…maybe in the poetry section? I’ve never heard of a Welsh poet with just one name.”

Nizar holds up the Prydain books. “He wrote ‘Armes Prydein,’ which I think is the inspiration for these.”

She lights up at the sight of the Prydain books. “Oh, I love those! Uhm, let me ask my manager. He might know.” She deposits her books on a nearby chair. “Don’t wander off!”

Nizar watches her leave, bemused. “You were carrying your own weight in books. I’m not going anywhere. You might be capable of beating me to death if I tried.”

He’s standing with his head tilted, reading titles and authors that are running along the shelf, when she returns. “I had to stop by the Mythology section to find it,” she says. Nizar bites back a lot of angry swearing as he turns around. “It’s supposed to be in the Literature section, but Jack says it kind of wanders back and forth depending on who did the shelving when a new copy comes in. Sometimes it’s in History, too.”

Nizar takes the books she holds out, entitled Facsimile & Text of the Book of Taliesin Volume 1 and Volume 2. “Is this all of it?” he asks, flipping open the cover of the first one. What greets him is not modern English, but annotated Welsh—younger than Old Welsh but definitely closer to the old language than the modern. If he hadn’t bothered to study up on Old Welsh months ago, it would be very difficult to read this.

For a moment, he feels a pang of sadness. Taliesin worked in Cumbric, but from what he can see after flipping through the pages, there isn’t a trace of the old language in the book. The ancient copy of Taliesin’s poetry is gone from Hogwarts library; he hopes whoever translated the poems to Old Welsh did an excellent job.

“Yep! This is all turn of the century work from back when a library finally got hold of it all proper, my manager says. There’s another book that’s an excerpt of poems, but I think they’re all from these two. Oh, and the same author did an English translation. Either way, moot point, we don’t have a copy of those books right now,” she says. “Is that all you needed?”

Nizar flips through the pages, looking at what appears to be photographs taken of ancient pages, replete with notations from various scholars—centuries’ worth of commentary, given the changes in language and phrasing. “This is amazing, actually. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome!” she chirps, scooping up her massive pile of books before leaving.

Nizar is using his own memory of the poems to translate the first one when there is a tug on his robe. He glances down to find a small girl staring up at him. She has multi-shaded dark brown hair in twin tails hanging down in front, greenish-gold eyes with flecks of brown and red, and light brown skin that still hosts a large smattering of freckles over her nose and cheeks. She’s also wearing a glittering skirt and coat, but unlike Dumbledore, she went with dark swirls of purple instead of collective eyesore. “Can I help you?” Nizar asks.

“What are you wearing?”

“A robe,” Nizar decides to answer honestly. The girl is eight years old, at most—she reminds him a lot of the youngest students Hogewâ’p would receive in his day. “But London is full of eccentric people, so mostly everyone assumes it’s just a very fancy coat.”
She grins, revealing that she’s recently lost her milk teeth in the front and none of the replacements have learned how to be neighbors again yet. “Are you a wizard?”

Nizar gives her a polite, miffed look. “No. The proper word is magician. It’s Latin. Leaves out the concern for if one is a boy casting spells, if one is a girl, or anything in between.”

“My brother is a wizard,” she supplies. “A magician.” There is no mistaking the sarcasm she puts into the word. “But his robes aren’t as neat as yours.”

“Oh?”

“Nope. Black and dull.” She holds out her hand. “I’m Jane.”

“Hello, Jane the Fearless.” Nizar smiles when she giggles, but takes her offered hand. He raises both eyebrows when magic sings beneath his palm. That explains quite a bit. Magicians have a bad habit of seeking each other out by accident. “I’m Nizar.”

“Nice to meet you!” Jane points at the books he’s holding. “Which one are you reading? I’ve read the Prydain books. They’re great!”

“Are they? That’s good to know, as I’ve never read them before. I’m reading Welsh poetry at the moment.” Nizar shows her the first pages of Taliesin. “Battles, bloodshed, magic, and a decent accounting of who hated whom a very long time ago.”

“Neat! Will you read it to me?” Jane sticks out her lower lip when he doesn’t answer right away. “Please? Mum’s off looking at dull stuff until the shop closes, and battles sound fun!”

“Battles sound fun right until you’re involved in one, trust me.” Nizar stares down at Jane’s pleading face and gives in. “All right. I’ll read it to you, but you’d best not get me arrested by law enforcement.”

“Why would they do that?” Jane asks as she drags him by the hem of his robe to an oversized, overstuffed chair.

“They might assume I’m kidnapping you.”

“That’s stupid,” Jane declares as she makes it clear that she’s going to be sitting in his lap. “We’re not even going anywhere!”

Severus finds him there sometime later. “There you—are you collecting children?” he asks in dismay.

Nizar glances up without moving his finger from the current word in the book. “No, I was kidnapped by one. There is a distinct difference.”

“Who is that? He looks like a vampire,” Jane whispers loudly.

“He absolutely does not. Ask your brother to show you an illustration of a real vampire,” Nizar says. “Jane, this is Severus. Severus, meet Jane the Fearless.”

“Hi!” Jane says in a much more cheerful tone. “Hey…no way. Are you Severus Snape?”

Severus looks like he’s contemplating escape routes. “Yes?”

“Neat! You’re my brother’s Potions teacher at school. He says you’re terrifying. But you don’t look terrifying. You just look like you’re terrified of the sun,” Jane says.
Severus’s shoulders relax, though his expression is still twisted up in discomfiture. “I am not terrified of the sun. I live in northern Scotland and spend much of my time in a dungeon.”

“How’s that not you being afraid of the sun?” Jane asks, puzzled.

Severus seems to give up, much as Nizar did when confronted with the child’s stubbornness. “My job requires it. Who is your brother, so that I may thank him for continuing to tell others that I’m properly terrifying?”

“Edward,” Jane says, making Nizar’s shoulders twitch in surprise. “He’s a third-year Gryffindor!”

“I’m aware of who Edward Black is.” Severus eyes Jane, using ire to disguise curiosity. “And when will I see the girl who has already been dubbed Fearless enter Hogwarts?”

“I just turned eight on the second,” Jane says. Nizar congratulates himself on being correct. “First of September in three years.”

“1999.” Severus nods. “I’m certain I can manage to have retired by then—”

“There you are—oh my God!” The pale-skinned woman standing at the entrance to the children’s area has both hands clasped to her mouth, her grey eyes wide and horrified. She has long black hair pinned up with combs, and looks like such a typical Black that Nizar wants to go right back to the townhouse and yell at the portraits until he finds the bloodline that produced this family.

“I told you someone would think I kidnapped you,” Nizar says to Jane.

Jane shrugs. “It’s just Mum. Hi, Mum! I found two of Edward’s teachers!”

“Did you?” Jane’s mother repeats in a faint voice. Her accent, like Edward’s and Jane’s, is solid London County without the western influence.


“Jane, perhaps you should introduce us before your mother panics,” Nizar suggests. “Better yet, get off of me. My legs are going numb. You’re heavier than you look.”

Jane hops up indignantly. “I’m not that heavy!”

Nizar gathers up his books. “Yes, you really are. Also, you’re learning Old Welsh faster than I am, and that’s just not fair.”

“Mum says that I’m smart,” Jane replies, beaming. “Mum, this is Nizar, but I don’t know the rest of his name, and that’s Professor Severus Snape that Edward likes whinging about.”

“Uh…nice to…meet you,” Jane’s mother says blankly.

“Professor Snape and Nizar, this is my mum, Ellie.”

“Ellie?” Nizar watches in surprise as Severus’s expression goes from uncomfortable and displeased to narrow-eyed humor. “Is it, now?” he purrs, his voice like rolling smoke.

Ellie covers her face with her hands and lets out a muffled groan. “Yes.”

Nizar looks down at Jane, who shrugs her lack of understanding. “Severus?” He would very much like Severus to inform him what Ellie did to earn that particular tone.
“In the summer of 1983, I met a talkative old woman going by that name who was in a part of Cokeworth they had no business being in,” Severus says, eying Ellie with a snide smile. “I suspect Polyjuice.”

“Polyjuice has many uses,” Ellie says through her hands.

“Polyjuice? Why would—” Nizar blinks a few times as realization filters in. “Oh. That would explain why Salazar was so insistent on leaving Edward’s family alone. They’re part of the Underground.”

“No, they use the Underground,” Jane corrects testily. “You’ve gotta take the Tube to go to work!”


Jane gives him a suspicious look. “How old is old?”

“One thousand twenty-one as of first March,” Nizar replies. “One day before your birthday.”

Jane’s eyes grow round and huge. “No. Way!”

“Yes, way,” Nizar retorts, wondering where that bit of annoying slang came from. “I am most certainly that old. Or I’m merely forty-three. Pick one.”

Jane’s face scrunches up before she decides to ignore his evident insanity. “Mum, how come Professor Snape knows you?”

“I miiiight have gone to check on him once for work, sweetie.” Ellie drops her hands and looks sheepish. “I just wasn’t expecting it to bite me in the backside.”

Severus shakes his head. “Of all of the imbeciles and intruders who spied upon me from 1980 through sometime around 1985 before giving up, you were at least polite about it.” He holds out his hand. “My name is Severus. Congratulations; you are raising a fearless child who will probably terrorize the entirety of a magical castle.”

Ellie hesitates before taking Severus’s hand. “Any teacher’s goal is to make certain they raise children that they then turn loose on other teachers as revenge. Or at least that’s what I was told the first time I taught a colleague’s annoying and gutter-mouthed offspring.”

“No longer retired from teaching, I see,” Severus says in dry observation.

“I’m no longer an octogenarian,” Ellie responds tartly, despite blushing a bright rose pink.

Severus rests his hands behind his back, a further hint that he no longer wants to flee the shop as quickly as possible. “What subject?”

“Subjects, actually. History along with Mythology and Folklore,” Ellie answers. Nizar tries not to grimace at hearing the word mythology. “I teach secondary school, the older children. Half of them want to learn, and half of them would rather leave the classroom the moment they sit down.”

“I teach Potions. Half of mine want to learn, and the other half are actively attempting to obliterate themselves,” Severus counters.

Ellie nods. “Our Chemistry teacher says the same thing. Daily.”
Nizar walks closer with his chosen books slung under his arm, glancing down at Jane again. “You were telling me about an author named Jane Yolen who wrote books based on mythology, too. Why don’t you find them for me?”

“Okay!” Jane agrees, and rushes off to the opposite side of the children’s section.

Nizar holds out his free hand. “No matter what Edward might have said, it’s not Slytherin. Nizar, House of Deslizarse, Professor of Defence.”

Ellie bites her lip before reaching out to clasp his hand. “Ellie Black.”

Nizar grins at Severus as he feels that same sense of magic against his skin. “I told you. Muggle-born, my arse.”

“And I believed you the moment she admitted to the Polyjuice,” Severus replies. “It tends not to work on the non-magical.”

Nizar gives him a confused look. “What? Since when? Or did they change the formula and I didn’t notice?”

Severus slaps his hand over his eyes. “God dammit,” he hisses between his teeth.

“Oh. I suppose that answers that question.”

“Saul’s version works no matter who drinks it, magical or non-magical humans,” Ellie says without looking at either of them. “And that is all I’m going to say because we’re really not supposed to be meeting each other. In fact, pretend we haven’t met at all.”

Nizar raises an eyebrow. “That will work so well when Jane comes to Hogwarts in three years.”

“Yes, well.” Ellie manages a weak smile. “Do you really think You-Know-Who is still going to be alive in three years to make an Underground necessary?”

Before Nizar can respond, Jane comes running back. “I found them!” She holds up two hardbound books for Nizar to take, their covers protected by paper illustrations. “Sorry, but I wanted to find the good covers.”

“Thank you.” Nizar takes a look at the first one, which has an intriguing image of a goddess-type figure cradling two smaller females, dark-haired and light, with her own hair. It’s the cover of the second book, White Jenna, that makes him feel like someone ripped his heart from his chest.

There are two grown women dressed in decorated leathers, just like the old Britons and Picts if they were of a mood to go to war but hadn’t yet buckled on their armor. They’re standing side-by-side, leaning in close to each other, holding the same oversized spear. One has dark eyes and hair that is stark white, bound in a braid that falls past her hips. The other is black-haired and darker-skinned, with the same dark eyes, but her features are unmistakable.

Nizar looks to Jane. “One more thing to fetch. The author’s name is Patricia Wrede, and the books are Dragonsbane and Dragon Search. Go find the copies you like best.”

“What are you doing?” Severus asks as Jane races off again.

Nizar holds out the copy of White Jenna. “Paying for a trade.”

Severus studies the cover, his expression inscrutable, until the resemblance makes itself known. “I
see. That does deserve recompense.”


Nizar shows her the book. “My daughter’s eyes were grey, like yours. Otherwise, the black-haired woman on this cover looks exactly like my daughter did the year she married her husband. I only have one portrait of my daughter, painted when she was much younger. The next time you encounter Sal while we’re all busy pretending not to know each other, you might wish to ask him to test your daughter’s Divinatory instincts.”

Jane comes back with two smaller paper-bound books. “I have them! Do you want them?”

Instead of answering her, Nizar says, “Come with me. I need to purchase everything, and you can help me carry the books.”

Nizar listens to Jane chatter excitedly about her primary school—one with excellent teachers, from the sounds of it—and the many books she has at home to read, and how often she re-reads her favorites. Severus and Ellie are following them, and Nizar keeps track of their brief conversation, as well.

“She’s nothing like her older brother,” Severus says in a neutral voice.

“Oh—no. Jane is quite a bit like her father. Edward is…” Ellie lets out a rueful chuckle. “Edward is very much his own person. I’m glad he was finally able to make friends at his school.”

“With Ginevra Weasley and Astoria Greengrass, no less.”

“With a Greengrass?” Ellie gasps in shock.

“Someone knows a great deal more about certain families than they’d prefer others to be aware of, don’t they?” Severus sound amused. “You don’t get to cast aspersions on other families. Unlike your son’s claims to the contrary, you are a Black.”

“No, I’m a Muggle-born,” Ellie murmurs. “Truly. It’s my husband who isn’t, and that is a secret we keep from the children. It isn’t safe for them to know. Not about us being Underground, and definitely not about both of us having wands.”

“I’m certain there was a great deal of entertainment to be had in pretending to be hapless in order to visit the Weasley Burrow, then.”

“That wasn’t so bad.” Ellie sounds more or less normal again as Nizar puts his purchases on the counter for the shop keep—the girl with the gold-rimmed glasses again—to ring up. “The difficulty came when Jasper let it slip that he owns a motorcycle. I’m still not certain how I pried my husband out of Arthur’s shed.”

“Stunning spells and Levicorpus work wonders in emergencies,” Severus informs her, and Ellie muffles a watery giggle.

“Adlevo corpus would be more accurate,” Ellie whispers as Nizar is informed of his total. He tries not to make a face over the unnegotiable price; he really, really misses ceap.

“I like you already—do I even want to know?” Severus asks when he spies the identification card in Nizar’s hand when the girl at the register wants to verify his identity against the credit card.

Nizar glances over his shoulder, innocent look on his face. “I suspect that Madam Tyler and Sal have
been conspiring to turn me into a real person.” Ellie lets out another choked laugh. “Oh, and bag the Wrede books separately, would you please?” Nizar asks the shop keep, who grins and finds a smaller sack with wrapped paper handles.

After collecting his receipt and stuffing it in a robe pocket (he still has no idea what to do with them), Nizar holds out the small bag with the Wrede books, offering it to Jane. “We’re trading. You brought me books, and one of them had something pleasing on the cover. Therefore, these are yours.”

Jane goes wide-eyed again as she peers into the bag. “Oh, wow! Thank you!” She immediately jumps forward and hugs Nizar around the waist. “We should trade more! I’ll get more books!”

“Slytherin,” Nizar says under his breath, smiling.

“Mum!” Jane bounces back to her mother. “Look! I got books!”

“Please wait until after dinner before you read them,” Ellie says in a wry voice. She raises both eyebrows at Nizar, who shrugs and pretends to have no idea what she means.

Nizar then takes in the expression on Severus’s face. “We’ll be leaving now, as it’s the dinner hour. See you in three years, Jane the Fearless.”

Jane already has her face shoved into the bag. “Bye!”

“Or less,” Ellie says as they turn to go.

“Or less,” Nizar agrees, and then lets Severus escort him from the store.

“We are not going back to the townhouse so you can find that particular family on the Black family tree,” Severus growls as they hurry down the walkway, trying to keep pace with the crowds that are now frantic to finish their shopping and go home for the evening.

Nizar glances back over his shoulder. Jane and Ellie have left the store and are standing on the walkway, watching them leave. Jane is waving; Ellie looks as if she desperately wants to chase them down, drag them back to the shop, and interrogate them for the next six days. “That’s all right.” He faces forward again to pay more attention to where they’re going. “It wouldn’t do any good.”

“What’s that? You’ve suddenly lost your rabid curiosity in regards to uncovering the inbred origins of Edward Black’s family?”

Nizar bites back a smile. “Not exactly. They’re Underground, Severus. Salazar would have hidden them just like he’s hidden himself, and likely every other magician involved in his lunacy. Their portraits won’t be there.”

Severus frowns. “How do you know?”

Nizar touches his wand so he can wordlessly cast the Privacy Charm. “I altered the family tree a bit in regards to the child’s photograph. It can only be done by Sirius or myself, but if we place our hands on that particular frame, it will switch to a portrait of me and trace my entire lineage until it ends in 1512. I know that their portraits won’t show up because Salazar’s portrait and lineage does not appear attached to mine.”

Severus tries not to betray his sudden renewed interest in the Black Family tree, and in Salazar’s lack of portrait. “If you’ve hidden yourself, as we discussed last week, then Black is no longer able to do so.”
“For now,” Nizar says. “I warned him it would happen, and when it would revert.”

“Is she, then?” Severus raises an eyebrow when Nizar glances at him. “She claims to be Muggle-born, but you are aware of magical lineages.”

“Jane is of a strong magical lineage for certain, just like her brother, but their mother…” Nizar slowly shakes his head. “Ellie Black most certainly has the famous features of a Black, but the magical lineage feels very distant. It’s most likely been so many generations since magic sprouted in that family that they all truly believe themselves to be non-magical.”

“Then either her husband took her name, or they both assumed the name Black for secrecy,” Severus muses aloud. “As we discussed regarding Edward, there are plenty of non-magical people named Black roaming about Britain.”

“I suspect the assumed name, yes.”

“I will admit it was gratifying to see another magical child named Jane who is intelligent. The last three Janes I taught in Hogwarts were abominable students.” Severus looks at Nizar from the corner of his eye. “Why didn’t you answer Ellie Black in regards to Voldemort’s demise?”

Nizar feels his good mood dry up and vanish. “Because something has changed. I don’t want to speak of it again until we’re within Hogwarts’ walls.”
Minerva watches Nizar pace the room, an activity she is far more accustomed to seeing Sirius Black indulge in. His hair is slowly returning to its sun-streaked lighter brown, which is intriguing to watch, but not enough to distract her from her concern. “Nizar. Patience.”

“Not in the mood,” Nizar replies tersely. He frowns and starts chewing on his thumbnail, which makes her frown. She’s never seen him resort to such obvious signs of stress.

Minerva is beyond relieved when Severus returns with Salazar. “Thank heavens. Please, one of you, sit him down on the sofa and then sit on him!”

Nizar rolls his eyes and flops down on the sofa before the others can react. “I’m sitting.”

“Severus would only tell me that you’d said something changed, little brother.” Salazar brings out the silver bowl he uses often for water-scrying. He once confessed to Minerva that the bowl is older than he is, but wouldn’t elaborate further. “What prompted that statement?”

“Someone asked me a question about when Voldemort would be defeated, and fortunately there was a well-timed interruption, as I couldn’t answer them.” Nizar gives Salazar a hard look that is mindful of battlefield politics. “I couldn’t.”

“I see.” Salazar takes a pitcher from the tray that was already waiting on the coffee table and uses the water in it to fill the silver bowl. He sits down, takes out his wand, and strikes it three times. Minerva flinches, still not in the habit of hearing magic ring in her ears and in her bones to such an extent.

“¿Qué joder es eso?” Salazar frowns and peers down at the water. “That cannot be.”

“Severus.” Nizar waits until Severus is looking at him. “Your cards. Ask the question. When will Voldemort die?”

Minerva watches Severus pull an oversized, wrapped package from within his robes, revealing a large deck of cards with a Tarot’s Victorian pattern on the back. “I didn’t know you’d begun practicing any sort of Divination, Severus.”

“Only of this sort,” Severus mutters. He glares at the deck and then draws three cards, laying them out on the table.
Every single one of them is solid black.

Severus looks thwarted, and well on his way to infuriated. “There are no black cards in this deck.”

“No. There aren’t.” Nizar inclines his head at the deck. “Draw three more. Same question.”

Three more cards. All of them black.

“What does that mean?” Minerva asks, baffled. She’s never heard of such a thing before, and unlike Professor Thorn’s hated, useless teaching, she received decent Divination lessons from Thorn’s predecessor.

“I’ve the same. Black water.” Salazar leans back, regarding the bowl with a pensive frown. “The black water of the River Stix. I received the same sort of image when I scryed upon Dumbledore’s intentions this past January, but in combination with the cards Severus has drawn tonight, I don’t think the meaning is the same.” Salazar glances at Nizar. “The elves?”

“Dobby, Filky,” Nizar calls, waiting until the two elves in question appear in Nizar’s sitting room. “My apologies for the late summons. I was wondering if the elves of Hogwarts had discovered that their Divination upon Voldemort’s defeat has changed.”

Filky and Dobby glance at each other before Filky pales and vanishes. “Dobby apologizes to the Professors on Filky’s behalf. She doesn’t want to…” Dobby tugs at his ear. “The elves has all stopped trying to predict the bad one’s fate.”

“Why?” Salazar asks. “What did they begin to see?”

“Nothing,” Dobby asks, giving Salazar a large-eyed look of concern. “We all be seeing nothing.”

“Thank you, Dobby,” Nizar says. “That’s all for the moment.”

Dobby eyes Nizar suspiciously before nodding. “All right. Good night, Professors.” He disappears with a muted pop of displaced air.


“When I was asked that question earlier today, the answer I discerned was never. When does Voldemort die? Never.”

“That…is not possible,” Minerva whispers. “He isn’t immortal, no matter how many bloody Horcruxes he has!”

“And we know only two remain.” Severus stacks the black cards and looks at Nizar. “Will they return to normal, or do I need to ask you to replace these?”

Nizar glances up from his glowering regard of the tabletop. “What? Oh. Stack them in with the others without asking anything more of the deck. If you wait a full lunar day, they should return to normal.”

“There is at least one way I can think of in which never would be an answer not to be feared,” Salazar ventures after a moment. “Someone might be thinking to toss our favorite walking corpse through the interesting archway they’re hiding in the Death Chamber within the Ministry. If Voldemort remained trapped beyond that arch, but his Horcruxes are never destroyed, he would have a most unpleasant continuing life in whatever lies beyond that veil.”
"Death Chamber. That’s auspicious,” Nizar mutters. “What sort of archway, Salazar?"

Salazar hesitates. “I believe Godric would have termed it a Door that was left not only active, but open. There is nothing to protect its entrance. The Ministry has quite the bad habit of using it to dispose of the still-living bodies of those subjected to the Dementor’s Kiss.”

Nizar pales. “The fuck—who the fuck would be stupid enough to leave a Door in that condition?”

“I’m less alarmed by the active Door and far more by its current use,” Salazar replies. “What do you think, little brother?”

Minerva resists the urge to knock Nizar’s hand away from his face when he starts abusing his poor thumbnail by chewing on it again. “It’s a valid theory,” he finally says. “I like it better than the idea that Voldemort figures out some true means of attaining immortality. Horcruxes won’t do it. They’re temporary, no matter if they’re living items or inanimate objects. A philosopher’s stone is a stopgap, even if it’s useful. To never die, though…”

“Do you know—how could Voldemort do such a thing?” Minerva asks.

“I’m not a Necromancer. Elfric!” Nizar calls, and waits for his elfin-faced son to pop into his portrait frame. “True immortality. How?”

Elfric is taken aback by the abrupt question. Minerva can’t understand his hissed answer.

Nizar rolls his eyes. “Not us, Elfric. Voldemort. Something has changed, and scrying on his future death now results in an answer of never. We’re discussing possibilities.”

“Oh.” Elfric frowns and then lets out a long response in Parseltongue.

“Fuck me,” Salazar breathes, wide-eyed. “We’ll be making certain he’s not capable of that.”

“I doubt he would know the spells, anyway,” Nizar says derisively. “That’s complicated work, far more than his shoddy use of a Blood Summons.”

“Someone please tell the rest of us what Elfric said,” Severus requests through gritted teeth.

“It’s a combination of Blood Magic and Necromancy. Voldemort would need a sacrifice,” Salazar responds, but he still looks troubled. “A massive one.”

“It isn’t even that it’s Blood Magic and Necromancy. It’s old magic, from a time before those terms even existed,” Nizar stresses. “It was ancient when I learned of it, and I’m sure as hell not going to be informing that walking corpse of how to do any of it!”

Minerva sighs. “I truly thought the worst of my day would be dealing with all of those utter baboons masquerading as Wizengamot members and Ministry employees at Grimmauld Place. Is there any way to stop Voldemort from performing this sort of sacrifice?”

“Yes. Fucking kill him,” Nizar retorts at once. “That remains the plan. He still fears that if he doesn’t deal with the child by learning of the prophecy’s contents, he won’t achieve his goals. We wait until he’s stupid enough to walk into the trap, make him dead, and the problem is solved!”

“I do find it quite delightful that you’re an efficient problem-solver,” Severus says.

Salazar grins and stands up. “And that would be the flirting, and our cue to depart, Lioness. I’ll be contemplating different questions to ask the water, hermanito. There has to be a way to answer that
particular question by going around our primary concern.”

“There probably is, yes. I’ll be doing the same,” Nizar says. “Good night, Minerva. Salazar. Behave yourselves.”

“Absolutely not!” Salazar declares, grasping Minerva’s hand and Disapparating them downstairs before she can say anything more.

* * * *

The school week after Sirius’s exoneration is odd, but in a pleasing way. Nizar has never seen these students so light-hearted—not in the portrait, and not afterwards. All four Houses are buoyed by the idea of something going right, of seeing justice done, and their attitude is infectious. Even Quintinus Stirling deigns to look something approximating cheerful, though Nizar sort of wishes he’d stop; he’s terrifying the first-years.

“I asked one of my portraits if I’d ever been this youthfully optimistic about anything,” Nizar comments to Severus when they watch the students enjoy dinner Monday evening in the Great Hall.

“Oh?”

“He laughed at me. I took that to mean I didn’t.”

Severus grimaces. “I know I certainly had no reason to be youthfully optimistic.” He glances over at the Slytherin table, where there are a number of animated conversations instead of furtive whispers. “I’m glad they do. Have reason to be, I mean.”

Nizar nods. “So do I.” Then he flinches back as a scroll pops into the air over his plate, but catches it before it can land in the remains of his potatoes. (It took far too long for someone to say that word aloud for him to know what the hell he was eating.) “What’s this?”

“A pleasing agreement between the four Heads of House regarding the student body.” Severus is smiling, a faint curl of his lip, so Nizar decides he isn’t being sarcastic.

“A change to the dress code?” Nizar raises an eyebrow as he reads. “Abolishing the mandatory wearing of skirts for anyone of female gender and vice versa. As long as the listed and newly accepted garments making up the Hogwarts uniform are worn in a complete and appropriately respectful fashion, anyone of any gender may wear it as they wish. Oh, that’s lovely. Miss Granger will be—” He looks up when he hears a gleeful squeal of triumph coming from the Gryffindor table. “—pleased.” He watches as Hermione clambers up on her chair to hug Parvati Patil, who is all but bouncing in place.

Nizar returns his attention to the scroll. “Is it just me, or is this list of accepted Hogwarts garments significantly longer than before?”

Severus’s smile widens. “It isn’t just you. I have a number of Slytherins who will be relieved to no longer be constrained by very outdated concepts of what a ‘proper’ British student should be wearing.”

Nizar rolls up the scroll and tucks it into his pocket to keep it. “That’s not as good as abolishing the idea of a student uniform entirely, but I’ll take it.”
“You’re certain about this?” Dumbledore is asking Pomona and Filius. He either grilled Minerva already while Nizar was talking to Severus, or is ignoring her in favor of the two Heads of House he views as still being steadfastly loyal. Nizar didn’t tell Dumbledore that Filius allowed himself to be tied into the school’s magic over the Eastern Seat, and suspects Filius also chose not to mention it.

“Of course we are,” Pomona says at once, surprising Nizar with how vibrant and insistent she sounds. “Albus, this is something that’s been stuck in my craw for quite some time, forcing young ladies to wear skirts in this day and age. I don’t mind one myself, but our children grow up wearing trousers more often than not. It should be their decision.”

“I see.” Dumbledore nods in acceptance, or is faking it well enough. “And the additions, Filius?”

“Denying a student their heritage is no way to respect them, Headmaster,” Filius says with a smile, though his tone is a careful neutral. “I don’t expect to see any disruptions to Hogwarts life from this, though I would give it a few days for the excitement to die down a bit.”

“Excitement?” Dumbledore asks just as Ramsay Urquhart yells, “I CAN FINALLY WEAR MY BLOODY KILT!”

“That sort of excitement,” Minerva says dryly before raising her voice. “You’ll not be wearing that kilt in the traditional manner, Mister Urquhart! Pass the world along to the others!”

“Kilt with pants underneath!” Urquhart salutes Minerva. “Yes, ma’am!”

“Minerva?” Dumbledore is twinkling again, but it’s obvious he is seeking more information. Minerva smiles. “I’m considering wearing my tartan tomorrow, Albus. To show my support, of course.”

“Of course.” Dumbledore settles back in his chair, a thoughtful look on his face. “You know, I’ve not seen my kilt or sporran in decades. I wonder what I did with them.”

“If either of them are like your favored bright green robes, please spare my eyesight and let them remain lost,” Salazar says wearily.

Nizar gives him a concerned look and switches to Parseltongue. “Sal? It’s a Monday evening. You’re supposed to look wrecked on the last day of the week, not the first. What’s wrong?”

Salazar clasps his hand over his mouth when he fails to fight a yawn. “I don’t sleep much after seeing so many centuries, but lately I’ve found sleep difficult to find at all.”

“Why?”

“An ill feeling.” Salazar frowns. “I’d like to say it’s a concerning one, but I’ve had an ill feeling since Grindelwald’s European Wizarding War coincided with World War II. Our world really never calmed down afterwards.”

“No way to narrow it down, then.” Nizar glances at his plate and is glad he’s done eating. He might have grown to accept that he has Divination moments, but he’s never been fond of them. “I told Severus after the last full meeting of the Order of the Phoenix that it felt like we were sitting in the calm before the storm.”

Salazar breathes out a long sigh. “That feels accurate enough.”

“It’s not here yet, Salazar. I’m not going to ruin the mood for two hundred eighty students who
finally feel as if things are going right.”

Salazar smiles in quiet agreement before turning to ask Minerva if she’ll be wearing only the tartan, or if she’ll be spoiling it by wearing it over her robes. Minerva says that she’ll do the latter when Salazar spends the day wearing full hose made of burlap, and not a moment before.

Nizar flinches, his skin crawling the moment he considers that sort of texture against his skin. Salazar gives a full-body twitch and declares Minerva to be a cruel woman.

“‘You’re both so bloody spoiled,’” Severus murmurs.

“No, we’re both that bloody touch-sensitive,” Nizar counters. “I didn’t even realize I was until—”

“Until what?” Severus prompts him.

“Sorry,” Nizar shakes his head to clear it. “I actually have no idea what I was going to say. Incomplete memory, I imagine.”

Severus gives him a searching look. “If you have one of your interesting flashbacks, I’ll make certain you’re safe.”

Nizar swallows. There is a level of devotion in those words that amazes him, something he isn’t sure Severus is quite aware of. “Thank you.”

Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday’s wardrobe changes help to encourage that light-hearted mood to remain in the castle. Rather than the continuing and unchanging appearance of student clothing—charcoal bottoms, white top, striped House tie, black robes—there is now more color, and a lot more individuality. Nizar thinks it’s all long overdue.

There are nineteen students in kilts and high banded socks, representing clans from Ireland and Scotland. All genders among the Irish and the Scots have full tartans slung over their robes, pinned at the shoulder by clan crests of varying complexity. Minerva does as promised and wears hers, a tartan of dark greens crossed with dark blues separated by wide gold bands. It’s held in place by the griffon crest recreated to mark the joining of both her family clans. Nizar is momentarily confused to count more tartans than the number of Irish and Scottish students until Hopkins is polite enough to explain that some of the Welsh magical families have tartans of their own.

Kellah Shafiq looks vastly relieved to finally be allowed to wear her hijab, which makes Nizar seethe in outrage. He hadn’t realized that Hogwarts’ previous dress code forbade anyone from following their chosen religious dictates.

Nizar notices that Amrish, Hermani, and Poonima are proudly wearing their Yajñopaveetam over their school ties. That makes Aamir Loonat ask what the strings are for, which leads to a long discussion about Hinduism and Islam that reels in nearly thirty students and completely blocks off the third floor corridor leading to Babbling’s classroom. Nizar has a moment of baffled amusement as he listens to them; he remembers the proper term for the sacred thread, but has no memory whatsoever of when he would have learned its name…or what it’s actually for.

The Japanese students of all genders start wearing folded sashes with a tantō sheathed and tucked into place at their waists. Any would-be tormentors give them a wide berth after that, which is fun to watch. The tantō is merely traditional; those students are still going to use a wand on an enemy before they unsheathe a blade.

Ona and Michael Karume both turn their cloaks from black to a vibrant red that almost hurts to look at. So does Orla Quirke, but she does so because she’s Manx, not Maasai. Alice Windcharm is
wearing a colorful headscarf mindful of the traditions that magicians of Greece were just starting to consider one thousand years ago.

There are saris of different colors folded and pinned in place over robes. The Punjabi students swap out their robes for traditional embroidered coats to wear over their uniform.

He’s confirmed the numbers by Thursday evening. “I am counting this correctly, right?”

“Counting what correctly?” Severus asks without looking up from what he’s brewing. He and Salazar have been trying to tweak Essentia, but so far without any real success at replicating the original’s full potential. Nizar was able to tell them it wasn’t toxic, but the potion isn’t supposed to result in thirty solid minutes of giggling whilst sobbing. That was not a fun way to spend Tuesday evening.

“Well, given names and certain demonstrations of cultural identity this week…seventy-thirty.” Nizar hoists himself up onto an empty workbench and frowns. “Seventy percent of Hogwarts is composed of English-born students. Thirty percent is composed of everyone else in the United Kingdom and the foreign-born immigrant students. Since when is this England’s School for Witchcraft and Wizardry?”

Severus lets out a derisive snort. “Nizar, it’s been that way for a long time. Over eighty-five percent of the United Kingdom’s population is English.”

“Yes, but magically, these numbers make no fucking sense,” Nizar says, scowling. “We have twelve Scottish students, Severus. Twelve Scots in a castle that is in fucking Scotland. There should be at least triple that number. The ratio I mentioned might sound proper in non-magical circles, but Hogewáþ was always far more balanced in regards to student origins. Where the hell is everyone else?”

“A lot of the Northern Irish and Scottish students willingly go to Ireland’s magical school in order to avoid the English. Not that I blame them. I’m not certain about anyone else in the British Isles, but I imagine it’s similar to the war-created problem,” Severus replies.

“Everyone else chooses to go to a school that isn’t actively being threatened by a megalomaniacal walking corpse,” Nizar surmises. “No, I can’t really blame them for that, either. How is the potion progressing?”

Severus flinches back from the cauldron when it flares up with magenta-silver sparks. “Not well. I don’t think the original formula is ever going to function again.”

Nizar watches him douse the tiny embers that land on the workbench. “Mm. Probably not. Maybe it’s time to start over. Same intent, but a different formula?”

“I’m not certain I’d know where to begin without consulting far too many books.” Severus Banishes the remains of the failed potion. “I know far more about toxicology than I do about altering mood.”

*          *          *          *

The gloom of Nurmengard hasn’t changed since Salazar saw it last, in 1945, the height and end of the European Wizarding War. They tend to call it the World’s Wizarding War, these days, considering Grindelwald’s recruiting efforts in the Americas, but in truth the worst of that war was
always centered here, just like its non-magical counterpart.

“Oh, it is you. I have not seen you in a while,” the guard says as Salazar approaches the castle’s barred doors.

Salazar reaches out and shakes the man’s hand, smiling. “Aurelius. It’s good to see you again.”

“And you, Saul,” Aurelius Achilles replies. “You have not aged a single day, you Goddamned cheating bastard.”

“I did tell you I’m of a long-lived line. Besides, is the silver in my hair not enough to convince you that I’m aging?” Salazar asks.

Aurelius peers closer. “It is telling, yes. Your hair was solid black in our youth.”

_Because I dyed it so every week in fits of paranoia that the silver would reveal itself, Salazar thinks ruefully. “How is Alexis? How are the grandchildren?”_

“Alexis is…” Aurelius’s face twists up in grief. “You remember that the European War was hard on her. She has good days and bad days. On good days, the children and grandchildren go to see her. We reminisce over what was good then, and what is good now, but I do not doubt that there will be a funeral soon.”

“I’m so sorry,” Salazar says, meaning every word. Alexis Achilles had been like Salazar, a spy infiltrating Gellert Grindelwald’s ranks to bring information back to the magicians fighting against him. When she had been caught, it hadn’t been by Grindelwald’s followers, but by German Nazis who’d thought Alexis was spying on _them_. The only thing that spared her life during that time was that she was German-born and could prove it, but it didn’t stop those soldiers from inflicting the sorts of cruelties that have accompanied war since men first picked up sticks to hit each other.

“If I can do anything, will you tell me?”

Aurelius shakes his head. “I think she is beyond even your talented touch with a potion, Saul. Thank you. If that changes, I know how to send word.” He coughs and clears throat. “This is not meant to be a social visit, is it?”

“In part, it’s exactly that. I waited until it was you on shift for the rotating guard on this place rather than converse with a stranger,” Salazar replies. “I need to speak with him, if it’s possible. I’d really prefer never to do so again. I doubt his company has improved in fifty years.”

Aurelius has already turned to unlock the door with a key magically tied to the Nurmengard Magical Guard. “He does not really speak much anymore. I don’t know if he will speak to you, but I will allow you to make the attempt.”

“Thank you.” Salazar waits for Aurelius to lower the wards that seal the entrance. Only then does the latch lift and the heavy door open. “Do I need an escort?”

Aurelius rolls his eyes. “No. It is you, and I will handle any who might ask questions. I would prefer that you not leave me a corpse to guard. They cursed him to live a long life in this place for his crimes, you know.”

“I’m aware.” The European magical community had still been enraged over all that Grindelwald had done. When Hitler escaped punishment by means of suicide, it was decided that Gellert Grindelwald would live imprisoned in his own fortress, cursed to live for as long as his body draws breath on its own…even if breathing has become nothing but torture.
Salazar climbs the stairs in the highest tower, one hand sliding over the cold stone wall. He can still hear the screams in his head of those who’d been imprisoned here, tortured on Grindelwald’s whim for daring to stand against him. Most of them had survived; Grindelwald had the heart of a narcissist, and a narcissist wants for company, even if their company is naught but victims.

Survival does not mean they fared well afterwards. Salazar regrets everything he could not do during that war. He’d done all that he could—they all had—and still they live with the guilt of a war that waged a decade too long.

Grindelwald is imprisoned in the top of the tower. The room has nothing to seal it against intruders but a wooden door, one spelled to be invisible to the prisoner inside. Salazar steels himself, not knowing what he will be confronted with, and opens the door. Grindelwald is seated at a table with a single chair, and sees him the moment Salazar enters the room.

Fifty years of captivity have taken their toll, and the onetime bane of the magical world has not aged well. He looks emaciated to the point of starvation, but there is a dinner tray with half its contents missing to prove that he is being fed. Grindelwald’s blond hair has thinned and turned white, hanging to his shoulders in frail wisps.

“Buenas tardes, Gellert Grindelwald.”

“Saul Luiz of Spain.” Grindelwald looks disappointed. “It’s been so many years, and still I hope that door will open and it will be another come to see me.” When he speaks, it is obvious that most of his teeth have departed his head.

“If you’re hoping for the likes of Albus Dumbledore, I’m afraid you will die of hope for a visit that will never happen.” Salazar shuts the door behind him, knowing from a single visit in 1945 that it will respond to his hand and allow him to depart.

Salazar might have taunted the fool for a bit that day. He hadn’t been able to resist the allure of disappointing Grindelwald with the knowledge that one of his “followers” was never such at all.

“Busy running that school, I imagine,” Grindelwald says. “He was such a disappointment to me.”

Salazar allows himself a hard smile. “Dumbledore might still hold affection for you, but he doesn’t dare to see you, Gellert. That would taint his ambitions.”

“Ambitions?” Grindelwald’s mouth forms a bitter line. “What could he hope to achieve by heading a school?”

“Do you still like secrets, Gellert Grindelwald?” Salazar asks.

Grindelwald’s eyes flash up to his. They are no longer ice and chill, but a watery blue so lackluster it almost isn’t a color at all. “You want something.”

“I want information.” Salazar leans against the wall and crosses his arms. “If you are willing to trade, of course.”

“Of course,” Grindelwald mutters. “What does this valuable secret entail?”

“The truth of your former beloved’s ambitions, of course.” Salazar pretends to debate with himself. “None here would care, but it would be one thing in this world that you know when almost all others do not, and I’m not speaking of Dumbledore’s ownership of the Elder Wand.”

“You know of it.” Grindelwald smiles, revealing his toothless gums. “He holds ambitions beyond a
school?"

"Far beyond. My word on it."

"You always kept your word. Everything you said was true. I reflected on that, you know," Grindelwald says. "I hated it, at first, having nothing to think about but my failure and the betrayal of those I thought loyal...but in time I came to admire it. Your way with words—such brilliance."

"You weren’t one for that sort of introspection when I last knew you," Salazar says in mild surprise.

"Fifty years is a long time to think on such things." Grindelwald nods. "Ask for your information. I do not promise you will get it, but ask."

Salazar takes a moment to admire the tenacity of a man who can sit in a small, drab prison for fifty years and still speak to his few visitors as if he is reigning over a Court. It does not make Salazar feel any sort of affection for Grindelwald; he would never have attained what he did if his spirit were not made of granite. "How did you learn about the Elder Wand, and who did you kill to master it?"

To his surprise, Grindelwald laughs, a dry, rattling sound. "Is that all? You could ask one of the greatest wizards of this century anything, and that’s all you wish to know?"

"It may be vital to a task," Salazar replies. "Given the task’s importance? Yes, that is all I wish to know, though I would not refuse any further details you chose to share."

"I don’t mind. No one wishes to speak to me. This will be a conversation I hold in my thoughts for years to come, petting it like a cherished cat." Grindelwald plucks the blanket from his prison cot and wraps it around his shoulders. "One day in the glorious year of 1904, I heard rumor of a man who held a powerful wand. It was a wandmaker, and rumor said he was attempting to duplicate this wand’s power.

"I knew at once that it was the Elder Wand. I longed for the Hallows, Saul Luiz. I had for years. Even Albus craved them, hoping to restore his dead sister with the Resurrection Stone." Grindelwald wraps himself more comfortably in his blanket. "Foolish notion, of course, but neither of our plans ever bore fruit in regards to the Stone. I’ve never heard a hint of its continued existence. I suspect someone threw it into the ocean. Not a hint of the cloak, either, though I did my best to research Ignotus Peverell’s lineage."

Salazar smiles. "James Henry Potter bore Death’s Cloak of Invisibility. Before him, it was held by Fleamont Potter, and before him, it was Henry Potter. I believe the two of you met during the war."

Grindelwald looks thwarted. "Damn him!" he snarls. "That bleeding-heart bastard had a Hallow? Him? Potter didn’t deserve to hold it!"

"Well, as he’s dead, he certainly doesn’t anymore," Salazar says dryly. "The wand, Gellert Grindelwald."


"The same Gregorovitch of Gregorovitch’s Zauberstäbe? How did he come by it, then?"

"From the notes I found in his workshop the night I stole the wand, he was gifted it. A wizard died, and his wife passed on her husband’s collection of wands won in battle to Gregorovitch. They were friends, perhaps. I didn’t concern myself much with that. I only had eyes for the Elder Wand."

Grindelwald’s gaze goes distant with fond recollection. "It was beautiful. So beautiful. I took it in my
hands and knew at once it was to be mine.” He frowns. “Then Gregorovitch caught me in the midst of leaving. I stunned him and escaped.”

Salazar stares at Grindelwald. “He was gifted the wand…and you stole it without murdering him.”

“Why would murder be required?” Grindelwald has the bright-eyed gaze of a happy child. “He hadn’t won it, anyway. Besides, I soon killed enough with the wand for it not to matter.”

Salazar tries not to make a face. “That is true enough.”

“I’ve told you my tale, Saul. Now it’s your turn.” Grindelwald leans forward. “Tell me what Albus is doing.”

“Albus Dumbledore is using the power of his many high positions to become the most powerful man in Wizarding Britain. When he kills the Dark Lord scampering about, the combined might of public adoration and his place as Head over a school will grant him everything he needs for a political coup and control of Wizarding Britain. The Minister for Magic’s office will be meaningless, as all will look to Albus Dumbledore.”

“Albus will be dictator over Wizarding Britain without a drop of blood shed except for everyone’s feared enemy.” Grindelwald lets out another dry laugh. “I’m so proud of him.”

Salazar smiles. “That is assuming he succeeds.”

Grindelwald only nods. “I suppose you’re going to stop him, then.”

“Oh, it will not be me stopping him. Another will be doing that.” Salazar gestures at the abandoned meal. “Enjoy the rest of your meal, Gellert Grindelwald. We will not be meeting again.”
Severus isn’t certain what kind of after-dinner gathering he’s going to attend on Friday evening until he enters Nizar’s quarters to find Nizar, Salazar, Minerva, Miss Granger, and Miss Greenwood in attendance. Salazar has returned from whatever place he’s been muttering about visiting for most of the week, and has beached himself on the sofa with a cup of steaming tea.

He has to admit, he entertained many possibilities, but the idea of Salazar simply just—fucking strolling up to Nurmengard’s locked doors and walking right up the stairs to Gellert Grindelwald’s prison cell hadn’t occurred to him. That Salazar might research Grindelwald’s ownership? Certainly. That he would have gall enough to ask the man himself?

In retrospect, Severus isn’t certain why he’s surprised. Nizar and Salazar are brothers for more reasons than their similar appearance.

“Grindelwald really gained the Elder Wand without murder?” Miss Greenwood asks in shock.

Salazar nods. “I found it an odd truth, myself, but given the fact of Gregorovitch’s continued existence? He most certainly did.”

“It’s Grindelwald,” Severus says with as much disparagement as he can muster. “He could have lied.” Wizarding Britain concerns itself with the magical aspect of the European War, but Severus’s mother feared Grindelwald because he’d also supported the Nazi regime. Before 1945 there had been more magical Prince families in the world, most of them located in France.

“No, he did not lie.” Salazar’s voice changes, a hint of strong upset coloring his words. “I would have known.”

Nizar glances at Severus, as if weighing an unvoiced opinion, before looking at Salazar. “For those that aren’t yet aware, Salazar was a spy to benefit both magical and non-magical peoples during the European Wizarding War. How close were you to Grindelwald, Sal?”

“Close enough to be grateful that others were willing to take on the burden of closely watching Voldemort upon his return to physical form last year,” Salazar replies. “I’d already done such spying
twice in this century, and wasn’t looking forward to doing it a third time.”

Severus tries not to grimace. That did explain how Salazar could so easily don a Death Eater’s cloak for spying on the events in Little Hangleton last June.

“Just a \textit{bit} of a spy,” Miss Greenwood says wryly. “Just a \textit{bit} of one. That’s what you told Her Majesty in February.”

Salazar flashes a charming smile. “Her Majesty has but to ask the Special Intelligence Service for my service records under the name I used at the time to find out more if she wishes to know.”

“Because you don’t like talking about it.”

Severus glances at Miss Granger, eyebrow raised, but says nothing. She has been quiet until now, listening instead of reacting, but Severus agrees with her assessment.

“All right, he’s not lying, then,” Miss Greenwood continues, doing an excellent job of moving the conversation along without allowing for awkwardness. “What about Wandmaker Gregorovitch?”

“Him I spoke with before returning to Hogwarts this afternoon,” Salazar says. “Retirement doesn’t suit him at all. I suggested he ought to return to wandmaking. Old age certainly isn’t stopping Garrick Ollivander. He could stand the competition.”

Minerva narrows her eyes. “You Apparated to Germany and back? In one day, Salazar? It usually takes a Portkey to travel that distance!”

Salazar grins at her. “Lioness, I’m an Earth Speaker. Desplazar—Apparition—is nothing to me. My worst difficulties come with crossing large bodies of water. If I were to attempt to visit the other side of the Atlantic, I would certainly need a Portkey.” His grin takes on a mischievous edge. “Besides that, I didn’t go to Germany and return in a single day. I went to Germany, yes, but Mykew closed his shop in eastern Berlin several years ago and retired to Moscow, the city of his birth.”

“Hogwarts, Germany, Russia, Hogwarts.” Miss Greenwood frowns. “Your ease with Apparition—does the war mage title also bestow some sort of earth sense that makes it easier to Apparate?”

“That’s the war mage’s title interacting with the magic of the kingdom,” Nizar answers her when Salazar looks surprised by the question. “If you’re on land that serves the Crown, Apparition from one end of this island to the other will be like nothing.”

Severus waits until he’s certain he won’t be sputtering. “You couldn’t have mentioned that before today?”

Nizar gives him an apologetic shrug. “I forgot it would happen, and none of you mentioned anything of it to me afterwards. Even before the title was reconfirmed, I still had that ability. I was used to it.”

“And I wouldn’t have noticed,” Salazar murmurs. “It would blend in with my sense of the earth.”

“Miss Greenwood.” Severus is pleased when she flinches a bit at his tone, but doesn’t otherwise act submissive. “When did you discover this facet of a war mage’s title?”

“Do you recall when I asked for a Hogsmeade pass the previous Saturday to visit the bookshop for reference material?” Miss Greenwood keeps speaking without being prompted. “I did go to the bookshop, as the need was legitimate, but I’ve felt...I’ve felt for days now that something isn’t right in the Greenwood. I decided to look in on my home very quickly before returning to Hogwarts. I used the Invisibility Charm!” she hurries to add when Severus begins to scowl. “I didn’t want to
encounter Mother and Father and have the sort of confrontation I’d much rather avoid. The Apparition south can be done in one trip, but it’s usually tiring. This time when I arrived I wasn’t tired at all. The same was true when I returned.”

“Leaving aside for the moment that you broke school rules by doing so when you could have just as easily asked for an escort…” Severus bites back a sigh. “What did you discover?”

“I don’t know. I saw nothing unusual. My parents were home, of course, and everything looked the way it should. It just didn’t feel as if the Greenwood was safe.”

Severus looks at Nizar, who frowns in response to the silent question. “I don’t want to be the one to tell her that! You’re her Head of House, Severus.”

“And I’m in as much hurry to inform Miss Greenwood as I have been any other student whose parents did something utterly stupid,” Severus retorts.

“I’d prefer it if you’d just tell me instead of arguing over my head, sirs,” Miss Greenwood says quietly.

“Fine.” Severus turns to face her. “Miss Greenwood.” No, that won’t do. “Adele. Nizar confirmed by his sense of blood magic that both of your parents bear the Dark Mark.”

Her eyes widen in horror, but she gives a slight nod. “Go on,” she whispers.

“We don’t know when it would have happened,” Nizar says. “I can tell if someone has it, and I can tell if it’s been altered from the original weave of spells Voldemort crafted, but I can’t say when.”

“None of mine have reported a Greenwood in Voldemort’s ranks.” Salazar is frowning. “It would have to be very recent.”

“That’s why. That’s why the Greenwood feels threatened, then.” Miss Greenwood takes a deep breath and lets it out, but her shoulders don’t bow. If anything, the new steel in her spine might be hardening further. “I thought that if anything would ever make them proud of me, to see me as something other than a marriage bauble to attract some rich Pure-blood male to run the Greenwood estate, then reacquiring our family’s noble title would do it. It didn’t, though. It only made them angry.”

“Because you had dealings with a non-magical ruler that they now oppose.” Miss Granger rests her hand on top of Miss Greenwood’s and gives it a gentle squeeze. “I think they’re stupid for not seeing you as you, anyway.”

Miss Greenwood lets out a bitter laugh. “Yes, well. They’ve certainly decided to take the prize on stupidity, so I’m no longer concerned about their comments regarding my intelligence. No, please—don’t.” Miss Greenwood waves off Minerva when she starts to speak. “This is a loss I’d prefer to grieve in private, thank you. I’d rather hear what Professor Salazar’s visit to the wandmaker entailed.”

Minerva nods. “Very well. Salazar, what did Gregorovitch have to say of the Elder Wand?”

“He confirmed Grindelwald’s story easily enough. Mykew was given a collection of wands by the widow of a dead friend. Among those captured wands from said friend’s many duels was a fifteen inch length of elder wood, carved with elder berries, and radiating such power that it made all other wands around it seem inert.” Salazar sips at his tea again. “The next bit was harder to draw out of him, as he didn’t wish to admit it. Mykew Gregorovitch was never a master of the Elder Wand.”
Miss Granger’s eyes gain the mad glow of the intrigued academic. “Because he didn’t win it in combat!”

“Precisely.” Salazar takes a moment to greet Kanza in Parseltongue when she climbs the sofa and twines her way around his wrist. “It’s more accurate to say that Grindelwald claimed the wand from its deceased former master.”

Nizar drums his fingers on the arm of the sofa. “The goblins say that the Elder Wand is the most cursed item in existence. That’s twice the wand was claimed without murder—three times if you count it being gifted to Gregorovitch. What would that mean for the curse?”

“Unfortunately, the most likely answer is that it means nothing.” Salazar leans forward long enough to return his empty teacup to the tray on the table. “Magic pays attention to will and intent. Gregorovitch believed he’d been given the wand of a deceased man. Grindelwald believed he was stealing a wand from a wandmaker. Only Albus Dumbledore took the wand in the traditional manner of combat, though he didn’t kill his opponent afterwards. Given what Grindelwald said regarding his and Dumbledore’s childhood ambitions to find and use the three Deathly Hallows, it’s likely that Dumbledore knew exactly what sort of wand he would win with his victory over Grindelwald.”

Miss Granger nods. “If it really had been three times the wand was claimed according to tradition, then it might have broken the original curse. Since everyone except for the wand maker’s friend is still alive…I suppose I have to respect Professor Dumbledore’s ability to own the Elder Wand and not brag about it.”

“No longer a nursery tale, Granger?” Miss Greenwood asks quietly, smiling.

“You’re the one who pointed out that Professor Salazar is older than the Hallows,” Miss Granger responds.

“Old,” Salazar mutters under his breath.

“Vain,” Minerva corrects him, smirking.

“This is the sort of thing that drives me to distraction,” Nizar grumbles. “Dumbledore keeps this particular secret and doesn’t make use of the power it could grant him politically. He uses the Elder Wand to repair Rubeus Hagrid’s shattered wand and simply asks Hagrid not to speak of that to anyone else. If Hagrid had, he’d quickly have found that what Dumbledore did with ease is something that usually cannot be done.”

“Because you cannot repair a broken wand.” Professor McGonagall purses her lips. “I’ll admit, I always thought that Hagrid had simply found the means to acquire a new wand, or one had been given to him by Albus. It never occurred to me that it was the same one.”

Severus offers her a snide smile. “Given that atrocious pink umbrella usually hiding it from view, it’s an easy assumption to make.”

“Is this helpful?” Miss Greenwood asks abruptly. “Knowing the history of the Elder Wand’s ownership.”

“All knowledge is useful, Adele,” Nizar says, but it’s obvious he’s deep in thought.

“I cannot think of any way in which this knowledge is useful for us,” Salazar replies. “But that could change at any moment. Better to know than to be left wondering.”

“Aberforth said that they had to all but bully Dumbledore into participating in the European
Wizarding War long enough to stop Grindelwald. The magical community’s consensus was that, after over a decade of fighting, Dumbledore would be the only one who stood a chance.” Nizar props up his elbows so he can rest his chin on his folded hands. “What if it wasn’t the bullying that changed Dumbledore’s mind? What if he recognized Grindelwald’s wand in a photograph and agreed to ‘help’ in order to acquire the Elder Wand?”

“Well, that’s completely terrifying,” Miss Granger says when everyone else remains silent.

“That, at least, is an easy question to have answered. Ask Aberforth,” Minerva suggests. “If he knew of the rest, he might know this, too.”

“That’s a good idea, but I’m not going to rush off to Hogsmeade this evening. It can keep until we’re free on Tuesday afternoon.” Nizar still looks contemplative. “I’d rather Dumbledore not have a clear idea of how often we have dealings with Aberforth. A resurgence in the goat rumors would be irritating.”

“What…what did Aberforth do with a goat?” Miss Greenwood ventures. “None of us have ever really dared to ask. The implications have always been that it was, er, unnatural.”

“He turned it bloody vibrant purple,” Nizar says, and everyone except Severus and Salazar tries not to giggle aloud. “Then he got caught, as the non-magical owner of said goat didn’t appreciate the color change. The worst of getting caught, Aberforth lamented later, was that purple is not what he intended. I did warn him. Goats are stubborn, tricky bastards. I told him to find a sheep, but he insisted it had to be a goat.”

“Why a goat?” Miss Granger asks, still trying to hold back laughter.

“Because he wanted to mock Dumbledore. He was attempting a ginger head, scarlet body, and golden legs, but goats and magic…” Nizar shrugs. “Alas, purple.”

Minerva gets an odd look on her face. “It’s wrong that I wish to make the attempt succeed where Aberforth failed, isn’t it? Someone remind me that it is.”

“You can’t use Gryffindor colors, not when it would mock your own House,” Salazar says. “Now, if you wanted to replicate those gods-awful lime green robes of his…”

“That is not discouraging me!” Minerva flops back against the sofa and glares at them all. “There are too many Slytherins in this room, and they’re all terrible influences!”

“Fucking with people is a time-honored tradition, Minerva.” Nizar is smiling. “If you’re going to do so, it shouldn’t be a charmed goat. Perhaps ask one of the castle ghosts to help you?”

“How is that less subtle?” Severus asks.

“Did I say that subtlety was required?” Nizar counters. “Personally, I’d rather throw bricks at Dumbledore’s face, but that is frowned upon in polite society.”

“You know, if you’re going to get a ghost to swan around in Professor Dumbledore’s robes, Nick would love to do it,” Miss Granger says.

Minerva lights up. “Given his daily attire? Yes, he most likely would, and he is quite skilled at keeping things to himself as long as I give the poor dear specific instructions.”

“Who is Nick?” Nizar asks.
Severus realizes that he isn’t the only one staring at Nizar. “I’d thought you’d met all of the castle’s ghosts.”

“Yes, obviously not. Then Peeves does not belong to Gryffindor?”

Minerva makes a strangled sound and turns pink. “Despite what the Weasley twins might imply with their practices, or what they may have claimed, Peeves is most certainly not Gryffindor’s ghost! That would be Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington. He was a Gryffindor student in his youth, but unfortunately managed to get himself mostly beheaded in the fifteen century.”

“Mostly beheaded.”

“‘It’s why he’s also called Nearly Headless Nick,’” Miss Granger clarifies. “‘You’re certain you haven’t seen him? He’s wandering around in Elizabethan period clothing. I think he’s fond of it because the Grey Lady likes their dancing.’”

“Ah. That means he’s avoiding me, which means he’s upset with me,” Nizar says.

“Upset with you? Why would he be?” Minerva looks surprised. “I’ve never known Nick to be upset with anyone.”

“Because the ghosts know who my brother is now, but also who he was.” Salazar’s smile is too faint to be considered true humor. “It’s hard to hide such things from the dead.”

“The fun part is that it’s enraging Edvard, but he won’t say a word because he swore that he would never speak again until Helena acknowledged his existence.” Nizar grins. “He’s in for a very long wait.”

Miss Greenwood tilts her head. “That explains a lot about the Baron. What about the others?”

“Helena never met the child, so she has no opinion on the matter,” Nizar says. “Jonathan just thinks it’s hilarious.”

“What of Peeves?” Minerva asks Nizar.

“Pretty sure Peeves is terrified of me. He doesn’t interact with myself or Salazar unless Helena orders him to.”

Miss Granger frowns. “You mean Nick is…is he angry with you?”

Nizar shrugs. “When I gain the ability to pin down a ghost and interrogate him, I’ll let you know.”

Severus considers his memories of the past few months. He never paid any mind to the castle ghosts except for the Baron, who has always been a useful ally, even during Severus’s student days. “Sir Nicholas has not been to the Great Hall when Nizar is present. In fact, I don’t think he’s made an appearance at a meal since the Hallowe’en Feast.”

Nizar suddenly sits bolt upright like someone yanked a string. His gaze is distant, not seeing any of them, before he shakes it off. “Fuck, I hope that hasn’t happened yet! Hermione, I need you to return to the Tower.”

“What? Why?” Miss Granger protests.

“We’re about to be departing.” Nizar holds out his arm, palm up. “Adele, you’re still a student. It’s your choice.”
“It’s not a choice at all,” Adele retorts, standing and gripping Nizar’s hand. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh, someone is about to be murdered,” Nizar replies. Severus growls under his breath and stands up to grab hold of Nizar’s wrist.

Minerva sounds annoyed. “Death Eaters, no doubt.”

Salazar’s expression takes on the hard edge of a man preparing for battle as he takes Nizar’s other arm. “Where, little brother?”

“No idea, but I think Minerva will know.” Nizar looks at her. “You’re not a war mage, but I saw you fight in the Ministry and know you’re capable. All I can tell you is that I’ve no idea what we’re about to find, only that someone is in…well, mortal peril,” Nizar says after a second’s contemplation. “I suppose those odd clocks are useful for something, after all.”

“I am a witch of Clan McGonagall, and I’ll not stand by when others are in danger,” Minerva declares. “I didn’t fight in the first war just to ignore this one when it’s at our doorstep!”

The moment she grasps Nizar’s hand, they’re Apparating. Nizar transporting five of them at once makes Apparition feel like it did before Severus gained the war mage title. He didn’t miss the sensation of being squeezed through a vise.

They land in the darkness of a quiet, grassy plain, with the occasional rolling hill rising from the lowlands. Some of the more distant hills have houses perched on them with lights shining through the windows, but the nearest hills are empty. They’re in England, far to the south, but this isn’t Devon. East Midlands, perhaps.

“Oh, dear God,” Severus hears Minerva whisper. “It’s Amelia’s home. We’re at the Bones’s winter cottage in Oxfordshire.”

Severus turns around to face the cottage, a three-storey brick dwelling with winter-dormant rose vines decorating its front face. There is torchlight in the cottage on the first and second floor, proving the cottage to be occupied.

“Pleasant home but for how vulnerable it is,” Nizar mutters, his wand dropping into his hand.

“What’s wrong?” Adele asks. Severus approves of the fact that she has her back to Nizar, standing armed with both her silvery aspen wand and a shining dagger. He worries about placing a student of his House in danger, but truly admires the utter steel Adele displays as a war mage.

“We should not be able to see this home,” Salazar hisses, a note of alarm in his voice. “All of the Bones properties are under loyalty charms!”

A broken Fidelius Charm. A betrayal. Severus slides his wand out of his sleeve and grips it firmly in his hand, feeling his heartbeat pick up speed. He breathes through the initial burst of adrenaline, setting it aside, readying that speed and energy for when it will be needed. “Minerva, I believe you were correct.”

“Who else would it be, Severus—it isn’t Riddle, is it?” Minerva asks in sudden alarm.

“We should act as if it is, even if we encounter no one but idiots,” Nizar says. “If you take out a Death Eater and they get back up again, your next spell had best make certain they stay down.”

Severus feels a quiet thrill run down his spine. Nizar’s voice is firm, absolute, and unforgiving—the voice of someone who expects to be obeyed no matter the circumstances. Severus hasn’t heard Nizar
speak that way since he ordered Umbridge to reveal her torture of Hogwarts students.

Salazar catches Severus’s eye and smiles. “Give us a plan, little brother.”

“Salazar: you, Minerva, and Adele are going to enter the house. Find Madam Bones and protect her.” Nizar glances at the house again. “Stay on the second floor, if you can. Make them come to you until either the battle is over, or it’s safe for Desplazarse.”

Adele swallows before her lips thin in determination. “Professor McGonagall, let me cover our backs. I trust in your abilities, but it’s your face Madam Bones will need to see.”

“Quite right,” Minerva says in approval. She leads the way up the hillside’s stone path to the cottage. Salazar is right at her heels, wand held in his outstretched hand; Adele is carefully pacing behind them while facing the opposite direction. Minerva taps her wand against the door in some sort of identification pattern before she lifts the latch, allowing the three of them to slip inside. Adele spares Nizar and Severus one more glance before shutting the door. The sound of a bolt sliding home is loud in the darkness.

Severus feels a moment of intense pride. “Miss Greenwood seems well suited to this.”

“She’s a Silver Spear and a war mage.” Nizar lifts his head, listening. “Apparition,” he notes.

Severus nods, counting the muted cracks he can hear. “Seven of them. It could be the M.L.E. If the Fidelius Charm is watched by the Ministry, Aurors would come to investigate.”

Nizar snorts. “Do you really believe the Ministry to be that efficient?”

Severus smiles and lifts his wand, turning so that Nizar is at his back. “Don’t cast the Killing Curse unless you have no choice. The M.L.E. has ridiculous standards regarding survival.”

“Which would be the other reason why we departed London in a hurry this past December. Of course, three dead Death Eaters found in full regalia didn’t even make the Daily Prophet.”

“Fudge would have swept dead Death Eaters under the rug before ever letting it be known. It would have given Albus a stronger case for proving Voldemort’s return.” Severus raises his head, allowing the soft breeze to bring scents to his nose. Spring grass and freshly turned earth, likely from the Bones’ front garden. Pilewort and thimbleweed sprouting wild in the fields. At least one unwashed body. Myrrh blended with rose water—that would be Lauranna Fleet, Millicent Bulstrode’s maternal aunt. It’s the only perfume she’s worn in all the years he’s known her.

Accompanying all of those smells is that same damned mold from the Riddle Manor.

“Who would have helped Fudge with that? Aurors had to have investigated,” Nizar says. His voice has dropped to a low murmur as the scent of mold become stronger. The Death Eaters still aren’t visible, hidden by strong Disillusionment Charms that work very well in the dark.

“I don’t know, but I doubt they’re the most trustworthy of individuals.” Severus mouths the first protective spell that will work its way into the soil around them. Tiny flares of green fire near his feet that tells him Nizar is doing the same. “How did you know Bones was in trouble? I felt nothing.”

Nizar draws in a long breath and lets it out slowly. “It wasn’t that. Sometimes those flashes of insight are less flashes and more like taking a gong to the skull.”

The first spell strikes the shield charm that Severus erects. “Jinxes? Really?” he asks in derision. He sends one back in the direction the first spell came from, unsurprised when it hits nothing. Three
more curses slam into Nizar’s blue-edged shields in rapid succession, crackling yellow, white, and an angry, flaring red.

They’ve never fought together before, only against each other in Nizar’s classroom, venting frustration when the stress of recent events became too great to tolerate any longer. Severus is relieved at how easily they fall into a pattern of slow circling, shields melding together as they guard each other’s backs.

Severus catches a flash of bright, murderous green from the corner of his eye, one that shines through the cottage windows. He has to ignore it. More than likely it was Salazar’s work, anyway.

“Who’s here?” Nizar asks in a bright, cheerful voice as they continue to trade hexes and curses with their unseen opponents. “Doesn’t anyone want to be able to take credit for our deaths?”

Severus finds himself smiling in the midst of a battle, something he’s never before indulged in. “It’s cruel to give them hope that they might succeed.”

“That’s the fun part!” Nizar replies before lowering his voice. “Would you prefer improved lighting, or continued darkness?”

Severus catches a vicious skinning hex on the tip of his wand and flings it back in the direction it came from. There is a startled yelp but no real sound of pain. Disappointing. “Improved lighting. I’d like to see what I’m bloody well aiming at.”


A second later, the entire field is as bright as a night-lit Muggle football stadium. There are several screams from Death Eaters that must have followed the motion of Nizar’s wand as he cast the spell at the sky. Between the sounds and the movement of grass—Severus nails one distracted Death Eater who is still screaming about being blind. They’re swiftly bound with Incarcerous, thumping down onto the grass. “Nizar, was the pun truly necessary?”

“More than three of them. That’s excellent!” Nizar’s blasting hex makes another Death Eater squawk indignantly as they go rolling backwards. “And the pun was not to be missed!”

Severus and Nizar keep turning in a circle while Severus watches for movement in the grass. “Five of the seven approached us. Four left.”

Nizar inflicts an odd variant of a stinging hex on a Death Eater who made themselves too obvious. “Three.”

Severus is about to question Nizar’s certainty regarding a minor hex when a male Death Eater starts shouting about bees, followed by the sounds of someone heavy running away from them. “Bees?”

“Nasty stinging hex that splits up into smaller parts and follows you around,” Nizar replies smugly. “I’d forgotten about that one.”

The remaining Death Eaters drop their Disillusionment Charms to focus on the battle, attacking now in earnest. The jaundiced yellow magic of the Cruciatcis Curse strikes against their shields more than once. Severus doesn’t think to worry about their shields failing until the magic fractures with an audible crack.

Then Severus finds himself pressed face-down in the grass with Nizar pinning him down. “¡Abajo!”
Severus turns his head just in time to see a vile ball of magic go hurtling through the place they were just standing. The spell looks like someone took a lightning strike and crumpled it up, all angry and violet jagged lines.

The Death Eater on the other side of their protective circle doesn’t have the chance to duck. Severus hears a scream that ends in horrible choked retching before the unlucky man falls silent.

Nizar springs up from the grass. “How dare you,” he hisses. The blasting hex that emerges from Nizar’s wand is so strong that it flattens the grass as well as the Death Eater who cast the lightning-like curse.

Severus points his wand at Lauranna Fleet and casts a stunner while she’s distracted by Nizar. She drops to the ground, unconscious, and Severus sighs in relief. Miss Bulstrode might be resigned to her family’s idiocy, but he would rather avoid needing to tell her that he killed one of her relatives. He’s in the midst of binding Fleet when there is a sharp crack of Disapparition, followed swiftly by another.

“Two of them escaped,” Nizar growls. He aims his wand and casts binding spells on the Death Eaters who remain.

Severus walks in the direction the jagged spell went and discovers that the fifth Death Eater is too dead to require *incarcerous*. He takes a few steps closer and is suddenly grateful that he’s seen so much carnage in his life, else he would have been sick immediately. “That would be the curse that destroyed Miss Condor’s leg and injured Miss Parkinson.”

“I realized what they were doing when they began hammering at our shields in one place. It’s the same thing Hermione said was done during the attack on herself and Pansy,” Nizar says. “How did the Death Eater fare?”

Severus uses his wand to lift the silver mask free and toss it aside. “Hector Selwyn has lost the use of his lungs in a rather permanent manner.”

“Florentia will be relieved to hear that. She’s hated her father as long as I’ve known her.” Nizar walks closer and grimaces at the mess that used to be Selwyn’s torso. “Thorfinn Rowle cast the curse. How is he at evading Veritaserum, Severus?”

“He’s terrible at it. If the Rowles had been put on trial after the last war, he would have spent the last fifteen years in Azkaban.”

“Excellent,” Nizar says in grim satisfaction. “I’m looking forward to finding out the incantation for this curse.”

“To duplicate it?” Severus asks. He would certainly not turn down the opportunity to have an effective curse in his arsenal that isn’t an Unforgivable.

“If need be. I was thinking more in terms of learning how to word a counter-curse to use on whoever it hits, not to mention crafting wards specific to keeping that shit away from us.”

“Practical,” Severus says, and then nearly hexes the bollocks off of Alastor Moody when the man suddenly Apparates into the field. “Fuck, you fucking idiot!”

Alastor raises an eyebrow at Severus’s wand before slowing lowering his own. “Sorry about that. We didn’t know anyone would be here. Severus. Nizar.”

“Alastor,” Nizar returns the terse greeting as other Aurors begin to Apparate in. Severus makes
himself lower his wand, thinking on ways to get revenge against Alastor that won’t incite the wrath of the Order or the M.L.E.

“Shit, what happened to this bloke?” a very young-sounding Auror blurts out when they notice Selwyn’s body.

“Another Death Eater aimed a fatal curse at us. We ducked; Selwyn didn’t,” Nizar explains. His tone is still exactly as it was before, and Severus is amused to see that everyone is responding to that air of command.

Well. Not Moody. Severus doesn’t think Alastor has ever listened to anyone else in his life.

Alastor looks down at Selwyn, takes in the mess that used to be Selwyn’s chest, and casually spits into the grass. “No big loss, that. Any other casualties?”

“Thorfinn Rowle probably needs a Healer before he bleeds out,” Nizar says. “His legs are a bit crushed.”

Alastor shrugs. “Not like he’ll need them in Azkaban. The others?”

“Lauranna Fleet is over there.” Severus tilts his head in the correct direction. “There were two more, but they escaped while we dealt with these three.”

“And Madam Bones?” Auror Williamson asks after he turns away from Selwyn’s body. The green tinge to his skin is easy to see in the light, though the effects of Nizar’s daylight spell is beginning to wear off.

“Salazar, Minerva, and Adele went into the house—” Severus begins to say, but then he hears the dulcet tones of Minerva tearing into someone in Scots Gaelic. “—and one of the Aurors must have been stupid enough to point their wand in the wrong direction.”

Alastor grins and signals for Williamson and Sinclair Torres to begin gathering up those still alive. “That’ll teach Robards a lesson, then.”

“Why are you here, Moody?” Severus asks, a bad feeling beginning to crawl up his spine. “If you’re responding to Madam Bones’s Fidelius Charm’s failure, then you certainly took your time.”

Alastor spits again, but waits for the front door of the Bones cottage to open, ejecting Gawain Robards first. The Auror still has his wand raised but otherwise looks as if his tail is between his legs. Then it’s Adele and Salazar, though Salazar’s arm is slung over Adele’s shoulders as she helps support him. The man looks like warmed-over death.

“What the fuck happened?” Nizar asks, though his eyes flicker over to Minerva and Madam Bones when they emerge from the cottage. Emily Goldstein, a junior Auror who graduated from Hogwarts in 1992, is guarding their backs.

Adele sounds extremely ill-tempered. “One of the Death Eaters got the drop on us. Salazar stepped in front of the Killing Curse that would have murdered Madam Bones.”

Salazar offers a weak grin. “I keep forgetting how much it hurts to do that.”

“It was certainly an intriguing way to meet a Founder of Hogwarts,” Madam Bones says, her expression still tight with fear and anger. “I’m afraid the caster of the Killing Curse is too dead to be prosecuted, Alexander.
Williamson acknowledges Madam Bones and then looks to Robards. “Cornelius Yaxley was in the house,” Robards supplies. “His chest was crushed by a blasting hex, sir.”

“I was a bit too preoccupied with pain to realize I’d hit him too hard,” Salazar tells Williamson, an apology that isn’t an apology at all.

“I’m not even going to ask why you’re immune to the Killing Curse,” Williamson says after staring at Salazar in astonishment. “I’m just going to assume it has something to do with your long lifespan and move along.”

“It’s Salazar _Slytherin_,” Moody barks at Williamson. “Told you he was still about back in January, Alex!”

Williamson looks offended and chastised at the same time. “Hearing it is one thing, Alastor!”

Minerva raises an eyebrow at Salazar before addressing Moody and Williamson. “Gentlemen! Do discuss that later. Gertrude Flint is still inside Amelia’s home, and _she_ is quite alive. If it weren’t for a silencing charm, she would be audible across the whole of England.”

“Marked?” Williamson asks Goldstein.

Goldstein nods. “Yes, sir. Both of them.”

“And all of those out here, too,” Severus says before the question can be asked. “Alastor, what the hell is going on?”

“How ready are you lot to keep at this?” Williamson asks before Alastor can reply.

Nizar stares at the man before he begins cursing in Spanish and Latin. “Madam Bones isn’t the only one, is she?”

“No. As far as we’re aware, the Death Eaters have targeted over half the Wizengamot,” Williamson says grimly. “Most of their wards are holding, but the attacks are ongoing. The Aurors and those in the M.L.E. capable of fighting are spread thin already. I’ll take a war mage’s help if it’s being offered.”

“The Order’s already been alerted. Those of us who are available are assisting where they can,” Alastor continues. “I’ve got a list. Everyone here can Apparate you lot where you’ll need to go.”

Madam Bones steps forward, giving Robards, Williamson, and Alastor each a hard, searching look before she pales nearly stark white. “Oh, God,” she murmurs. “Rufus?”

Robards lowers his head while Williamson clenches his jaw. Alastor scowls. “Rufus didn’t make it, Amelia.”

“Shit,” Salazar whispers, nudging Adele to let go so he can stand on his own. “What happened?”

Williamson looks to Alastor, who rolls his eyes and gestures for Williamson to explain. “Rufus Scrimgeour was the first to be attacked tonight. They went after Madam Bones when we’d already left the Ministry, or we would have known this was a coordinated assault much sooner.”

“You-Know-Who was there,” Goldstein adds in a shaking voice. “For Scrimgeour. Tonks saw it before he escaped. He’s the one who killed Scrimgeour.”

Severus looks at Nizar, Salazar, Minerva, and Adele. “I take it the M.L.E. now believes in
Voldemort’s return.”

Goldstein quails at the name, but she doesn’t turn away. Williamson nods; Robards and the young Auror who arrived with Alastor look fearful and grim. “Y-yes,” the youngest Auror says, which finally helps Severus to place them as Josh Adams’s older and graduated Gryffindor sister.

“I have the feeling that Shacklebolt was ready to steer us in that direction, but…” Williamson sighs. “Bit too late. By morning, everyone will know, whether they like it or not.”

“Don’t particularly like it much at all,” Adams mutters.

“Everyone’s deferring to me right now. Pain in the arse, I tell you.” Alastor gives Madam Bones a brief nod. “Afraid you’ll have to come with us, Amelia.”

Madam Bones’s shoulders settle into the sort of unforgiving line Severus has witnessed in the Wizengamot. “Then let me get my battle robes. If I’m going with you, it’s to fight, not to hide.”

“Madam Bones—” Williamson tries, but is silenced by a glare before Madam Bones whirls around and goes back into the cottage. Adele grabs Goldstein by the arm before following after her to act as security.

Nizar joins Severus and looks at him for a moment. Severus nods in answer to the unspoken question. “All right,” Nizar says. “Get that list and tell us where to go.”

“Why don’t you know?” Robards suddenly yells. “You’re a bloody war mage! You should know where to go already!”

“Be glad I knew of this!” Nizar retorts in a scathing voice. “Seven Death Eaters came here with the intent to assassinate Madam Bones, and I doubt it would have been a clean death!”

“Voldemort didn’t attack the Crown, you idiot,” Severus decides to add, feeling vicious pleasure when most of the others flinch again at hearing Voldemort’s name. “He attacked Wizarding Britain, which has yet to formally acknowledge a war mage’s status.”

Minerva glares at Robards one more time before she steps forward. “The list, Alastor. We’ll need to move quickly if we’re to be of assistance.”

Madam Bones returns in silver-edged grey battle robes, her wand in her hand and a cold look in her eyes. “Yes, quickly. I’ve lost one colleague tonight, and I refuse to lose any others!”
War

Chapter Summary

War creates victims, but it is the survivors who must bear the pain.

Chapter Notes

Beta awesomeness credit: @mrsstanley, @norcumii, @saneronthinsides, & @jabberwockypie!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Towards the end of the first British Wizarding War, Severus was often kept away from the fighting. Voldemort was convinced he needed to keep his spy away from the front lines. He’d believed that Severus’s lack of participation in the bloodshed would cause Albus Dumbledore to reveal greater secrets to Severus, who would then dutifully report them to Voldemort.

Sometimes Severus is still amazed that Voldemort never figured out the truth of Severus’s loyalty, not in all those years. Not until Margot Dolohov opened her foul mouth and nearly got him killed.

That night is the longest night of fighting Severus has participated in since the worst battles of 1978, 1979, and 1980. This is so mindful of those hated times that it’s only Nizar’s presence at his side that keeps Severus from forgetting where he should be pointing his wand.

They can’t always guard each other’s backs. Severus hates the vulnerability, but it does grant him the opportunity to watch Nizar engaged in battle. When Nizar is not dueling for the fun of it, he is utterly merciless. He uses his wand as if it’s merely an extension of his magic. His expression is fierce, as if he is fueling spells with the force of his anger alone.

Severus doesn’t expect that to be the sort of thing that would elicit his interest. He puts that realization aside to deal with at another time, and focuses on making certain none of them die.

They Apparate from homes to flats to manors, flinging complicated jinxes, hexes, and curses at masked, robed Death Eaters. They split up after the first two homes. Salazar is with Minerva; they fight together as if they’ve done so for years. Adele remains with Goldstein and Williamson, which Severus approves of. Goldstein is too new to her role not to have someone at her back. Adele Greenwood is capable of defending herself and others, while Williamson is at least proficient enough to look after the other two.

Robards informs Severus and Nizar after the fourth skirmish that Sirius Black is with Jacob Proudfoot and a team of junior Aurors, while Remus Lupin and Tonks are leading another group. All of the war mages are now in the fight, including their war mage to be and their titled Black duke. Albus is involved as well, working with Kingsley and Madam Bones to coordinate a massive defence of Wizarding Britain.

Severus just wants that fucking walking corpse to slip up and attack a home on Crown soil. It
frustrates him that he doesn’t think it likely, and neither does Nizar.

Robards never shuts up, even in the midst of a battle. Severus’s patience is wearing thin; he would happily strangle the man if given the opportunity.

“He’s mourning Scrimgeour’s loss,” Nizar murmurs as they wrap up the fifth skirmish of the evening, this one in front of the Bagnold Estate.

“Mourning?” Severus narrows his eyes as Robards places a Portkey on a bound Death Eater before activating it, sending the prisoner directly to Azkaban. “You mean Robards and Scrimgeour—”

Nizar grimaces before nodding. “Yes, I think so.”

Severus rolls his eyes. “Then Scrimgeour had no business throwing stones about proper Wizarding marriages between men and women.”

“It’s too bad he lived in a glass house,” Nizar replies as Robards returns in Millicent Bagnold’s company. The woman has a scratch across her face that will require dittany, but is otherwise seething. “Are you all right, Madam Bagnold?”

“They’re throwing around the damned Killing Curse worse than they did during the first war!” Bagnold yells. “The Death Eater lying in my back garden certainly didn’t live long enough to regret it!”

“Madam Bagnold wishes to join us,” Robards says in a stilted voice. “I’ve reminded her that as an Auror, it is my duty to see her protected—”

“Sod that,” Bagnold snarls. “They went after my children. My men are guarding them now under new wards, but in the meantime, I’ll make those damned Death Eaters all bloody well regret thinking to target my House!”

Nizar seems pleased by Madam Bagnold’s rage. “Gawain, I don’t think you’ll be able to stop her. Where are we going next?”

They find Augusta Longbottom sitting on her front garden steps, smoking a long, dainty pipe giving off the sweet scent of cognac-laced tobacco. “You’d think the fools would have learned their lesson the last time,” she says as a shrill scream rends the air. “Longbottom Manor takes care of itself.”

“Is there, uh, anything you need, Madam Longbottom?” Robards stutters.

Madam Longbottom smiles at him. The vulture on her hat seems to be mirroring the expression. “Someone should stop by in the morning to collect the bodies, dear. You lot go on. There are others who don’t have old ties to the land like we do.”

Someone in Voldemort’s ranks breaks the pattern after midnight. Nizar stands stock-still, just as he did for the moment of Divination that alerted them of the threat to Madam Bones. “Fuck!” he snarls, and then grabs Severus’s arm. Severus has just enough time to grab Robards, who has glued himself to Madam Bagnold, before they’re Apparating.

Given the smell of the Thames lingering in the foggy air, Severus thinks they must be in a village south of London. The Dark Mark is floating above a modest house with all of its windows blown out, the glass littering the home’s tiny front garden and walkway. “Does anyone recognize it?” Bagnold asks.

Severus has just realized that Nizar is missing when he Apparates back into place next to them, a set,
harsh expression on his face. “We’re too late. Those living here are already dead, and the ones who did it are gone.”

“Who were they?” Robards asks, staring up at the Dark Mark in horrified fascination. “We’ll need to get a team here to placate the local authorities—”

“Given their appearance, not to mention certain photographs in the house?” Nizar sighs. “I would say that they’re the parents of Dennis and Collin Creevey, Gawain. Gryffindor students.”

“Fuck,” Severus mutters. He isn’t particularly fond of them, but Collin Creevey was the first to defend the war mages in very Gryffindor fashion. Dennis is an excellent student. Neither of those young men deserved to be orphaned.

“Muggle-born students.” Robards gulps and casts his Patronus. “Kingsley, the Death Eaters are targeting the parents of Muggle-born Hogwarts students. First fatalities already located south of London.”

After Robards summons a team from the M.L.E. to help create a cover story for the non-magical community—a break-in gone wrong, the perpetrators fled after the murders—they have to leave again. Death Eaters are still attacking, and from the intelligence coming in by Patronus from varying Aurors, there seems to be no end to it.

“How the hell is an attack on a non-magical family not enough to trigger the war mage’s magic?” Severus asks in a harsh whisper while Madam Bagnold and Robards chase after the Death Eaters who were lingering around the Holmes manor. Severus recognizes their robes; they’ve already fought these Death Eaters at least once tonight.

Nizar just looks grim. “I don’t know. It should be—that was an act of fucking war!”

“There must be some way of determining why,” Severus insists. “I assume I would be aware if that sort of magic announced itself!”

“You would be, yes.” Nizar takes a breath. “Hold on. I think I remember…something.” Nizar rests his hand on his chest and closes his eyes, looking like a Pure-blood ready to swear an oath. Severus can feel the thrum of magic under his skin, even if doesn’t understand what it is.

Severus waits, clenching his wand in his hand. No one approaches, but he doesn’t relax his guard even after hearing the crack of Disapparition, signaling the escape of the Death Eaters.

Nizar is still standing in place, looking almost meditative, when the others return. “Nizar?” Madam Bagnold asks in concern before Severus can warn her off.

“Oh. That would do it.” Nizar opens his eyes and drops his hand. The fury in his eyes is no longer a banked fire, but utter frost. “The Death Eaters going after the non-magical families are acting on their own. Voldemort didn’t order them to do it.”

“Instead of an army assaulting the Crown, the magic then sees the attacks on student families as… what, exactly?” Madam Bagnold asks.

“It isn’t an army doing the killing, even if it is soldiers from an army.” Nizar shakes his head. “Those are ancient rules wrapped up in ancient magic, Madam Bagnold. Unless Voldemort orders more of these attacks personally, the war mages won’t be granted access to the sort of magic that would give us the means to do away with that Fidelius Charm he hides under and promptly turn him into so much paste.”
“Do you think You-Know-Who understands a war mage’s limitations regarding the Crown and Wizarding Britain, or is it just…” Madam Bagnold flaps her hand in apparent frustration. “Terrible people taking advantage of the situation to do terrible things?”

“He’s had time to do his homework.” Nizar nods. “Yes, I think he’s aware. The attacks on the non-magical homes have been too random. The assaults on the magical homes are coordinated. They know what they’re doing.”

“Dammit!” Robards scowls. “And if You-Know-Who were to appear on the battlefield?”

Nizar grins like a feral cat. “I don’t need the war mage’s magic to deal with that stupid fuck. If he is fool enough to show himself, I’ll happily obliterate him.”

“I do admire your efficiency in regards to waste disposal,” Severus drawls.

Houses and names blur together as the fighting continues. Sometimes they capture one or two Death Eaters, and bits of detritus are turned into Portkeys to send them on their merry way to Azkaban. Sometimes they all escape, though not without leaving destruction in their wake.

Severus has no idea if any other Death Eaters die aside from the fatalities in Oxfordshire, and doesn’t yet want to know. He once counted some of these idiots as close companions, if not friends. He has students who are closely related to many of those in Voldemort’s inner circles. Florentia Selwyn may not mourn, but others will.

A weasel Patronus sees Nizar, Severus, Madam Bagnold, and Robards Apparating to the Weasley Burrow in Ottery St. Catchpole. There, they join an infuriated Molly Weasley in fending off three attackers before Molly calls up a veritable fucking army of garden gnomes. They swarm the Death Eaters, who quickly give up on the assault and Disapparate to escape.

“Just because I sat out the rest of the war after William was born….” Molly snorts in amused disgust. “I think they’ve forgotten about a few key battles.”

Bagnold grins at Molly. “I wonder how their Dark Lord will handle the fact that three of his Death Eaters were defeated by garden gnomes.”

Molly smiles back. “If I were them, I wouldn’t be in any great hurry to admit to that sort of thing. Oh, and Arthur informed me as to what’s going on. I’m going with you.” Robards makes a despairing sound at collecting another “civilian,” but doesn’t protest.

After another battle, Molly yanks the mask off of a prone Death Eater before Robards can send the woman to Azkaban. She looks surprised by the face underneath; not even Severus recognizes the unconscious Death Eater. “I don’t know who this is. Do any of you?”

Madam Bagnold looks disgusted. “That’s Alice Stimpson. I’d no idea that she considered You-Know-Who’s rot to be so appealing. Idiot.”

“Any relation to Patricia Stimpson?” Severus asks, naming Hogwarts’ seventh-year Gryffindor.

“I don’t know of anyone in the Wizarding World with the same family name as another who is not related to them in some fashion.” Madam Bagnold purses her lips. “An aunt, I believe.”

Nizar shakes his head as Robards puts on a great show of irritated impatience as he sends Stimpson to Azkaban with a new Portkey. “I’m so glad Minerva has the joy of that conversation.”

Robards receives a Patronus from Proudfoot sometime after three in the morning. “Black pulled the
address for the next Muggle attack from a bloody Death Eater’s head. I hate Legilimency!”

Proudfoot’s hare Patronus declares, and then rattles off an address in East Devon.

“He must have been practicing,” Nizar comments just before they Apparate. Severus grimaces; he does not want to live in a world in which Sirius Black is competent at Legilimency.

They arrive to a home on fire, the Dark Mark glowing green in the sky above the flames. “Fuck,” Severus mutters. The first war taught him to be leery of house fires in non-magical homes.

“Is anyone alive in there?” Madam Bagnold yells. If there is, it’s not likely to be heard by those trapped within.

Nizar recasts a variant on the Shield Charm that surrounds his entire body in edges of blue before striding right for the blazing front door. Before Severus can follow, Molly grabs his arm. He turns around to glare at her and finds only—surprisingly—concern in her eyes. “It was the Tonks home. Wasn’t it?” she asks.

Severus feels a chill spread over his skin despite the heat from the fire. “Thank you very much; I was doing an excellent job of not recalling that.”

He has no idea why Molly finds that to be the correct response. She releases him, raises her wand, and uses a jet of water to extinguish the flames around the broken doorway Nizar just disappeared through. “Remind our friend that he does not want to breathe in that smoke.”

Severus nods and uses a brief burst of Apparition to save time, appearing in the doorway before the flames can dry out the wood and make another attempt. He hears sirens, Robards yelling, and then he is within the house and can hear nothing but crackling flames and groaning timbers.

Nizar is intelligent enough not to shout from wherever he is in the house. His Patronus appears instead, hissing out, “This way,” in a voice that is and is not Nizar’s. Severus has no time to dwell on the difference as he chases the Patronus basilisk through the house to the rear, skirting flames and burning furniture. A flash of scarlet and gold catches his eye, belonging to the tie of a Hogwarts student captured in a non-magical photograph on the wall. Severus just recognizes the student as Raza Mohammad before a curl of flame consumes the picture.

Nizar is hefting the shoulders of a woman whose hijab has already been stripped off and wrapped around her face. “Help me get her out of here!”

Severus grabs the woman’s legs to help Nizar carry who he assumes is Madam Mohammad from her own burning home. “Is she alive?”

“I’m not about to linger in a burning home to find out!” Nizar shouts back.

Outside, Robards is trying to have a row with the captain of a local fire brigade. “ROBARDS!” Severus roars the moment he can place Madam Mohammad on the ground, safe in Molly’s company. “LAY OFF THE MAN AND LET HIM PUT OUT THE BLOODY FIRE!”

Robards goes wide-eyed, shrinking back from Severus. The fire brigade looks relieved to be allowed to finally do their jobs. Both outcomes are pleasing, especially as Robards was overreacting. Their robes look far more like necessary coats at night, not archaic dress.

Molly surreptitiously examines Madam Mohammad with a quiet diagnostic spell while the fire brigade is distracted. “Stunning spell,” she mouths at Severus, who nods. The Death Eaters stunned the woman and left her to burn alive. He hates that he is familiar with the tactic.
He goes to Nizar, who is watching as the first hose puts a better dent in the blaze than a few wands can manage. “Nizar?”

“Not my first burning building, Severus,” Nizar mutters. He gives the second hose an appreciative glance as the water cuts back on the amount of heat trying to suffocate them.

“Here, now.” Severus turns his head to find the fire brigade chief approaching, the orange light revealing that sweat has already broken out on his dark skin. “What sort of fools are you, running into a burning house like that?”

“The sort who didn’t wish to see anyone die,” Nizar says in a mild voice. “It isn’t the first such rescue I’ve done.”

“No? You volunteer for Fire and Rescue?” the chief asks, frowning.

“Not formally, no.” Nizar glances back at the house. A third hose is being hooked up to a fire hydrant at the walk, which should give them the means to control the fire. Severus doubts the house itself can be saved, not when magical fire is involved. “I rescued my sons from a burning home when they were small. They were the only survivors.”

Severus flinches. He’s been so busy trying to not think on the last burning home he’d stood in that he forgot that aspect of Nizar’s history.

The chief’s frown eases into something approaching sympathy. “That sounds like it was a rough time. IRA?”

Nizar shakes his head. “No, nothing to do with the Irish. Just…cruelty.”

“Arson.” The fire chief takes the hint, glancing behind them. Molly and Madam Bagnold have allowed the medics to abscond with Madam Mohammad, who is still unconscious with a clear plastic oxygen mask over her face. “Bloody hateful bastards. That one has a boy up in a private school. He’ll be devastated to hear about this.”

The chief has just unintentionally given them the perfect excuse to be here. “We know. We,” Severus gestures to himself and Nizar, “are two of young Raza’s teachers. There have been recent threats against the family—nothing overt, not enough to summon the police regarding the matter. Mister Mohammad asked if we would be willing to look in on his family while in the area this evening.”

Severus can tell that the chief does not entirely buy that story, but he isn’t about to accuse the two men who went into the burning house of being the ones to set the fire. “All right, then. Who am I going to contact about this to further the investigation?”

Nizar reaches into his robe pocket, rummaging around for a few seconds until he retrieves a flat billfold, too pristine not to be both new and largely empty. The card he withdraws is not the identification Salazar acquired for him, but something Severus has not yet seen.

The chief’s eyes nearly bug out of his head. “Sec—all right.” He all but throws the card back at Nizar. “You’ll be handling the investigation, then?”

“Along with others, yes.” Nizar doesn’t have a hint of humor in his eyes. “One of them will let you know if there are any encouraging results, but in the meantime? Know that this was most certainly an attempt to murder another.”

The chief nods before steeling himself, sticking out his hand. “Chief Bill Sharp. Can’t say it’s a
pleasure to meet you, Mister Deslizarse. Not under these circumstances.”

Nizar raises both eyebrows. “It’s a miracle; you said my name correctly. And it’s professor, not mister.”

“Bloody government secrets act hiring bloody school teachers,” Sharp mutters, but holds out his hand to Severus. “And you are?”

“Also a professor. Severus Snape.”

Sharp looks surprised. “Snape—family out of Cokeworth?”

Severus hopes his expression portrays how much he would like not to have just heard that. “Unfortunately, yes.”

“Grew up near there;” Sharp says, politely ignoring Severus’s discomfort. “I’ll work up the incident report for the missus there to file for the insurance claim.” None of them wince when part of the house caves in on itself. “Such as it is, at least.”

“Thank you.” Nizar takes one last look at the fire. “We need to go. Raza’s mother was not tonight’s only target.”

“Oh, God. How many more of these should I expect?” Sharp asks in resignation.

“In East Devon? Most likely none,” Severus responds curtly, turning to leave. It takes far too long for Sharp to be distracted by the work of containing the fire to stop paying attention to them, allowing everyone to Apparate away.

“Where to now?” Madam Bagnold asks as they take a few minutes to regroup in a small clearing in a wood north of Devon. Molly was hiding apples in her pockets, and shares them without hesitation. Severus is not fond of apples, but it’s better than the constant taste of poisonous smoke on his tongue.

Robards is holding a Protean Charm coin in his hand, frowning as he waits for an update. “We’re in a holding pattern, though I desperately hope that was the last of it.”

Severus tosses the apple core and catches Nizar’s gaze. That way.

Nizar nods and follows Severus to the outer edge of the clearing. “What is it?”

“What the fuck did you show to Sharp?” Severus asks.

“Oh. That.” Nizar retrieves the card again and passes it over.

Severus reads what he’s holding, blinks a few times, and reads it again. “This says that you work for the Security Service.”

“I’m so glad that Madam Tyler explained what that was and what the card was for in the letter she sent today. I think she enjoys the owl Salazar gifted her a bit too much,” Nizar says. “Oh, and there is one for you, as well, since Madam Tyler also rightfully inferred that we tend to live in each other’s pockets.”

“Not literally, we don’t.” Severus shoves the card back at Nizar, much as Captain Sharp had. “You know, when I said I felt like bloody James Bond in February, it was meant to be a joke.” Wrong agency, but still close enough to be exceedingly disconcerting.

Nizar puts the identification card away again. “What does that have to do with anything?”
“Never mind. I don’t want one, Nizar.”

“You’re a war mage who works for Her Majesty to protect Britain. It’s a requirement of the role, if only so no one arrests us for doing our job,” Nizar points out.

Severus frowns. Avoiding arrest is usually beneficial.

“I’m given to understand there was nearly a bureaucratic war over who would host the war mages—MI-5 or MI-6,” Nizar continues. “MI-5 would be the Security Service, yes?”

Severus resists the urge to bury his face in his hands. “My life is ridiculous, and it’s your fault.”

They visit another family estate, arriving far too late to do any good. Robards and Madam Bagnold retrieve the dead from the home, laying them out in a row on the grass. Their bodies are not mutilated. Instead, their eyes are closed, expressions slack—the Killing Curse, all of them.

Madam Bagnold is a bit rougher with the body of Cornelius Fudge, letting him thump to the ground after treating the others as if they were made of glass. Robards’s expression twists, but he says nothing in protest.

Severus doesn’t care at all about Fudge’s death. He considers it a permanent form of justice for the damage Fudge’s denial of Voldemort’s return has wrought. It’s the rest of the family who did not deserve to share in his fate.

Molly dabs at her eyes with a handkerchief. “I’m so grateful that Fudge and his wife had no children.”

Severus nods, regarding the woman in question. Morgana Belby, her parents, and her brother, targets because Morgana decided to wed an imbecile. Marcus Belby in Slytherin is a cousin to Morgana, but Severus has no idea how close Marcus is to that part of his family.

He doesn’t recognize the next adult to be pulled from their destroyed home, but Molly does. “Oh, you poor man,” she whispers, sitting with their head cradled in her lap. “It’s Saul Croaker. He and Arthur are friends.”

“God, he wasn’t home alone,” Severus hears Robards’s strangled voice announce.

“Children,” Nizar reports, turning Severus’s blood to ice with a single word. “Two of them, too young for Hogwarts. He was protecting them.”

Robards comes out of the wreckage and vomits into the closest shrub. Nizar is the one who retrieves them from the house, using a levitation charm. The blankets covering each small body drag along the grass until they are placed on the ground next to their father. Nizar then whirls around and obliterates the nearest boulder sticking out of the ground, sending shards of rock and clumps of dirt flying.

Severus looks up at the Dark Mark, glowing vibrant and strong against the night sky. He’s practiced at controlling his rage, but this is one of the few times when his control almost slips.

At the Bainbridge Estate, brothers Charles and Cuthbert Bainbridge are both standing on their front lawn, dueling against six Death Eaters. Nizar knocks the nearest Death Eater off his feet with a harsh slash of his wand and then binds the man while he’s still flying through the air.

With the odds turned against them, the six Death Eaters don’t have a chance, and they’re smart enough to recognize it. The Death Eaters Disapparate after flinging two final hexes at Cuthbert and Molly. Cuthbert dodges to the side; Molly bats the hex away as if it’s a minor irritant.
Charles lowers his wand and scowls. “How am I supposed to bag my first Death Eater of the decade if the bastards run away?”

Cuthbert glares at his younger brother. “If this is what I think it is, you’ll get your chance, you old fool. Auror Robards, Mrs. Weasley, Madam Bagnold, Professors—or should I call you war mages in this instance?”

“That doesn’t really matter.” Nizar has an odd look on his face. “He was here, wasn’t he?”

Charles looks surprised. “How did you know that?”

Severus smells it then, almost lost to the churn of fresh dirt, torn grass, and the lingering atmospheric tang of powerful hexes: the far more unwelcome aroma of Riddle Manor mold, thick in the air.

“The walking corpse has a distinctive odor,” Nizar answers Charles. “But he didn’t try to kill you, did he?”

“No.” Cuthbert shakes his head, looking a bit bewildered. “Made some rubbish speech about marking his return properly, and then said the Death Eaters he was leaving behind would deal with us.”

“Cornelius was wrong.” Charles has a chagrined expression on his face. “I believed him. I utterly, truly believed that nitwit…but he was wrong. You-Know-Who returned last summer, just as the Potter boy claimed, didn’t he?”

“Yes,” Severus says in a flat voice. “He did.”

“Who else did You-Know-Who attack tonight?” Cuthbert asks. “From the looks of you lot, it wasn’t just us.”

“Oh, pretty much everyone,” Bagnold replies, smirking when Cuthbert goes pale. “I do believe Wizarding Britain is officially at war.”

“Bollocks,” Cuthbert mutters. “We can’t afford another war, Millicent.”

“Bugger!” Robards exclaims, pulling the charmed knut from his robe pocket and holding it in his hand. After a moment, it turns white, and Robards smiles in obvious relief. “Oh, thank Merlin. That’s the all-clear.”

“They’re certain?” Molly asks.

Robards nods. “I trust Auror Moody’s word on it, Mrs. Weasley. Misters Bainbridge, my apologies, but you’ll need to come with us to the Ministry. Everyone attacked tonight who witnessed the capture or death of any active Death Eater will need to give verbal testimony before returning home with an M.L.E.-appointed guard.”

Cuthbert sighs, but Charles nods. “No apologies needed, Auror Robards. Let’s get on with it.”

When they arrive in the Ministry Atrium via Portkey, Severus glances up at the large clock on the wall and stares at it in surprise. “It’s five in the bloody morning.”

“We’ve been at this for quite a while, then.” Nizar glares at the atrium’s ugly fountain before he sits down on the fountain’s wide edge. He slumps forward, resting his elbows on his knees, and lets out a long sigh.
Severus decides that sitting down is an excellent idea and joins him. He suddenly feels utterly wrung out. “I think I might be too old for this.”

Nizar snorts out a laugh. “If you’re too old for this, then so am I.”

“Fuck,” Severus mutters.

“I’m off to report in,” Robards says. “Mrs. Weasley, Madam Bagnold, you were both attacked this evening, even if you assisted afterwards. I’ll need statements from you both.”

Madam Bagnold nods. “Might as well get it over with, then,” she says, but Severus does not miss the fact that she grasps hold of Molly’s arm before following Robards.

The others trickle in as the minutes tick by. Minerva’s lip was bloodied at some point, though she seems unaware of it. Salazar looks exhausted, but his teeth are still bared in anger as he sits down on the fountain’s edge next to Nizar and Minerva.

“Are you all right?” Nizar asks them.

“Quite,” Minerva replies, her shoulders settling into a weary line. “I’m not certain my knees will ever forgive me, though.”

“We spent a great deal of time avoiding the Killing Curse,” Salazar says, which explains Minerva’s statement about her knees. “Fucking Death Eaters were more creative during the first war. Bastardos sin valor.” Salazar turns his head and spits into the fountain. “Beware the Ides of March.”

“Does everyone have all of their body parts intact and in their proper places?” Minerva asks.

“Yes.” Nizar reaches out and rests his hand along Salazar’s arm.

“You smell like a fire,” Salazar mutters.

“House fire,” Nizar says, but Salazar doesn’t press for details.

Tonks and Lupin join them when it’s nearly five-thirty. Her left arm is in a sling and her hair is the soft pink of dawn. Lupin is limping and disheveled, his jacket torn in several places, but otherwise seems to be fine.

“How did you lot fare?” Tonks asks after resettling her arm. Severus notes Nizar eying the injury and wonders if there is something about Metamorphmagi that he is still unaware of.

“Fire, death, destruction, dead Death Eaters,” Severus summarizes. Tonks nods in acknowledgement, but she doesn’t seem pleased. He suspects it has less to do with his response and far more to do with their long night of fighting.

Sirius Black turns up with his robes splattered with blood, a broad grin on his face. “Got to hex the Talbots. The fuckers got away, but damn, that was satisfying.”

“What did they do to you?” Lupin asks in alarm.

Black blinks and glances down at his robes. “Oh. Not my blood.” He sits down next to Lupin. “Wilhelmina lost her temper, and well…exploded Death Eater. Hope the fucker wasn’t diseased.”

Adele is last to join them, still with Auror Goldstein on her arm. Severus is relieved to see that both are uninjured, though the young women look as exhausted as he feels. They sit down on the edge of the fountain next to Salazar. “They went after the parents of students who are Muggle-born—I mean,
non-magical,” Adele whispers.

“We know.” Lupin releases a heavy sigh. “I’m pretty sure one of the victims is Dean Thomas’s absent father.”

“Fuck,” Severus repeats under his breath.

“And his mum,” Tonks adds quietly. “Dunno what we’re going to tell the kids.”

“The truth.” Nizar sounds bitter. “We owe them all that much.”

Chapter End Notes

This is another chapter posted due to the Fundraisening and some amazing, generous people. The Fundraisening is ongoing so that I can pay rent this month. <3 (I am also making shinies; track my Tumblr @deadcatwithaflamethrower for shiny listings when they happen!)
Chapter Summary

“Everything is sad. I’ve never felt everyone be so sad before.”

Chapter Notes

Made it to the end of Part VI, and it's been a weird, awesome ride. Part VII is a flashback so I have time to finish Part VIII, but I hope you'll all think that Salazar is worth it.

Betas of awesomeness: @norcumi, @mrsstanley, @sanerontheinside, & @jabberwockypie! They all helped Part VI happen, along with the rest of the story to come.

This chapter's early publication is also brought to you by another marker being met in the Fundraisening. Still trying to pay the rent! Details are on my tumblr @deadcatwithaflamethrower

Thanks for reading, and I hope you'll stick around for the rest of OaLC's journey.

Hermione always grants herself a bit of a lie-in on Saturday mornings. After nearly five years at Hogwarts, the habit is so ingrained that she doesn't need an alarm to wake and arrive at breakfast half-past the hour. This morning, the Weasley twins trudge in behind her, muttering to each other in broken sentences that only they can interpret. She'd like to say that tea or coffee improves their communication skills, but honestly, it just makes them so much worse.

She draws up short; Fred plows into her from behind before he notices. “Oi, Hermione!”

“Sorry,” she apologizes automatically. “It’s just…”

“Oh.” George steps up to her side, his eyes on the empty staff table.

The staff table is barren, and it makes her feel chilled. The elves didn’t even set the table.

Fred sounds bewildered. “There is *always* someone up there, even on a Saturday.”

Hermione nods vague agreement. They aren’t the only students gazing at the table in confusion, either.

“None of the papers have been delivered. Not even Owl Post.” Hermione glances over at Millicent, who looks stern and out-of-sorts. Granted, Millicent hates mornings as much as the Slytherin Professors and Professor McGonagall.

Hermione suddenly feels the bottom fall out of her stomach. For even *Witch Weekly* to skive off on its Saturday delivery… “Something’s happened.”
“Something big.” Fred frowns. “Plans?”

“Warn the others,” George says. “Then…probably sit here like lumps until someone useful comes along.”

“Headmaster’s office?” Millicent suggests, though she looks doubtful.

“Already tried it when we got here at seven,” Roshan says as he joins them. “Even if you know that scratching trick, the gargoyle’s letting no one up there.”

“Then we pounce the first useful target,” George declares. All of them understand that Useful Target means Professor Slytherin.

For the first time, Hermione sits down at the Slytherin table for breakfast. What should have been nerve-wracking is almost inconsequential. Even the Weasleys sit down with them, eschewing the Gryffindor table to have, as Ron puts it, a clear view of the rest of the Great Hall.

Unlike the empty staff table, breakfast awaits them as it always does. Hermione has tea, her leg jittering with nerves and her appetite somewhere out beyond Saturn’s orbit. Millicent and Pansy emulate Hermione’s example with tea; Edward sits with Luna and Ginny, chewing on his fingernail and not having anything at all. Fred, Ginny, and Ron are the only ones who make a go of eating, and even they don’t have very much.

The first adult they see is less than useful, in Hermione’s opinion. It’s Filch, though he’s with a stout, grey-haired woman that she’s never seen before. They don’t go up to the staff table, but roam the Great Hall as if looking for someone.

What makes her truly frightened is that Filch isn’t scowling.

By the time the breakfast hour is over, almost no one has left. All four Houses are lingering, gossiping about the empty staff table. “There are a lot of people who didn’t show up for breakfast,” Pansy notes after returning to their table to sit with Millicent. “The Head Boy and Girl aren’t here. More importantly, Adele isn’t here.”

“War mage.” The whisper crawls up the Slytherin table before making its way through the ranks of Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, and Hufflepuff. Curious, loud chatter becomes much quieter and nervous in response.

Hermione starts back from the table in surprise when a bound scroll drops onto her empty plate. She picks it up, noticing that Pansy, Ron, and Draco have one, as well. Her stomach is doing queasy flip-flops as she opens it. She recognizes Dumbledore’s handwriting at once, but it’s the Headmaster’s seal beneath his signature that proves it genuine.

To the Prefects of Every House:

You must fulfill your duties to a greater extent than is usually required. This morning, you must join with the Head Boy and Head Girl, Mister Filch, Mrs. Norris, and when he arrives shortly, Professor Hagrid. It is vital that you look after all of your fellow students in our absence without care or concern for the separation of Houses. A terrible time is afoot, but I am not currently at liberty to give you details.

Professor Hagrid will announce the curfew that is now in effect. If any of Hogwarts’ students have wandered outside, please retrieve them before eight-thirty this morning.
Hermione drops the letter and stands up. “I heard some of the first-years say they were going outside for some air.”

Draco nods. “I’ll go with you. Ron, round everyone up. If Hagrid is going to make an announcement…”

“I’m on it, mate,” Ron says, gaining Pansy’s company. Fred and George glance at each other, shrug, and stand to help them.

They gather back in the Great Hall at eight-thirty sharp, with Pansy rolling her eyes as she nudges one last recalcitrant Hufflepuff back to their table. Hagrid has arrived, and is standing in front of the headmaster’s lectern, shifting nervously in place.

Hagrid sees the Prefects arrive and clears his throat, blushing as the students all focus on him. “Right, then. Good morning, you lot. Got a bit of bad news, and I don’t much like that I’m the one to tell it.” He swallows and coughs. “You-Know-Who decided to prove to all o’ us that he’s alive. Last night there were a lot of battles. I don’t know much more’n that yet.”

Hermione presses her lips together as shock rolls through the Great Hall. She didn’t want it to be that, but she doesn’t know of anything else that would have pulled all of the teachers away from Hogwarts. Pansy grasps her left hand in a tight, fearful grip; Draco accepts her hand before Hermione even realizes she’s reaching for him. Ron and Tamsin are huddled together with Nandini and Fred; Randall has his arm around Sourav, whose normally dark complexion looks like stale cheese.

Hagrid nods when the students quiet again in a fearful hush. “Right. For safety and all that, Professor Dumbledore has ordered a curfew. Do whatever you like in Hogwarts, an’ that’s fine, but don’t leave the castle. Myself, the Prefects, Head Boy Randall, Head Girl Applebee, and Mister and Missus Filch will be about to keep an eye on you lot. The others are meant to be back sometime this afternoon, and Professor Dumbledore promises he’ll explain things at dinner.” Hagrid blushes again. “Try not to get up to mischief in the meantime.”

Hagrid walks away from the lectern, but there isn’t an outcry. Most of the students don’t even stand up; they put their heads together and start whispering. Hagrid joins Mister Filch—er, the Filches.

“I can’t believe there is anyone about who can stand Filch long enough to marry him,” Pansy mutters.

Ron shrugs. “She’s likely to be as sour as he is. I’m a bit more concerned about how we’re expected to keep an eye on this entire bloody castle!”

Tamsin stops chewing on her thumbnail. “There are eighteen of us, Ron. It won’t be that difficult.”

“Seventeen. Susan’s not here,” Roshan says, which really doesn’t help Hermione to feel any better about things.

“Seventeen of us, then, and half the student body won’t even bloody listen to us half the time as it is,” Sourav puts in sourly. “Ron’s right. If anyone chooses to act up, today’s not the sort of day where anyone is going to be all that concerned about points.”

Hermione lifts her head, startled, as she realizes they have the perfect, necessary solution. She just
hopes Nizar won’t mind. “Ron, come with me. We’ll be right back—we know of a way to help keep
an eye on things.”

Neil Randall gives her an odd look, but nods. “All right then. Hurry it up, and I hope it really is
useful.” He glances back at the student tables. “They’re behaving themselves at the moment, but I
don’t see it being a trend.”

Hermione grabs Ron’s hand and leads them out of the Great Hall. “This way,” she hisses, leading
him upstairs to the hidden stairwell on the first floor.

“Oh, secret passages again. This one doesn’t lead to insane Blacks and werewolves, does it?” Ron
asks, trying to make light of things.

*That would probably be easier to cope with,* Hermione thinks. “Just hurry up!”

When Hermione walks back and forth along the wall three times to get the Defence classroom door
to appear, Ron finally balks. “Hey, whoa!” he yelps. “There’s nothing in there that’s useful right
now, Professor Slytherin included!”

Hermione shoves him inside and closes the door. “That’s not the point, idiot!” She takes a breath and
then uses their chosen key phrase to temporarily disable the Deflection Charm. “Ron. It’s *Harry.*”

Ron steps back, startled, before he rubs his eyes with both hands. “Oh, blimey, that itches! It’s my
brain being all itchy, Hermione!”

She smiles in relief. “Sorry. That side-effect does keep happening.”

“What are we doing here, then? Harry—I, er, Nizar is off with the other teachers, I imagine.” Ron
makes a face. “That isn’t getting any less odd.”

“We’re getting the Marauder’s Map.” Hermione grins when Ron’s expression brightens.

“He still has it? That’s excellent,” Ron declares, all but dancing with impatience as Hermione adjusts
the metal S on the office door so they can go into Nizar’s quarters. Ron follows her inside and then
his jaw falls open. “He made the Room of Requirement door’s trick work for all the bloody doors in
the tower!”

“Close enough,” Hermione decides, walking straight to the fireplace to retrieve the Map from the
mantel. A light weight on her trainer causes her to look down, where she discovers Kanza rearing up
on her foot to give Hermione a demanding look. “All right, fine,” she mutters, scooping Kanza up
and trying not to twitch as the basilisk climbs her arm and curls around her neck. It’s obvious the
basilisk wants to be involved…or maybe she just doesn’t want to be alone.

“Miss Granger?”

Hermione turns around to see that Galiena is in her painting. “What is it, Galiena?”

Galiena raises an eyebrow as she glances at the Map, then at Hermione’s neck. “I take it this is an
emergency, and not a sudden descent into petty theft.”

“As if anyone could steal a bloody basilisk,” Ron says, grinning at the portrait. “Hello again!”

“Hello, Mister Weasley,” Galiena says in a wry voice. “If you’re seeking other information, all we
know is that the group you were with last night departed at the time you witnessed, Miss Granger,
and they’ve not yet returned. About fifteen minutes afterwards, the portraits noticed that the staff
began rushing to the Headmaster’s office. Unfortunately, no one breathed a word as to what was occurring. Given the lack of discussion, I think even Dumbledore only knew that there was an emergency, not what sort.”

“There are several students missing,” Hermione says. She and the other Prefects compared notes. Ron didn’t see Seamus and Dean at all that morning. Nandini reported that Katie Bell wasn’t in her bed when the others woke up; Jack Sloper was absent from the seventh-year dormitory. Edward told them that Dennis Creevey wasn’t in the third-year dorm that morning, either, and no one has seen Collin, Blake Shelby, Vicky Frobishier, Raza Mohammad, Patricia Stimpson, or Kellah Shafiq. Draco and Higgs said that Richard Vaisey, Poonima Shah, Yatin Bhagat, Theo, Tracy Davis, Goyle, the Carrow twins, Blaise, the Greengrass sisters, and Tabitha Bainbridge were all absent from the Slytherin dormitories. Justin Finch-Fletchley, Ernie Macmillan, Xavier Macnair, Hannah Abbot, and Susan Bones are their missing Hufflepuffs; the Ravenclaws can’t find the Goldstein cousins or Natalia Ollivander.

Galiiena frowns and then turns to face someone not in her canvas frame. “Ah, I see. The elves came for your absent students just after dawn this morning. Many of them were on their way to Saint Mungo’s.”

Ron pales. “You think it’s You-Know-Who?”

Galiiena grimaces before nodding. “I would not spread that tale until it is certain, but I believe so, yes.”

Hermione leads Ron from Nizar’s quarters and halts them before they leave the classroom. Then she holds up the Map. “You’re going to remember this through the Deflection Charm—Harry let us borrow the Map at the end of last year, just in case something…happened.”

Ron swallows. “Well. Something did happen, and that is the sort of thing Harry might’ve done if we’d had more time to think on it. Go ahead and put the charm back, Hermione. We both know I’m still complete rubbish at Occlumency.”

“You’ll make progress soon. You’re too loud not to be capable,” Hermione says dryly, and reactivates the charm.

Ron glances around in confusion. “I’m not even going to ask what we’re doing in here.”

“Deflection Charm,” Hermione reminds him, trying to smile.

“Oh, right! That thing I agreed to do that isn’t Obliviation for reasons that you can’t tell me.” Ron grins. “S’not so bad, ’Mione. Let’s go show off the Map for the others.”

Once they’ve gathered the other Prefects, Tamsin, and Randall, Hermione and Ron lead them to a quiet, empty room near the shallow stairs for the dungeon. Fred and George don’t even ask to come with them; they simply do, pushing their numbers from seventeen to nineteen.

Ron helps Hermione spread the Map out on the table, revealing the blank paper. “This is the Marauder’s Map,” Ron says, grinning.

“Oi, Harry’s supposed to have that!” George exclaims, glaring at them.

“Harry…” Ron hesitates. “Harry let us borrow it at the end of last term. Just in case, he said. Hermione’s better at being responsible than me, so she’s been keeping it safe in case…well, in case something happened.”
“Well, something bloody well happened,” Fred mutters, echoing Ron’s words from a few minutes ago. “All right, then. Gather ’round, everyone. You’re about to meet the Marauders.”

“Who the hell are the Marauders?” Randall asks in annoyance.

Ron rolls his eyes and addresses the Map: “I solemnly swear that I’m up to no good.”

Hermione smiles in relief as the map of Hogwarts appears in beautiful, spreading lines of black ink. She points at the ground floor and the dots labeled with their names. “Here we are.”

“This is a complete map of Hogwarts, and everything you see on it is happening right now,” George explains, for once looking entirely serious. “Prongs?”

Writing appears on the Map that looks quite a bit like Harry’s old handwriting: *Mister Prongs is wondering what the hell is going on here.*

The others are quick to join in, which Hermione has never seen them do before. *Mister Moony is wondering what a lot of Prefects are doing with our Map.*

*Mister Padfoot would like to remind Mister Moony that he is a bleeding Prefect, and has no leg to stand on.*

*Mister Wormtail would like you all to shut up.*

“I…I take it those are the Marauders,” Kinjal says as she happily accepts Kanza. Hermione tries not to feel guilty about not being able to tolerate Kanza for more than a bit at a time, but she still has vivid memories of what it’s like to be Petrified. At least the basilisk doesn’t seem to mind Hermione’s skittishness.

*Mister Prongs is happy to introduce himself!*

*Mister Wormtail is trying to figure out why we are being nice to Slytherins.*

*Mister Moony is reminding Mister Wormtail that it is because we’re trying to bloody well grow up.*

*Mister Padfoot is reminding all of you idiots that we are captured bits of consciousness that do not age.*

Fred grins. “The Marauders Map was finalized in 1975 by the Marauders themselves. Gentlemen, do you mind if I do the honors?”

*Mister Padfoot is preening right now. On with it, Fred Weasley!*

“You’re all in a right mood!” Ron rolls his eyes. “Padfoot is Sirius Black. Or, well, Sirius Black as an arsehole of a teenager.”

“Fuck,” Tamsin blurts out, wide-eyed. “You’re Harry Potter’s father?”

*Mister Prongs is still gleeful about this and thinks that Mister Padfoot likes being a father.*

*Mister Padfoot is not going to deny that.*

*Mister Moony is still going to laugh forever about this.*

“Moony is Professor Lupin,” Hermione says in a dry voice, which cases most of the others to stare at her in disbelief. “It’s true. He was the quiet one of the group.”
“The one you would need to watch,” Pansy says thoughtfully. “They called him Moony because of the werewolf bit, I imagine.”

*Mister Moony would like to be known for more than that, but it’s a wasted effort.*

*Mister Prongs is reminding Mister Moony that he somehow managed to become a Professor.*

*Mister Wormtail still thinks that to be insanity.*

*Mister Prongs would like to know if there is any word on his son.*

Hermione tries not to shiver at that sudden shift from insanity to worry emanating from the Map. “Not yet, Prongs. We need your help with something else.”

“Who is Prongs?” Cadwallader asks, frowning. “Sirius Black is Potter’s legal parent!”

*Mister Prongs is informing Mister Cadwallader that he is James Henry Potter.*

“Holy shit,” Roshan whispers.

“Wow.” Mandy Brocklehurst smiles. “That’s…that’s amazing! You’re really him?”

*Mister Prongs is just a bit of magic, Miss Brocklehurst. It’s a very good bit of magic, mind.*

“Do you—do you talk to Potter?” Draco asks. Hermione thinks she understands the hint of longing in his voice, given what his own father is like. “I mean, do you speak to Harry?”

*Mister Prongs says that he does not get to speak to his son as much as he would prefer. Harry Potter was still getting to know the Map, and—*

*Mister Moony says that Mister Prongs was being shy, and it was entirely ridiculous.*

“Wait. That means that Wormtail is—that’s Pettigrew,” Maxine says in astonishment. “We can’t trust him!”

*Mister Wormtail would like to be insulted, but unfortunately, Mister Wormtail is aware that he grew up to be a giant prick.*

Randall lets out a snort of laughter. “At least you’re honest about it.”

*Mister Padfoot is informing you all that Mister Wormtail of the Marauder’s Map never had plans to do…what was done.*

Hermione supposes even magical maps can be uncomfortable with harsh truths. “Every teacher is gone from the school except for Hagrid.”

*Mister Prongs noticed, Miss Granger.*

*Mister Padfoot says it’s a fine time to get away with anything.*

*Mister Moony is reminding Mister Padfoot that Now Is Not The Time!*

“Dumbledore put all of us in charge of monitoring the school for the entire day, with only Hagrid, Mister Filch, and…well, Mrs. Filch for assistance,” Hermione says.

*Mister Moony is not pleased by this.*
Mister Padfoot agrees that this is nonsense, but is too distracted by none of you noticing the obvious about Mrs. Filch and is thus laughing at you all.

“What?” George prods at the Map, which leaves a brief, inky stain behind before it vanishes. “What about Mrs. Filch?”

Mister Prongs suggests you look at her on the Map. She is with Mister Filch in the Great Hall.

Hermione finds Mister Filch easily enough, as he’s right next to Hagrid. Standing with them, however, is a dot labeled Mrs. Norris. “Er…”

Terry bursts out laughing. “She’s a bloody Animagus! Mrs. Norris is an Animagus!”

Oliver Rivers doesn’t laugh. He just stares at them. “No—no wonder Mister Filch was so upset when that basilisk Petrified Mrs. Norris.”

That sobers them all. It was pitiful when they all thought it was Mister Filch’s beloved mangy cat. To know that it was his wife who was Petrified in the hospital wing…

“That’s completely awful,” Marietta Edgecombe murmurs, biting her lip. “Er…Map?”

Mister Padfoot says that would be us, Miss Edgecombe.

“Right. How do we—what’s the best way for us to keep an eye on this entire castle?” Marietta squares her shoulders. “I don’t want to do this, but I don’t want anyone to be hurt under my watch.”

Mister Prongs suggests choosing a central command.

Mister Moony says that Mister Prongs has read too many of his novels, but Mister Prongs is correct. Centralize and mobilize from a chosen location. We can tell you where students are, but we can’t tell you what they’re doing.

“Maybe we could confine everyone to their Common Rooms and the dorms for the day?” Nandini suggests hesitantly.

“That would go over like a rotten egg on a sunny day,” George replies. “We can all cast a Patronus, right?” He waits for them to nod. “Well, then we know exactly how to handle this. Two of us will stay with the Map to keep an eye on things, make certain no one strays outside or other places they really don’t belong. We can all keep in contact by Patronus. Shift out the map-watching every hour so no one gets bored.”

“It should be the Head Boy and Head Girl making that decision!” Randall insists.

George shrugs. “All right, then. You want to do something different?”

Randall hesitates before sighing. “No, it’s a good plan.”

“I like it, too,” Tamsin adds. “It would be a lot harder to keep an eye on every single bit of this castle without this Map, too. Thank you, Marauders.”

Mister Prongs says that we are troublemakers of the most excellent sort, thus we know exactly what sort of trouble everyone will be up to.

Mister Wormentail says that it is sometimes useful to be a complete prat.

Mister Padfoot mourns that our purpose has been thwarted.
Mister Moony is suggesting that Mister Cadwallader and Miss Edgecombe should take the first shift watching the Map.

“Why?” Cadwallader asks, glancing at Marietta.

Mister Wormtail is thinking that we make you nervous.

Mister Prongs says that it’s best to get that out of the way now, before anyone is tempted to be a twit.

Mister Padfoot still regrets that we’re all passing up this golden opportunity to get away with anything.

The rest of the day goes well enough, Hermione supposes. Once the shock of curfew and a potential Voldemort attack wears off, the other students don’t go back to their normal Saturday activities, but they aren’t exactly on their best behavior. There is a lot of tension between rivalries that still exist among individuals, concern for the missing students, worry for family members, bafflement or glee over the missing staff, and the automatic impulse to chafe against the idea of not being allowed out of doors.

Hermione and Pansy find Luna sitting on the edge of the covered bridge, her legs idly swinging over the very long, long drop below. “Luna?”

“Hello, Hermione. Hello, Pansy.” Luna holds out her hand, and sudden wisps of what looks like fog twines around her fingers.

“Hi, Luna.” Hermione glances over at Pansy, whose eyebrows are raised as she stares at the not-fog. “Are you all right?”

Luna frowns. “Everything is sad,” she whispers. “I’ve never felt everyone be so sad before.”

“We don’t even know if there is a reason to be sad,” Pansy points out. “We just know there were battles.”

Luna blinks a few times and looks at them in an intent way that reminds Hermione that Professor Salazar named Luna an elemental magician. “Not the people, Pansy. Magic. Magic is sad.”

Hermione hates that her stomach keeps twisting into knots today. “Why?”

“Because magic has been dying, and the caretakers are trying to fix it, but then the deathless one wants to destroy it,” Luna says in a matter-of-fact voice. “That’s why.”

“Dying?” Pansy squeaks. “Magic is dying?”

“It has been, for a very long time, Professor Salazar says.” Luna returns her gaze to the not-fog that is…well, it looks as if the fog tendrils are playing. “He says Myrddin built our school to help keep magic from dying, but then not even Hogwarts was protected the way it should have been.”

Hermione feels utterly chilled, and it has nothing to do with being out of doors. “Luna, er. The curfew says that no one should be outside. Remember?”

Luna climbs down from the wall. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize that would include the bridge, as it leads to other buildings that mean I would still be inside.”

“Right.” Pansy opens the door and watches as Luna walks through. The not-fog follows her. “No harm done.” The moment the door is closed again, Pansy stares at Hermione. “Dying?” she repeats.
“I think she means that if Voldemort wins, magic dies.” Hermione swallows hard. “Professor Slytherin mentioned that once, the bit about magic dying.” It was in one of Harry’s letters. The compass points of Hogwarts were the Founders, tied to the strongest magical point left on the island of Britain. “If magic dies, so does the land.”

“Well, it’s a good thing the war mages are going to kick the shit out of You-Know-Who, instead,” Pansy says firmly. “Let’s go back inside. Maybe if we ask nicely, Luna will just float any troublemaking Baby Death Eaters to the ceiling and leave them there.”

Hermione smiles. “Don’t tempt me.”

Marietta and Cadwallader both look a bit more at ease when Hermione and Roshan trade off with them for an hour of map-watching, though they quickly discover that it’s because the Marauders have chosen to be talkative. For the entire hour, they fill the Map with chatter about possibilities regarding the students and shenanigans, how to do those shenanigans better, how not to get caught, how to get caught for the right reasons, and so much other blither that it’s hard to keep track of. It also includes a five minute rant against Snape as their struggle for maturity fails and they succumbed to childishness.

“Why?” Roshan asks, looking uncomfortable as they read the insults scrawled across the Map.

“They hated each other,” Hermione says absently, watching the dots labeled Ron and Maxine advance on a cluster of dotted first-years near the Entrance Hall doors. “The Marauders embedded the insults into the Map. No way to really get rid of them, though they do try to be better.”

“Professor Snape would set this Map on fire if he ever saw this nonsense,” Roshan says.

*Mister Prongs says that the Greasy Git has seen it, but was not allowed to set it on fire.*

*Mister Moony stopped him. The real Mister Moony, I mean.*

*Mister Wormtail says he deserves what he got for looking at what wasn’t his!*

*Mister Padfoot would like to point out that Mister Pucey is meeting with Miss Peebles in a storage cupboard.*

“Oh, bother,” Hermione mutters, and sends her Patronus with the message to Tamsin and Terry. “You’d think they would find more discreet places for…for that!”

Roshan shrugs. “I just wait for Hogsmeade weekends. There are some really nice rooms available in the Delphini-Inn.”

“There is another inn in Hogsmeade?” Hermione asks, even if she has no plans on doing…that. It’s still nice to know, though.

When it’s George and Fred’s turn to watch the Map, Hermione goes out on her next hour-long patrol with Draco. It’s a bit of a cheat, taking advantage of the situation to spend time with him, but she’ll take it.

They don’t get to do much talking. A trio of second-years decides that now is an excellent time to release dung bombs in the second-floor corridor. There is a mess to clean up before they send the idiots off to the Filches. Hermione wonders if the Map is just—just broadcasting ideas and hoping something sticks. Mister Padfoot and Mister Wormtail had been discussing dung bombs and diversions just a half-hour ago.
“Diversions. Oh, no,” Hermione nearly wails, just as George’s water salamander Patronus crawls up the wall next to them and opens its mouth.

“Just letting you know, it looks like Robins, McDonald, Peakes, and Wolpert look to be up to something in the girls and boys toilets on the second floor,” George’s voice says as the salamander paces about on the stone. “I mean, I’m proud of them and all, but today is really not the best time to flood out the lower floors.”

Draco rolls his eyes. “Bloody Gryffindors!”

Hermione sighs and grips her wand. “Believe me, I’ve been saying that since I was Sorted.”

The rest of the day continues along that vein. All of the mischief they encounter is students wanting an outlet for frustration, or students who are still silly enough to think a lack of teachers means a lack of rules. Even the Baby Death Eaters restrain themselves to petty dueling that Hermione helps to interrupt with her next partner in patrolling crime, Cadwallader. He isn’t a very good duelist, and Hermione privately thinks Cadwallader is in desperate need of Nizar’s type of Defence teaching. He’s enthusiastic about stopping mischief, at least.

Then she’s running off with Mandy to convince another group of nervous, frightened first years that no, they will not be getting answers out of the stone gargoyle. Breaking into the Headmaster’s office will just get them so many detentions that they’ll be serving them during the summer. That sends them scurrying off, though Hermione feels guilty. She wants to know what’s going on, too. Vanity Jugson looks particularly dejected, worried about both sides of her family.

“I’d be tearing out my hair if I had to worry about idiot family members turning Death Eater,” Mandy comments, giving the stone gargoyle a good pat on the head.

Hermione nods as they meet up to trade partners for the next hour. She wonders how many Muggle-borns are now entirely relieved about their birth status because there will be a certain and complete lack of Death Eaters in the family.

Ron looks exhausted when they meet in the halls just before the dinner hour. “Did you remember to bloody well eat lunch?” he asks after giving her a hug.

Hermione shakes her head ruefully as she takes the folded Marauder’s Map back from him and tucks it into her robe pocket. “No, I was—it’s been that sort of day, hasn’t it?”

“Too right.” Ron yawns so hard his jaw cracks. “Our teachers are insane, ‘Mione. They do this every day.”

“It does make me wonder which is harder: wrangling students, or wrangling politicians?”

Ron looks horrified. “I think you’re comparing eggs to eggs, there.”

“Probably—oh, what is it, Kinjal?” Hermione asks as Kinjal comes flying down the nearest staircase like she’s sprouted wings.

Kinjal leaps over the banister, reminding them both that she is far more athletic than she appears. Hermione is all but certain she cultivates that appearance on purpose. “They’re back!” Kinjal says excitedly. “No one knows anything else yet, but Draco and John both saw teachers in the castle again.”

Hermione and Ron look at each other. “Should we be on time for dinner, you reckon?” Ron asks.
“I don’t see why not.” Hermione casts her Patronus, smiling as the Kneazle forms and waits for instructions. “Find the other Prefects,” she says. “The teachers are back, and it’s time for dinner.”

The Kneazle Patronus stretches and vanishes.

Kinjal has already cast hers, and Ron is belatedly copying them. “Find Neil and Tamsin,” she instructs her tiger Patronus, repeating the same message that Hermione gave to her Kneazle. The tiger stretches and slinks away as Ron gives his Jack Russell Patronus the same message, but for Fred and George.

Hermione stops short upon entering the Great Hall for the second time that day. A few students have already wandered in and are sitting in small clusters to converse in terse whispers. The staff table is full. Almost every teacher is yawning, sitting with their head resting in their hands, or in several cases, slumped over with their head on the table.

“Blimey,” Ron gasps.

“Oh, it is bad,” Kinjal says, looking worriedly at the Slytherin end of the staff table. Everyone who Disapparated from Nizar’s quarters last night look to be wearing the same clothing. Snape is lacking both robe and jacket, sitting with his white shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows; his hair is hanging in tangled strands. It’s so utterly unlike him that Hermione can’t help but stare.

Beside Snape, Nizar is resting with his face on the table and his arms over his head as if to block out noise and light. He is also lacking his robe. The edges of his shirt sleeves are torn and tattered, but he doesn’t seem to be injured. Professor McGonagall is missing her hat, and her hair is half out of its usual pins to hang around her face in limp wisps of black and silver. She still has her robes, at least, though they look a bit singed. Professor Salazar is wearing last night’s t-shirt, though it’s now torn and splattered with mud on one side. His eyes are closed; Hermione suspects that he’s sleeping upright.

She hopes that it’s mud. It could also be dried blood.

Professor Sinistra has a deep scowl on her face, no hat, and is clutching a cup of tea as if it has personally offended her. Professor Flitwick is missing his jacket as well as half of his mustache. Where that had been is an angry red swath that looks like a healing burn. Madam Pince is for once not scowling, but instead looks terribly sad.

Professor Sprout is sleeping with her head propped up on one hand. She has dozens of tiny, Dittany-coated scratches on her face and hands. Her robes, fit for the dangerous plants in Herbology, look to have been ripped by dozens of small teeth. Madam Hooch is speaking with Professor Vector and Professor Burbage. All three of them look worse for wear, though only Madam Hooch has bandages on her arms.

Trelawney is sitting in a miserable huddle of shawls, with Professor Babbling patting her shoulders to comfort her. Professor Willowood is busy scribbling on a scroll with a frightening grimace on her face. Hermione does not envy whoever is going to be receiving that scroll. Mister Filch is lurking behind her with Mrs. Norris, properly a housecat again, perched on his shoulder.

Aside from how terrible everyone looks, the biggest surprise is to see Professor Binns at the table with Professor Stirling and Professor Viridian. All three of them are talking in inaudible, somber voices, though Binns is floating in a seated position instead of using a chair.

It’s worrying that Madam Pomfrey isn’t present. Professor Shafiq is absent, too, as is Professor Harper.
At least Hermione knows that Hagrid is fine. Given his absence, she suspects that Hagrid is with Dumbledore.

“Miss Granger. Mister Weasley. Miss Bhatia.”

Hermione, Ron, and Kinjal look up to see Helena Ravenclaw floating just to one side of them. “Hello, Lady Ravenclaw,” Kinjal greets the ghost.

Helena inclines her head in acknowledgment. “You should all take your seats, and be prepared to continue to act to the benefit of your fellow students,” she says as the Bloody Baron and the Friar emerge from the wall. Nearly Headless Nick follows a moment later, though he looks decidedly uncomfortable.

“What’s happened, ma’am?” Ron asks the ghost—rather more politely than he would have last year, Hermione thinks.

Helena looks to the Baron, who immediately turns his head away. It’s Jonathan who meets her gaze, his face set in grave lines. “Britain has been delivered a terrible blow this day,” she says. “Sit, please. The Headmaster will be addressing everyone before the meal.”

Hermione is trying not to drum the table with impatience as the sixth-year Prefects for Gryffindor finally make it to the table. “Sorry,” Sourav pants out, leaning over the table to catch his breath. “Had to corral a lot of ingrates into coming to dinner.”

“It was a bit easier when we got them to listen as to why it would be a good idea,” Nandini mutters, trying to pull her black hair away from her face. George and Fred are some of the last students to enter the Great Hall, looking highly unimpressed with the three first-years they’re escorting.

“At least it was a Ravenclaw, a Hufflepuff, and a Slytherin up to…well, whatever they were up to,” Ginny says, though she’s giving the twins an odd look. Hermione doesn’t blame her. None of them are exactly used to George and Fred being responsible. The twins are usually treating the idea as if it’s a contagious disease.

The entire room falls silent as Dumbledore emerges from the door behind the staff table and makes his way to the lectern. Hermione finds herself biting her lip. Dumbledore looks as he always does, but there is a mournful light in his eyes that she doesn’t think is feigned at all.

“Students of Hogwarts: good evening,” Dumbledore greets them, but his voice lacks its usual cheer. “Thank you for your patience and your good behavior on what has been a very dark day for Wizarding Britain. I am sorry to once again be standing here, bearing terrible news that will affect every single one of us.”

Dumbledore pauses, his gaze sweeping the room. Hermione strengthens her Occlumency shields on instinct, though she doesn’t feel any sort of sensation that means he tried to read her thoughts. Behind Dumbledore, all of the teachers have awoken or sat up to give the Headmaster their strict attention. The hazel-eyed gazes of the Slytherin brothers are particularly sharp and intent.

“Last night, the Dark Lord Voldemort announced his return with a coordinated assault against every high-ranking witch and wizard in Wizarding Britain. I am sorry to once again be standing here, bearing terrible news that will affect every single one of us.”

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For a moment, Hermione could have heard a pin drop with perfect clarity. Then frightened whispers and noises of dread break out in a wave that spreads throughout the Great Hall.

Dumbledore holds up his hand to request their silence. “I’m given to understand that the Daily Prophet will deliver a late edition of the paper sometime this evening. In the meantime, you should
know that this school has not been spared Voldemort’s wrath. Though the Ministry, the M.L.E., the
war mages of Britain, and every teacher at this school fought to protect those in danger, there
were…” Dumbledore breaks off in sorrow. “There were many enemies, and too few of us.
However, I will say that though the losses are tragic, it could have been far worse. We should all take
comfort in that fact.

“Miss Frobisher, Mister Thomas, Miss Bell, Mister Vaisey, Mister Sloper, Miss Shafiq, the Creevey
brothers, Mx Shelby, and Mister Finch-Fletchley have all lost family today. They will need your
understanding and patience when they choose to return to Hogwarts, though it is too soon to know
when that will be. Other families were also attacked during the long night of fighting, and of those,
there were many indeed. A number of your fellow students are absent today in order to be with
injured family members on this terrible day.”

Dumbledore waits for the louder rush of fear and dismay to quiet before speaking again. “I am sorry.
I wish I had better news for you. I regret that those who should have listened did not, and others have
paid a terrible price for their complacency.

“I would rather you hear it from me instead of reading it in a newspaper. You all deserve to know
that as of this morning, Wizarding Britain is officially at war.”

Dumbledore glances down at the lectern for a moment before looking up to regard the students
again. His voice is soft, but no less stern. “Hogwarts has long been a sanctuary, and it will continue
to shelter anyone who wishes to reside in safety. No matter your familial obligations or allegiances,
you are students first. If you cannot go home, or have no home left to go to, you may dwell here until
the danger of this war has passed—and make no mistake, it will,” he continues. “The Dark Lord
Voldemort has struck a terrible first blow, and it may not be his last, but he will be stopped. This I
promise you all.”

Dumbledore steps back from the lectern. As if it’s a signal, owls begin swooping into the Great Hall.
Some are the Post Owls that never arrived at breakfast, but they’re vastly outnumbered by the
Prophet, Witch Weekly, and Quibbler owls all trying to deliver their burdens at once.

Hermione all but snatches her copy of the Prophet out of the air, ripping off the twine and letting it
fall open. She sucks in a horrified breath at the photograph that greets her at the top. Beneath the
headline is a moving photograph of a house ablaze. The Dark Mark is visible in the sky above the
flames.

Standing just on the edge of the firelight is a tall, thin man with white skin. He’s wearing a black
robe, holding aloft a wand as if he’s in the midst of casting a spell. He wears no hood or mask, but
his features aren’t clear. It’s when he turns his head in the frame, putting his face into profile and
revealing the lack of nose, does Hermione realize who she’s staring at.

YOU-KNOW-WHO RETURNS

“Oh,” she gasps, and nearly drops the paper from suddenly nerveless fingers.

Voldemort. That’s Voldemort. He was with his Death Eaters last night. Murdering people.

“Ignore old Voldie. Check out the bottom half of the paper,” Fred says, sounding far too cheerful.

Hermione doesn’t understand why until she smooths out the Prophet on the table. Below the image
of Voldemort is another photograph, one that makes things seem a bit less terrible.

The statue, awful as it is, is one Hermione has read about—this was taken within the Ministry of
Magic, right in front of the atrium fountain. The clock on the wall in the photograph shows that it was just after six that morning. Nizar, Snape, Professor Salazar, Professor McGonagall, Tonks, Remus, Sirius, and Adele are all sitting together on the lip of the fountain, along with a few others that Hermione doesn’t recognize. They look weary, leaning against each other or clutching steaming cups of tea. Their clothes are stained and torn. Some injuries are quite obvious, though Sirius looks far too happy to be badly hurt. None of them are aware of being photographed, else Hermione firmly believes many of them would be glaring in the camera’s direction.

When Hermione clips that photograph out of her copy of the *Evening Prophet*, she includes the modest, unassuming second headline:

*Defenders of Britain*

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